

## IMAP USA: #Media Ethics Starts With Me

Hans Moyer  
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Dear friends of freedom, faith and family,

With the recent disclosure of false news fabricated by a supposedly trusted media outlet BBC, the question of how reliable and trusted news and media information can be safeguarded needs an answer.

The International Media Association for Peace recognizes the vital role that journalists play in guarding against totalitarianism and supporting the expansion of freedom. IMAP represents a worldwide professional network of journalists who support a socially responsible and moral media to convey accurate content, address the challenges of our time based on the highest principles of ethical journalism, and understand that universal values are key elements of a world of peace.

I have attached copies of two excellent presentations from our recent webinar on "Journalism, Free Speech, and Media Bias in a Rapidly Changing World," which take a deep dive into this question.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this important matter.

With best regards,

Hans

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# Journalism, Free Speech and Media Bias in a Rapidly Changing World

By Peter Zoehrer, Executive Director of Forum for Religious Freedom Europe & IMAP  
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*Presented at the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) Webinar, 28. October 2025*

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Good evening to all distinguished colleagues, media professionals, faith-based NGO representatives and defenders of freedom joining us from around the world.

In our information-saturated age, the stories we tell – and those we neglect to tell – determine not only what people know, but what they believe to be true.

## Two Freedoms, One Destiny

The subject I address this evening — *Media Bias and Democratic Freedoms: Protecting Religious Minorities* — transcends theory and scholarship. It strikes at the core of our shared existence. For when one of our twin freedoms — belief and expression — crumbles, the other does not stand far behind.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Articles 18 and 19 were not drafted as separate pillars; they were laid side by side so that thought, conscience, religion and voice might flourish together. Without the freedom to believe, expression becomes hollow — and without the freedom to speak, belief becomes invisible. They are two sides of the same coin. When one collapses, the other quickly follows.

That is why media bias is not merely sloppy journalism — it is a profound human-rights issue. A press that distorts realities doesn't only mis-report — it shapes public perception, legitimises repression and corrodes democracy from within.

Research confirms this link: diminished media freedom correlates with weakened democratic safeguards and increased rights violations. As the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states:

“Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing and indispensable for democracy and the rule of law.”

And as the Washington Post reminds us:

“Democracy dies in darkness.”

When journalism goes silent—or worse, joins the mob—democracy begins to die from within.

## **When the Press Echoes the Powerful**

Consider this case: In Rwanda authorities, beginning in 2018, mandated inspections of faith-venues; by 2024 the national governance board reported inspecting more than 13,000 places of worship and closing over 8,000 for alleged safety or registration violations. Many believe the true motive was regulatory pressure on minority religions. In much of the press coverage the language sounded harmless — “compliance”, “modernization”, “standards” — but the reality was stark: pastors silenced, congregations scattered, believers locked out of their sanctuaries. Most media outlets simply echoed the official line. Reports spoke of “regulations” but ignored religious freedom or human dignity.

Whenever journalists merely repeat government talking-points, persecution hides in plain sight — and democracy loses its voice.

## **The Press: Guardian or Enabler?**

Article 19 declares the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.” A free press should be democracy’s watchdog — not its echo-chamber. But when journalism becomes biased, sensationalist or submissive, it stops defending freedom and begins enabling oppression.

When a press system abandons religious minorities, it signals a broader erosion: freedom of religion and freedom of expression are not separate rights, but deeply connected. As one UN-mission summary puts it, they are “indivisible and interdependent”. That means the media bears a heavy burden — not just to report facts, but to handle language, labels and narratives with care. Because the way events are framed affects who is included in public life, and who is pushed to its margins.

## **Labels Matter: The “S-Word” & Headlines That Kill**

Words, images and headlines shape public opinion. That framing can either defend dignity or legitimise prejudice.

One of the clearest dangers: how minority faiths are casually branded with the “S-word” — “sect” — or its cousin “cult”. That reminds us of the dark past when the “N-word” was used as a racial slur against people of colour. Being labelled a “sect member” can wound, exclude, and delegitimise in equally damaging ways.

And yet journalists keep using it freely — sometimes dozens of times in a single report. In Austria, for instance, the national broadcaster recently used the word “sect” 13 times in just two minutes of airtime. Behind this obsession lies not only organised anti-cult networks but also plain journalistic laziness: reliance on Wikipedia entries, decades-old dossiers, or press-releases disguised as facts. Over time these shortcuts harden into “common-sense” prejudice.

In France, the state-agency MIVILUDES circulates lists of alleged “sectes” that many journalists cite uncritically — turning yoga practitioners, Pentecostals, Buddhists and new Christian movements into public suspects. This systemic framing — stigma embedded in blacklists, amplified in media — sets the stage for more serious consequences.

Now consider Russia: where independent media have been stamped out and journalists killed by state actors. Years of demonisation in state-controlled media paved the way for the 2017

ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist". Over 200,000 believers were forced underground or into exile. A single label — "extremist cult" — turned peaceful worship into a criminal act. Once a label is normalised, repression is only a step away.

Headlines can kill reputations, or as one grim media-adage goes: "If it bleeds, it leads." Research shows that roughly 60-70 % of readers never read beyond the headline; for most, the headline *is* the story. When journalism trades truth for outrage, it does more than mis-inform — it destroys trust and weakens democracy.

## **Case Study: BBC and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**

A sharp example of distortion: In October 2023 the BBC ran a headline:

"Japan asks court to dissolve 'Moonies' church over Shinzo Abe killing."

Two things stand out: first, the use of the term "Moonies" — a slur to the faith community. Second: the headline merges the church with a killing. The assassin of former Prime-Minister Shinzo Abe was a lone individual, acting from personal grievance, with no organisational link to the church. Yet the headline effectively portrayed the community as responsible. Because it came from one of the world's most trusted media brands, the damage reverberated worldwide. What began as tragedy became a three-year headline campaign. This is not investigative reporting. It is character-assassination by headline.

## **Global Patterns: Media Bias → Repression → Loss of Freedom**

From one region to another the pattern repeats: media bias leads to stigma, which prompts state action, then brings repression — and ultimately results in a loss of freedom.

- **Japan:** After the Abe assassination, thousands of articles attacked the faith community. Government officials, anti-cult lawyers and mainstream media built a firewall of hostility; believers' voices were excluded.
- **South Korea:** Even large mainstream churches faced smear campaigns. More alarmingly, Dr. Hwak Ja Han Moon (82) — a founder of interfaith initiatives — was placed in pre-trial detention weeks after heart surgery. Much of the press recycled stereotypes instead of questioning the measure.
- **Nigeria & Sub-Saharan Africa:** Between 2019-2023 nearly 56,000 died and 21,000 abducted in violence with a religious dimension — mostly Christians. Yet Western media routinely reduced these atrocities to "ethnic clashes" or "farmer-herder disputes". This silence—this refusal to name genocide for what it is—not neutrality; it is complicity.
- **China:** The Communist Party has mastered state propaganda. Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and unregistered Christian house-churches are branded "cults" or "terrorists". Once labelled, they are stripped of rights, detained, or forced into "re-education". State-media transforms persecution into policy and propaganda into truth.
- **Hungary:** In 2011 the Orbán government stripped >300 churches of legal recognition; most media outlets called it "reform". When the same regime later attacked independent journalism, reporters realised too late — the assault on religion had paved the way for the assault on the press.
- **India:** In 2024 Christian organisations documented over 800 attacks and wrongful arrests. In Manipur, sectarian violence displaced 60,000 and destroyed nearly 400

churches. Much of the Indian media called it a “law-and-order issue”, refusing to name religious persecution.

## **What Must We Do? A Shared Responsibility**

Defending freedom is everyone’s task.

- Journalists must verify before publishing, avoid stigmatising labels, and let minorities speak for themselves.
- Editors must treat headlines as promises, not hammers.
- Regulators and public broadcasters must monitor systemic bias and ensure taxpayer-funded media serve *all* citizens.
- Faith communities and civil society must monitor coverage, respond factually, and share positive stories of peace-building, humanitarian aid and inter-faith cooperation.

If hostile networks flood journalists with prejudice, defenders of freedom can flood them with truth and hope.

## **Closing Thoughts**

We are not here to silence critics. Scrutiny—honest, balanced scrutiny— is vital for democracy. But scrutiny without fairness becomes slander. When media bias targets religious minorities, it harms not only those communities—it undermines the moral core of democracy itself. A free press should defend the vulnerable, not endanger them; challenge power, not echo it.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said:

“The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.”

When the press stays silent in the face of injustice, that silence becomes complicity.

I commend the Universal Peace Federation – USA and IMAP for organising this important dialogue and elevating it to the international level.

Thank you for your attention.

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# **Journalism, Free Speech and Media Bias in a Rapidly Changing World**

*Remarks for the International Media Association for Peace  
October 28, 2025*

**Larry Moffitt**  
**Executive Director, The Washington Times Foundation**

Good afternoon everybody. It's quite a challenge you're taking on, with this topic.

I truly applaud the high-minded intent of this webinar. There are not many venues dedicated to talking about the ethics of the mass communication media regarding the need for it to be a champion for human rights and freedom of religion, and to speak freely.

The free press also has a healing function that usually gets ignored. It has the capacity to encourage intercultural, interracial, international, inter-everything communication and cooperation in the topics a society communicates about – politics, the social order, ethical values, and... sports and entertainment news.

Of all these things, it's our core values – spiritual and community – that are central and foundational for how we view everything else.

I guess the first question has to be, do the mass communication media even have a responsibility to uphold healthy values?

It's a legitimate question.

Aren't journalists just supposed to say what happened, report the news "without fear or favor," as we say? We tell it like we see it, let the pieces fall where they may, and leave it to you good people sort it out?

That's what they taught me in journalism school... back at the dawn of time.

Impartial news pages and a vigorously opinionated commentary section is the ideal ethic for our profession.

However, even if we report in a fair and balanced way, just the act of an editor selecting some stories to print and not selecting other stories, determines what issues will end up as talking points on the national agenda. In our media-driven culture, if a tree falls in the forest and NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX or CNN and the Internet isn't there to cover it, it never happened.

A newspaper or television station is a fixed container of information that's pre-selected for you. You choose CNN or ABC or FOX or you read The New York Times or The Washington Times because you're watching, and reading content you find agreeable at some level.

The internet, however, is the wild west. It's got everything. And people come to the internet with personal standards that are all over the map.

After a while the internet turns you into a container. With all its little algorithms that keep track of where you land and they give you more of that, instead of other things. So instead of you watching the internet, the internet is watching you. It pre-selects what to offer you first.

Do you own it, or does it own you? The answers in my mind are very disturbing.

Just as when the photocopier made every person a publisher in the 1960s, the internet today makes every person a broadcaster. With audiences in the millions. And there are no governing ethics.

A great myth is that entertainment is just entertainment. Sometimes a citizen advocacy group will criticize a movie studio or record company for glorifying sex among 15-year-olds or violence in music.

People who make violent video games and violent music insist, "We don't influence anybody. This is nothing more than entertainment. You have an on/off switch and 500 channels. If you're offended, watch something else." That's a complete cop-out in my opinion.

I think the debate is pretty much finished about whether television, movies and the internet shape our values. There have been too



many instances of copycat crimes, including killings, taken from the media.

FOR EXAMPLE: Do you know what a 30-second Super Bowl commercial is going to cost in February 2026? It was \$7 million. It recently went up to \$8 million. \$8 million bucks for 30 seconds. THAT'S BECAUSE... Advertisers know about influence and they are happy to spend money to have it.

We in the news and entertainment media have used the freedom of speech protection in the U.S. Constitution to steadily push back the envelope of acceptability in the public media – year by year, decade by decade since the 1950's when even married couples on TV had to be depicted in twin beds. Which was a bit much.

We have been so successful at this erosion, that we are now at the point where the period of innocence traditionally associated with childhood has been almost completely erased.

There are some parents who have been super diligent about protecting this window of innocence for their children. Reducing screen time to an hour a day, for example, and monitoring it. They are heroes.

Here's an example of the erosion of values caused by our culture. The movie, ET, came out in 1982. Steven Spielberg's movie based on an adorable extraterrestrial guy who gets left behind on Earth. One morning, the kids are arguing at breakfast about what to do, and the character Elliott, age 10, says to his slightly older brother, "It was nothing like that, penis breath!"

To some of us, it hit like a sudden sucker punch to the gut.

The reviewers in the mainstream media praised this for its honesty and realism.

Every child in America, age 7 to 10 was sitting in the theater watching that movie. And it was NOT okay out in Lincoln, Nebraska. But this movie released it, put into the culture. The media called it honesty. Who can be against honesty? Abe Lincoln was honest.

The blame for this erosion is shared by everyone of us. The media isn't evil. The men and women of the communication media are the people next door. They are us. Their ethical values are our ethical values. The media helped erode our values, but it was we who let that happen, by our lack of attention to what is sacred in family. So let's not get all finger-pointy.

Anyway, that's where we are today. Now my question posed at the beginning is, does the media have a responsibility to support and encourage the full set of human and religious freedoms and healthy life VALUES?

I think we do. In fact I know we do. In a speech to the World Media Conference in the late 1980s, Rev. Sun Myung Moon reminded us that, before you are an editor or broadcaster, you are first a human being, with a human being's God-given responsibility to society.

We know that a great deal of the world's popular culture originates in the U.S., and it gets exported.

## A general lack of critical thinking

A huge, enormous gap in our culture today is a general lack of critical thought and respectful discourse. Old time editors with ice water in their veins, who raised me in this business, used to tell me our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

“Editors don’t have friends,” the late Wes Pruden, editor of The Washington Times, told me that.

If journalists go against the grain of the prevailing media trends of political thought, they can run into trouble in the friends department. Do this: get a job at the New York Times... MAGA

However, if your moral rudder is an inviolable set of principles, like say, the Ten Commandments, or John Locke’s political philosophy of God-given rights, then the temporary values of collegial friendship have to take a back seat to that.

In the American Constitutional framework there are three Estates: Executive, Legislative and Judicial. The press is commonly called the “Fourth Estate,” because its influence is *that* pivotal, *that* critical to the very survival of a free society. The Founding Fathers intended for the media to be a watchdog on the government. And if it gets corrupted by a lack of ethical imperative, and personal backbone, we’re sunk.

President Biden’s dementia for example, was well-known to the press corps before it started being widely written about. There are things you can’t not see when someone as high-profile as a

President is slipping that badly. Biden's debate with Trump was the only thing that finally forced the issue out into the open.

I do have hope for the up and coming generation of men and women in America. They are young, which is good. However, the young tend to have big gaps in their knowledge of history, which makes them targets for tragic repeats of history. They want "likes."

In New York, election day is in one week, Zohran Mamdani is the pre-election leader.

So take the issue of government-run grocery stores, one of Mamdani's promises. With subsidized lower prices, they would pose a threat to regular grocery stores.

There are legitimate pro and con thoughts on this idea, but it's an issue that needs a very, very prolonged discussion – BEFORE YOU VOTE. It needs investigative journalists with boring spreadsheets. This issue is fundamental to the quality of life of people living in New York.

I'm happy to be proven wrong, but I don't think the required intensity of debate is happening in the mainstream press in New York.

We'll see how the election goes. Personally, I hope Mamdani wins.

On the international front. And I'll close with this – the United States' two best allies in Asia – Japan and Korea have always been strongly influenced by the U.S.

Korea recently elected a President who calls himself a “democratic communist.” That’s like someone calling themselves a “MAGA Democrat.” But young Koreans are listening, and many are nodding in approval.

As soon as he took office, the newly elected President Lee began arresting everyone who played a role in opposing him. Especially mainstream Christian ministers. Korea’s a very Christian country. He raided the churches. He also raided the opposition party’s headquarters for the crime of being the opposition party. In a democracy, you’re allowed, in fact you’re supposed to have an opposition party. He seized their membership rolls, so he can take names.

He also arrested Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who founded Universal Peace Federation and this International Media Association for Peace, and who works tirelessly for peace and reconciliation, and is often referred to as the Mother of Peace.

They threw her into a detention cell without even convicting her of anything. She’s an 82-year-old great-grandmother who is legally blind and crippled. She has diabetes, congestive heart failure and thyroid disease. Only a couple weeks ago she was hospitalized for a heart procedure, and the likelihood of her having a stroke is high.

They put her in a detention cell with no bed. Just some blankets on the concrete floor. The entire cell is the size of a compact car. It's unheated and it's getting cold over there. Being crippled, she has to crawl around the cell on her hands and knees.

It's utterly inhumane and cruel. It's religious persecution and elder abuse. It's now blatantly obvious, the South Korean government's goal is to completely break her, or kill her, before her trial comes up.

This is horrifying to everyone who knows Hak Ja Han Moon, because as I said, she is known globally and very affectionately, as the Mother of Peace.

Religious leaders, the kind of people who tend to oppose "democratic communists," are increasingly being hauled off to prison.

President Trump has just finished making the rounds in Asia, and he is aware of what's going on in Korea. We'll see how that goes.

So those are my comments. Thank you.