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# Journalists honored by the Index on Censorship: the fight for freedom of expression in the post-Arab Spring era

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study focuses on journalists and media outlets that have defended the freedom of expression and spoke out against censorship in the post-Arab Spring era. **Methodology:** The findings reported here are based on an examination of statements made by winners of the Index on Censorship’s 2015 Freedom of Expression Awards and an evaluation of the degree to which cyberspace raises the visibility of reporting exposing government oppression, corruption and restriction of free expression and international awareness of such situations. **Results and conclusions:** Journalists working under conditions that severely impede their ability to practice their profession are increasingly taking activist stances. The Web has become their primary means of drawing attention to the stories they produce and reaching a broad audience. Television and the Internet play a major role in the dissemination of their work. The questionable quality of some of the information exchanged via social media lowers the potential of these channels to promote constructive civil debate.

## Keywords

freedom of expression; censorship; activists; journalists; cyberspace.

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Translation by **Jenni Lucak**

## 1. Introduction

Attacks on free expression perpetrated in France in early 2015, to which people throughout the Western world reacted in mass with the slogan “Je suis Charlie”, made public concern for the protection of this basic human right a worldwide news story. Meanwhile, international organisations such as Index on Censorship, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Change.org and numerous news outlets continue to provide daily coverage of other attacks against the freedom of expression occurring in democratic as well as autocratic states that receive far less coverage than those carried out in France. Although it might appear at first glance that the emergence of the Internet has undermined government censorship in many countries and that the level of freedom of expression has risen worldwide, information overload has had a negative impact on countries embroiled in armed conflicts and governments have become increasingly adept at silencing citizens, journalists and activists in general and those who denounce human rights violations in particular.

Although all of the watchdog organisations mentioned do a good job of defending human rights, only the first, Index on Censorship, focuses exclusively on the defence of the freedom of expression on a truly global scale. This organisation raises public awareness by means of the reports, interviews and situational analysis it generates on the state of the free expression around the world. It also mounts public campaigns designed to sway public opinion in favour of the protection of this basic right and improve government policies and national legislation related to this issue.

Index on Censorship also grants yearly awards in categories such as campaigning, digital activism and journalism that recognise individuals and groups for their efforts to foster social change and denounce abuses in democratic and autocratic countries alike. An analysis of statements made by 2015 award winners in the category of journalism and the projects they have carried out reveals the ways in which new technologies are helping them do their job and their motives for maintaining their heroic commitment to the common good.

Tactics used by governments to deprive citizens of their right to free expression include suppressing public access to the Internet, censoring online content and blocking specific sites and content. Some of the journalists examined for this study live and work in democratic countries and others in states ruled by repressive regimes. What sets all of them apart from others practicing the same profession are the challenges and dangers they face in the course of their daily work. Our research has focused specifically on the Index on Censorship due to the broad spectrum of nationalities and governments it tracks, a factor that has allowed us to gauge the extent to which the Internet and digital technology has allowed earnest journalists working in different political and cultural contexts to reveal abuses of power and social injustices despite the obstruction and repression they face on a daily basis.

The work that 2015 Index on Censorship award winners Rafael Marques e Morais (Angola), Safa Al Ahmad (Saudi Arabia), Lirio Abbate (Italy) and the radio station Ekho Moskvý (Russia) continue to perform four years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, indicates that new technologies have allowed them to have a social impact unimaginable prior to the digital era despite the overload of news and information about social movements and activism. Their reflections regarding the role that the Internet

has played in the type of journalism they perform provide insight into the utility of advanced technology in promoting free expression.

## **2. Object of the study, hypothesis and objectives**

The object of this study has been to identify the opportunities digital media in various formats has provided to defend free expression following the Arab Spring by means of a close examination of the work carried out by recipients of the Index on Censorship's 2015 Freedom of Expression Awards for journalism. Four years have passed since the outbreak of what is commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring" and the social unrest in North Africa and the Middle East that has engendered a "wave of political change" (Szmolka, 2015). During this time, a democratic regime has been established in Tunisia, Egypt has moved towards authoritarianism and Yemen and Libya have slid into a state of ungovernability. None of the processes of political liberalisation embarked upon in other Arab countries have produced a substantial shift away from authoritarianism. Control over the Internet in Western countries and other democracies throughout the world has been steadily tightening during the same period. In spite of these circumstances, the research reported here has been conducted on the premise that journalists seeking to denounce government oppression and corruption in the post-Arab Spring era continue to consider the Internet a crucial vehicle for free expression.

The main objectives of this study have been:

- To identify the opportunities and risks associated with the Internet as a communications tool in places in which the freedom of expression is restricted or suppressed.
- To examine the role of cyberspace and the opportunities it offers journalists to denounce social problems in the post-Arab Spring era and the possible impact of news and information overload on this area of journalism.
- To determine the values that motivate these journalists to carry on with their work despite the dangers it supposes.

## **3. Methodology**

A thorough review of organisations devoted to the defence of free expression indicated that the Index on Censorship best satisfied the requisites for a meaningful study on the subject. Factors that set this organisation apart from others considered were its annual awards programme honouring journalists defending this basic human right and its digital publication of reports and information on the status of free expression around the world and interviews with award recipients focusing upon the role digital technology plays in their work.

A data sheet based on Lasswell's theoretical model of communication was devised for recording "acts of communication" corresponding to each of the subjects examined. Information compiled for analysis included the type of journalism practiced by the award winners selected for analysis and the geopolitical context in which they worked. In his landmark article *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, Lasswell suggests "a convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions: Who / Says What / in Which Channel / To Whom / With What Effect?" (Moragas, 1985). In light of the fact that the journalists covered by our study practiced their profession in different parts of the world, we posed the additional question "In what country?" and

analysed the degree of freedom of expression, censorship and access to public information in the places subjects lived and worked in. Other factors such as gender and media format were also taken into consideration.

The content of interviews published on the Index on Censorship website was studied in detail in order to determine journalists' perceptions regarding the utility of the Internet in their work, the values that motivate them to defend the free expression at the risk of their very lives and the consequences and impact of their actions. A hybrid version of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method (1985), which involves compressing statements made by interviewees into smaller, paraphrased units that can subsequently be organised into more specific categories, was used to analyse and interpret this material (Kvale, 1996).

#### 4. Concepts

In order to draw clear distinctions between the circumstances under which recipients of the 2015 Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award practice their profession, it was necessary to define the basic concepts that would underpin the analysis of their work and devise categories into which their statements and the contents of interviews with them could be organised.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

The Real Academia Española defines freedom of expression as “the right to openly espouse and freely disseminate ideas, opinions and information”. As Laura Verónica Coronado (2015) notes in her thesis on freedom of expression in cyberspace, “any discussion of freedom of expression must acknowledge the fact that self-expression takes place via human-devised channels and procedures that constitute the full spectrum of available opportunities for expressing one's thoughts publically. Academia, the theatre, literature, the press, film, radio and television fit into this category. In addition to these, one must also consider all of the physical instruments used to communicate ideas”.

UNESCO (2017) considers “the freedom of the press” a corollary to the freedom of expression. The press (in all of its various formats) performs an indispensable service to society by providing news and analysis related to topics of public interest, setting the agenda for public debate on issues central to development and democracy and acting as a watchdog of government and private sector interests. Given the nature of its remit, the press requires freedom in order to fulfil its function.

Freedom of expression is sometimes thwarted by means of obstruction and threats. Journalists must be able to practice their profession without undue interference. Unesco (2017) warns, “nevertheless, this freedom is threatened in many ways, including direct censorship by means of laws that do not conform with international standards, media concentration, violence against media organisations and journalists, impunity for crimes committed against media outlets and journalists, digital violence and self-censorship”.

Censorship could not exist without censors. The Real Academia Española defines the verb *censurar* (to censor) in the following manner: “Said of an official or other type of censor: To exercise his

function of imposing suppressions or changes upon something” (2014). The same authority defines *libertad de información* (freedom of information) as the “power to disseminate or receive information by any means of distribution without previous government censorship”.

## 5. Theoretical framework

In step with advances in technology, every generation of communications media adopted offers new opportunities for creating utopian public spaces and fostering civic debate between informed citizens free to express their opinions. Efforts to secure the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression have historically included battles in support of human rights and against censorship, slavery and other social ills. Such struggles have contributed greatly to the development of democratic states as well as the principles and legislation that guarantee the right to information and open communication in many parts of the world today. As previous authors (Ambrosi, Peugeot & Pimienta, 2005; Cardoso, 2008; Castells, 2006) have noted, media that have traditionally helped build social consensus and foster and amplify the scope of public discourse by facilitating the mass dissemination of information now share the arena with newer forms of independent, alternative and community media that have raised civic engagement to even higher levels.

Media organisations and ICTs have long been considered important agents in democratisation processes, the creation of public spheres for civic engagement, the formation of national and cultural identities and the promotion of expression and constructive dialogue. The Internet and digital devices have individualised and democratised access to the world of communications, providing platforms for voices not represented by conventional media and facilitating the emergence of new alternative, community and collaborative media outlets. The emergence of the Internet has strengthened these organisations by setting the stage for interactive social communication. Internet has also opened up the possibility of developing novel spaces for the exchange of information that have allowed international civil society movements to have an impact on global affairs (Ambrosi, Peugeot & Pimienta, 2005; Cardoso, 2008; Castells, 2006).

Blogs and other online publications and platforms maintained or coordinated by journalists and activists are having a social impact. Internet has fostered the proliferation of social movement networks, citizen networks and cyber communities focused on global issues such as freedom of expression and other basic human rights, environmental protection, and gender equality.

Núñez Ladeveze (2016) asserts “Democracy on a grand scale is not possible if freedom of expression and citizen access to information of public interest are denied; which is to say, if citizens have no knowledge of decision making processes related to issues of concern to them”.

Governments that suppress online free expression not only routinely censor independent news and opposition party sites but have also been known to intimidate and even imprison Internet users and bloggers who criticise official ideologies (Fei, 2017). Journalists Without Borders reports that censorship is a daily fact of life in over 80 countries in which authorities have found the Internet to be a convenient and efficient tool for identifying, tracking and suppressing what they consider to be subversive behaviour.

The “Great Firewall of China” blocks access to a vast spectrum of online information considered detrimental to the Chinese state. The Chinese government’s Golden Shield Project uses advanced technology to control the domestic flow of information and block public access to Google, foreign news sites and specific news stories. China also maintains secret alliances with foreign companies such as Microsoft, CISCO, IBM, Sun and Nortel that aid and abet government censorship and control of online information in that country (Cardoso: 2008; Castells: 2006).

Other countries and supranational entities that implement subtler forms of control such as data retention and communications interception (in many instances supported by legislation) include Bahrain, South Korea, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Zimbabwe, the United States and the European Union. According to Philip Bennet and Moisés Naím (2015), “In Hungary, Ecuador, Turkey and Kenya authorities are emulating autocracies like Russia, Iran and China by censoring critical news stories and setting up state-run communications companies”.

Numerous studies have stressed the ways in which the Internet and social media are providing a means of expression to people who had no public voice prior to the emergence of digital technology. Zeynep Tufekci (2012), faculty associate at Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, and Habibul Haque Khondker (2011), professor at Zayed University in Abu Dubai and co-President of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Social Transformation and Sociology of Development, both of whom have written about the civic implications of new technologies in the Middle East and North Africa, underscore the critical role social media have played in places where conventional media tend to toe the official government line. Philip N. Howard, Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussain, Will Mari and Marwa Mazaid (Howard, et. al, 2011), who have researched the impact of social media on civic action during the Arab Spring, conclude that social media have been fundamental to political debate, the organisation and coordination of political protests and the dissemination of democratic ideas.

The theoretical framework of this study has taken into account various studies on the economics of attention in the context of today’s media ecosystem. According to Tufekci (2013: 850), “Explicit conceptualization of attention as a distinct resource is not just more accurate; it allows examination of the impact of emergent means of attention acquisition through pathways that do not start with, or remain limited to, traditional mass media, even if they do also incorporate it”. She likewise notes, “Understanding attention as a resource makes effects of its scarcity more apparent” (Tufekci, 2013: 850). Behavioural scientist and Nobel economist Herbert Simon observed early on that “in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (1971: 40-41).

It is therefore not surprising that although social networks and cyberspace facilitate the dissemination of a vast volume of messages, a superabundance does not guarantee that information relayed by activists, defenders of human rights and those seeking to denounce abuses of power is necessarily valuable or will produce the desired effect.

Pertinent to the research reported here is the dearth of academic literature on the economics of attention under specific circumstances, especially in the context of social movements and activism. According to Tufekci (2013:849), “Not examining ‘attention’ as a distinct resource for social movements was less of an omission until recently, as mass media were the oligopolistic means of production, acquisition, and distribution of public attention”. The processes of attention acquisition associated with new media form a critical part of the history of the Arab Spring that shook the Middle East and Northern Africa during 2011 and 2012 and subsequent attempts to denounce the ills and abuses that plague those regions.

Parting from the premise that attention is a resource, this research has been focused on an analysis of cases in which journalists have defied the information overload associated with conflict situations in different parts of the world and launched internationally recognised news projects.

Other studies examining the role social media played during the Arab Spring worth mentioning in the context of the theoretical framework applied to this study are Sahar Khamis’s (2017) analysis of the state of cyberactivism in the Middle East six years after the Arab Spring and a comparative study of press freedom in Jordan following the same chain of events carried out by Matt Duffy and Hadil Maarouf (2015). Two other useful references were an analysis of the sometimes nebulous boundary between journalism and activism conducted by Bolaños (2017) and a study of journalists’ relationships with activists in Syria (Johnston, 2017). Other works taken into consideration were Evgeny Morozov’s *the Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), Oh and Aukerman’s article Freedom of Speech and Censorship in the Internet (2013) and Walid’s study on how citizens have circumvented government Internet censorship measures in Syria (2016).

## **6. Index on Censorship and its defence of freedom of digital expression**

The Index on Censorship, a non-profit organisation founded in 1972 that seeks to create a world free of censorship and repression by supporting free speech journalism and activism, places a strong focus on Web-based communication. The fact that it was created at the height of the Cold War, at a point in time when the Iron Curtain divided the world into opposing capitalist and communist camps, is not at all surprising. In a polarised world in which people who spoke out against repressive regimes paid an unacceptably high price for their courage, the Index on Censorship sought to give dissidents a voice. The organisation, which continues to defend free expression throughout the world and uncover and disseminate information suppressed or censored on the basis of ideological or religious beliefs or cultural gender bias, pays special attention to digital freedom of expression, the focus of this research.

The Index’s interest in censorship under every type of political regime imaginable and its engagement with journalists and activists in countries and regions as diverse as Europe, India, Brazil, South Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, China and Russia, makes its work particularly relevant to this study. It is one of the driving forces behind Mapping Media Freedom, a Web-based project it co-founded in partnership with the European Federation of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders that provides continually updated information concerning attacks against journalists in European Union member states and neighbouring countries (Mapping Media Freedom, 2016). (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Source: Mapping Media Freedom (2016). URL: <https://mappingmediafreedom.org/#/>  
Index on Censorship is supported by the European Union, the Arts Council England, Google, *The Guardian* and the London law firm Doughty Street Chambers (Index on Censorship, 2016).

## 7. Results. Index on Censorship Awards 2015

Thousands of defenders of free expression throughout the world are nominated for the Index on Censorship's annual Freedom of Expression Awards. In addition to recognising the role that journalists play in the defence of human rights, the Index's journalism awards programme generates a vital, ongoing flow of reliable information on the work being carried out in this area.

Among the nominees in the journalism category of the Index's 2015 awards programme were three journalists and a radio station honoured that year for their defence of free expression.

Index on Censorship uses its award programme, magazine, numerous informational campaigns and website to inform an international public about the work being done by journalists and activists in defence of free expression and raise the visibility of the causes they support.

The winners in the journalism category of the 2015 Freedom of Expression Awards were Lirio Abbate, an Italian journalist forced to live under the constant protection of police bodyguards for his investigative reporting on the mafia; Safa Al Ahmad, author of a documentary film on an unreported uprising in Saudi Arabia; Ekho Moskv, one of the few remaining independent radio stations in Russia; and Rafael Marques de Morais, an Angolan journalist who has been repeatedly persecuted for his investigative journalism related to government corruption and corporate abuses in Angola.

### 7.1. Rafael Marques de Morais: Blood diamonds in Angola

Rafael Marques de Morais is a distinguished Angolan journalist and human rights advocate whose work focuses on government corruption and abuses in the diamond industry. Born in 1971 to parents



with the means to send him abroad to study in London and Oxford, he began to practice journalism in 1992.

Marques de Morais was fired from positions he held in Angolan television and radio for being “too liberal”. He was jailed without charge for 40 days in 1999 following the publication of “The Lipstick of Dictatorship”, an article he wrote for the magazine *Ágora* in which he accused José Eduardo Dos Santos, president of Angola from 1979 to 2017, of stoking the flames of that country’s civil war in order to divert public attention from government incompetence and corruption. During his imprisonment, he was often held in solitary confinement without food and water. His subsequent six-month sentence was later suspended on the condition he would not write articles offensive to the regime for the next five years (Haydon, 2015a). Unbowed by this incident, the journalist continued to probe the dark underbelly of corruption in his country.

Marques went on to write *Blood Diamonds: Torture and Corruption in Angola*, a book that documented 100 arbitrary executions, 500 cases of torture and the intimidation and forced displacement of villagers and diamond seekers living near mines located in the Cuango and Xá-Muteba districts of Angola’s Lunda Norte – abuses in which members of Angola’s state security and armed forces were heavily involved (Front Line Defenders, 2012; EFE, 2015). The author nonetheless places the ultimate blame for these atrocities on private diamond mining companies.

It took Marques years to convince victims and witnesses of these crimes to allow him to tape their accounts. According to him, “This is the kind of journalism that’s needed in a place like Angola, where reporting and investigating alone are not enough. You have to take it to the next level, to act on behalf of your sources and the subject of your stories” (Cummings, 2015).

As Haydon (2015a) notes, “Journalists in Angola are routinely threatened for speaking against the state – seven have been murdered since 1992. (...) Rights activists are also targeted. In November 2014, a female student was beaten for two hours by a group of police officers for taking part in an anti-government demonstration”.

Basia Cummings observed in an article on Marques published by *The Guardian* in 2015, “In this climate of oppression, free expression is nearly impossible”. During the interview with the award-winning journalist upon which she based her piece, Marques asserted, “A journalist has first to fight, inch by inch, for the right to do his or her job. So you have to be an activist to be a journalist” (Cummings, 2015).

Cummings observes that Marques “has mixed feelings about reporting on the Internet: the potential audience is bigger, but he has doubts about the quality of reporting online”. According to Marques, “Ironically, with social media you have more people speaking through networks, but they’re not articulating information that can be of greater benefit to the public”. The journalist does believe, however, that the Internet might well constitute “the last frontier in the battle for freedom of expression”. Although political tensions prevent him from working for media outlets in his country in spite of his impressive credentials, he continues to publish articles of interest to readers in Angola on his personal website *Maka Angola* (Cummings, 2015).

## 7.2. Safa Al Ahmad: Saudi Arabia through a critical lens

Saudi journalist and documentary filmmaker Safa Al Ahmad was given an Index Freedom of Expression Award for Journalism in 2015 for her personal bravery, work in a country in which dissident journalism is a highly risky occupation and a documentary she put together over a three-year period recording the unbearable conditions of daily life under the present regime. It must be kept in mind that Saudi Arabia is one of the world's four remaining absolute monarchies and that the interpretation of Sharia law there is one of the most rigorous in the Muslim world. The majority of what are considered today as basic human rights are either highly restricted or suppressed in this country, and its population heavily oppressed. *Saudi's Secret Uprising*, a 30-minute documentary film by Al Ahmad broadcast by the BBC in May 2014, provided a fleeting glimpse of the true social and political situation in Saudi Arabia to television viewers throughout the world.

Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the Middle East thanks to an economy based almost entirely on petroleum production. Social conditions there are nevertheless lamentable due to the chauvinistic regime in power, which denies women even the most basic human rights and enforces an implacable policy of censorship. Saudi women were prohibited from operating motor vehicles until the summer of 2018 (*eldiario.es*, 2017). Free expression and freedom of the press are almost totally suppressed in the country and the Saudi royal family has the power to ban journalists and choose the heads of media organisations. As Amnesty International has reported on numerous occasions, the Saudi government subjects anyone who dares to protest or criticise government policy to severe punishment. The sweeping but vague provisions of the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing promulgated in Saudi Arabia in February 2014 allows any form of pacific activism in favour of human rights to be interpreted judicially as acts of terrorism that carry penalties considered unacceptable and extreme from a Western perspective (*El Confidencial*, 2014). Not unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia ranked 168 on the list of 180 countries covered by Reporters Without Borders' 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

Safa Al Ahmad filmed various waves of civil unrest that shook Qatif, a city located in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, following the onset of the Arab Spring in March 2011. Her documentary film records recurring episodes of protest and repression not covered by local or Western media (Index on Censorship, 2015). Threats against her life have prevented Al Ahmad from returning to her country since the BBC broadcast of her documentary in 2014.

Although, according to Al Ahmad, no one is permitted to use the word "protest" to describe what has gone on in the province, her film contains ample evidence of local demand for reform interspersed with footage documenting public protest and scenes of violence and assassination (Index on Censorship, 2015). Twenty activists and two police officers lost their lives and hundreds of people were detained for months without being specifically charged of any offense during the ongoing turmoil.

As Saudi government censorship prohibited national and foreign media from covering these acts of civil unrest, no one elsewhere in Saudi Arabia or in other countries around the world was aware of what was happening there. Safa Al Ahmad broke the wall of silence by travelling to the region, personally interviewing activists involved (many of whom would subsequently be imprisoned or killed) and filming numerous protests.

The journalist recounts that many people who at first refused to be interviewed on camera later decided to collaborate on the project as their outrage and desire to demonstrate the truth of their situation proved stronger than their fear of danger and government reprisal. Even though it had little local repercussion and sparked the ire of local authorities, her film provides cogent evidence of the lack of freedom in Saudi Arabia, the tyranny of its rulers and the importance of Saudi women's struggle for civil rights. Unfortunately, local media outlets deeply offended by the content and thrust of Al Ahmad's documentary denounced the filmmaker and her work.

*Saudi's Secret Uprising* has meanwhile attracted the attention of the international community. Television, and to an even greater extent the Internet, which provides a permanent mechanism for dissemination over time, have played key roles in the distribution of Al Ahmad's film. The Web and social networks have proved to be highly effective vehicles for the distribution her work as a journalist.

As noted previously, governments have the ability to restrict public access to the Internet and censor online content. Saudi Arabia, which has created one of the most sophisticated filtering systems in the world, routinely blocks access to approximately 400,000 websites that government censors consider counter to the tenets of Islam and the country's deeply rooted social customs. The censorship shield in Saudi Arabia has allowed the country's ruling elite to restrict the free expression of Saudi citizens dissatisfied with the political and social status quo (Reporters Without Frontiers, Saudi Arabia). Such systems are not only used to block public access to specific Internet sites; they also provide governments with the means of identifying and targeting dissidents for persecution. Although people in many places throughout the world have adopted covert methods of communication to deal with this problem, this tactic has provoked the governments of some countries to restrict access even further.

Part of the success of *Saudi's Secret Uprising* at the international film festivals at which it has been presented can be attributed to the circumstances under which it was made: in a country as repressive as Saudi Arabia, it is practically impossible to practice journalism in the conventional sense.

### **7.3. Lirio Abbate: One man's never-ending crusade against the mafia**

The third journalist to be honoured with a Freedom of Expression Award in 2015 was Lirio Abbate, an investigative journalist who covers criminal activity and the mafia's political connections for the Italian weekly news magazine *L'Espresso*. Abbate has been forced to live under police protection for the past eight years due to the threats and attempts on his life he has suffered since he began writing about mafia activities. He is nevertheless determined to continue reporting on the subject and speaks openly about how censorship functions in Italy.

"In Italy, a synonym of censorship is 'threat': the concrete threats and intimidation that criminals use to discourage journalists from telling the truth about underworld activities. Unfortunately, there are journalists who yield to the mafia. But there are reporters who do their jobs well and are threatened. I fight against the mafia through my articles and books", Abbate informed Index on Censorship (Haydon, 2015b). This backhanded form of censorship leaves Italian citizens almost entirely in the dark about a very important issue. During an appearance at the University of Milan, public prosecutor Nino Di Matteo was highly critical of the fact that Italian politicians who had made deals with mafia bosses were not being brought to justice, asserting, "The situation is worse now than it was in the times of Falcone and Borsellino". "There have been convictions, as in the case of Dell'Utri", he stated, "but

instead of being driven from the political arena, the individuals implicated are now discussing how to go about reforming the Constitution” (Bongiovanni, 2015).

Abbate’s 2012 article *The Four Kings of Rome* raised public awareness about mafia drug dealing and human trafficking. His books, which have been translated into various other languages, include *Fimmine Ribelli* (2013), an exposé of the harsh realities of women living within the Calabrian mafia’s immediate sphere of interest. *I re di Roma: Destra e sinistra agli ordini di mafia capitale*, a book he co-authored with Marco Lillo that was released in 2015, explores the covert relationships between mafia kingpins and city officials in Rome.

In addition to various awards related to his writing, Abbate received the 2008 Premio Nazionale Enzo Biagi for his commitment to rule of law. He was also recognised as an “information hero” in 2014 by Reporters Without Borders, an NGO that recently ranked Italy 62nd out of the 180 countries listed in its Index of Freedom of Expression (Reporters Without Borders, 2017).

Lirio Abbate’s work reveals that the suppression of free expression is not a problem unique to totalitarian states and can also happen in a country such as Italy, which despite being a democratic state since 1948 struggles to control mafia-related political corruption that has given rise to a form of censorship difficult to eliminate.

#### **7.4. Ekho Moskvyy: An independent Russian radio station**

Ekho Moskvyy also received an Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award in 2015. Journalists working for this independent radio station – one of the few to survive in Putin’s Russia – have been harassed by government authorities on various occasions. In March 2014, Roskomnadzor, the government agency that supervises communications, information technology and mass media in Russia, shut down the station’s website after it published a blog post by opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Roskomnadzor reprimanded the station again later that year for airing interviews with journalists covering the activities of Russian insurgents in Ukrainian territory (Haydon, 2015c).

The Russian government has introduced a number of measures unjustifiable from the perspective of human rights in general and online freedom of expression in particular. According to a news article published on the website of the Spanish television network *La Sexta*, the Russian government enacted a law in May 2014 “obliging owners of blogs with over 3,000 visitors per day to publish their identities on their sites and report this information to an official government registry. Vladimir Putin’s administration has also prohibited ‘the use of obscene language’ and required the users and people posting comments on these sites to avoid such speech. Violation of this legislation supposes a fine between 100 and 500 euros. This measure is as absurd as it is controversial in that it only applies to websites hosted in Russia and gives bloggers seeking to avoid government censure the option of switching to a foreign hosting service” (Otto, 2018).

These are not the first laws in Russia to attack online free expression. C. Otto (2018) also notes in the *La Sexta* article, “In 2009, the Russian security agency FSB (the modern reincarnation of the Soviet era KGB) asserted that services provided by Skype, Gmail and Hotmail supposed ‘a large-scale threat to national security’ and initiated procedures to block access to all three sites. In reality, the only threat these three platforms posed was to Russia’s main telecom companies, which had pushed for action out

of a concern for the growing popularity of free Internet calling services. Plans to block these sites were bandied about until 2011, when the government withdrew its support for the measure under international pressure. These are a but a few examples, but there are many more such as the blocking of access to websites critical of homophobic Russian legislation, the criminalisation of P2P users and attacks on social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook”.

Will Haydon (2015c) has noted, “Despite challenges, the station’s news coverage was commended for staying true to its spirit of independence. Reports on the fighting between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukraine government were praised for their even-handedness at a time when the majority of Russian media took a staunchly pro-Kremlin approach. As a result, Venediktov and his colleagues appeared on several blacklists and have been labelled ‘enemies of Russia’”.

In spite of the obstacles they face on a daily basis, the station’s editor-in-chief and his team continue to offer quality programming and non-biased news reports in the heart of Russia.

## **8. Conclusions**

Protecting human rights and freedom of expression in certain countries in the era of information and communications technology is a complicated business.

An analysis of the Index on Censorship’s activities indicates that the organisation employs a combination of journalistic techniques, social mobilisation campaigns and advocacy activities to defend reporters and activists facing censorship and repression. Most of its work is conducted via digital platforms.

Repressive governments threaten, persecute and even occasionally execute journalists and activists who speak out against state policies. Journalists working in adverse environments that do not allow them to exercise their profession from a conventional, neutral perspective often become activists. Those who take this step often spend years convincing their sources and the victims and witnesses of abuses to speak on record and are deeply committed to the people affected by the situations they cover. Convinced that merely investigating and reporting abuses occurring in their countries falls short of what is required, professionals in this category feel compelled to act on behalf of their sources and the protagonists of their stories.

Journalists recognised by the Index on Censorship defend human rights and denounce circumstances in which they are violated, government corruption and abuses perpetrated by private interests and criminal groups. They carry out their work in spite of the serious threats it entails. The subjects of their investigative reporting have been known to acquire media outlets and author’s rights in order to prevent the dissemination of revelations that could undermine their positions of power.

In terms of the possibilities cyberspace has opened up for investigative reporting, the 2015 recipients of the Index on Censorship’s Freedom of Expression Awards recognise that social media platforms have brought more people into the conversation but remain sceptical about the quality of information being circulated via these channels. All feel that social media has helped their work reach a broader audience. They value the initial introduction to their work that television provides but appreciate the permanent exposure that Web-based platforms offer as well.

Given the lack of conventional outlets for their work in the countries they live in and report on, they nevertheless consider personal websites to be crucial to their efforts to keep local audiences informed. News organisations that require land-based facilities and government licenses in order to operate such as Ekho Moskvyy, the independent Russian radio station examined for this study, constantly face the possibility of being shut down by government authorities. Self-censorship – rife in countries such as Russia and China – constitutes another battle in the never-ending struggle for free expression. Despite the opportunities cyberspace offers, much remains to be done to ensure freedom of expression throughout the world. There is no doubt that the information heroes examined in this paper, as well as their colleagues around the world, are doing their part.

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