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Freedom of the Press: A Soft Power Focus for Canada

by Ian Brodie
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CGAI Advisory Council Member
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The term ‘soft power’ is a useful one. It reminds us that the West relies on more than military might or ‘hard power’ to influence the world around it. The West also influences world events through the power of its ideas, culture and institutions. When soft power promotes Western ideas, it helps hard power deterrence to preserve international peace and domestic liberties.

Certainly, countering some of today’s threats to peace and liberty requires hard military power. Force will play a role in defeating enemies like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Force will also help preserve international peace and Western liberties by deterring adversaries in northeast and southeast Europe, in the South and East China Seas and elsewhere. The new Canadian government has announced its intention to create a smaller, leaner military. This intention is based on the hope that distant threats do not pose a direct threat to Canada. Time will tell if that’s a false hope.

But Canada can contribute to peace and liberty in other ways and the new government can expand Canada’s efforts on other fronts.

The end of the Cold War raised hopes that liberal self-government, and the political and economic freedoms needed to sustain it, could expand globally. Look just at the Western Hemisphere. The government of Brian Mulroney set the stage expanding self-government and freedom in the Americas when it negotiated Canada’s entry to the Organization of American States (OAS) and committed it to the OAS Democracy Unit. The government of Jean Chretien doubled down on that commitment at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas in 2001 and by leading efforts to draft the Inter-American Democratic Charter, an expression of the universal commitment to liberal self-government in the region.

But post-Cold War hopes were premature if not misguided. Liberal self-government did advance in some states that were previously unfree. But some once-free states have suffered setbacks. Important advances like the Inter-American Democratic Charter and its explicit recognition of freedom of expression and the press are now under attack. Worryingly, Cuba was invited to the last Summit of the Americas and may be on a path to membership in the OAS without having to commit to even a timetable for respecting these minimums of democratic government.

The projection of soft power has to be based on a domestic consensus and, ideally, a domestic strength. Canada’s soft power efforts will be successful where they are broadly non-partisan and where Canadian capabilities can be put to use. One area where a Canadian consensus could enable successful soft power is in promoting and expanding the global freedom of the press. The central importance of the free press was recognized by the government of John Diefenbaker in its 1960 Bill of Rights and by the Pierre Trudeau government in its 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And this domestic consensus is well grounded. A free press is universally recognized to be part and parcel of liberal self-government by boosting transparency, accountability and public debate. A zealous free press brings a skeptical eye to entrenched power. It builds civil society. And it helps form a public agenda that is separate from any one government’s agenda.

Time and again, would-be authoritarians eventually find they must try to extinguish the free press. Figures from Freedom House and other international monitors show that, over the past decade, press freedoms have been rolled back in the Western Hemisphere and remain severely restricted in Eurasia and Asia. In every place where press freedoms are under attack, poor governance spreads and citizens suffer.



News 1130

During the Cold War, Western governments established international public broadcasters that became trusted sources of news in unfree countries. Radio Canada International, the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were vital tools in sustaining the hope of unfree peoples. Their fidelity to news over propaganda challenged the broadcast monopolies of totalitarian governments. These days, the technologies for collecting and disseminating the news are changing quickly. These changes give Canada's government new opportunities to leverage soft power. A free press no longer depends on networks of high-power broadcast towers, printing presses, paper, or dangerous *samizdat* distribution networks. Simple logistics are not the barrier they once were. But free access to radio waves and the digital commons does matter. Canada's previous government recognized unique Canadian resources like Toronto's Citizen Lab, which works in many languages to liberate digital communications from authoritarian governments and their online Great Walls. That government was particularly concerned to use this soft power to free the press in Iran. The new government may have concerns in other parts of the world. And that is to the good since similar efforts are needed in many places.

Beyond promoting the use of liberating technologies in unfree countries, the new government can also use Canada's soft power to provide direct help to journalists, bloggers and other parts of the press. Canadian news organizations are shedding reporters as they cope with new business models and revenue pressures. Why not expand efforts to employ some of these unemployed reporters to work with the independent press in unfree countries?

Press freedom was under direct attack in Argentina recently as the previous government tried to escape an economic and political crisis of its own making. The country is now moving in a better



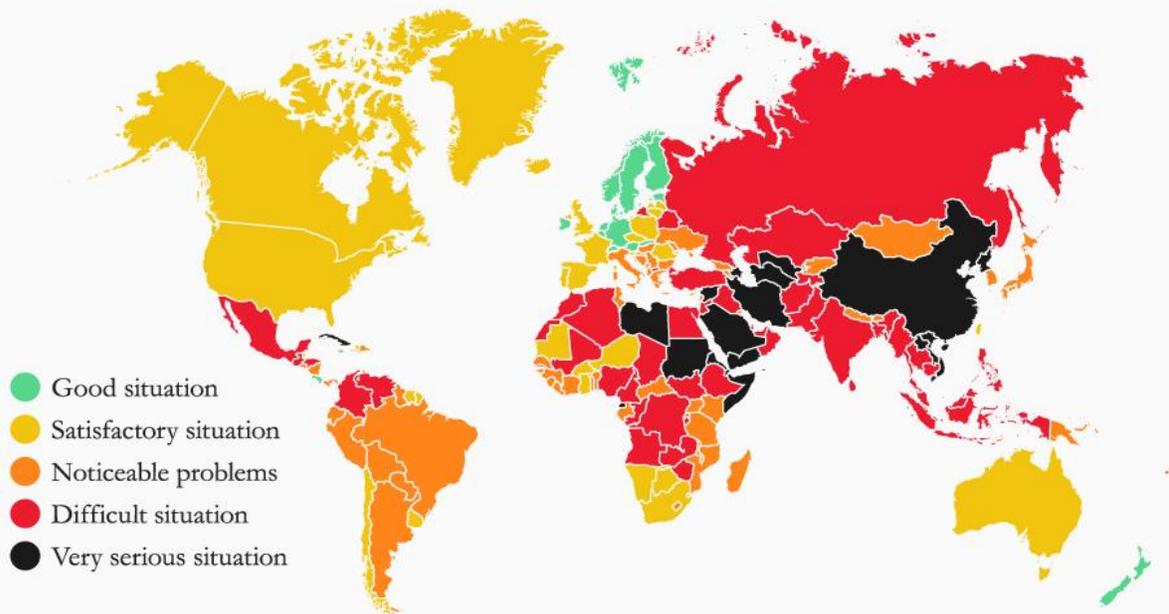
direction. In Venezuela, an economic disaster born of political malpractice worsens by the day. Government forces attack press freedoms as part of their broader effort to contain every form of political opposition. In Cuba, the change of American strategy and the looming political transition opens room for Canada, the country's leading foreign investor, and Canadians, the country's leading source of foreign exchange earnings, to foster a freer civil society and with it a freer press. Justin Trudeau could use his family's credibility with the regime and his own international celebrity to pry open more space for political freedoms.

The recent conduct of the Chinese Foreign Minister in upbraiding a Canadian journalist for asking difficult questions during a media conference showed the critical importance of the free press in Canada. Canada's international interests and those of the Chinese people would both be advanced by a soft power effort to expand press freedoms in that country. The Chinese regime's recent moves against Ren Zhiqiang, a businessman and Communist Party member, for his criticisms of President Xi Jinping's push to curb dissent illustrates the new challenges of ensuring the free press, but also the new opportunities for expanding press freedoms. Freedom of the press also underpins freedom of intellectuals, academics and other citizens.

International public broadcasters provide accurate and independent sources of news to those living under oppressive regimes. Those services still have a role in any soft power strategy. With a modest budget and some creative leadership, Canadian soft power can enable domestic, on-the-ground, digital reporting about oppressive regimes around the world and help preserve press freedoms that are essential to the cause of peace and liberty in Canada and abroad.

World press freedom visualised

Countries ranked by level of press freedom in 2016



Sources: Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index



Statista

► **About the Author**

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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