

The Chill of Impunity

Worldwide problem poses challenges for free expression community

IMPUNITY, as it relates to free expression, thrives in societies that allow people and organizations to threaten and harm those who exercise their right to free expression—including journalists, bloggers, activists and artists. The threats often extend to their families, friends and colleagues.

“Impunity exists when crimes committed against journalists and media workers go uninvestigated and unpunished,” says Heather Oorange, campaigns and advocacy specialist with IFEX, the global network of free expression organizations. “Such crimes range from intimidation and threats to attacks and murder. A culture of impunity silences free expression in all its forms.”

Impunity makes people afraid to question authority. Corruption and abuses of power go unchecked, leading to more oppression, injustice and violations of human rights. “When no one is held responsible, and everyone knows where the threats are coming from, there’s an incredible chill,” says Annie Game, executive director of CJFE and IFEX. “Writers stop writing. Reporters stop reporting. People stop expressing themselves, and that diminishes democracy.”

“It leads to further violations,” adds Rachael Kay, IFEX manager. “Where people in society learn that nothing will happen if they intimidate or threaten others, it becomes an accepted form of silencing people.”

Sometimes, those ordering the silencing are involved in criminal or corrupt organizations. But in some countries, it is the people in power behind the threats, and they are liter-

ally getting away with murder.

UNESCO’s director-general underlined the magnitude of the problem in a report to a meeting of the organization in March 2012. The report, *The Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity*, stated, “the primary aim of guaranteeing the safety of journalists, and striving to combat impunity of the perpetrators of crimes committed against journalists, are both essential to preserving the fundamental right to freedom of expression, ensured by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as to promote democracy.”

Many of the crimes cited in the UNESCO report not only go unprosecuted, but they are not even investigated. In those cases where charges are laid, they are often filed against the person who committed the murder but not those who ordered the assassination.

Although many people think of impunity as a problem only affecting third-world countries and perpetrated by oppressive regimes, it is an international issue—and it has happened in Canada.

In 1998, Tara Singh Hayer, publisher of *Indo-Canadian Times*, a weekly Punjabi-language newspaper, was shot to death at his Surrey, B.C., home; 14 years later, his murder remains unprosecuted. He is the only journalist in Canada to be assassinated for his work.

For several years, Hayer had been the victim of threats and intimidation. In 1986, just seven months after the bombing of Air India Flight 182—an incident Hayer reported on—a bomb was left on his paper’s doorstep. It was defused with no injury. In August 1988, a week after he wrote an article about the Air India bombing—a story that implicated Canadian Sikh separatist group Babbar Khalsa International (BKI)—Hayer was shot. One bullet hit his spine, paralyzing him. The shooter was sentenced to 14 years in prison, but Hayer believed someone else ordered the attack. If he was right, that person has not been brought to justice.

In 1998, Hayer was supposed to testify as the Crown prosecution’s witness against Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajai Singh Bagri, BKI members alleged to have planned the bombing

of Air India Flight 182 and a bombing at a Japanese airport. However, Hayer was killed on Nov. 18, 1998.

Although many people connected to Hayer believe someone has information about his murder, they say no one will come forward because of the fear that they or their loved ones will be in danger.

Since 2000, CJFE has honoured Canadian journalists who risk their safety with the Tara Singh Hayer Memorial Award. Honourees include Michel Auger, who was attacked after writing about the biker war in Quebec; Guy-André Kieffer, who disappeared in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, after receiving death threats; Zahra Kazemi, who died in an Iranian prison due to injuries inflicted during an interrogation; and Radio-Canada’s television program *Enquête*, which won in 2012 for its investigation of corruption and Mafia involvement in Quebec’s construction industry.

In response to impunity, IFEX coordinates the International Day to End Impunity (IDEI), held each year on Nov. 23. Launched in 2011, the goal of the day is to raise awareness about the factors that create and sustain a culture of impunity, while encouraging citizens around the world to take action. The date marks the anniversary of the 2009 Ampatuan massacre in the Philippines, in which 58 people, including 32 journalists and media workers, were murdered. So far, no one involved in carrying out the massacre has been brought to justice.

Although impunity often refers to the silencing of journalists and media workers, a culture that targets journalists will target any citizen who speaks up.

“Where there is no accountability for such violence, the whole culture suffers,” Game says. “It is not a true democratic culture if this is happening. Impunity is so pernicious and it’s very complex. We can talk about journalists and the culture of impunity, but there are artists, teachers and lawyers that this happens to. How can you participate in a meaningful way in democracy with this going on?” ❧

Heidi Turner is a freelance writer in Abbotsford, B.C.

What we did

Webpage



Toolkit



Infographic



Cartoon contest



23 Actions in 23 Days



Trailer



Interactive game



"We 23 stand among many cases throughout the world, and are of many races, creeds and situations, but we all have the same battle cry and the same purpose: we will NOT be silenced."

- Jiveth Bedoya Lima,
Colombian journalist,
profiled on 2 November

"Being part of this international campaign gave me a huge moral push to continue my work."

- Jaffer Ishtayeh,
Palestinian photojournalist,
profiled on 8 November

"Your game is wonderful. I am going to use it as a demo of a social cause game in my class and for a potential client too."

- Miriam Verburg,
Canadian teacher and consultant

What we accomplished



Map legend

- 54 IFEX members participated
- 22 events
- Media coverage in 6 continents

"I support the day because the culture of impunity in Cambodia is a huge issue, impacting every area of society."

- Ramana Sorn,
Cambodia Center for Human Rights

2012

21,813
2,600



Website visits
Actions taken

up from 2011

↑ 137 percent
58 percent

"I am grateful and impressed with the work of this campaign."

- Leslie McDanquah,
Media Foundation for West Africa

Social media buzz increased by 89 percent.

Brought to you by



Illustrator



Game Developer



Members and Staff



Translators



Graphic Designer