

International Encounter of Publishers and Booksellers
Freedom to Publish: An International Perspective
Lima, Peru, July 2019
Hugo Setzer, President, International Publishers Association

Many thanks to the Peruvian Publishers Association, to its president, José Carlos Alvarino, for organizing this meeting and for his kind invitation for me to participate. It is an honor to be with you today.

The International Publishers Association, IPA, is the largest and most important federation of publishers' associations globally. We have 81 member associations in 69 countries and through them, we represent and defend the interests of thousands of publishers worldwide.

Our work has to do basically with two main pillars. The first is copyright protection.

Copyright, which is the regulatory framework that allows authors and publishers to recover the investment made to create and produce new works in all genres, is today under attack. We are currently experiencing a concerted attack by major technology companies that have to some extent succeeded in presenting copyright as an outdated system that only blocks legitimate access to content and enriches publishers. It is somewhat ironic that the largest and wealthiest corporations known to mankind now are accusing publishers of enriching themselves through copyright.

The best protection of intellectual property, however, comes second when you are at risk of being persecuted, imprisoned or even killed because of the works you publish.

Freedom to publish is threatened all over the world.

In China, we have the case of Gui Minhai, a publisher and bookseller in Hong Kong who was kidnapped in Thailand and is currently imprisoned in China, due to the publication of books critical of Xi Jinping's government.

In Turkey, publishers, teachers, writers and journalists are persecuted and imprisoned by the government of President Erdogan. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, to date there are still 68 communicators imprisoned in Turkey.

In Bangladesh, publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan was killed by an extremist group because of the books he published. His widow, Razia Rahman, has courageously continued his legacy, opening a cultural centre in his memory.

My own country is qualified as one of the most insecure to practice journalism. According to Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, since 2000 at least 144 journalists have been murdered. In this context it is really worrying to have a president who threatens journalists: "be prudent with what you write, otherwise you already know what happens ...".

On many occasions a violent act against a publisher has the function not only of silencing a critical voice, but also of frightening others.

Publishers around the world must stand together to show that we are not afraid, as fear becomes more and more a form of control.

For this reason, every year at the IPA we award a prize for freedom to publish, which seeks to acknowledge publishers working under difficult circumstances. The award is called "Prix Voltaire", in recognition of the philosopher from the Enlightenment who is credited with the phrase "I may disagree with your opinion, but I would give my life to defend your freedom to express it".

The person who has been awarded this year's Prix Voltaire is the Egyptian publisher Khaled Lotfy. Khaled is the founder of the Tanmia bookstore and publishing house in Cairo and on 4 February was sentenced to five years in prison for publishing the Arabic translation of the book "The Angel: The Egyptian Spy who Saved Israel". The book has become so popular that there is even a film based on it. The International Publishers Association demands from the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi Khaled's unconditional release.

In addition to censorship, the phenomenon we see with alarming growth is self-censorship. In many places authors and publishers are affected, not daring to write or publish controversial content that could put them at risk.

Censorship and self-censorship prevent publishers from contributing to a more plural, tolerant and inclusive society through the publication of diverse ideas and opinions, stories and novels, educational and scientific information and so much more. Freedom to publish is essential, not only for a social and economic environment in which authors and publishers can develop and grow, but for a functional democracy.

Conclusion

Stephen Pinker says in his book "Enlightenment now" that "At a few times in history, people have hit on technologies that multiply, indeed, exponentiate, the growth of knowledge, such as writing, printing and electronic media."

Our industry is at the core of these technological developments and therefore of the progress of humanity. We need to acknowledge and celebrate this fact.

We should be proud of our profession. We work for a better world by bringing the creation of the intellect of countless authors to as many readers as possible. Publishers entertain, educate, bring carefully curated scientific information to those who need it. In short, we carry out our contribution to humanity by providing reliable stories and information to all.

Let us be proud of it. Let us stand together to defend our right to contribute to society by publishing any work that seems relevant to us, so that there are no more publishers silenced, imprisoned or murdered.

Thank you.