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Arab Publishers Conference

Panel discussion on Freedom to Publish – *delivered by Richard Charkin, IPA Vice-President*

Freedom of expression and freedom to publish are the most basic of human rights, as creative thought is what makes us human. Freedom of expression and freedom to publish are also inextricably linked to each other. Freedom to publish is one form of freedom of expression: it is the freedom of authors and publishers to put thoughts in writing, regardless of what those thoughts may be. Furthermore, the two are closely linked to publishing, as the idea that the expression of dissent or subversion views should be tolerated, and not censored or punished by law, developed alongside the rise of the printing press and publishing.

Because these two principles are inextricably linked to publishing, one of IPA's core missions is to uphold and protect them. IPA promotes the principles of free expression set out in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "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."¹ Likewise, publishers have the right to freely choose the works they wish to publish, how and when they wish to publish them, and to make further editorial and commercial choices with respect to such publications without government interference. Governments cannot seek to influence, pressure, or punish publishers through the arbitrary use of administrative procedures, criminal investigations or other governmental acts.

In particular, misconceived interpretations of patriotism, terrorism, or national security are obstacles to freedom to publish, as well as blasphemy and criminal defamation laws. In 2010, IPA lobbied against the UN combating religious defamation. Human rights protect individual human beings, not institutions or religions. Criticism of religions and religious practices, particularly when religions are integral to governments, must be allowed, no matter how much we disagree or disapprove. As noted philosopher and MIT professor Noam Chomsky noted, "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all."²

Therefore, IPA upholds and defends the right of publishers to publish and distribute their works in complete freedom. IPA steadfastly opposes any attempt or threat to restrict that freedom. We do this by monitoring, assisting, lobbying, networking, showcasing, and leading fact-finding and trial observation missions. We also call the world's attention to those bravely fighting for these freedoms with the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize.

¹ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

² John Mark Ministries, *John Pilger interviews Noam Chomsky*, <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/14177.htm>.

Freedom to publish is the foundation of our successful and stable political systems, drives progress in science, and strengthens our economies. Reporters Without Borders (RWB) is an international NGO advocating freedom of the press and freedom of information. It publishes a Press Freedom Index every year, ranking all countries in the world on their level of freedom to publish and freedom of expression. While the index does not take into account countries' political systems, those countries in the top ranks have consistently been democracies, while those ranking lowest are ruled by dictatorial regimes. Furthermore, research undertaken by the World Bank has indicated that freedom of speech, and the process of accountability that follows it, have a significant impact in the quality of governance of a country.

Freedom of expression and freedom to publish are linked to political debate and democracy. The concept of democracy is that of self-government by the people. For the people to self-govern, there needs to be a well-informed electorate. This requires the free flow of information and ideas.

The desire to manipulate opinion or suppress information can—and often does—stem from a desire to benefit society. For example, books are often banned because their subject matter is deemed inappropriate for children. However, choosing manipulation or suppression negates the democratic ideal. Democracy cannot truly function if those in power are able to manipulate the electorate by withholding information and stifling criticism. Authoritarian regimes suppress any idea that goes against the grain which they have unilaterally established. They do not leave room for the diversity of opinion that is the basis of creativity, the basis of inquiry, and the basis of social (and often economic) growth.

Indeed, freedom to publish is essential to economy. All of society benefits from a well-functioning publishing system. This is because publishers, by spreading both old and new ideas, help foster innovation. Innovation is the key to solving complex problems, and today, it seems to be ubiquitous as companies boast about their innovative products. Indeed, innovation is a good thing for the economy: many of the top economies in the world are also the most innovative. The top 10 most innovative economies are: Sweden, the US, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Australia, the UK, Canada, and Japan.³ These are countries which are strong proponents of freedom to publish. 5 of those countries are in the top 10 countries on the Press Freedom Index (Finland, #1; Netherlands #2; Norway #3; Denmark #6 and Sweden #10). The remaining 5 are in the top 32, except for Japan which was ranked #53 after an increased lack of transparency on subjects related to Fukushima. Previously, however, Japan was ranked #22.⁴

Centuries ago, newness and innovation were seen as something to be wary of. Throughout the sixteenth century, novelty, innovation, and the like were considered to be suspect in practice. In

³ "Most innovative economies" *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/news/pictures/slideshow?articleId=USRTR2A3BU#a=1>

⁴ Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index 2013," http://fr.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement_2013_gb-bd.pdf

1624, the French mathematician Jean Baptiste Morin asserted that, “There is nothing more seditious and pernicious than a new doctrine.”⁵ Reformers were regularly accused of being “novel” by their scholastic opponents: the intention was not to compliment, but rather to call their ideas into question.

Today, detractors of new ideas remain. Books are still banned; libraries are still destroyed; authors, reporters and publishers are still threatened, imprisoned, and sometimes even killed. Novel thoughts and differences of opinion, however, are what drive our economies, lead to progress in science, and anchor our political systems. Citizens must be allowed both freedom to express themselves as well as the freedom to consume whatever information they desire, provided by publishers operating without censorship or government control.

To conclude, I’d like to turn to the essence of what it means to be a publisher. The origin of the verb “to publish” comes from the Latin “publicare.” “Publicare” simply means “to make public” or “to show and tell the people.” Publishers aim to help spread different ideas to as many people as possible. This is good for science and for creativity. It is the basis of civilization. However, publishers can only function well if there is freedom of enterprise and freedom from government competition. To limit what can and cannot be published goes against the very essence of publishing.

Advocating for freedom to publish is not denying that ideas can be dangerous. Ideas are very powerful. They can lead to great change, but they can also be dangerous to an incumbent. This may be why we are still fighting for the basic rights of freedom of expression and freedom to publish all over the world. If ideas weren’t so powerful, it wouldn’t matter what you published. Individual publishers and national publishers’ associations have a responsibility to engage in freedom to publish activities both nationally and internationally and to show solidarity with publishers that are persecuted.

As I said yesterday, IPA has closely monitored the Arab Spring. While we are heartened to see this massive push for democracy and human rights, we have not yet seen tangible evidence of a systematic evolution in the way freedom to publish and freedom of expression are approached. The Egyptian PA has established a national Freedom to Publish Committee to promote freedom to publish and address issues related to it. It is and IPA’s sincere hope that publishers associations throughout the rest of the Arab world will soon follow the Egyptian PA’s lead and establish freedom to publish committees. As this transformation occurs across the Arab world, IPA hopes that we will see the emergence of an independent and free publishing system. It is a rare opportunity to transform restrictions on publishing and expression. It is up to you, the publishers of the Arab world, to lead and to defend the basic human rights of freedom of expression and freedom to publish.

⁵ Sorell, Tom. *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension Between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59.