UNESCO identifies threats to press freedom in Mekong Region

Thursday, 5 May 2011, 11:13 am
Press Release: UNESCO

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least six reporters who worked primarily online were killed in 2010. And for the first time, more online reporters were jailed than those working in traditional media in 2008.


World Press Freedom Day is commemorated annually to examine and ensure the fundamental principles of press freedom: to evaluate media independence globally; to defend the media from attacks; and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.

“It serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom – a grim reminder that in dozens of countries around the world, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists, editors and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained, and even murdered,” said UNESCO Bangkok Director Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim, during his welcoming speech.

Over the last decade, over 500 journalists have lost their lives during the course of their duty. Sixty killings were reported worldwide in 2010 alone.

President of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights Ou Virak said 13 journalists in Cambodia were killed between 1992 and 2008.

“Till today no one has been brought to justice,” Mr. Virak said.

Research on media development in Cambodia, funded by UNESCO, and presented at the World Press Freedom Day event, stated that 34 per cent of Cambodian journalists have encountered threats.

These include threats of murder, disproportionate legal action and physical violence to reporters and their families. Thirty six per cent of respondents said they were afraid of these threats.

While 95 per cent of journalist respondents said they were aware of journalism ethics and 91 per cent claimed media ethics were very important, over half of media respondents said that the collective media is mostly biased.
and not professional. Almost fifty per cent of respondents cited government legislation as the major factor obstructing their ability to write news.

Reports on Laos PDR and Thailand’s media development, funded by UNESCO, were also presented at the World Press Freedom Day event.

The Lao PDR report stated that the state run media of Lao PDR is viewed as a public relations vehicle and a voice of the government. Some other criticisms were that the news in that country is too technical and official and it is not challenging, in-depth and critical enough. However, many accepted that there are obvious positive changes in the media in Lao PDR.

“We finally have the media law [which was officially released in 2009],” said Vannaphone Sitthirath, a documentary filmmaker at Samsains in Lao PDR.

“The government has recently allowed the private sector to own television and radio stations and print media outlets and private companies to produce programmes and buy airtime on government TV and radio channels. In general, the government has opened more for journalists to criticize the negative phenomenon, but of course to a certain extent.”

Regarding the research in Thailand, the overall results and analysis suggest that Thai people’s perception of the media as a platform for democratic discourse is still uncertain but it is gearing towards a more positive direction.

A public service broadcasting model implemented in Thailand projects the media’s role as a vehicle for democratic discourse. The Thai Public Broadcasting Service (TPBS) was established in 2008 to employ an independent and transparent system of governance indicated by the way the board of governors were selected.

“Public broadcast, in general, happens by desire. But for Thailand it happens as an accident. It happened because of the coup. Maybe we can call this a positive legacy of the coup,” said Thepchai Yong, Managing Director of Thai PBS.

“In Thailand and other countries, the broadcasting industry is dominated by commercial broadcasting and its mission is to make profits,” Mr. Yong said. “But we treat viewers as citizens rather than as consumers. So our mission is to enlighten the viewers with educational thought provoking programmes.

“However, in public broadcasting there are barriers; barriers that not only broadcasting has to face but also the members of the society who have to stand up and defend, especially when it comes to issues of independency.”

This year, the Word Press Day Freedom theme focused on new media. Internet-based applications, particularly the emergence of social networks, user-generated content, and micro-blogging, have enabled nearly every Internet user to be a potential broadcaster with the ability to rapidly create, modify, and share digital content and knowledge with millions of other users, both locally and globally.

These changes introduce new patterns of communication, break down country borders, and create new forms of creative expression, journalism, and participation.

“In Cambodia, there has been a growing participation in expressing opinions through Twitter and Facebook. The young people write short messages to express their dissatisfaction, concern and reports on social issues,” said Mr. Virak from the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights.

According to Mr. Virak, around 400,000 Cambodians have Facebook accounts.

This phenomenon is similar to Thailand. Arthit Suriyawongkul, Coordinator of the Thai Netizen Network, said at the World Press Day Freedom event that in the past, people in Thailand used Facebook for games, but since the country’s recent political turmoil, they started to post news and express their opinions about incidents.
In Thailand, there are seven million Facebook users, of which six million live in Bangkok.

Mr. Suriyawongkul said in his view new media are not replacing traditional media but completing one another. However, he emphasized that ethics should be attached to all types of media.

“And it’s always a good image for any government to give freedom of expression,” he said.

For more information on the media development reports and World Press Freedom Day, contact Susanne Ornager, Adviser for Communication and Information in Asia, UNESCO Bangkok at s.ornager@unesco.org.

ENDS