

## **International Public Opinion Says Government Should Not Limit Internet Access**

April 30, 2009

**All Nations Polled Support Principle of Press Freedom, and Half Want More Freedom  
But Many Muslims and Russians Accept Press Restrictions to Preserve Political Stability**

[Country-by-Country Summaries \(PDF\)](#)

[Questionnaire/methodology \(PDF\)](#)

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*This report presents an updated analysis of a poll of 20 nations originally released in advance of International Press Freedom Day in 2008, a year that marked the 60th anniversary of the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*



In all nations polled there is robust support for the principle that the media should be free of government control and that citizens should even have access to material from hostile countries. With just a few exceptions majorities say that the government should not have the right to limit access to the internet. But while most publics say the government should not have the right to prohibit publishing material it thinks will be politically destabilizing, a majority in several predominantly Muslim countries and nearly half of Russians say that governments should have such a right. In many countries, majorities want more media freedom.

*(Photo: Stefano Corso)*

The poll of 20,512 respondents was conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org, a collaborative research project involving research centers from around the world and managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Polling was conducted between January 10 and October 24, 2008.

Interviews were conducted in 22 nations, though in three of them not all questions were asked. Those nations interviewed include most of the world's largest nations --China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia--as well as Argentina, Azerbaijan, Britain, Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, Poland, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, and the Palestinian territories. The public in Hong Kong was also polled. These nations represent 61 percent of the world population.

### Worldwide Support for Principle of Media Freedom

The broad principle of media freedom gets very robust support. Majorities in all nations asked say that it is important "for the media to be free to publish news and ideas without government control."

On average, 81 percent said it is "important," with 53 percent saying it is "very important." In no country did more than 29 percent say that media freedom is "not very important" or "not important at all."

Citizens are also seen as having the right to read publications from hostile countries. Respondents were asked whether people in their country should "have the right to read publications from all other countries including those that might be considered enemies." Once again, majorities in all countries affirmed this right; on average 80 percent.

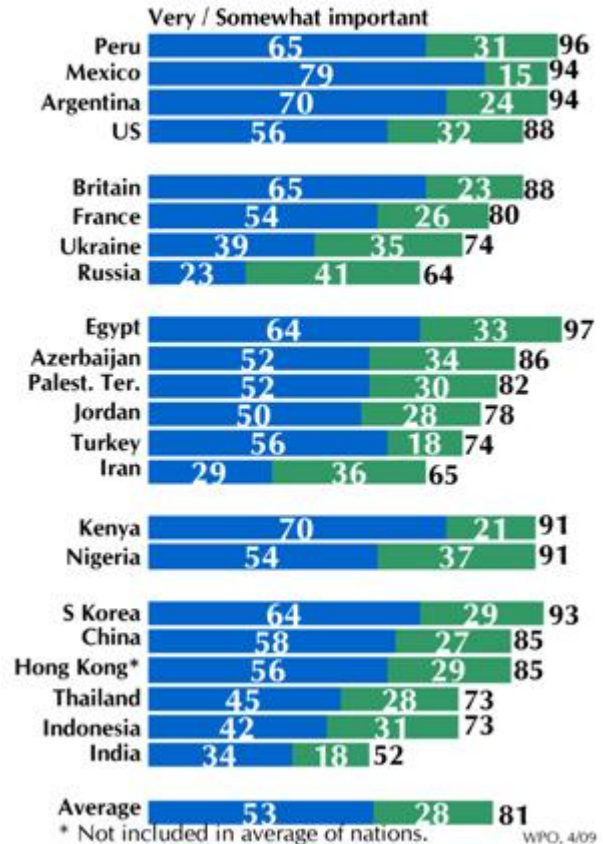
The only country with fewer than seven in 10 agreeing was India, where 56 percent agreed. India also had the highest percentage (33%) saying that access to such publications should be limited.

### Internet Censorship

The Internet is a significant new medium for news information, and ideas. As some governments have sought to regulate access to the Internet, it

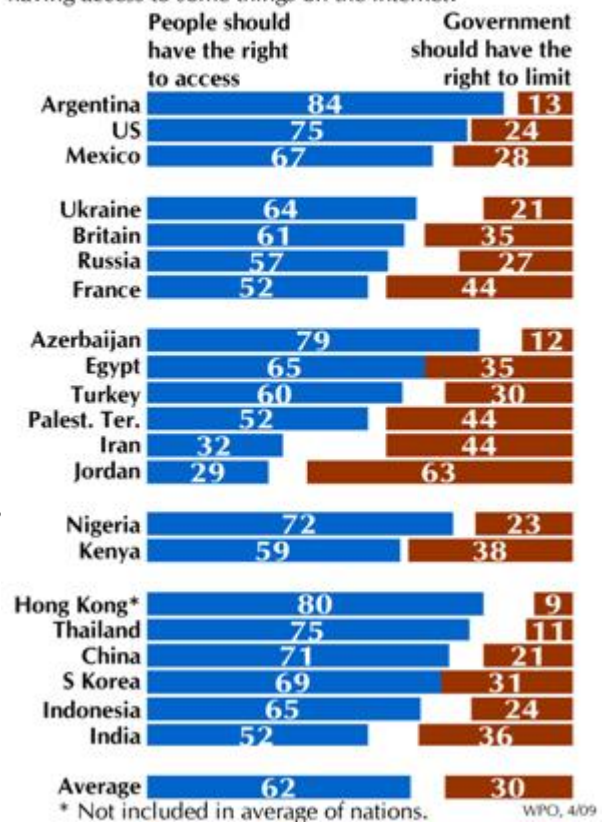
### Media Freedom

How important is it for the media to be free to publish news and ideas without government control?



### Internet Censorship

Do you think people in [country] should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet or do you think the government should have the right to prevent people from having access to some things on the internet?



has also become a new arena for conflict about media freedom.

Presented the issue of Internet censorship, a majority in all but two of the countries that were asked this question said that "people should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet." On average 62 percent endorsed full access, while 30 percent said that the government should have the right to "prevent people from having access to some things on the Internet."

In China, a country whose Internet censorship policies have received a great deal of international attention, 71 percent of the public said that "people should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet;" only 21 percent of Chinese endorsed their government's right to limit access.

The only two publics to not endorse full access were Jordan and Iran. In Jordan 63 percent supported government regulation of the Internet, as did 44 percent in Iran (32% favor unlimited access).

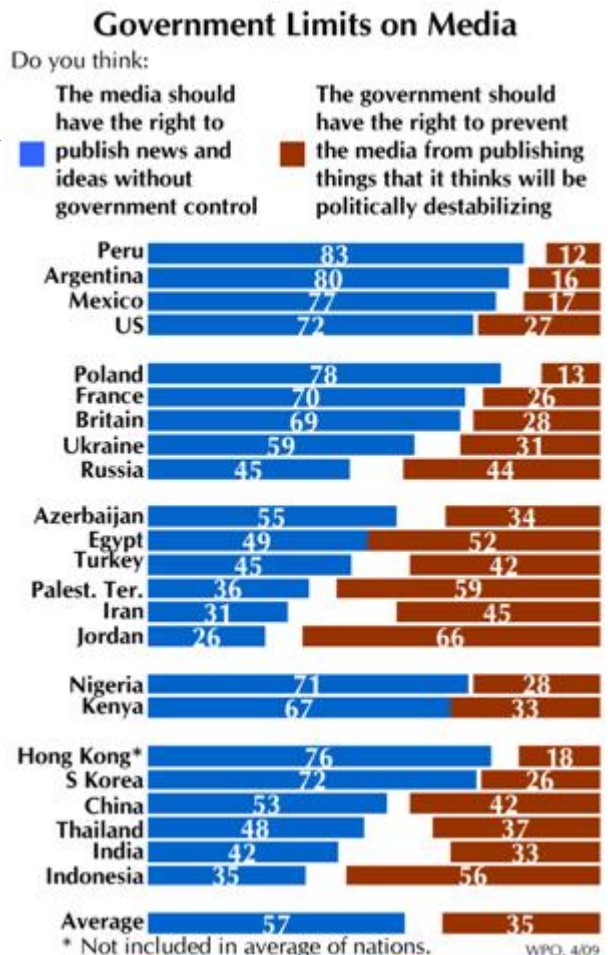
However majorities in other Middle Eastern nations favored the right to full Internet access, including Egypt (65%), Turkey (60%), and the Palestinian territories (52%). Two other majority-Muslim countries polled also endorsed this right: Indonesia (65%) and Azerbaijan (79%).

Though majorities in all countries except Jordan and Iran favored the right, there is also significant minority support for some government control of access to information on the Internet in France (44%), the Palestinian territories (44%), Kenya (38%), India (36%), and Great Britain (35%).

### Controlling Potentially Destabilizing Information

Presented with a choice between an argument in favor of media freedom without government control and the argument that "government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it thinks will be politically destabilizing," majorities or pluralities in 15 publics polled felt that that the risk of political instability does not justify government control.

However, in six predominantly Muslim nations and in Russia this scenario prompted considerable support for government control. Majorities in Jordan (66%), the Palestinian territories (59%), and Indonesia (56%) supported government control of the media when the government thinks that publishing some things might be politically destabilizing. In Iran, a plurality (45%) supported government control under such circumstances (31% felt the media should be able to publish



freely). Views were divided in Russia (45% to 44%), Egypt (49% to 52%), and Turkey (45% to 42%).

This does not, however, mean that any of these publics favor greater government regulation in general. Rather, in four of these cases majorities favored greater media freedom--Egypt (64%), the Palestinian territories (62%), Jordan (56%), and Indonesia (53%). Only small minorities favored less freedom in Iran (9%), Turkey (30%), and Russia (17%).

Those countries with strong majorities continuing to favor media freedom even when it may be destabilizing include Peru (83%), Argentina (80%), Poland (78%), Mexico (77%), the US (72%), South Korea (72%), Nigeria (71%), France (70%), Great Britain (69%), and Kenya (67%). Smaller majorities or pluralities in three other countries also preferred media freedom over government control: Ukraine (59%), Azerbaijan (55%), China (53%), Thailand (48%), and India (42%).

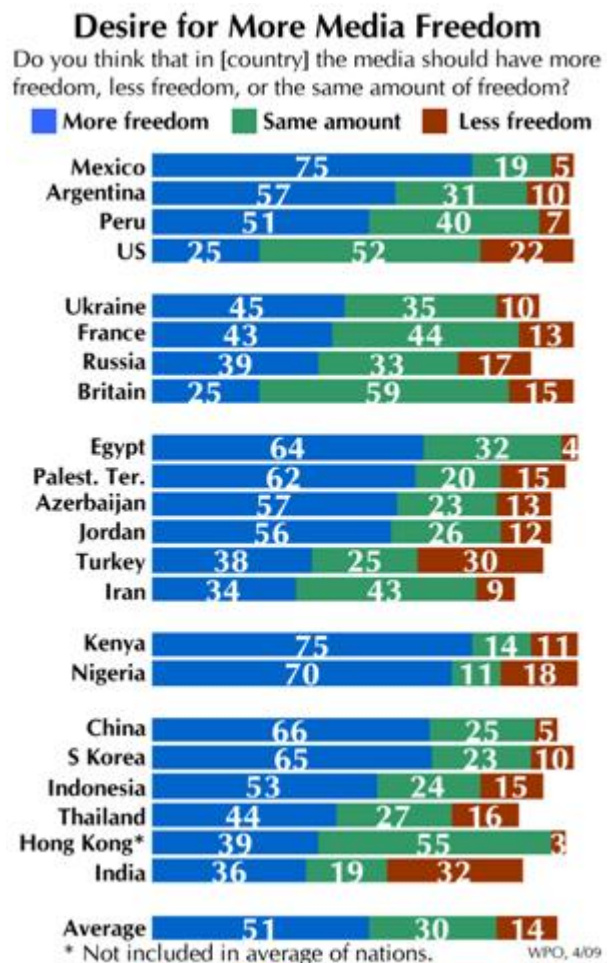
### Widespread Desire for More Freedom

In 12 nations a majority favored more media freedom and in another six their publics leaned in that direction. Just three countries are largely content and in no country did more than one in three favor less freedom.

The 12 nations with a majority calling for more freedom included Mexico (75%), Kenya (75%), Nigeria (70%), China (66%), South Korea (65%), Egypt (64%), the Palestinian territories (62%), Azerbaijan (57%), Argentina (56%), Jordan (56%), and Peru (51%).

An additional five countries had substantial numbers favoring greater freedom. These included Ukraine (45%), Thailand (44%), France (43%), Russia (39%), Turkey (38%), and India (36%). It should be noted, though, that in Turkey and India there was an unusually large number calling for less freedom (30 and 32%, respectively).

Three countries expressed relative contentment. Only small minorities called for more freedom in the United States (25%), Great Britain (25%) and Iran (34%). Majorities in Britain (59%) and the United States (52%) said that they have the right amount of freedom, as did 43 percent in Iran. In the United States an unusually large 22 percent called for less freedom--approximately the same number of those calling for more (25%). This is



in contrast to Britain and Iran where those calling for more freedom were significantly more numerous than those calling for less (Britain: 25 to 15%; Iran: 34 to 9%).

On average, across all nations polled, 51 percent said that they would like their media to have more freedom, 14 percent favored less freedom, and 30 percent favored the same amount of freedom.

### Perceived Status of Media Freedom in Country

This poll also assessed public views of how free the media are in their own country. In all nations polled, a majority said that media in their country have either "a lot" of freedom (30% across countries) or "some" freedom (41%). In no country polled did a majority say "not very much" or "none at all."

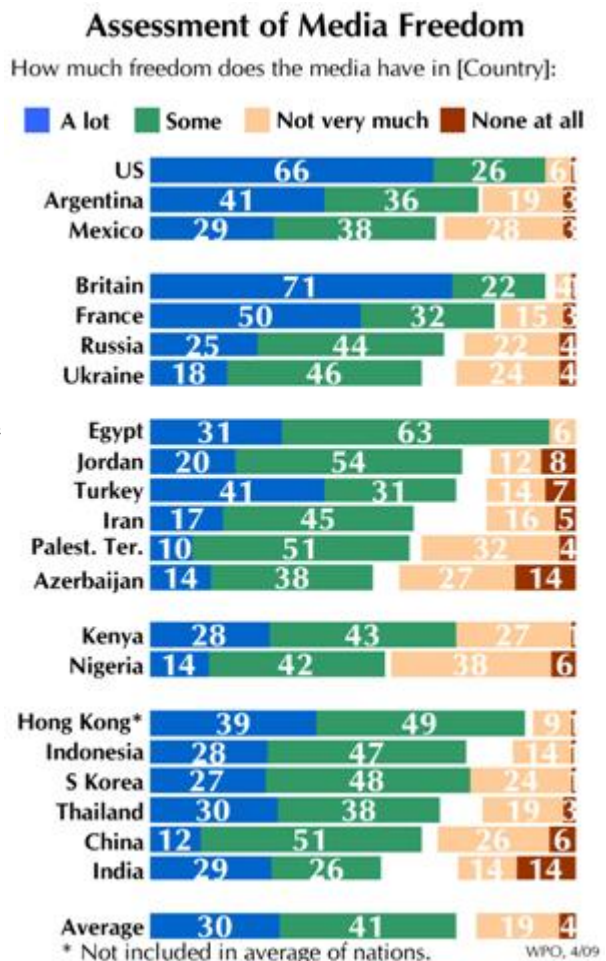
This may not be surprising. Even when governments, or other forces, do exercise control over the media, they usually create an environment where control is not complete, where "some freedom" is present.

In only three countries polled did 50 percent or more say that the media in their country have a "lot of" freedom: Great Britain (71%), the United States (66%), and France (50%).

The largest percentages saying the media have either not very much or no freedom were found in Nigeria (44%), Azerbaijan (41%), the Palestinian territories (36%), and China (32%).

There is a clear correspondence between how people perceive media freedom in their country and outside evaluations. For example, the organization Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF, or Reporters without Borders) ranked 169 countries in terms of their media freedom (see [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org) for details of their measures). There is a correlation of 0.64 between the 2007 RSF rankings of countries in terms of media freedom and the proportion of the public in those countries saying in the poll that there was a lot of freedom.

In the poll, the three countries rated by at least half of their citizens as having "a lot" of media freedom also had three of the four highest ranks in the RSF 2007 Index: Great Britain (24th), France (31st), and the United States (48th). South Korea had a ranking of 39 among the 169



RSF-ranked countries, but only 27 percent of Koreans said there was a lot of media freedom in their country.

Those nations where very few citizens polled said that there was "a lot" of media freedom also got low rankings among the 169 countries in the RSF index: the Palestinian territories 158th, China 163rd, Azerbaijan 139th, Nigeria 131st, Iran 166th, and Ukraine 92nd.

There also appears to be a relationship between the actual level of freedom--perceived by respondents or outside evaluators--and expressed dissatisfaction. In the three countries where half or more of the public said that there is "a lot" of media freedom, and who scored relatively high on the RSF Index, the public tended to indicate that they want the media to have the "same amount of freedom." This was the case in Britain (59%), the United States (52%), and France (44%), though in France another 43 percent said they want more freedom.

In the 14 nations where the publics characterized their country as having "some" rather than "a lot" of media freedom, majorities in nine said that there should be more media freedom: Mexico (75%), Nigeria (70%), China (66%), South Korea (65%), Egypt (64%), the Palestinian territories (62%), Azerbaijan (57%), Jordan (56%), and Indonesia (53%).

Argentina displayed a similar pattern: a slim plurality (41%) said their country had "a lot" of media freedom and 36 percent said it had "some" freedom. A majority of Argentines (57%) did think the country should have more freedom than it currently has.

In six other countries that said they had "some" media freedom, the view was more mixed: Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Thailand, India, and Iran. In none of the six did a majority say there was a lot of media freedom, and each of the six countries received low RSF Index rankings on media freedom. However, in none of the six did majorities say that there should be more media freedom.

In five of the countries, support for more media freedom is the most common response, but not a majority: Russia (39%), Ukraine (45%), Turkey (38%), Thailand (44%), and India (36%). Here, the publics seem to recognize that media freedom is at least somewhat limited; they also said that media freedom was important, but a majority of the people were not demanding more.

Among Iranians, only 17 percent of the public said there is a lot of media freedom, but only 34 percent said there should be more freedom in their country, and the most common response (43%) was that there should be the same amount of freedom as there is currently.

People with greater education tend to support media freedom more than those with less education. This pattern is evident in response to questions on the importance of media freedom, whether the media should be free to publish without government control, whether people should be able to read publications from other countries even those considered enemies, and whether people should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet. Those with a college degree supported media freedom across each of these issues more so than those with less than high school educations by magnitudes ranging between 7-14 points. However, even those with the lowest level of education supported media freedom on all these questions.

Education has no effect, however, on people's view of how much media freedom their country has or how much it should have.

The effect of age showed a different pattern. Older and younger people showed little difference in the importance of media freedom, whether the media should be free of government control, or on whether people should have the right to read publications from other countries. But people 60 years and older (though still a majority of 52%) were less likely than younger respondents (66%) to feel that people should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet.

The oldest respondents (40%) also were more likely to say that their country has "a lot" of media freedom than the youngest (26%); and the oldest (42%) were less likely to feel that their country should have "more" media freedom than the youngest (53%).

These findings were also published in the December 2008 report [World Public Opinion and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).