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Publics Around the World Believe Governments Should Not Limit Internet Access

All Nations Polled Support Principle of Press Freedom, and Half Want More Freedom

Many Muslims and Russians Accept Media Restrictions to Preserve Political Stability

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College Park, MD, May 1—A new worldwide poll finds widespread support for freedom of the press and strong opposition to government restrictions on Internet access. Although most publics surveyed believe the media in their countries should have more freedom, those polled in Russia and many Muslim countries think their leaders should be able to regulate news coverage they consider politically destabilizing.

WorldPublicOpinion.org is releasing the new 20-country poll in advance of World Press Freedom Day on May 3. The survey, which includes 18,122 respondents, is one of a series conducted by WPO this year to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of the declaration states that everyone has the right to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media.”

WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland that involves research centers around the world. The countries studied represent about 59 percent of the world’s population and include China, the United States, Russia and India. Not all questions were asked in every country.

Majorities in all but two of the countries polled say “people should have the right to read whatever is on the Internet.” This includes seven out of ten in China, where the government has imposed restrictions on Internet access. Overall, 60 percent of those polled favor the right to full access.

Only a third of those polled around the world (32%) say the government “should have the right to prevent people from having access to some things on the Internet.” Jordan is the only country where a majority (63%) favors such restrictions, though a plurality of Iranians agree by a margin of 44 percent to 32 percent.

The broader principle of press freedom gets even wider support. Majorities in all countries polled consider it important for the “media to be free to publish news and ideas without government control.” An average of 82 percent say this is important, including

53 percent who consider it very important. Similarly majorities in all of the countries or an overall average of 79 percent say that people in their country should “have the right to read publications from all other countries including those that might be considered enemies.”

“The principle that the media should be free of government control receives robust support from all corners of the world,” said Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. “With few exceptions, people think that the Internet should be free of government control as well.”

Majorities in ten nations polled think that the media in their country should have more freedom: Mexico (75%), Nigeria (70%), China (66%), South Korea (65%), Egypt (64%), the Palestinian Territories (62%), Azerbaijan (57%), Jordan (56%), Indonesia (53%) and Peru (51%). In no country does more than one in three favor giving the media less freedom. On average across all nations polled, 50 percent say they would like their media to have more freedom, 14 percent less freedom and 31 percent the same amount.

The biggest area of controversy is over whether the government should have the “right to prevent the media from publishing information that it thinks will be politically destabilizing.” In the majority of countries the dominant view is that it should not and on average 55 percent have this view.

However, in six-majority Muslim countries plus Russia substantial numbers think the government should have the right to restrict politically sensitive information. Majorities favor government controls in Jordan (66%), the Palestinian Territories (59%), and Indonesia (56%) while a plurality does in Iran (a plurality (45 to 31%). Views are evenly divided in Egypt, Turkey and Russia.

But this does not mean that these publics favor greater government regulation. In four of these countries, majorities think the media should have more freedom: Egypt (64%), the Palestinian Territories (62%), Jordan (56%) and Indonesia (53%). In the others, most want the media to have the same amount or more freedom, with only small minorities saying it should have less: Iran (9%), Russia (17%), Turkey (30%) and India (32%).

The countries included in this study are China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russia, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Britain, Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan, Mexico, Peru, Poland, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and the Palestinian Territories. Polling was conducted between January 10 and March 20, 2008.

This release is part of a series of international polls related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Previously released polls have explored attitudes about women’s right and racial discrimination. For more information, please visit www.WorldPublicOpinion.org.

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