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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I'll call this meeting to order. Thank you, everybody, for being here.

We have two witnesses today, who are both coming in by video conference.

Today we will be talking about our study on the global state of the free press with particular focus on Myanmar and Venezuela.

We have with us Emmanuel Colombié.

[Translation]

Since July 2015, Mr. Colombié has been the director of the Reporters Without Borders Latin America Desk. He is based in Rio de Janeiro. Reporters Without Borders is known for its signature project, the annual World Press Freedom Index.

[English]

I think it's notable that Venezuela has placed 143rd, and Myanmar, 137th. That's something that is probably relevant for today.

We also have Linda Lakhdhir, who is a legal adviser with Human Rights Watch, with the Asia division. She has written a report entitled, "Dashed Hopes: the Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Myanmar".

Our witnesses are very well equipped to answer questions specifically on Venezuela and Myanmar, which is the focus of our study.

We'll start with 10 minutes for each witness, and then we will go to questions from the members here.

[Translation]

We will begin with you, Mr. Colombié. You have ten minutes.

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié (Director, Latin America Desk, Reporters Without Borders): Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for having me here today to speak to you about a topic that is, naturally, of great concern and importance to Reporters Without Borders, but also to all of those who defend freedom of the press throughout the world.

In short, Reporters Without Borders is a Paris-based international organization. It has for 30 years worked to promote and defend freedom of the press and freedom of information with field representatives and correspondents, and regional offices such as the office I direct in Rio de Janeiro, which covers Latin America, from Mexico to Patagonia.

From that office, I advocate for freedom of the press. On social media, but also through open letters, we denounce the most serious attacks against freedom of the press. We also work to help media and journalists in vulnerable situations on all continents and in all of the countries we cover.

The Rio de Janeiro office works mainly with a short list of countries, which includes Mexico. As you know, many journalists are murdered in Mexico. They are murdered simply for doing their job. We also cover Brazil and Colombia, and for several months now, Nicaragua and Venezuela. There has been a dramatic shift to authoritarianism in Nicaragua. In the course of this shift, independent journalists and opposition journalists, those who do not support President Ortega's official line, have been persecuted, censored, arrested, assaulted, insulted, threatened, and so on.

To get back to the topic at hand, Venezuela, as you know, is experiencing a serious economic crisis, which has gotten worse since 2016, as well as a grave political crisis, which took a new turn in January with the election of President Maduro for a second term, and the self-proclaimed interim presidency of Juan Guaidó on January 23.

In this context of serious political tensions—which were already present before these new developments and the current worsening of the crisis—Venezuelan journalists, whether they work for the written press, radio, television or the Internet, have become the victims of state censorship, orchestrated and put in place by the Maduro administration. This censorship has been going on for months, and indeed for several years. It intensified in the beginning of 2019, but it's a reality we have observed for a very long time.

President Maduro's government uses several techniques to censor independent media, opposition media, and, in short, any voices that are too critical of his administration. That censorship may take various forms. For example, in Venezuela there is a communications regulation commission known as CONATEL. That commission, either through couriers or direct intervention on the premises of the independent media, simply blocks the frequencies radio and television channels use, to prevent them from transmitting their information.

That is one thing that has been done. In January, CONATEL shut down all opposition television channels that wanted to broadcast live coverage of Juan Guaidó's speech. They were censored by CONATEL, which shut down the frequencies they needed to broadcast their programs. Radio and television channels are subjected to this kind of practice.

• (1310)

The daily or weekly written press is subjected to another, even more vicious type of censorship: paper rationing. In Venezuela, the government controls the distribution of paper, the raw material, and has a monopoly. The authorities use that monopoly to prevent the written press that opposes them to have access to paper. Thus, many newspapers can no longer publish because they have no paper to print their articles on. That is one more example of the censorship practised by the state. It is very frequent. It's not something that started in 2019.

Journalists who cover opposition demonstrations are arbitrarily arrested. Arrests are carried out by the SEBIN, the riot police which is the Venezuelan intelligence and counter-intelligence service. This service arbitrarily arrests opposition journalists who do not support the government's official line.

The riot police arbitrarily detains people. It confiscates and destroys equipment. It goes directly to see opposition journalists and destroys their cameras, photography equipment and so on. I've been talking about the national context. I could give you an even longer list of the censorship means that are at President Maduro's disposal. There are others, but let's get back to current events.

The fate of journalists from the international press is even more worrisome in the context of this censorship. It is directed against press agencies, but also the international media. In 24 hours, we saw the arbitrary arrest of no less than seven foreign journalists who had come to Venezuela to cover the political crisis. Once again, the Venezuelan police arrested these people who were simply doing their work providing information. Chilean and Colombian journalists, one Spanish journalist, two French journalists and one Brazilian were arrested, arbitrarily detained, and questioned. After some hours, they were freed thanks to the work of their respective embassies. Most of them were escorted by the police to the Caracas international airport before being purely and simply expelled from the country. They were asked to leave the country and stop transmitting information, even though they had all registered as journalists when they arrived in Venezuela.

These actions are, of course, very serious, and we condemned them. We wrote several times to the Secretary General of the United Nations to inform him of these practices. They are not new, but they have intensified since the beginning of 2019, which is very worrying. Since the political crisis in Venezuela is far from being resolved, Reporters Without Borders and all of the other organizations that defend freedom of the press are very worried about the future of press freedom in that country. It is harder and harder for journalists to describe reality, to talk about what is happening, the economic crisis, the food shortage, the repression and the very tense situation that has prevailed there since the beginning of 2019.

There is the lack of international information, and the censorship issues, but I want to close my statement by emphasizing that this is a

dramatic situation, especially for the Venezuelan people who do not have access to independent, varied, objective or critical information on what is happening in their country. On the day of Juan Guaidó's inauguration, Venezuelan media only broadcast President Maduro's speech. The Venezuelan people did not have access to news describing what was happening that day in their own country, since the radio and television channels had been censored in advance by the government.

I simply wanted to give you this overview and let you know how concerned we are about the future of freedom of the press in Venezuela.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Colombié.

[*English*]

We will now start with Linda Lakhdhir from Human Rights Watch for 10 minutes.

Ms. Linda Lakhdhir (Legal Advisor, Human Rights Watch): Thank you.

The hopes that Myanmar's first democratically elected civilian government in decades would better protect freedom of the press and freedom of speech in the country have not materialized. Instead, we found that over the past almost three years, there's been a serious decline in freedom of the press in the country, with increasing numbers of journalists being arbitrarily arrested, detained and imprisoned under a range of vaguely worded and broad criminal laws. Certain topics appear to be particularly risky for journalists to cover, such as abuses by the Myanmar military, particularly in the ethnic areas, allegations of corruption by government officials, or criticism of government officials, the military or Myanmar's ultra-nationalist movement. All of these have resulted in the arrest of journalists trying to report on those issues in the country.

In the most well-known case, two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were sentenced to seven years in prison under Myanmar's Officials Secrets Act, in apparent retaliation for uncovering a massacre in the village of Inn Din in Rakhine state.

That case is only one of the many cases of journalists who have been arrested in Myanmar in the last few years. According to the civil society group Athan, up until September 2018, at least 43 journalists have been arrested in Myanmar since the NLD-led government took power. These arrests have had a serious chilling effect on journalists working in the country.

I will give you a few examples of the use of criminal laws against journalists in Myanmar.

Lawi Weng of The Irrawaddy and two reporters from the Democratic Voice of Burma were arrested after they went to an area controlled by an ethnic armed group to cover a drug-burning ceremony being performed by that group. They were doing their jobs; they were reporting the news. As they were returning to Yangon, they were arrested and accused of violating Myanmar's Unlawful Associations Act, which is a very broad law that's used to punish anyone viewed as having any contact with one of Myanmar's many ethnic armed groups. They were detained for two months before the case was ultimately dropped after the attack that took place in Rakhine state in 2017.

While the case was ultimately dropped, the message it sent was very clear. Reporters who travel to conflict areas and reporters who have contact with and report on ethnic armed groups risk arrest in the country.

Myanmar's multiple laws making defamation a criminal offence are also being used against journalists. Use of defamation laws against journalists has a serious chilling effect on freedom of the press.

In just one example, Swe Win, the co-founder of the news service Myanmar Now, has been on trial for the past 18 months, accused of criminally defaming the ultra-nationalist monk Wirathu. After Wirathu issued a statement applauding the murder of lawyer U Ko Ni, Swe Win assigned a reporter to look into how that statement should be analyzed under criminal law and under the rules of Buddhism. In the article that the reporter wrote, he quoted a monk saying that Wirathu should be defrocked because he was condoning murder.

That article was sent out by Myanmar Now, Swe Win put it on his personal Facebook page, and he was criminally charged with defaming the monk Wirathu. For the last 18 months, he's had to travel 630 kilometres each way to Mandalay every other week for the trial that is ongoing, with a serious disruption to his personal and his professional life. He said that in his view, that case has put a serious a serious fear in all newsrooms for covering issues related to the Buddhist monks and the nationalist movement in the country.

In at least two cases, journalists have been arrested for what was clearly satire. The Voice Daily published a satirical review of a movie that had been produced by the military and shown on national television. For that, the editor was arrested for defaming the military.

The editor of a small journal in Tanintharyi is currently on trial for defaming a regional administrator in a satirical article about a local election.

The results of all these arrests and detentions is a climate of fear in Myanmar, particularly among local journalists. A local journalist told me that local journalists feel much more vulnerable than international journalists. They're living in the country and they don't have the support networks that international journalists have. He said, "For us as local journalists, there is no guarantee of our work security or our safety."

Activists and ordinary citizens are also being arrested for speaking out on issues like military abuses and corruption. People have been arrested for telling the media about a military strike on a church in Kachin state, for calling for help for trapped civilians during a

conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independent Army, for making allegations of corruption against the regional minister, and even for telling what it was like to be a child soldier in Myanmar's military.

Aung Ko Htway is currently serving a two-year sentence for giving an interview to Radio Free Asia, talking about his experiences as a child soldier in Myanmar.

• (1320)

The prosecution of people speaking about these sorts of issues makes it much more challenging for journalists to get stories, to report on these very important issues in the country—military abuses, corruption, child soldiers—because it makes people afraid to talk and because it makes the journalists much more fearful about reporting on these subjects.

Another threat facing journalists who report on sensitive subjects is—

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption. We have a technical issue. I'm going to have to suspend the committee for just a moment, so you will lose us for a moment, but please remember your spot because we will be coming back to you.

I apologize for that.

• (1320)

(Pause)

• (1325)

The Chair: We'll resume.

I apologize for the delay. We will try once more.

Ms. Lakhdhir, please continue with your testimony. We hope that it works a little better with the sound this time.

Ms. Linda Lakhdhir: All right. Thank you.

Journalists and activists also face threats by ultra-nationalists and militant supporters of the government and the military when they touch on these sensitive topics. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Esther Htusan left Myanmar for her own safety in December 2017 after receiving death threats from government supporters who were unhappy with her reporting on Aung San Suu Kyi.

Finally, media freedom in Myanmar is being hampered by limited access to information and limited access to conflict zones. Many journalists told me that the current government is not responsive, does not provide information, does not respond to questions, so there's a problem with access to information; and that there are broad restrictions on access to the current areas of conflict in Rakhine, Kachin and Chin states.

I hope that concerned governments such as the Canadian government can press the Myanmar government to take steps to better improve media freedom. The report that I want issued was released on Friday and identified many of the laws that are being used against journalists and against ordinary citizens for peaceful speech, laws that should be amended or repealed.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the testimony.

We will start immediately with questions, starting for seven minutes with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their great and courageous work on making sure that we have a free and secure press.

For a free country like Canada, and others like it, are there things we can do without...any concern of any group that government getting involved with media might, how would I say it, sway the media itself? Is there something that we as a nation can do to lend a helping hand to journalists in areas particularly where their lives are in danger, which hasn't been done so far? We've mentioned two places, in particular, that we've done many studies on: Venezuela and Myanmar. What could be the role of the Canadian government to assist with the safety and security of journalists in those countries?

Ms. Linda Lakhdir: I think that embassies can reach out to local journalists and recognize them and support them. It does in some places give a bit more protection for them if governments know that embassies are looking out for the journalists and know who they are, because local journalists, particularly, can feel very vulnerable, very isolated and very alone. That's just one small thing that I think governments can do.

Mr. David Sweet: Would the other witness have any comments on this?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: I too think that the support embassies provide to their journalists who are in dangerous situations can be helpful, and sometimes vital.

What governments can do, as some governments, like the Government of Canada, are already doing, is raise the profile of the issues we have described, such as censorship and the lack of information being provided to the Venezuelan people.

There is one aspect that has not been mentioned and that is financial support. Canada could provide funds for training initiatives for local journalists who need cybersecurity and physical protection on the ground very badly. They also need protective equipment. There are even some media being persecuted by the government that need journalistic material. How that can be put in place is another matter.

There are several international organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, and several others, who are working to find solutions to directly assist vulnerable media, and sometimes journalists who are in danger as well. It is true that there are financial needs and realities behind all of that, as well as a great need for training for independent journalists who don't know how to defend themselves in the face of threats of physical and verbal violence, arrests and online attacks. This type of assistance would be helpful.

The most important thing is to continue to speak out and explicitly condemn what is happening in those countries, notably in Venezuela.

● (1330)

[*English*]

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, I think there needs to be a broader dialogue. There's a debate right now in this country in regard to government funding and the media. I don't want to go there. We're talking about international press freedom. I do want to go to another place, where it would be hard to come to consensus. We need to have some dialogue, I think, between organizations like yours and governments.

I recently read one of Winston Churchill's classic quotes, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on." He said that in his time. I can't believe what it would be like now with social media.

We all agree a line probably gets crossed between propaganda and being an angle on a story, but many of us probably wouldn't agree where that line is. Is there a way for your organizations to have some dialogue with governments so we can be better educated as policy-makers to determine where that line exists?

Ms. Linda Lakhdir: [*Inaudible—Editor*] that are willing to debate with us on these issues. In countries where we're working we also try to engage with governments on these issues.

One of the risks we have is that in many countries in which governments have tried to draw lines or make laws we've found, as is true with hate speech laws, that often those laws, however well-intended, tend to be used against the minority by the majority, as opposed to the reasons for which they were intended.

Mr. David Sweet: Are there any other comments?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: In all of the countries where we work, Reporters without Borders also tries to engage the authorities in debate. Sometimes that is possible, sometimes it is impossible. Venezuela is one of the countries where we have not managed to speak with the authorities, as are Cuba and Nicaragua, among others. We try, but we are unable to have an open dialogue with the authorities.

The line between propaganda and information is sometimes very thin. There are a lot of governments and countries that are grappling with the issue of fake news. How do we prevent the spread of fake news, which, as you mentioned, spreads faster and faster now through social media? Fake news spreads much faster than real news. It's a real problem, and it is a sizeable one.

The initiatives that have been taken to fight fake news are not adequate. We don't know who should determine whether information is real or false or whether the information can be characterized as propaganda or in the public interest. It's a very complex issue.

Fortunately, in some countries we manage to hold discussions, make proposals and have an exchange of views. In countries like Venezuela, where an authoritarian government, to say the least, is in power, it's impossible to have any debate. We do our work. We don't do politics, but the least we can do is condemn censorship and violence against the press.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move to Mr. Tabbara, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to step back and talk a bit about the history in Venezuela, so my question will probably be to Mr. Colombi .

I want to talk about the state of the free press and how it has diminished over the years. Perhaps we can go back three presidents, through not only Maduro but also Ch vez and, before Ch vez, President Caldera. In 1967 he brought in a constitution, and it was stated that Venezuela was one of the more stable Latin American countries.

Can you briefly describe the state of the free press under Caldera, then under Ch vez—when it diminished quite a bit—and then the current state now? Then I'll end with one last question.

• (1335)

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombi : To be perfectly honest, I must say that I don't have enough hindsight and experience at Reporters Without Borders to provide a detailed analysis of press freedom in Venezuela in 1967. However, I can say that press freedom doesn't exist without democracy. Since the coming into power of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro right afterward, there has been an ongoing and constant deterioration of press freedom in general. The legislative framework has become more and more restrictive, and journalists have fewer and fewer rights. There have been judicial persecutions, but also arrests and criminal convictions. We obviously think that a journalist has no business in a criminal court.

Without going much further back, I can say that we're seeing a steady deterioration of press freedom in general, and that the deterioration is directly linked to the social crises. Obviously, a social crisis and economic crisis go hand in hand. The seriousness of the economic crisis in Venezuela explains the social and political tensions. Each time the opposition becomes more prevalent—this was the case in Chavez's era and it's the case today with Maduro—censorship automatically grows at the same time.

That's why I was talking to you about our concerns regarding the coming weeks. This political crisis is far from being resolved. Moreover, whenever there are demonstrations and the opposition steps in and tries to assert its rights or demand a more democratic state and the rights and freedoms to which it's entitled—these situations have occurred several times a year, at least since 2016, when I joined Reporters Without Borders—and there are social and political tensions, it leads to an increase in repression, arrests, and censorship. As time goes on, the censorship takes on new forms.

With regard to the Internet, there are now some very troubling bills in Venezuela. The Maduro administration wants to create legislation to maintain control over private data. This affects all the privacy issues on the Internet. It's very troubling to have a forthcoming bill that concerns these issues.

[English]

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Many of these journalists, and quite frankly even regular civilians, are putting up blogs and putting things

on social media. What is the regime charging them with when they're reporting on upcoming protests that are happening and on the civil unrest? When journalists are reporting facts on the ground, what is the regime charging them with in Venezuelan courts?

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombi : There are a variety of possible and imaginable charges. In particular, you could be charged with espionage or conspiracy.

There's a fairly detailed list of other possible charges, whether the journalist is local or foreign. Foreign journalists have been detained for several months now in Venezuela, including a German journalist named Billy Six. He was charged with espionage because he was taking photos of President Maduro during a public speech. He isn't allowed to ask for legal assistance, and he has been allowed to contact his family only once since he was thrown in prison almost two months ago.

We're dealing with a range of charges that have absolutely no validity. In our opinion, the charges are simply intended to silence not only journalists, but also bloggers and other people. A Twitter user is currently in prison in Venezuela because he tweeted public information about the route of an internal flight taken by President Maduro's airplane. He was charged with trying to destabilize the government in power and prepare for a terrorist attack.

There are many examples, and we don't think that these are valid reasons for imprisoning journalists.

• (1340)

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Hardcastle, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

So many thought-provoking questions have come up just from your responses to previous questions with regard to the definition of journalism, with regard to the independence of free press versus propaganda. I will use my time to ask both of you to comment on and just explore a couple of things that I will put forth to you. This is with regard to the connection between the financial health of the news industry, the independence of media, freedom of the press, and independence of the press, and considering the training of actual journalists as opposed to the state-run press that is producing propaganda. Or perhaps the state press is doing the fact-checking, and there is propaganda from an opposing side.

How do you see us addressing those, especially today, when there's growing animosity, it seems, for journalists in general and for the free press? That's another thing you might want to comment on. What, if anything, do you think Canada can contribute to a healthier narrative for that?

Let's start with you, Linda, and then Emmanuel can take a few minutes to answer that.

Ms. Linda Lakhdhir: I would like to start with the last question, which is about what Canada can do. I think one thing Canada can do is speak up very strongly about the importance of a free press around the world and press the countries where the press is not free to better protect freedom of the press, to stop censoring the press and to stop arresting journalists simply for doing their jobs.

In terms of the question about animosity towards journalism, that is a big problem. It's a big problem in Myanmar, in fact. It's a problem that is not being helped by a government that, although it ran on a manifesto promising press freedom, has members of the government who regularly demonize or denigrate the press and support the prosecution of journalists. Again, Canada, in speaking to countries where the press is denigrated, where the press is not free, should be calling out those countries and saying, "This is not the way you treat the free press. The free press has a role to play in a democracy"—or a quasi-democracy or what purports to be a democracy—"and you should be supporting it."

In terms of financial health and independence, obviously a media that's struggling financially is much more vulnerable to pressures to report certain ways or to not report certain things if advertisers or financial backers pressure them. Obviously, a financially healthy press is a press that has more freedom and more independence.

I think I will stop there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: Media independence is obviously very important when it comes to press freedom. The readers, audience and general public must know who owns the media and the information consumed, since journalism must be considered an industry that produces information.

People must be taught from an early age how to consume information and analyze where it comes from. Once I know where a given piece of information comes from, I may understand why the information is treated a certain way. I'll then be able to look for different information in order to cross-check the information and form my own opinion. I think that Canada, the democratic countries and all states in general must strengthen media literacy so that people understand that information can result from a conflict of interest or can be manipulated. Let's go back to the social networks, which we discussed earlier. From a young age, people must ensure that the information they consume and post on the networks is reliable and that they know where it comes from.

Regarding media independence, Reporters Without Borders considers that too much media concentration is dangerous to press freedom in general. As a result, we promote—obviously within our means—media pluralism and independence. In a democratic country, we must have access to a variety of opinions, reviews, editorial writers, agencies and journalists from all walks of life. Part of our work involves promoting this pluralism, which we consider fundamental.

I'll wrap up the issue of the negative environment for journalists by sharing the following observation. I believe that journalists and both small and large media have a great deal of responsibility in this area and must learn from it. As a French citizen, for example, I've observed the "yellow vest" phenomenon in my country and I've seen

a great deal of mistrust toward journalists, who are sometimes held responsible for the situation even though they're only the "messengers" doing their reporting. Journalists must also take into account this reality and take responsibility perhaps by working in a more ethical and professional manner. In particular, they must return to certain fundamental principles of journalism, such as the verification of sources and the cross-checking of information. These are fairly basic points, but they're sometimes forgotten, which can lead to the somewhat widespread environment of mistrust prevalent today.

I believe that governments are responsible for providing more education and for teaching people to analyze the source of information consumed, and that journalists are responsible for further verifying the facts in order to produce better quality information.

● (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

That's the seven minutes.

For the next round, because we're lacking time, we'll just go to three questions—one each—of three minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

When the Internet first developed everybody had such high hopes for it for a number of reasons. There were advocates of democracy in this country and around the world who thought that it would make the world more democratic. The jury is still very much out on that. I wonder if you could speak with special reference to social media and how it's been used by journalists, by advocates for democracy as well. Is it helping or hindering democracy in those two contexts?

This is to both of you, for a Myanmar perspective, and then a Venezuelan perspective.

Ms. Linda Lakhdhir: Social media has had a very complicated role in Myanmar, where basically, the Internet is Facebook. That is pretty much the only Internet that most people know and use, and it has played a very complicated role. It is actively used by activists on the ground to promote democracy, to talk about protests, to raise awareness, to counter hate speech. It has played in many ways a very positive role, but it has also played a very negative one. There has been a huge amount of abusive speech on Facebook in Myanmar. It arguably helped fuel the ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity that took place in Rakhine state.

As you say, the jury is very much out on the role that Facebook and social media play and whether it's positive or negative in Myanmar overall.

• (1350)

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: In the case of Venezuela, I would say that the result is fairly positive. We don't have time to discuss the broader issue of the Internet's role in press freedom. However, Twitter is playing a fundamental role in the current crisis in Venezuela. Twitter is one of the few tools where people can find information provided by opposition and independent media, which aren't aligned with President Maduro. Since this media can't use the regular channels, which are systematically censored by the Maduro regime, they use Twitter—more than Facebook. To find information about Venezuela quickly, I use Twitter a great deal. It's one of the few sources of information available and it therefore plays a key role.

However, we've noticed that the government is beginning to see Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and social networks in general as a threat. Last week, Internet access was strangely cut off in several parts of Venezuela, and access to platforms such as Twitter and Instagram was restricted. The government has a monopoly or at least control over the infrastructure that provides access to high-speed Internet in the country, and it sees the social networks as a threat. When too much dangerous information or [Technical difficulty—Editor] is posted on these networks, the government will censor the networks directly by cutting off access to the Internet or the platforms.

In general—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but it has already been more than three minutes. Thank you.

We'll move on to the next question.

[English]

Welcome to the committee today, Mr. Sorenson. You have three minutes.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much.

It is a real pleasure to be here. I thank both our guests for their testimony today. I know it will help our committee members as they write a report and as they look at this subject.

A number of people have asked what Canada can do. Thank you for your answers. It has caused us to think a bit more about that.

I can tell you that over the last number of decades, certain things have been added. Even when we negotiate a free trade agreement, all governments seriously have to ask: what are the human rights levels in those countries that we're trying to negotiate a free trade agreement with? What is the freedom of religion? What is the freedom of speech or freedom of association? These are things we've added into the equation as we've tried to come up with free trade agreements or any type of negotiation with other countries.

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié, you talked about the responsibility of journalists. You said there are certain things—we have to check our facts, and we have a code of conduct or a code of ethics that we try to live by. I wonder maybe if you would comment on this.

One of you mentioned satire. In the last five years, with the predominance of the Internet and social media now, there is so much satire. In the constituency I represent, I have had calls—I'm not going to say hundreds of calls, but when there is some satire, people sometimes absolutely believe it and get worked up over it. When you get worked up over it, typically a lot of governments will tend to push back on that type of thing.

I guess my question is a little more on the journalists' code of conduct. There are certain things that both sides obviously have to do, but should there be certain things that we, as a country, say to our journalists? Should we at least warn them of what they might be facing in a conflict area? Maybe you would like to comment on that.

• (1355)

The Chair: Just as a reminder, we only have 30 seconds for the response, so please be very brief.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: In short, a government isn't responsible for telling journalists what to do. It's instead responsible for educating the younger generations about what constitutes a satirical newspaper, a news agency or a right-wing or left-wing newspaper. Once the audiences and readers have all the information available to them, they can keep things in perspective and they won't attack a newspaper simply because it has published a satirical review of a given situation. I think that we must start with education to prevent readers from taking information at face value and to ensure that they understand that the press involves not only information, but also satire, political analysis and criticism. I think that the government's education role is fundamental.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much for being brief.

We will now turn to Ms. Hardcastle for the final three minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: We know that there are different laws in different countries about free press. In terms of talking about and denouncing the oppression of a free press in other countries, do you think that part of what we should be doing has an international role, a United Nations role? It could be about advancing freedom of the press and educating much in the way that Emmanuel was describing, which is that journalism is a profession, not just a tool for propaganda. It is supposed to be independent.

I'm not sure where we can go with it, but I know that even in Myanmar they have a telecommunications law that anyone can use. In Venezuela, they can “netblock” opposition, and it's well within their law and constitution.

Can you talk about how we might advance that as an international community, perhaps, within the UN?

I'm sure I have limited time, and Emmanuel, I know your wheels are turning.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Colombié: This issue is too broad to be addressed in a few seconds. The more the United Nations exerts pressure—and Canada's voice is very important—the more the cause can make progress. For a number of years, we've been asking the United Nations to create the position of special adviser on the protection of journalists. The adviser would report to the secretary-general of the organization and could speak regularly about issues

concerning press freedom. If Canada were prepared to support this request, we would be very grateful.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thanks to both of you for your very informative testimony, and thank you to the committee members for helping us to keep to the time even though we lost a few minutes.

With that, we will adjourn our meeting. Thank you.

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