The rise and fall of the International Organization of Journalists (IOJ)

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How to read them and what to learn from them?

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Abstract

The story of the International Organization of Journalists (IOJ) began in 1946 and ended in 2016; so it reached the age of 70. However, since 1997 the IOJ has been practically dead, and thus its active life lasted for 51 years. Its predecessors had still shorter lives: the International Union of Press Associations (IUPA), founded in 1894, was active only for 20 years, and the Fédération Internationale des Journalistes (FIJ), founded in 1926, was finished before it turned 15. The IOJ should indeed be seen in the context of an international movement with a history of over 120 years.

The IOJ makes a particularly colourful chapter in this history. Its beginning was ecumenical, with journalists' associations from all the countries in the winning side of World War II and also others. However, only two years later, in 1948, the Cold War began and a wave of political system changes in Central and Eastern Europe led to a division of Europe into East and West, separated by the "iron curtain". The IOJ was part of this battleground, becoming embroiled in Cold War politics. It lost the West European and North American members, except for left-leaning friends there. The Western unions established a new International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in Brussels in 1952 – as part of the "free West" countering the "communist East". Meanwhile, the IOJ, based in Prague, gained new members in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. In 1966 its membership amounted to 130,000 journalists in 108 countries, while the IFJ had 55,000 journalists in 31 countries. The heyday of the IOJ was in the late 1980s, when its membership had grown close to 300,000 and its operations included journalism schools and publishing houses in Central-Eastern Europe and regional centres in the developing world. They and numerous international meetings were financially supported by a unique system of commercial enterprises in Czechoslovakia and Hungary – a veritable island of capitalism in the sea of socialism.

Then suddenly the fall of the Berlin Wall and the "velvet revolution" in Prague in late 1989, followed by the "collapse of communism" in Central and Eastern Europe, changed global geopolitics. The IOJ was immediately shaken: its headquarters and operations in Prague came under sharp attack from the rising political forces in Czechoslovakia, and its local member union – the legal base of its seat in Prague – was closed down and replaced by a new syndicate which did not want to affiliate with the IOJ but joined the IFJ. Moreover, other strong member unions in former socialist countries began to lose political and material ground.

Nevertheless, in early 1991 at its 11th Congress in Harare, the IOJ was still formally unchanged as the world's largest organization of journalists. However, the pressures for change from former socialist countries, particularly Czechoslovakia, were overwhelming, and the situation was exacerbated by quarrels within the new leadership elected in Harare. Financial resources were rapidly dwindling and activities in training, publication, etc. were gradually discontinued. Member unions one after another decided to join the IFJ, while most of them also remained nominal members of the IOJ. By the end of the 1990s the IOJ had in fact disappeared from the scene, while the IFJ had grown into organization also representing the bulk of the earlier IOJ membership.

Hence, the IOJ was founded as a united platform for professional journalists but it lost this role during the Cold War, becoming a partisan representative of journalists from the socialist and developing countries – while at the same time supporting efforts to reunify the movement. When the Cold War ended, the IOJ not only failed to regain the united platform lost 40 years earlier but also disintegrated to the point of extinction. Its once mighty institutions have disappeared, while its Western counterpart in the Cold War, the IFJ, has emerged as the new united platform, which counts among its membership the bulk of earlier IOJ members. However, the earlier IOJ schools, publishing houses, translation services, etc. have not been transferred to the IFJ; they were lost with the IOJ.

The history of the IOJ is indeed a history of paradoxes – a fruitful source for reflecting how to read these histories and what lessons they give for contesting pasts, presents and futures.

This paper presents a brief overview of the history of the IOJ and raises some lessons to be learned from it. The paper is based on the academic work of the authors (Nordenstreng et al. 2016, 2017; Ševčíková 2008, 2015). Its extensive source material is listed in the References at the end of the paper. For a more comprehensive overview, see http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/95228

Overview

The IOJ was founded in June 1946 in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, which had only recently been liberated from Nazi occupation. The World Congress of Journalists was attended by 165 delegates of journalists' unions from 21 countries from the USA to the USSR, from Greece to Iceland, from Australia to Peru. The new Organization was established to carry on the legacy of the inter-war International Federation of Journalists of Allied or Free Countries (IFJAFC) and its predecessor the Fédération Internationale des Journalistes (FIJ)¹. The immediate post-war atmosphere was one of joy and optimism.

The same atmosphere prevailed in the second Congress in Prague 1947, although some tension about the impending division of the world could already be sensed. The constitution and principal resolutions were approved unanimously, likewise the leadership elected, but the site of the headquarters had to be put to a vote. The majority supported Prague, while a minority led by British and Americans voted for London.

Crisis and split

Soon after the Prague congress some British and American press reports accused the IOJ of "falling under Russian influence", with the headquarters "taken over by communists" and its Secretary General denounced as a hard-line Soviet puppet. Yet Jiří Hronek was not a communist but a progressive patriot — one of those who, due to their Jewish origin, had fled the fascists and gone into exile in London and then returned to participate in the national democratic reconstruction. Moreover, the American Newspaper Guild (ANG) President Milton Murray proposed that his union should disaffiliate from IOJ. The proposal was defeated and Murray resigned in consequence. Then Harry Martin was elected as ANG President and assumed the American seat in the IOJ leadership.

However, Vice-President Martin turned against Secretary General Hronek, while the two attended the UN Conference on Freedom of Information in Geneva in March-April 1948. Martin made public a letter he had written to President Kenyon, suggesting that the headquarters be moved from

¹ The IFJAFC was established at the War Congress of Journalists held in December 1941 in London to continue the work of the pre-war FIJ. The FIJ was founded in 1926 and came to an end in June 1940, when its headquarters in Paris was destroyed in the Nazi occupation of France.

Prague to the West and claiming that Hronek was misusing IOJ funds for communist propaganda. Hronek replied immediately in a letter which was also made public.

No doubt this clash served as ammunition in the nascent Cold War. The forces of confrontation advanced on several fronts, from international security with the founding of NATO to the international trade union movement, which was divided, both nationally and internationally, into a left-wing and mostly pro-Soviet faction on the one hand, and a right-wing and pro-Western faction on the other. These developments were naturally reflected within the IOJ. For example, in France the IOJ Vice-President Morin, who represented the right-wing "Force Ouvrière", stood down and his place was taken by confirmed leftist forces, including Jean-Maurice Hermann.

The situation escalated after the IOJ Executive Committee meetings in Budapest in November 1948 and in Prague in September 1949, leading to the withdrawal from IOJ membership of the British NUJ, the American ANG and several other Western member unions, including the Scandinavians. In October 1949 President Kenyon resigned.

As a consequence of the development in the late 1940s, the IOJ became an organization whose core membership was made up of national journalists' unions in the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the recently established German Democratic Republic (GDR). It was also joined by several smaller journalists' associations in the Western world with a "progressive and democratic" orientation. In addition, the IOJ increasingly acquired members from the developing countries, including mainland China.

Meanwhile the Western associations established in 1952 the IFJ to serve journalists' associations in the "free world". The founding Congress in Brussels was attended by 41 delegates of journalists' unions from 14 countries. During the 1950s, both the Prague-based IOJ and the Brussels-based IFJ consolidated their membership, confirming their respective positions both in actions and words. The IOJ nevertheless tried to reach out to the IFJ for co-operation, but all approaches were rejected. Outside attempts to restore unity were also made by the Italian, Yugoslavian and several Latin American associations, which were not members of either international – these were also in vain as only the IOJ was ready to negotiate.

A very broad-based initiative taken through the World Meeting of Journalists in Helsinki in 1956, convened by an independent international committee and supported but not organized by the IOJ. Attended by over 250 journalists from 44 countries, the World Meeting was the largest and most representative gathering in the history of journalism so far. The Meeting approved several

resolutions and appointed the International Committee for the Cooperation of Journalists (ICCJ) composed of 30 members from over 20 countries on all continents. It convened two other World Meetings: in 1960 in Baden near Vienna and in 1963 in the Mediterranean. None of these World Meetings were able to bring the two internationals together, and by the mid-1960s the ICCJ had ceased to exist. The IOJ was active in mobilising regional federations in Africa, the Arab world and Latin America in the 1960s. It was also at the forefront of mobilizing international solidarity with Vietnam – after the Chinese member association had withdrawn due to the severed relations between China and the USSR. The IFJ for its part began to expand to Latin America and Africa – with national rather than regional approaches.

Consolidation and growth

The IOJ redoubled its membership in the 1960s and 1970s – mainly due to expanding membership from the global South and thanks to growing activities especially in publishing and training. Membership fees were not sufficient to cover the expenses of these activities, and other complementary means of financing were invented. First a solidarity lottery was organized in the socialist countries generating considerable revenue, especially for the training schools. But the main source of financing, engineered by Secretary General Jiří Kubka together with Hungarian Treasurer Norbert Siklósi, were the commercial companies operating as branches of the IOJ in Czechoslovakia² and Hungary³.

Consequently, the IOJ built up two levels of activity. First, there was the journalistic professional area, in which not only congresses, executive and other professional meetings were organized, but also books, magazines and newsletters were printed and training institutions were founded. Second, a separate business group was created consisting of more than a dozen companies, including a publishing house, conference and translation services, a mass-media management service and a travel agency.

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² Conference services, established in 1969 in Prague, might be regarded as the beginning of IOJ's commercial activities. A further shift in the IOJ's business field occurred in 1974, when also Prague-based company named "Videopress IOJ" was founded.

³ Interpress Budapest was founded in 1971 and provided services in four main areas: (1) publishing (2) printing, (3) advertising and (4) foreign trade. Publishing was a key activity, with these as most important outlets: Interpress Magazine, Alfa Junior (children's version of Interpress Magazine), Interpress Expo (economic magazine), Interpressgrafik (graphics, visual culture) and Interpressissues.

The second half of the 1980s was the heyday of the IOJ, with a huge membership base, expanding professional activities and stable business enterprises. The executive leadership was also open to make changes for decentralisation and democratisation – areas which had been widely criticised by employees. By 1990 the IOJ had grown to cover through its national affiliates altogether 300,000 journalists. Counted by its membership reach and activities in Prague, Budapest, Berlin and several regional centres, it was the biggest non-governmental organization in the media field at large.

Détente and co-operation

The last two decades of the Cold War were a period of co-operative diplomacy highlighted at the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE 1973–75), with its Final Act signed in Helsinki in 1975. The IFJ and IOJ leaders began to meet in 1973, facilitated by the Italian FNSI – nearly two decades after the first attempt. In 1976 the IOJ Congress was held in Helsinki, with the IFJ leaders attending.

Although the two internationals were now in dialogue with each other, and the IFJ no longer pursued a separatist line, they continued to have quite different profiles and to compete against each other. It was not only the IFJ that was suspicious of the IOJ, typically perceived as an arm of Moscow-led world communism; the IOJ was also wary of the IFJ, seen in turn as a soft instrument of US-led imperialism. The trust between the two was shaky and nobody could foresee that they might really unite.

From 1976 on the two internationals began to regularly meet and attend each other's congresses. Concrete co-operation took place in the context of the UNESCO-sponsored Consultative Meetings of International and Regional Organizations of Journalists – a unique constellation starting in 1978 to produce several joint ventures including three books (on journalists' status, rights and responsibilities; on journalists and new technologies; on the protection of journalists). It even discussed a new initiative towards the unity of the movement: the World Council of Journalists as an umbrella organization for existing international and regional federations. However, this promising co-operation ceased in 1990 with the emerging new world order.

Disintegration and end

After reaching its heyday in the late 1980s, the IOJ was doomed to fall after the "collapse of communism" in the early 1990s. The "velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia in late 1989 immediately released a vociferous opposition to the IOJ, which was seen by the new forces as a

partner of the old repressive regime. The most serious setback was the loss of the member union in the host country. Several negotiations were held between the IOJ leadership and the Czechoslovak Union of Journalists in late 1989 and its successor the Syndicate of Czech Journalists in 1990 and even after the Harare Congress in 1991, but the concessions from the IOJ side were always seen to be "too little, too late". Hence, the new, post-communist government ordered the headquarters to be expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1991 (before it was divided into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993). The expulsion was negotiated and processed by the courts for eight years, but in 1997 the appeals of the IOJ finally led to the end of the legal road.⁴

Meanwhile there was a natural end of the IOJ in Czech Republic after 1997 since by that time its financial base had collapsed and the once flourishing activities throughout the world faded away. The commercial enterprises, which had earned money for the professional activities, were brought to an end and no savings were left to maintain even a minimal secretariat. The last statutory meeting was the Executive Committee in Hanoi in 1996. No Congress since 1995 – even to dissolve the IOJ. The sudden death of the last Secretary General, Antonio Nieva, in 1997 confirmed its demise.

The expulsion consequently became a non-issue, and the IOJ got permission to retain in Prague a small legal entity, which was not supposed to be involved in any professional activity but just to keep the salary records of former employees as required by law. The professional activities, if any, were outsourced to a pro forma office of the last President in Amman.

With this arrangement the IOJ was *de facto* dead, but *de jure* still alive. As the years passed by, the member unions did not take any serious initiatives to revitalize the IOJ. They seem to have taken it for granted that history had passed it by and most of them joined the only remaining worldwide organization, the IFJ.

The fate of the IOJ was sealed by a letter of the last two IOJ Presidents, addressed to the 29th IFJ Congress in Angers (France) in June 2016. After recalling the long history of the movement and the relations between the IOJ and the IFJ, the letter ends:

Today it is obvious that the IFJ is the sole representative of professional journalists around the world. This does not mean that the IFJ is the direct successor of the prewar FIJ, whose legal heritage was passed to the IOJ. On this occasion of the 29th IFJ

⁴ In 1991 a formal legal decision was issued by the Federal Ministry of Interior on revoking the IOJ's rights to have a headquarters and develop related activities within the territory of the CSFR. Both parties to the dispute – the IOJ and the Ministry of Interior – lodged many appeals against the decision between 1991 and 1996. However, the final resolution came in March 1997 from the Czech Constitutional Court, issuing a decision against which there could be no appeal. In 1997 the IOJ nevertheless lodged a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights, which in 1999 decided not to support the IOJ.

Congress in 2016 it is important that the IFJ perceives itself correctly in history as a successor of both the pre-war FIJ and the post-war IOJ. While celebrating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the FIJ, we should not forget that a common IOJ was founded in Copenhagen exactly 70 years ago, on 3–9 June 1946 – with high hopes, until it was split by the unfortunate Cold War.

Dear colleagues,

As the President of the IOJ and its Honorary President elected in the last IOJ Congress in Amman in 1995, we note that the historical development has led to a natural demise of the IOJ as an operational organization. While closing this page in history, we are pleased to pass on to the IFJ the heritage of the pre-war FIJ. We wish you every success in taking good care of this valuable heritage.

Amman and Maputo, 3 June 2016

Suleiman Al-Qudah, IOJ President

Manuel Tomé, IOJ Honorary President

This honorable message was received by the Congress with applause. It remains to be seen when the IFJ will update the inaccurate account of history in its website http://www.ifj.org/about-ifj/

Lessons

An overall lesson was presented in the conclusion of the first all-round history of the international movement of journalists (Nordenstreng et al. 2016, 180):

• The overall lesson from history is that the international journalist organizations are always bound by their political environment. It is naïve and self-deceptive to believe that international journalists and their associations can be completely apolitical. However, the movement is not deterministically driven by politics; it is also driven by professional interests with greater or lesser autonomy. At the crossroads of professionalism and politics the movement needs to be vigilant and reflective *vis-à-vis* both its current challenges and its own history.

The history of the IOJ suggests two other lessons of a general nature:

 Political influence and control even under totalitarian conditions operates typically as an umbrella or 'outer space', under which both overtly political and non-political activities may flourish. An impressive example of non-political activities is the commercial enterprise family of the IOJ. The IOJ also serves as an example of the grey area within the "Communist bloc behind the Iron Curtain", which was much more versatile than presented by typical Western stereotypes during the Cold War – and likewise by typical Eastern stereotypes emerging in these countries after the "collapse of Communism" in association with new right-wing politics.

• While overall political structures determine the main course of history, considerable room to manoeuvre is left for subjective factors to influence the cause of events and developments. Good examples are provided by the IOJ Secretary Generals, particularly Jiří Kubka (1966-88) as a positive case and Gerard Gatinot (1990-95) as a negative case. Therefore it is not pointless to be wise in hindsight and pose the speculative "what if" question – in some cases history could really have taken different turn with different people in place and different decisions taken. Even pure chance has played a role in history, as happened in the election of the Secretary General in the IOJ Presidium session in Balaton in 1990.

Many aspects of the IOJ history are open for further study, making full use of the archive materials which have been preserved, although much of it was disgracefully lost in the late 1990s. The first compilation of full IOJ history (Nordenstreng 2017) does not claim to be a final account but rather a comprehensive overview which invites closer examination of details. One of the most intriguing details emerging from the IOJ history was presented by Ševčíková (2015) as a hypothesis for further investigation:

• The IOJs business enterprises employed a number of people, who had been actively involved in the new business community after 1989 in Czechoslovakia. Is it possible that IOJ's business enterprises and activities might have affected the initial business development and capitalism in a democratic Czechoslovakia (in positive or negative way)?

In conclusion, there is both an intellectual challenge and a practical opportunity to continue examining the IOJ story. After our review of the archive materials they will be available in the State Archives for further academic research.

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