



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on June 18, 2010

Iceland to Become ‘Journalism Haven’

With the support of several prominent organizations, the Icelandic Parliament (the Althing) unanimously approved a new legislative package aimed at creating a sort of “haven” for journalism and freedom of expression.

The so-called [Icelandic Modern Media Initiative](#) (IMMI) includes several important provisions taken from a review and analysis of media laws around the world — compiling all of the strongest protections into one package.

Among the components: source protection laws taken from Sweden (where revealing a confidential source can be a criminal offense), communications protection rules from Belgium (where private discussions between a source and a journalist cannot be admitted as evidence in court), a shield from unfair libel suits against journalists modeled after a New York state law, and much more.

The reforms also establish a Prize for Freedom of Expression, a Freedom of Information Act making government even more transparent, a limitation on prior restraint so that the government cannot halt publication of information, limited liability company laws taken from Vermont, and a whole host of other protections for journalists and publishers. A more complete list can be found on IMMI’s [website](#).

"Protection of whistle-blowers is especially important in a small community like ours. People are afraid to leak things here," Parliamentarian Brigitte Jonsdottir, a cosponsor of the bill, told the [Associated Press](#). "This is what the nation wants, and this legislation will put it into stone." A few media companies have already relocated to Iceland, according to news reports, and Jonsdottir said a great deal of interest has been expressed among foreign media firms.

Several factors were involved in turning the idea into reality. For one, Icelanders were furious when a national broadcaster was barred by government from reporting on a banking scandal during the economic crisis. Also, so-called “[libel tourism](#)” in countries like the United Kingdom has become problematic for a lot of journalists, including some in Iceland. British laws - which can be abused by litigants from around the world - tend to lean in favor of the plaintiff, which critics say stifles free speech with fear of costly litigation.

Supporters of the legislation believe it will improve Iceland’s image and prevent corruption. Others hope it will help the economy by attracting foreign media companies to Iceland — or at least their Internet servers. But even if it doesn’t bring in a great deal of foreign money, the law could still influence freedom of expression around the world.





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“At first glance it would seem that any particular nation state’s laws can only affect the behavior of its own citizens and companies,” notes the IMMI on its [website](#). “However, because the world is economically and culturally connected, experience shows that the laws of one nation can affect the behavior of persons in another. Indeed, that is how, on the opposite side of the equation, ‘libel tourists’ are able to abuse states with poor press protection laws to suppress freedom of expression in other countries.” It then proceeds to cite some examples of foreign laws offering protection in free speech and whistle-blowing cases.

[Wikileaks](#) founder Julian Assange, who was instrumental in pushing the legislation and is serving as an advisor to IMMI, [noted](#) that the law may not be the “magic bullet,” but it is a “good bullet” and will certainly help. He also hopes it will inspire other countries to follow suit. The organization he leads publishes leaked documents and material from around the world, including its recent “[Collateral Murder](#)” video showing U.S. troops in Iraq firing on civilians, a Reuters photographer, and good Samaritans from a helicopter. The person who leaked that video has since been arrested by U.S. authorities.

Journalists around the world welcomed the legislation, putting the small volcanic island nation in the North Atlantic — with around 300,000 citizens — back in the spotlight once again. What will happen from here remains to be seen, but even if it only helps expose a tiny fraction of the corruption going on in governments around the world, supporters say it will have been a good move.



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