

Freedom of the Press: Theory of a 4th Government Power, the Press

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Abstract

Freedom of press and media through the different ways of communication, whether it is printed or electronic is a right and has to be exercised with liberty. Since the press is a major threat to these regimes, its access is basically controlled and reflects the importance of their existence. News organizations are state-run, therefore the information given out through the ways of communication is mostly propaganda. However, with the advance of social media and the internet, these cases are often reported and studied to judge the caliber of press freedom in each country.

Keywords: ethics, freedom, press, news, social media

Introduction

The freedom of press, one of the most essential pillars for a democracy to exist, is consecrated in every constitution of any country. It makes its appearance in chart declarations as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in many more important ones since the 19th century. But due to certain drifts and infringements to fundamental freedoms, we should consider that the matter of the right to the information that every citizen possesses is in fact in danger.

Freedom of press and media through the different ways of communication, whether it is printed or electronic is a right and has to be exercised with liberty. It implicitly insinuates non-interference from any state and of course preserved by the constitution and many other legitimate documents and charts. Another point is the government information that cannot be shared due to security reasons and its relevance. A state can then distinguish the materials and whether they should be

public or forbidden from public disclosure. This can only happen for two reasons: the information might be sensitive, secret or in the matter of national interest and its impact.

We might as well encounter states that are subject to sunshine laws of information legislation, used to define the level of national interest and which enables the citizens of that state to request access to any information that is held by the regime.

In 1948, the United Nations put in place the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which quotes: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and conceptions through any media regardless of frontiers”.

This brings us to the idea of freedoms given to anyone, to share and receive information but also to the freedom of speech and to express ourselves whenever we feel the need to and to also have opinions on any matter. This is mostly applied in democracies around the world but when it comes to authoritarian regimes, these freedoms are disregarded, sometimes mentioned in the country’s constitution but not so much respected.

Freedom of speech is very often covered by the same laws that are covering the press and giving equal treatment to spoken and published expressions. Historically, the first country to adopt the freedom of the press into its constitution was Sweden, with the Freedom of Press Act of 1766. A few years later, the Founding Fathers of the United States of America drafted the U.S Constitution, with the First Amendment mentioning the freedom of speech, which relates to the press as well as the opinion. France didn’t include it until 1881.

A free and independent press is often characterized as the key mechanism of a functioning and salubrious democracy. This is the case for all countries that have had an authoritarian or totalitarian regime antecedently and have broken out towards democracy.

Eastern European countries like Romania, Poland that were a component of the Eastern Soviet Bloc or Spain under Franco’s regime are all examples of incipient democracies and giving way to freedoms, such as the press.

When censorship is absent in a state, journalism is present and subsists as a watchdog for private and regime action, mostly providing information and maintaining an apprised population.

Therefore, regime efforts to endeavor and influence any published or broadcasted news content, whether it is by media control or by inflicting self-censorship represents a great threat to the access of consequential and indispensable information and of course, affects the quality of the democracy in place. Independence of the press is a way to increase political erudition, participation and voter turnout and acts as a consequential and essential driver of civic participation in all matters regarding the country.

With all of this being said, we can indeed notice that there is a certain power here. The press can shape opinions, give new ideas and new ways of thinking to the masses. We might as well say that the press is a weapon to direct people. And with the current situation that we live in, with the presence of fake news, propaganda in some authoritarian countries and the hard job that a journalist has to bring out the truth, the press nowadays is embodied in our daily lives and will be for as long as we exist. It makes the subject of the study an important topic that must be understood and analyzed.

However, we do find irregularities in certain cases which we will bring up, that have marked history and made regimes rethink how to loosen the prehension of the press and give it its consummate freedom. We will be defining the model of press liberation and what it consists of to determinately be able to answer whether we can consider that the media has taken a more sizably voluminous impact in our society in the past 50 years and if we can definitely, consider it as a 4th power to be included or not.

Freedom of Press Around the World

Based on Reporters Without Borders, we can estimate that a third of the world population lives in countries where the freedom of press does not exist. These countries either have no democratic regimes or have major deficiencies in their democratic process. One of the reasons for these deficiencies can be corruption or a divided regime in which a part of it does not want to proceed in the democratization.

Countries that first come to our mind are North Korea, China and Russia. The first two are amongst the last countries to have the one-party system with the Communist Party ruling. In Russia, Putin's authoritarian regime restricts freedoms in order to hold on to power and not lose grip over the

country he has been president of since 1999. But many other countries remain in the same situation as the first three, mostly found in Africa, Asia and Latin and South America. These countries are located in war zones, conflict areas, suffer from civil wars or armed rebel groups and may have encountered precedently and may still be military regimes.

Since the press is a major threat to these regimes, its access is basically controlled and reflects the importance of their existence. News organizations are state-run, therefore the information given out through the ways of communication is mostly propaganda. Negative aspects will be hidden behind the some positive or made-to-be positive aspects of the regime.

For example, North Korea would only showcase what a strong army it has, with military parades on TV and daily news about what Kim Jong Un, the leader of the country has done.

To keep everything under control and the political base, brutal ways are used by the government: police, military and agencies keep journalists from challenging them on the different political, economical and social issues of the society. Intimidation is very common accompanied by threats, jail sentences and blacklisting. Other serious cases included torture, kidnapping which may lead to death in many known stories.

Several famous stories about journalists being abducted and murdered are The Lira Baysetova case in Kazakhstan and the Georgiy R. Gongadze case in Ukraine. Many more have followed in the last 10 years, including during the Arab Spring or the famous Jamal Khashoggi case. For simply using the wrong word in Nepal, Eritrea, and mainland China, journalists may spend years in confinement, labour camps and jail.

However, with the advance of social media and the internet, these cases are often reported and studied to judge the caliber of press freedom in each country. ONG's like Reporters Without Borders studies in each of these countries the numbers that come up, including deaths, jail sentences, harrasements and expulsions. State monopoly on the means of communications are also an important factor to study, which would automatically indicate to us that there is censorship and difficulties encountered by journalists to perform their duty.

The CPJ, Committee to Protect Journalists tracks down all of these injustices too, using its correspondents and local journalists. It later shared the amassed information to international press organizations such as the network of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange. Every incident is studied and investigated with a full report to know the story and finally denounce any mistreatments and breaches of freedoms.

Freedom House, another independent organization, studies the political and economical spheres of the countries in question to have a report on whether journalists are obstructed and how freedoms are neglected. After making the assessments, three categories are given: free, partly free or not free press.

Although all of these organizations are working everyday to denounce what happens around the globe, it remains a hard mission. With the help of journalists, activists and social media which mostly shares pictures and depictions of the dangers of being a journalist and reporting the truth in authoritarian regimes, change is being made as people now are aware of the breaches of freedoms. But these breaches and infractions continue to rise, as the danger of reporting is as well.

These regimes will not tolerate the loss and cannot risk giving out journalists the freedom to exercise their duty to the detriment of what they hold in tight hands, which is their power and their so-called legitimacy, broadcasted on state-run news.

In their case, the holding back of the power of the press and what it can actually prove to denounce them and ridicule them is a very important key to their survival and continuity.

In the developed countries, it is the complete opposite where freedoms are sacred and cannot be disposed of, as proven by their history and fight for freedoms.

The Perception of the Press in Recent Years

Press freedom continues to be in decline in the world, as well as in democratic countries for the last few years. According to the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, the number of countries where the freedom of press is respected has gone down drastically and journalists are meeting more obstacles in doing their job, making it less safe than it was before.

The press freedom in the U.S was declared as problematic, a first in its history. Concerns are increasing in other parts of the world about the threats and hate against journalists.

This is mainly fuelled by politicians, who use extreme language in debates, accusing them of scapegoats and liars. Consequently, this ignites violence against journalists which they meet in their everyday professional lives.

Authoritarian regimes continue to hold a large hand on their local media based on Freedom Index reports. Europe continues to be the first continent that guarantees press freedom even though it is also decreasing. Reports are coming where journalists are obstructed from doing their work, being the targets of pressure and intimidation.

A phenomenon grew in Europe, precisely in France where politicians threaten and insult journalists. Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of La France Insoumise (France Unbowed), stated that it was healthy and just to hate journalists.

According to the World Press Freedom Index, out of 180 countries, 140 made journalist's presence and freedom difficult and problematic and only 30 with good media presence.

Of the countries that saw their ranks drop are the U.S, Venezuela, Brazil, Iran and China. The last one is found to be problematic, since their government interferes massively on the local and international level with propaganda.

The U.S found itself with these countries that dropped ranks due to the attack on the Capital Gazette paper in Maryland, where five members of the paper's staff were shot down by a man. Again, we can also talk about the fact that Trump, just like President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, characterizes any information that criticizes them as misinformation and fake news.

Saudi Arabia also finds itself in the bottom after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. A Washington Post columnist and longtime critic of the regime, he was killed in October 2018 at the Saudi Arabia embassy in Istanbul. This resulted in the ignition of global concerns over deteriorating press freedom in the country. Political leaders repeatedly take down and criticize the work of journalists, assuming that the media is just pushing an agenda whenever they hear something that displeases them.

Les Nouveaux Chiens de La Garde by Serge Halimi, published in 1997 and updated in 2005, deals with modern journalism with the same reverence in front of their bosses, money and power. Today, press, television and radio journalists comply with politicians, large industrial groups or even the market. As the author emphasizes, they are dependent on it, almost all the major private television or radio news channels from Le Monde and TF1 are run and subsidized by large industrial groups. meaning that almost all these media must bow to their shareholders to hope to exist for a while. But it is not only a question of money. And it's hard to believe in the objectivity and critical thinking of a journalist who feels important and powerful when backed by politicians as depicted in the book.

The market also plays its part and creates a journalistic world of unique thought, all of us repeating the same often derisory information, the same opinion, a kind of national manipulation.

Serge Halimi presents his analysis of what he considers to be a collusion between media, political and economic powers. He also intends to dismantle the sometimes partial and obliging treatment of certain French media towards the companies which are their shareholders. He also explains the lack of attention that he says is made of social movements, and the preponderant place of various facts in television news. He takes up the thesis according to which the news is a diversion.

In 2020, Reporters Without Borders have declared that 50 journalists have died this year as a result of their work, a number which has been in decline for 10 years. But although this seems like good news, 50 is still a consequent number and is aggravated by the global decline of press freedom. And behind this number, we can conclude that two-thirds of these journalists died in countries which are not engaged at war with other countries.

For the case of Mexico, it remains with the highest tally, having 8 dead journalists, a consequence of the war on drugs and cartel conflicts along with internal issues.

But if we look at Syria, the country has taken more than 600 journalists and correspondents alone, making it one the deadliest areas for them in this last decade according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Conclusion

During the Corona pandemic that struck the globe, many countries passed emergency laws that consequently limited temporarily press freedom. Some were added in common law, and therefore limiting press freedom.

Emprisonnement wise, 387 journalists were jailed in 2020 with 117 from China alone. It is a direct result of the whistleblowing when the Corona pandemic started in the country, the Ouigours controversy but also the Hong Kong protests.

The consequence of these death tolls and restrictions to journalists to perform their duty safely weakens the right to information but not the power of the press. They actually reflect that there is something that needs to be done in order to avoid these numbers and manage the flow of free press around the globe. 2020 has seen how much information is valuable to the world.

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(<https://cpj.org/reports/2020/12/record-number-journalists-jailed-imprisoned/>, article by CPJ about the record of imprisoned Journalists in 2020)

(<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>)