
A FREE SOCIETY OR A FREE PRESS — WHICH COMES FIRST?

— HENRY GRUNWALD —

If I were to nominate a patron saint for journalism, it would be a seventeenth century English printer and pamphleteer named William Twyn, who published a book endorsing the right to revolution. Condemned for treason, he was hanged, cut down while still alive, emasculated, disemboweled, quartered and, presumably to make absolutely sure, beheaded. In our time, in many parts of the world, journalists are still treated more or less that way. Indeed, in our own enlightened country, quite a few people would like to see journalists edited — as it were — in that fashion. Still, we have come quite a long way, especially in the last few years.

A little over a decade ago an international meeting of journalists took place in Talloires, France, under the joint sponsorship of Tufts University's European Center and the World Press Freedom Committee. The name of the conference was "Voices of Freedom." It issued a ringing statement reaffirming Article 19 of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, which, in an echo of the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man, stated that "everyone has right to freedom of expression and opinion." The Talloires document further insisted that being "fully informed is fundamental right" and that "denying freedom of the press denies all freedom of the individual".

This was done at a time when communist regimes across the world were still firmly in place; when freedom of information was seen either as a fantastic dream or a subversive threat by most Third World governments; and when UNESCO was still trying to impose political controls on the global flow of news through the so-called "New World Information Order."

Some at Talloires, who helped draft the document and enthusiastically backed it, nevertheless had certain doubts. Was it possible to promote freedom of information in countries whose rulers simply did not believe in freedom, and whose people had little experience with it? Was it realistic to talk of freedom of the press before free political institutions existed?

This year brings the publication of a successor document to the Talloires

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Declaration titled "Charter for a Free Press." Its provisions were approved earlier by an international conference in London, again sponsored by the World Press Freedom Committee in cooperation with other journalistic institutions. It affirms that censorship, direct or indirect, is unacceptable, that independent news media must be allowed to emerge everywhere unhampered by government intervention, that national frontiers must be opened to foreign journalists, and that licensing of journalists must be eliminated.

This ambitious charter was submitted to a follow-up meeting of the 52-nation Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki last spring. Delegates expressed support for the charter, but postponed action on it, calling instead for a CSCE seminar on free media in 1993, where it can be considered in greater detail. Whatever the outcome, the demands of the Charter are surely closer to becoming reality than they were a decade ago.

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Totalitarian regimes are no longer smug or safe in the conviction that they can suppress and control information. Borders can no longer limit communication. This is an era when nomads in the Mongolian desert use portable generators to watch television in their tents. For years before the Iron Curtain was torn down, much of Hungary had watched Austrian television. Most of East Germany had been tuned into West Germany's TV. One part of East Germany that had poor reception was called *das Tal der Ahnungslosen* — the valley of the uninformed. But the facsimile machines, printing presses, radio transmitters, and photocopiers that were smuggled into the Communist empire (many incidentally, by priests and union representatives) gradually penetrated this and other valleys of the uninformed. In short, the information revolution has led, and is still leading, to political revolution.

The process underscores an important truth; we used to fear, as did George Orwell, that technology would become the means by which Big Brother would rule all citizens and their brains. But the opposite happened. Technology, in the hands of the citizens, or the outside world, overthrew Big Brother.

And yet the question remains — put in slightly oversimplified terms — of what comes first, a free society or as free press, political freedom or freedom of expression? In one sense, the answer is obvious. A free press cannot exist on its own, without being based in a free society. The two types of freedom are aspects of the same freedom, they are inseparable. But how they interact, help, advance and sometimes hinder each other is a highly complex and important phenomenon.

Revolutionary change is often led by forces other than the press, such as economic or natural disasters, war and other forms of violence, or spontaneous mass eruptions of anger. However, at times it is the press itself — underground or legal — which leads the way. To assume that not much can be done for a free press except when the political change has already and the right climate exists, would have a paralyzing effect on such change; this proposition was disproved by the upheavals in the Communist world. Yet it is also true that one must not

they found it heroic to fight against tyranny, many find it merely boring to write about budgets and constitutions. Moreover, in the European tradition, many journalists in the former East Bloc see themselves as intellectuals who prefer punditry and polemics to factual reporting, which they consider mere craftsmanship and drudgery. Objectivity does not mean much to them; sometimes it is seen as downright cowardly or irresponsible. After decades during which news was nothing but an institutionalized lie in the Communist world, these journalists often feel that merely giving "straight news" is inadequate, and that they must tell their readers what they feel is right. Readers often feel the same way. A press independent of political parties, unions or other centers of loyalty is still a startling idea.

Just as unsettling are the new commercial imperatives, the need to make profits, sell papers and peddle advertising. How can a press be independent, many Eastern European journalists ask, if it depends on advertisers — a question not exactly alien to their colleagues in the West.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty involves the attitude of yesterdays rebel who becomes today's boss. Consider Solidarity in Poland, a movement inextricably linked with the press. In 1977 the Workers Defense Committee, known by its Polish initials KOR, founded a crudely produced newspaper, Robotnik (The Worker), which in a sense was the seed of everything that followed. On the initiative of Robotnik, the first unofficial free trade union was formed, a movement that in turn produced more papers, distributed at factory gates and outside churches, and more unions. The regime in Poland cracked down, yet gradually the Solidarity movement revived. In 1989, the people who had been writing for the underground press were running the major Polish newspapers and Solidarity members were running Poland.

Yet when journalists began criticizing the new regime, the new rulers felt betrayed. Lech Walesa did not "take over the media," as he had threatened, but some critical journalists were fired and some TV programs were dropped. The Catholic Church which had played such an important role in the revolution, fiercely attacked the press for "corruption and disinformation." This may not have been entirely unjustified - many Poles are worried by the possibility of extremism.

The story in Czecho-Slovakia was similar, where yesterday's persecuted underground writers and journalists have become today's establishment figures, including among others, the president, Vaclav Havel, the foreign minister, and the ambassador to the U.S. When the press began criticizing Havel's government, he complained bitterly, accused journalists of sensationalism, said that certain official secrets should not be disclosed, and declared that along with freedom of the press came responsibility. Of course that is an impeccable sentiment, depending on how you define responsibility.

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This dilemma is not new. During the American Revolution the press gleefully attacked British rule but rarely dared to criticize the new, popularly elected

push for the impossible and expect the emergence of a functioning free press almost overnight, without major changes in the surrounding society. That is the dilemma faced by all of us who have tried to help the development of free media in former totalitarian countries.

The impact of information on our societies — specifically the link between information and democracy — leads to these propositions:

- 1) Information is necessary but not sufficient by itself to bring freedom.
- 2) Freedom itself is necessary but not sufficient to build either an effective free press or democracy. Both require certain skills, disciplines, and habits of mind.
- 3) The unprecedented proliferation of information can be as unsettling as it is liberating. It is therefore more important than ever that we know just what we communicate and why.
- 4) We should not assume, as we sometimes do, that these problems arise only in those benighted regions where people are still struggling to establish freedom of information. They arise among ourselves as well, and we should examine ourselves even as we undertake to instruct others in the arts of democracy.

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Central Europeans, and especially yesterday's dissidents, have long used the concept of "civil society" as distinct from a society in which everything is controlled by the government. A free press is part of this "civil society", but it also includes many other institutions, social and cultural activities, and professional groups. William Echikson who reported on Eastern Europe for the Christian Science Monitor from 1985 until 1990, noted that his editors would not let him use the term "civil society" because they thought no one in America would understand it. That is because, he argues, America takes "civil society" for granted. But in the former Communist world it is still a novelty. It grew slowly but irresistibly during the seventies and eighties, although it is far from complete or secure, and the underground press, the Samizdat, was essential in spreading its impact.

But difficulties developed as the press emerged from underground. Overthrowing Big Brother no matter how arduous or heroic, is easier than replacing him. The press is a great instrument of protest; it is not nearly as good a tool for re-construction.

We have become familiar with those difficulties. Some are caused by governments and bureaucracies, many still infested with the old Communist crowd; they are reluctant to let go of their grip on newsprint, presses, distribution systems, not to mention radio and TV stations, whose control by the government is a deeply ingrained habit. Press laws drafted by governments are full of pitfalls, such as the Czech proposal to license journalists and an Albanian proposal that the press should promote national objectives or be subject to fines.

Some of the difficulties are caused by the journalists themselves. Although

American leaders. As the historian Leonard Levy has observed, if the New York printer John Peter Zenger had attacked the New York Assembly rather than a despised royal governor, he would probably have been convicted of treason and jailed, rather than acquitted in a celebrated mid-eighteenth century trial and enshrined in American history as a hero of press freedom. Loyalist editors were savaged, in one typical case by a body calling itself "the Committee of Tarring and Feathering."

Thus also in the French Revolution, which, perhaps more than any other political upheaval, was prepared for by the written word. For more than a century an underground press had flourished in France. After it surfaced and freedom of the press was proclaimed, the press was soon free only to praise the new revolutionary regime. It is sometimes forgotten that the famed Declaration of the Rights of Man, extolling freedom to speak, write and print, also noted that citizens "shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as defined by law."

Given this background, and given the legacy of decades of totalitarian thought control, I think we can be mildly optimistic about the emerging journalism in the former Communist world, despite all the enormous difficulties. The real danger to the press is economic breakdown and chaos, followed by more or less righting regimes ruling in the name of "order", a development that a fledgling press might not be able to prevent or survive.

But there have been many positive developments. During the coup in Moscow in the summer of 1991, some newspapers, including Pravda, supported the plotters; others were shut down, their presses surrounded by tanks. The staff of several of these papers risked their lives by working together to produce a common edition, and by using facsimiles and copiers to turn out pamphlets that denounced the Putsch.

Another example is David Remnick's reports from Moscow on the emergence of a new journalistic generation quite different from the older, idealistic but cautious protesters, whom he characterized as a crowd of "business neophytes, scholars, hustlers, editors," building not on old Russian models but on "fragmentary notions gathered from the West." To Remnick, this generation is personified by Vitaly Tretyakov, now 40 years old, who had left the earnest, highbrow Moscow News and started *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Independent Newspaper), perhaps the closest thing to a Western newspaper Russia has ever produced. Of his own young staff, Tretyakov says: "They are the first generation that knows no fear. Journalism is not a mission to them... It's a terrific game."

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Are the lessons of the former Communist empire penetrating the world's other "valley's of the uninformed"? Many are opening up or are under siege. In Latin America, with some notable exceptions, the advance of democracy has been accompanied by a burgeoning free press. In Argentina, where a decade ago the free press was virtually dead, there are as many as four newsstands at city street corners selling everything from poetry journals to pornography. Just

how secure the press is in its new freedom remains to be seen. In other Western Hemisphere countries, press freedom exists only in theory, if at all. Often it is threatened by "unofficial" sources which harass journalists.

In too many places, the fight against free information continues unabated. Let me cite a few instances, mostly from the 1992 International Press Institute (IPI) report on press freedom. Kuwait, for whose liberation we fought the Gulf War, reimposed censorship. In Nigeria, which officially denies the existence of censorship, the information minister declared: "To criticize Nigeria is to criticize God."

In China, the party leadership in effect has said the same, without referring to the divinity; press freedom does not exist. In the Philippines, where the press played a major part in the "people's revolution" against Marcos and the victory of Corazon Aquino, it is free, but also vicious, often corrupt — and often its members are victims. Thirty-one reporters have been murdered in the past six years, and journalists have not won a single court case against assailants.

Overall, one of the most serious threats to press freedom is what the IPI's Peter Galliner calls "economic censorship," imposed deliberately by governments withholding resources or, in some cases, simply by bad times. In Turkey, a major media concern went bankrupt, throwing 1,000 journalists out of work, even as the government was easing some laws curbing press freedom of expression. In South Korea, which has an increasingly free and rambunctious press, there is such fierce economic competition among many new, small publications that reporters are pressed into service as salesmen, occasionally threatening businessmen with bad stories unless they buy subscriptions or ads.

An odd case is Singapore, highly prosperous yet distinguished by one of the worst press records of any economically advanced country. Its crackdown on foreign publications that criticized Lee Kuan Yew's regime is notorious. Singapore enforces a law requiring the regular flushing of toilets and urinals, and it is treating information in much the same way. Books are censored, as are videotapes (bare breasts must be edited out). Naturally, there is a thriving business in uncensored books and videotapes just across the causeway in Malaysia.

Television is also strictly controlled. Foreigners used to complain that one was more certain to have access to CNN in Beijing and Saigon than in Singapore, where CNN news must be relayed by local TV, satellite dishes having been outlawed. Lee may not know that in Eastern Europe, people used to build their own satellite dishes from abandoned instruments like radio telescopes and chicken wire, but he undoubtedly remembers that the early protest demonstrations in Prague were broadcast on television while protesters shouted at police: "The world sees you."

Singapore is important because it is such an anomaly. Ordinarily, a modern economy requires open communications, and Singapore is part of the new global computer-plus-satellite network which, cutting across all national frontiers, carries out billions of dollars worth of transactions in seconds. These transactions are often prompted by instant news. In the 19th Century, the Rothschilds were able to make fortunes by sending couriers to battlefields and

buying and selling stocks before anyone else heard about the outcome. Today, everybody knows everything at once, and Walter Wriston, former chairman of Citibank said that the Gold Standard has been replaced by the "Information Standard."

It is simply untenable for a place like Singapore to deal freely in all financial data but not in other forms of information. The same applies, in varying degree, to other holdouts against the tide of information.

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That tide comes in many forms which we do not always recognize as information. It comes in the form of movies, TV sitcoms, music, fashions, gadgets — all of the ingredients of what we consider pop culture. It happens to be a great American export, perhaps the greatest. It contributes, for better or for worse, to the American image in the world. American popular culture is often shocking for its sexual license, violence, and sheer extravagance. But on the whole it projects the kind of life growing numbers of people seem to want.

A recent article in *Rolling Stone*, by Jon Katz, asserted that we are seeing a major transition from what he termed Old News to New News. Old News means straight news, the stuff you find in newspapers and news magazines and conventional TV news shows, and it is, in *Rolling Stone's* inimitable style, "pooped, confused, and broke... The people watching and reading are aging and dying, and the young no longer take their place."

By contrast New News consists of movies, rock, cartoons, MTV rather than CNN. In this view, we learn about gender conflict from "Thelma and Louise" and working class blues from "Roseanne". Bart Simpson is a trenchant social critic, Guns 'N Roses and Skid Row songs tell us more than newspapers and newscasts do about David Duke, Bruce Springsteen tells us that jobs are not coming back, and the movie JFK teaches us history, or at least, according to Katz, displays "journalistic instincts."

All this a little like suggesting that the novels of Dickens and the satirical lyrics of Bertolt Brecht were "news." They certainly taught us something, or moved us. But to call them news is, to put it mildly, eccentric. I am tempted to say that New News is no news and no news is bad news.

Bill Moyers took up this subject recently with some anger and bewilderment. He still believes in straight news, and our political discussion he says "has become the verbal equivalent of mud wrestling." Moyers cites the anthropologist Marvin Harris, who observed that the attack against reason and objectivity in America is becoming something of a crusade, and that we urgently need to rediscover rational dialogue between human beings "regardless of whether they happen to be women or men, whites or blacks, straights or gays, Jews or born again Christians."

In short, our own information environment is not necessarily adequate to our own democracy. As we export more and more information in the broadest sense — Old News or New News — to the rest of the world, this is something we need to keep in mind, lest we simply impose our own confusion on everyone else.

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Information advancing across the world is ultimately irresistible. But one can understand why it is being resisted, whether by Islamic fundamentalists or by economic nationalists who are trying to legislate against the free flow of data (failing to understand that information is not a commodity like oil).

Information, like freedom itself, is unsettling and threatening. William Twyn and countless other martyrs of the press learned this at the cost of their lives. Information undermines old habits, customs, patterns, and traditions. It undermines, among other things, the conventional notion of sovereignty. A Japanese management expert says: "People don't want nationalism and soil; they want satellites and Sony."

It will take a quite a while before that assertion becomes generally true. In the meantime we face a paradox: we must have information to make intelligent decisions, but too much information sometimes short-circuits intelligent decisions. Like the free market in goods, a free market in ideas creates endless choices, and the need to make choices creates a kind of fever of insecurity.

Going through the mail these days, we find a dizzying variety of junk mail mixed in with the real mail, and what may be junk mail to you may not be junk to me. How to decide? I heard about a computer firm that is attempting to write a software program that will sort out the junk mail for you. It is rather ironic to have one computer to throw out what other computers produced. But my real point is this: how does the computer know? We have to tell it what we consider junk or real, what we want and do not want.

Take this as a metaphor for the ever expanding information explosion around us. It may be ironic to talk about an overabundance of information as we are considering so many parts of the world where information is still scarce and where the computers and facsimile and Xerox machines that we treat as ubiquitous toys are desperately needed and almost touchingly wanted. But in due course, the information explosion will cover the earth and we will have to find ways to sort the information out. We will have to pay much more attention to how and on what basis we make choices. We will have to decide what is junk and what is real and why.

To do that software may help. But ultimately what we need is still the software of the human brain, a program not for the computer but for our consciousness, a program of values. Only if we rediscover and reassert our values will information lead to democracy rather than chaos.

