

# PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION AS DESIRED RESULTS OF PRESS FREEDOM: MEASURING MEDIA SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

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## **Introduction**

Freedom of the press is not an end in itself but serves a function in a democratic society. Journalism needs to be independent from the state, but also from overwhelming economic interests to provide diverse, complete and correct information to the citizens and enable universal participation in public discourse.

The term 'press freedom' is related to the concept of freedom of expression. In the broader sense, it encompasses freedom not only of print media, but also electronic and other public media. Conventionally, it is understood primarily as freedom from government control. The concept of press freedom was developed in the context of economic liberalization and the emergence of a free market in Britain – independent information was seen as a necessary condition for free trade. Absolute 'press freedom' demands that newspapers and other mass media organizations in a given state can operate and convey information without government interference. This is an important condition for press freedom. However, freedom from government control alone does not guarantee the free exchange of information and a pluralistic public debate. The common understanding of press freedom focuses on press freedom as commercial freedom, whereas in a context of consolidating and enhancing democratic processes, freedom of the press is seen as the opportunity for every citizen or societal group to be informed and have their voices heard and views reflected in public debate.<sup>1</sup>

The existing indices which are used to 'measure' press freedom in different countries are often superficial, biased and unsystematic, as Markus Behmer has pointed out in his previous chapter. Conventional indices emphasize freedom from government control and tend to neglect other aspects, such as other structural and direct factors that influence press freedom, thus

disregarding to some extent the complexity of the issue. In addition, they often lack scientific consistency, a major challenge for any such index as Bindé has noted (Bindé 2005: 161). So, what could be a different way of determining press freedom?

### **Structural conditions**

First of all, structural pre-conditions need to be analysed on a broader basis. Merely stating whether or not press freedom is guaranteed by the constitution and simply counting cases of censorship and harassment against journalists does not alone suffice to describe the state of press freedom in a country. In a complex society, the different sub-systems, such as political, economic and other sub-systems (religion, education), interact with media systems, and their competing objectives overlap and influence those of the media system. This is especially true since the media have the function of enabling communication between sub-systems and are therefore strongly interconnected with the other sub-systems. Various dependencies influence media organizations and have to be taken into account when looking at the degree of independence a media system enjoys. Of course, *legal provisions* are essential, but the judicial practice is also relevant.

Increasingly important are the *economic structures*. Dependency on market mechanisms such as high return margins limits the freedom of journalists and their reporting. In liberal democracies such economic conditions become main constraints to freedom of the press. Freedom of the press and of the media, in a broader context, thus also includes (relative) independence from economic influences.

The *political framework* also needs to be looked at more closely. What are the government's political objectives towards the media? Which political goals are dominant at the moment, and in what relation can they be seen to press freedom? For instance, security policies might prevail at a certain time and may render freedom rights secondary. A special concern in most European countries have been anti-terrorism measures that have interfered with media freedom, for instance when journalists are subject to surveillance or are forced to reveal their sources.

Furthermore, constraints on press freedom might be based on the *historical development* in a country. The historical experiences shape media structures and the conditions around them. In Germany, for example, Nazi propaganda is illegal by punitive law, which is a direct reaction to the Nazi past. But there are more indirect consequences as well, such as the re-structuring of the media landscape in Germany after the Second World War: due to the fact that many traditional publishers did not receive printing licenses from the Allied Forces directly after the War, new actors (such as Bertelsmann and Springer) could develop in the vacant space. In Greece, Spain and Portugal, media systems are still shaped by the aftermath of their relatively recent totalitarian rule. And in the post-Communist countries the impact of the past and the transition phase itself contribute to specific concerns with press freedom and plurality.

When comparing media systems and media freedom, social, cultural, traditional, and religious issues are often neglected, but they play an important role. The *social structures* of a country may be reflected in different ways in the media system. In the United Kingdom, for example, a relatively stratified class society results in a rather segregated newspaper market with different print media types (tabloids vs. 'quality' press) catering to different groups of society. Another aspect is the question of how minorities and disadvantaged groups are represented in the media, have access to them and find their views and concerns reflected in

public media. *Cultural factors* might include the dominant communication culture, which might have an impact on public discourse, as well as a tradition of taboos. Cultural traditions, such as the degree of communal organization of the citizens, may contribute to certain media traditions. In Italy, for example, where involvement of the citizens in communal and church associations, unions and political parties is very high and such alignments are closely knit, journalism reflects this partisanship by also being closely aligned with distinct associations' interests and positions. However, in other countries such as Germany, where such partisan involvement is not as common and less stable, journalism is expected to be more neutral and internally pluralistic. The possible impact of *religion* on media freedom is highlighted by the discussion surrounding the publication of the so called 'Mohammed caricatures' in Denmark, but the influence of Christian churches on European journalism can also be an intervening factor, for example when defining norms of morality and taboos.

In sum, a first step in analysing the state of press freedom in a country can therefore be to analyse such structural pre-conditions, which we attempt to do with the case studies in this book. The structural conditions vary in each country and create unique situations which are shaped by unique combinations of the conditions in these realms, but despite all differences, the comparison also shows commonalities (and common concerns) among some countries and, as decisions and policies on the European level become more and more relevant, even Europe-wide.

### **Content pluralism**

The project group formed by the authors of this volume will not, however, stop at looking at the structural conditions. The basic idea of a new index for press freedom suggested here is that press freedom in a country can be measured by exploring the *outcome* in addition to the structural conditions: is the system producing diverse, critical informational (journalistic) content? And is a broad public able to participate, as consumers and as producers, in the information exchange? There are two assumptions: for one, societies are complex and diverse; a variety of different views and interests exist in every society. Thus, a democratic media system should reflect this diversity and give all groups of society the opportunity to be represented and voice their views and interests. The second assumption is: if a lack of pluralistic media content and restrictions of access to informational media content are observed, this could indicate that freedom of the press is inhibited. It could therefore be possible to measure press freedom by determining whether (informational) media content is diverse and whether all groups of society are represented and have access to the public media – in short, whether media systems perform with regard to their societal functions.

An unregulated media market tends to produce monopolies or, at least, very dominant media conglomerates; a development that reduces the chances for other groups to voice their opinions and interests, especially if they do not cater to a mass market or address citizens as consumers. Looking at media content, an unregulated, concentrated media market would cater to such mass markets rather than minorities and deliver content that has a monetary value or can be sold (to advertisers and consumers). However, the correlation between external pluralism (meaning plurality of media ownership) and content diversity has not yet been sufficiently proven. Media concerns even argue that they ensure diversity by 'saving' smaller media enterprises from bankruptcy when they acquire them. It cannot be assumed that a very concentrated media market or very market oriented media policies *per se* lead to less independent, less diverse

media. In addition, diverse media ownership alone does not guarantee press freedom and pluralism, as many examples in the case studies later on in this volume show.

The approach of measuring content pluralism as one indicator for media freedom may also help with another critical issue. Self censorship is often a concern in journalism, induced by various dependencies on the political and economic system. But it is difficult to measure self-censorship. Thus, pluralism of media reporting can be an indicator because high diversity of media content indicates a low level of self-censorship. The analysis of content diversity in relation to the structural independence will be the next step of research that the project group will undertake beyond the analyses included in this book.

### **Journalistic independence**

One issue that is often discussed in the context of press freedom is whose freedom press freedom is, that is, who has the privilege to claim that right? In practice, not everybody can participate equally in the public discourse. But even if one considers only the media organizations themselves, it may be asked whether the proprietor of a newspaper, for example, has the right to exercise press freedom, or whether each individual journalist has this right (even in opposition to the newspaper's owner). Merrill makes a distinction between 'press freedom' as an institutional freedom from government control, and 'journalistic freedom' as an individual freedom of journalists from interference by editors and publishers (Merrill 1989: 34).

Another critical aspect of the concept of press freedom is that press freedom is not only a freedom *from* (for example government control), but also a freedom *to* – a freedom to report or not to report, a freedom to convey certain messages and opinions and not others. From this standpoint, the discussion about a 'responsible use of press freedom' arose. Freedom from external interference, certainly, is the foundation for an ethical use of the media, because one can only act ethically if one is free to choose. But in addition, journalists are often required to make responsible decisions about what to report about. They have to consider the possible effects of their reporting on others.

For example, in 1984, UNESCO published a list of ten principles of professional ethics in journalism (see Nordenstreng 1984). The list was developed by several international journalism organizations and is supposed to serve as an 'inspiration' for national or regional codes of ethics. Those principles encompass not only demands for free access to objective, unbiased, and accurate reporting, but also ethical standards for journalists. They state that the journalist is accountable not only to those controlling the media, but to the public at large, and that journalists should respect privacy, human dignity, democracy and equality. They also state that journalists should be committed to the elimination of war, apartheid, oppression, colonialism and neo-colonialism, poverty, malnutrition and diseases, and that they should promote a New World Information Order. These goals go much further than the western idea that a free media in a 'marketplace of ideas' would function automatically. They are based on the acknowledgment that further guidance is needed, and that freedom also comes with responsibilities.

While the UNESCO objectives go quite far and could be interpreted as contradicting press freedom in some regards (consequently, the US government rejected the initiative for a new information order in favour of a 'free flow of information' – with a dominance of a handful of north-western news agencies processing most of the world's news), discomfort with an absolute free market approach to press freedom remains, nevertheless. In order to avoid public interference

with media freedom and still ensure ethical reporting, self-regulation by media institutions might be a third way<sup>2</sup> towards ensuring freedom of the press and responsibility which is discussed by Vinzenz Wyss and Guido Keel in this volume.

## Participation

The question of who is actually free to communicate leads to another factor that is relevant when determining the state of press freedom: the possibilities for participation. Press freedom does not fulfil its democratic functions if it is only freedom for the very few. As the UNESCO World Report points out, 'knowledge societies in the twenty-first century will only be able to usher in a new era of sustainable human development if they ensure not only universal access to knowledge, but also the participation of all in knowledge societies' (Bindé 2005: 159). Is access to the media an elite privilege? Or is it open to the public? Does everyone have access to a wide range of information, are there possibilities to place information or actively produce media content? Only if a broad public and all relevant groups of society have access to diverse media and the potential of being heard, is press freedom really achieved.

## Index of press freedom

Whether media systems are relatively free, and produce diverse, critical information, can be measured with an index based on these considerations that could be applied to media systems in different countries. When evaluating press freedom, five factors could be looked at:

- *Structural conditions* (legal, political, economic, historical and cultural)
- *Organizational prerequisites* (organizational objectives, internal structure, self- and co-regulation)
- *Individual journalistic freedom* (influence exercised, degree of harassment, censorship and self-censorship)
- *Content pluralism* as an indicator for press freedom
- *Possibilities for participation* (access to the media; active as producers and passive as consumers/recipients).

### *Systematic data collection*

One aspect was to include more factors into the scope of examination. The other critique of conventional measures is a methodical one: The data collection process in the current indices is often arbitrary and unsystematic. It would be an improvement to obtain the necessary information about the situation in different countries in a systematic and scientific way. The values could be comprised to indicate the relative level of press freedom in a country, and the development can be compared over time. Thus, a content analysis will be an important instrument in the future implementation of the index, as well as systematic surveys. The following table suggests a systematic evaluation of the index, which could be conducted in various countries and yield a more differentiated picture of the status quo of press freedom in a country, and be used to compare major problems, constraints and possible solutions.

**Table 1:** Index of press freedom.*Structural conditions*

- Legal provisions and implementation
- Economic structures
- Political framework
- Historical developments
- Social, cultural, religious and traditional influences

*Organizational prerequisites*

- Organizational objectives and values
- Internal structure
- Self- and co-regulation

*Journalistic independence*

- Occurrence of repressions by the state or other organizations against journalists and/or media organizations
- Cases of censorship
- Occurrence of harassment and intimidation of journalists, media organizations
- Self-censorship
- Resources / employment conditions
- Education

*Plurality – Scope and diversity of media content / i.e. informational content*

- E.g., are certain controversial topics neglected?
- Are opposing views displayed?
- Is there critique of government and other organizations' policies?
- Are minorities' perspectives represented?
- Is there a broad variety of topics and views represented?

*Participation – Access to the media / possibilities for participation in public discourse*

- Passive access: who has access as a recipient? (There could be restrictions, e.g. technical, economic, lack of education, distribution restrictions)
- Active access:
  - a) Who has access to media content production?
  - b) Who are the sources and actors referred to in media reporting?
- Empowerment: media education and literacy

**Outlook**

The thesis underlying this index is that content pluralism and universal participation in public debate are desired characteristics of democratic media systems. The question is whether media systems and the actors within them are autonomous enough to pursue these goals, and this again can be determined by measuring their performance in terms of plurality and participation.

**Table 2:** Index of press freedom: Method and Evaluation.

<i>Method of data collection</i>		<i>Values (examples)</i>
<i>Production</i>		
Legal and structural conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Secondary Analysis</li> </ul>	<p><i>Macro level</i></p> <p>0 = no legal provisions for press freedom or many restrictions; majority of media under state control or very monopolized.</p> <p>1 = legal guarantees for press freedom exist but in practice many restrictions are applied; certain diversity in media ownership but strong state control or control of few large media organizations etc.</p> <p>2 = few legal restrictions; various media owners (state and others) etc.</p> <p>3 = no legal restrictions, little concentration in media markets, high diversity of media owners etc.</p>
Organizational prerequisites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Secondary Analysis</li> <li>■ Survey</li> </ul>	<p><i>Meso level</i></p> <p>0 = organizational objectives are focused on economic goals and/or particular interests; organizational structure is hierarchical and restrictive; possibly strong regulation.</p> <p>1 = some commitment to societal objectives (dissemination of information, enable communication, reflect pluralistic views), but economic and/or partisan interests prevail.</p> <p>2 = societal/democratic objectives are dominant at least in some media organizations, economic/partisan interests secondary; organizational structures allow some autonomy to organization members.</p> <p>3 = most media organizations focus on societal objectives, structure allows universal and diverse access, functioning self-regulation.</p>
Journalistic independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Survey among journalists; media organizations</li> <li>■ Secondary sources</li> </ul>	<p><i>Micro level</i></p> <p>0 = repressions against journalists are frequent, censorship and self-censorship occur</p> <p>1 = repressions and censorship occur, but some journalists are able to report critically without being intimidated.</p> <p>2 = repressions occur, but the majority of journalists can report freely.</p> <p>3 = there are no cases of harassment or censorship.</p>

		Service
Content Pluralism/ Scope and diversity of informational media content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Content Analysis</li> </ul>	<p>0 = media report one-sided, government policies are not criticized, opposing views are not displayed, large segments of society are not represented.</p> <p>1 = some criticism of the government or other major organizations occurs, but government-sided, uncritical or elite-oriented reporting dominates.</p> <p>2 = diversity and critical reporting dominate vs. biased reporting.</p> <p>3 = there is an overall diverse reporting; many relevant topics and opinions can be voiced, differing interests are displayed, there is criticism and control of state and economic policies.</p>
		Citizens
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Content Analysis</li> <li>■ Survey</li> <li>■ Secondary analysis (e.g. statistical and demographic data)</li> </ul>	<p>0 = active and passive access to media is reserved to a small elite.</p> <p>1 = there are possibilities to participate, but large segments of the society are excluded from public discourse.</p> <p>2 = there are many possibilities to access media, but some groups are excluded because of structural, political, educational or economic reasons.</p> <p>3 = broad active and passive participation is possible for most relevant social groups.</p>

In this book, we mainly address the first three factors, which represent three levels of conditions shaping the freedom and plurality of a media system: system-wide structural conditions, the level of media organizations, and the individual level of media actors with regard to information content, for example journalists. The other two factors, content diversity and participation chances, will be subject to future research of the work group.

## Notes

1. UNESCO for example pursues four goals with its communication and information policies 'Towards Knowledge Societies': freedom of expression, universal and equal access to information, education for all and cultural diversity (see Bindé 2005).
2. On the discussion of reconciling freedom and regulation, see McQuail 2003.

## References

- Bindé, Jérôme (2005), *Towards Knowledge Societies*, UNESCO World Report, Paris: UNESCO.
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