

**New Media and Press Freedom in the Developing World,**  
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**Abstract:**

Inasmuch as journalism is involved, new media complements other media in regard to influencing the shape and space of press freedom. At the same time, the freedom of new media - like other media - is dynamically related to the overall societal context as regards press freedom dispensations. Old and new media realms do have different issues, and there are particular matters for developing countries. But there is also much in common between old and new media, and between developing and developed countries, and all have interdependent interests in a free environment for journalism.

**1. Introduction**

Historically, “press freedom” is known as such because it was printers and newspapers that fought for this right which nowadays refers to media in general. It is a right that goes beyond an individual's freedom of expression, much as it is also built upon that right. In many places, it is privately-owned newspapers that continue this quest or help preserve victories against powerful forces who are sensitive to certain information becoming public. The question to be addressed in this paper therefore is the extent to which the battleground of press freedom today has a new frontier that incorporates cyberspace. This also entails taking stock of the main forces in the realm of new media (besides newspapers' presence there), and indeed whether old and new media are even on the same side in respect of this new arena. There are also questions of tools, tactics and issues in the contest for and against “press freedom” in this non-traditional environment. What, in short, are the new battles being fought, how do they affect “old” ones, and vice versa? And how does all this relate to “developing countries”?

In characterising the stakes in all this, one can safely say that contestation around press freedom in general is fundamentally around public power - and in particular about that form of communication that deals with power, i.e. journalism. In all this, “press freedom” is of course a sub-site of wider power contestations. Its parameters are largely determined by a broader balances of forces. Hence there are often correlations between different indices of freedom (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_indices\\_of\\_freedom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_indices_of_freedom)). At the same time, what happens within the broad press freedom topography of struggle can have substantial repercussions in other realms. In whatever media realm, old or new, press freedom - as freedom for the institution of journalism - is thus a pivotal prize for power more broadly.

Against this background, what this paper tackles is the extent to which new media and traditional media are different creatures, and to what extent the rise of the new means an extension of an existing battle (an expanded “army” of players who favour press freedom), or a contest which also entails a qualitatively changed set of forces and fortresses. Further, it is important to probe to what extent, if there are differences related to the increasingly diverse vehicles and platforms for journalism, what these mean for the prospects of commonality of purpose as regards press

freedom. Also addressed are the following questions:

\* To what extent does the old(er) media use new platforms to amplify the space and extend the impact of their journalism in regard to press freedom? (See O'Sullivan 2005).

\* Does new media, and specifically journalism in this realm, make a difference to both traditional media and to the wider political environment for generic press freedom?

\* There is also the issue of the source, and play, of journalism in cyberspace. Thus, besides the presence of traditional media, what about bloggers who do journalism (notwithstanding that only a minority do so)? How about search engines' news offerings, and even non-media institutions publishing "journalism" in various forms? Who, in short, are the direct stakeholders of press freedom in the new media terrain?

\* Finally, how do all these play out on a global scale, and with particular regard to press freedom in the "developing countries"?

## **2. Clarifications and core assumptions.**

The term "press freedom" can cover many bases - for example, the Reporters Sans Frontieres index is based on 50 distinct indicators. However, what does merit singling out as especially fundamental is that specific dimension which refers to the overall political-judicial dispensation of a country. In other words, one can zero in upon how a country's authorities relate to constitutional, legal and practical entitlements of citizens to produce and consume critical freedom of expression on a one-to-many basis. This is central to the state of the "public sphere" of expression in general - the cultural climate of society wherein public opinion operates with regard to what is talked about, and what is allowed to be said, where, when and by whom.

In this interpretation, a degree of press freedom can exist without other aspects of democracy (as it did in Apartheid South Africa), but a democracy cannot thrive without press freedom. At its core, then, "press freedom" is about the limits of state power as regards the media (both old and new) as a social institution, and very especially about the possibilities of critical journalistic information that bears directly on the exercise of public power.

With that understanding established, it is now possible to interrogate what is meant by "new media" and "developing countries". First, it needs to be recognised that much discussion of new media originates in "developed countries", and it mistakenly talks as if there exists a homogenous entity called "today's global media environment" and as if issues "facing the media industry worldwide" were equally universal. This kind of thinking exists in the sweeping claim by the European Parliament recently that: "the fight for freedom of expression has today largely shifted on-line as the Internet has become a means of expression of choice for political dissidents, democracy activists, human rights defenders and independent journalists worldwide." (Report cited at <http://www.out-law.com/page-7130>)

However, such artificial "assimilationist" perspectives are shown up by an elementary acknowledgement that the world's countries and classes have differential access to new media, and differing relations to the content available in this realm. Besides the digital divide that describes most people's lack of access to new media, the reality of the Web, from a "developing country" perspective, is: "It's rich, it's white, it doesn't speak the local language and it thinks it knows best." (Parsons, 1998). As will be shown, global unevenness in new media has significant implications for the focus of press freedom in different places.

Second, to the limited extent that much discourse acknowledges “the Other”, it is often assumed firstly that “Developing countries” = “Undemocratic countries”, and, further, that “Developing” means being en route and merely at a stage behind the “Developed”. But both assumptions are problematic. It is wrong to homogenise “developing countries” as if all were non-democracies with equal absences of press freedom. It is also flawed to think in a “catch-up” paradigm of linear “advanced” and “backward” stages on a singular trajectory. This implies that the “info-poor” have nothing of value and are inert as a result of their deficit. On the other hand, the “info-rich” are then seen to have all the answers (not to mention the only worthwhile language!). It erroneously assumes that there is an inexorable momentum in the same “desirable” modernist direction, with the only difference being the pace of progress. In reality, the world is not so much one of separate, discrete entities at differing stages, but is an integrated and interdependent system. Thus information industries are weak in some places at least in part because they compete on the backfoot with a flood of information commodities from elsewhere. (Meanwhile, the “info-rich” are typically poverty-stricken in regard to knowledge about the “info-poor”).

Even shedding these problematic assumptions, it still needs to be recognised that “developing countries” is very broad. In terms of new media, Malaysia, for instance, is a far cry from South Africa; the latter is very different to Nigeria. But for the purposes of this paper, the phrase “developing countries” will be interpreted as referring to those places where “new” media is still “new” to the majority of the population (not forgetting that old “mature” media is itself also fairly new and scarce to millions of people for whom “traditional” media means griots and other forms of oramedia). Immediately, however, one has to pause and ask about cellphones - which are increasingly not so new or rare even in poor communities and countries.

To deal with this factor requires that we interrogate the definition of new media. Not everything printed on paper is “the press”; and not all in the press is journalism in the power-sense defined earlier. Instead, around the world, much is propaganda - commercial advertising and/or state messaging. Similarly, despite the ubiquity of cellphones, not all cellular use is relevant to public life, just as not all Internet use touches on freedom of expression issues, let alone press freedom. As with cellphones, much Internet use (everywhere) is primarily for personal use (rather than issues that test rights, freedoms and state authority) (Parsons, 1998). Yes, Internet does enable “messages to be sent farther, faster and with fewer intermediaries than traditional media forms” (Singer, 2005), while cellphones are astounding networking tools, and indeed all this is potentially significant from a media point of view. Yet, the point is that both the Internet and cellphones are far wider creatures than just media ones. Their significance for democracy is also wider than the role of journalism within such media. Thus, in a nutshell, not all cellphone or Internet use counts as new media in a mass-communicational and public sense; and further not all new media amounts to journalism as such. Yet, the focus for this paper is upon press freedom as it pertains particularly to journalism as critical one-to-many (i.e. public) communication about public power. Other Internet or cellphone functionalities may be highly relevant to democracy, but they are not at heart matters of press freedom.

What is therefore at stake for the concerns of this paper are new ways for journalism to be channelled, and in this regard the specific use of cellphones as mass-media platforms in many “developed countries” is as limited as it is in most “developing countries”. It will likely be different in future, but at the time of writing, most users of cellular telephony around the world are barely aware that their devices can be used as media receivers as such, and most media has also done very little to exploit this potential for journalism.

In this perspective, “developing countries” can therefore be understood as the places where the

journalistic use of new media is a relatively new and uncommon phenomenon for the majority of the population. Since most countries are still “developing” when it comes to cellphones as media, this paper therefore concentrates mainly on the Internet, and on countries where no more than a small elite are able to access this platform for journalistic production or consumption. Indeed these countries, whether democratic or not, are also typically societies where even the broadcast and print media industry (along with general economic capacity) is all comparatively very weak when examined alongside other (“developed”) countries.

In summing up the arguments above, this paper seeks to highlight those dimensions of new communications technologies, and in particular the Internet, that are significant to information that implicates public power on a one-to-many scale in those societies where such communication has limited outlets. In short, a journalism-centric perspective is applied, and to specific places with particular low-density journalism conditions that are designated “developing countries”.

In concluding, this section has argued against inappropriately universalised and generalised interpretations of the topic of “new media and press freedom in developing countries”. There are indeed some general points that are made below, but they attempt to avoid the pitfalls that have been identified. Lastly, it must be stated that much of this paper deals with principles, rather than practices. The reason is partly because principles help us make sense of complicated phenomena. But it is also because, in this world of supposed “information-overload”, and on the supposedly “information-rich” Internet, there is remarkably little online information (in English at least) about new media and press freedom as regards “developing countries”. This in itself speaks volumes about global generalisations that are based on the hype and hopes of a handful of developed countries. Ironically, what is evident is that even in developed countries, while new media affords many opportunities to develop journalism, not much of this is actually taken up (Waldstein, 2005). That least is one thing in common around the world! (see section 4 below).

### **3. Taking cognisance of two traditions**

The “new” in new media has the sense of better and more exciting. In contrast, new media technologies should, instead, be seen on a continuum with (rather than in any fundamental opposition to) earlier media platforms (Landow, 2003, cited by Banda, 2006). There is certainly value in avoiding over-radical dichotomies between old and new media, but it is also important to look at both the similar and the dissimilar, the convergences and the clashes, between the two realms of media.

At the outset, we can consider political philosophy. In much of the world, there are distinctive political traditions associated with the two media realms. In the case of the press, it is a liberal cum social-responsibility tradition; in the case of the Internet, a libertarian one. These are close, but not completely compatible, traditions. The key difference is that while much old media tends to acknowledge self-regulation, the spirit of new media is more of a “free-for-all”. This is a significant distinction, because from a libertarian point of view, self-regulation is not much different to self-censorship.

This insight helps explain why the disappointment with Google and Yahoo's censorship concessions to the Chinese authorities was probably greater than that which greeted Rupert Murdoch's parallel kowtowing in the field of satellite broadcasting. As the Internet ethos goes, new media in principle are expected to be freer than old media. This can be positive for press freedom, but from a liberal perspective, the absence of self-regulation in much new media can also provide governments with an excuse to step in - with negative implications for press freedom in both old and new sectors. For example, in 2006, the South African government decided that

media - especially cellphone content providers - which purveyed child pornography, and/or which exposed children to pornography, needed regulation. In a classic case of a bulldozer taking the place of a flyswatter, legislation was tabled to bring all media under the pre-publication scrutiny of the Film and Publications Act. Prior to this, statutorily self-regulating newspapers and broadcasters had been exempted from the law. Protests blocked the initiative, but the wider point is that a problem in the one sphere (of new media) elicited a threat that could have allowed for government to constrain press freedom across the board.

The influence can operate in the other direction as well - for example, with "insult laws" or defamation law dispensations in old media applied to online content - even where this originates in foreign jurisdictions. However, many observers originally thought that the new technologies defied regulation of any type. The only way for governments to control them would be to stop their spread altogether. But although regulation is complex, costly and personnel-intensive, it is increasingly happening.

Indeed, most governments today - even developing countries in financial straits like Zimbabwe (apparently being aided by China in Internet control, see Malinowsky 2006) - successfully curb publication or circulation of online content. RWB lists the wider "enemies of the Internet" as including Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia. In these countries, there is censorship and there are filters. There is also often blockage of listed websites, including those like Anonymouse.com and other proxy sites and those offering anonymising technology like Tor (and likely to come, the recently launched Psyphon software). Typepad, which offers blogging technology, is blocked in some countries. Domain-name control is also exercised by some governments, such as Zimbabwe, where the banned Daily News newspaper also had to close its website.

More, the new ICTs also lend themselves to electronic tracking and surveillance. Yahoo's provision to Beijing of a user's identity details is widely seen as having led to his jailing as a cyber-dissident. There are fears that cellphones may "lead to a 'digital panopticon' of people under continuous monitoring" (May and Hearn, 2005). Generally speaking, not too many advocates of press freedom (in any part of the world) would quibble with police - operating under strict privacy safeguards - being able to track cellphone calls in order to combat serious crime. But a line would certainly be drawn at journalists' cellphone records being made available to the authorities - and there is contestation in many countries over legislation in this precise regard. It is true that serious dissidents can circumvent controls on press freedom in cyberspace more easily than they can with regard to traditional media. Many valiant efforts against such constraints help to keep alive an aspiration to press freedom, and they can be influential. But in such situations, it is simply not possible to be part of a readily-accessible media mainstream, enacting and reinforcing a culture of press freedom. In turn, a populace cannot know and cherish press freedom if this is a marginal, unstable or underground phenomenon. In these cases, the majority of citizens cannot even know what they are prevented from knowing - and even, sometimes, that they are being prevented per se.

Coming back to the different philosophical traditions of traditional and new media, what is noteworthy from the point of view of press freedom is that notwithstanding status differences around the ethos and practicalities of regulation and self-regulation, it is evident that both approaches and both media realms still share an antipathy to state curtailment of content. Indeed, the rise and growth of a mainly free Internet owes much to the broad press freedom environment promoted and often pioneered by the press. What this should make for is a situation where - despite philosophical differences - there is nonetheless a fundamentally shared concern between those who have journalistic interests in either new or old spheres (and of course, for those who also span the two). This is, however, not always the case. In developed countries, much old media experiences new media more as a rival than a political ally. And even amongst old media in these countries, divisive rivalries between print and broadcast are carried over into the online. The situation in many developing countries, however, is one where new media has so little reach, that

old media hardly sees the new as a factor either way. Work would need to be done in both cases to promote understanding about the common benefits of transcending the separate silo thinking.

If this is how press freedom traditions diverge and converge between old and new media generally, one can proceed to further examine the play of these traditions between developed and developing countries. In many developing countries (democratic or not), press freedom for the old media remains the primary issue simply because they are still the most extensive vehicles for journalism. This is so even in a country like Malaysia, where the Internet - because of its economic significance as a multi-functional platform - has been relatively unconstrained, but where strong state control of the major print and broadcast media continues (George, 2003). In contrast, in many developed countries threats to effective press freedom come not from the state but from giant media corporations (like Clear Channel which banned the songs of anti-war group Dixie Chicks). For Internet in particular, the big telecoms operators seeking a two-tier Internet, the Intellectual Property companies and major IT empires are seen as threats to effective press freedom in cyberspace. Thus while press freedom as an issue is broadly relevant in both parts of the world, there are different emphases between developed and developing countries with respect to old and new media realms. The extent to which press freedom for all media, can be a common issue for people in both developed and developing countries is assessed further below. The point is that the Internet, to the extent that it serves as a medium, is also a global medium, and this raises the stakes of press freedom to a higher level.

Up till now, the discussion has concentrated upon the established media sector in regard to both old and new platforms. In examining the relationship between them in Italy, Fortunati (2005) has noted the “mediatisation” of the Internet, and the “Internetisation” of the classic mass media. In her view, the “invasion” of the Internet by the press, radio and television in their dissemination of news reinforces the Internet as a mass medium, while the Internet in turn has especially influenced TV in terms of style. (In Italy's case, she says, the Internet as a source of information has now overtaken radio.) This presents an emerging picture of mutual colonisation between old and new platforms, with portents that the new will eventually be hegemonic.

Two points can be drawn out of this. First, the mediatisation is also a global one in the sense that the Internet can make information available to audiences all over the world. Local journalism (and local languages) may still be the key concern for press freedom in most places, but the significance of Internet's reach is that it enables local (even if elite) audiences to gain access to media content that offends opponents of press freedom in their countries. In this way, it undercuts local laws that can restrict press freedom in a given jurisdiction.

Second, just as the media industry has been establishing a presence in cyberspace, so too have others - albeit also unevenly when developing and developed countries are considered. These “newcomers” are IT and telecom companies, international organisations, business, government information apparatuses, political parties, civil society groups and individuals - all putting online not just information, but also often journalistic information. Whether opinionated or not, or agenda-driven or not, is not overly germane to this discussion. There is also the rise of stand-alone (independent) “net-native” journalists and media players - whether institutional or individual (see below). This “mediatisation” of non-media entities, enabled by “internetisation”, ends an era of exclusivity where only those who owned and operated means of mass communication could take direct advantage of press freedom. This development, reduces the standing and authority of the traditional gatekeepers, but it also vastly extends the terrain for contestation around control of “journalistic” information. It further means that where there is growing new media in a country, the direct stakeholders of “press freedom” become many more than the “usual suspects” - i.e., the traditional print and broadcast media. This raises the question

of competition and collaboration possibilities not just amongst media operators - old and new, but between them and all kinds of other players in the new environment.

In an increasingly integrated world, all these issues are relevant to press freedom. Where new media and the range of local players participating therein become more widespread in a given society, so the importance of press freedom for the old media may diminish as an issue relatively speaking. Already in the USA, by 2004, 54 percent of Americans were getting political news online (Pew Research Center, 2004; cited by Singer, 2005). This prospect is different to the developing world, however. As noted earlier, from many developing countries' point of view, the "struggle" is understandably concentrated on the old media front. It is the case nonetheless that new media is still an area where some headway can sometimes more easily be made in such countries. Thus, it can be noted that in much of the developing world, people try to use new media for objectives that cannot be met through old media. "The less press and personal freedom people have, the more attractive the Internet looks as a safe site for anti-government political expression" (George, 2005). The limited reach of new media in developing countries means that many governments are not excessively bothered about the content on these platforms as compared to the old mainstream ones, notwithstanding that, as indicated, there is increasing regulation being attempted.

In global terms, a united front of those with an interest in press freedom across all platforms seems to be called for despite the differences between participants and between country situations. Fortunately, new media itself greatly extends the capacity for activism to create, defend or deepen press freedom. In this sense, websites, email lists, emails, and cellphone uses that circulate pertinent information have greatly strengthened lobbies for media freedom around the globe.

#### **4. When old media become new: significance for press freedom**

Moving now from general considerations discussed above towards the more empirical level, it is possible to assess some of the more concrete specifics of press freedom and new media forms. The comparative (if exaggerated) ease of entry into online electronic publishing, as distinct from print or broadcast, in countries with a minimum of Internet connectivity means that new media objectively widens the environment where press freedom comes into play. This is especially important in countries with low media density, where arguably the more information on offer, the better. Better still, such international publishing at least serves the vast diasporas of many of these countries, as well as creates an international presence for the knowledge within the wider global information resource base.

But old media have only embraced the online environment belatedly, and developments are still minimal in many developing countries in particular. In the developed countries, some of this expansion into cyberspace was defensive - seeking opportunities in markets where new competitors foraged (including scavenging off old media's offerings), and following migrating audiences or intercepting a new generation (Benson 2005). In many developing countries, in contrast, it was idealistic in the sense of wanting to "get the message out" on all available platforms. It was also to serve the diaspora and the outside world, and indeed also a matter of professional pride. Nowhere, despite some initial illusions, was it originally a matter of making serious profits - at least in the early days. It was, instead, an exercise in experimentation that actualised the freedom (of the press) to publish. Whatever the motivation, it should be welcomed, and encouraged. But at the same time, it amounts in a sense only to a quantitative extension of journalism. Indeed, although many models exist (see He and Zhu, 2002), most online newspapers remain heavily dependent on content from their print parents. Yet, as is well-known, new media platforms also make possible a qualitative change.

As is well known, the Internet in particular allows for a journalism empowered by interactivity, hyperlinking, peer-to-peer file exchange, enhanced content, increased depth and multi-media forms of story telling. The Utopian vision of seeing this happen is not restricted to developed countries (see Hattatuwa, 2006). But even in the developed world, such possibilities are seldom or only partially realised. “What emerges from observation of online news in action, and from discussions with those providing its content, is far from a revolution in media, but an expression of the cautious continuity, if not inertia, of media content and practice” (O'Sullivan, 2005). Some evidence from developed countries is also that citizen forums, offering the potential for greater journalist and audience interaction, have failed due to lack of interest among both parties (see Boczkowski, 2004, cited by Benson, 2005). Indeed, “(w)hile new media use can be viewed as a form of 'productive consumption', not all users deploy their productivity in the same way and many are happy to defer productive control to producers” (Kerr et al 2005).

One reason for this phenomenon is that old styles and habits of both producers and consumers are simply transplanted from traditional media into the new media universe (Marshall, 2002, cited by Kerr et al 2006). Another reason is that resources - and investment - in training and talent to exploit new media's strengths is not easily forthcoming, and especially in developing countries when infrastructure is still limited bandwidth costs exorbitant and viable business models still unproven. Thus, many websites of media in poorer countries consist only of a portion of re-purposed content from the parent platform; they also lack archives and proper search capabilities, let alone instances of multi-media or interactive journalism. This is one reason perhaps why these platforms are not treated by many governments as significant. State action against online newspapers (as in Zambia and Zimbabwe) has been a function of repressing the parent platform, rather than special problems unique to the new media as such.

If old media have impacted on new media via a fairly conservative presence there, in both developed and developing countries the question arises as to whether there has been any reverse influence. The general argument is that there has been some, and that this has some bearing on press freedom. Thus, there are many cases where the participatory ethos of new media has encouraged old media to open up to audiences - (although, understandably, stopping short of transmutating from mainstream into community media). The main model in the developing world has been to encourage the use of cellphones for voice and text contributions. This audience involvement, accelerated by Internet's example, can only be good for fostering a culture that values press freedom more broadly.

In recent years, new media has also influenced old media (mainly in developed countries) in the form of traditional journalists producing blogs - either privately, or as an add-on to their jobs. In this way, blogging is recognised and even adopted by the traditional as a complementary form of “participatory media” which can enhance connections between old media journalists and the communities they serve (Blood, 2003:62; Mitchell, 2003). It has been noted, though, that this particular strand of blogging often tends to keep to a “traditional journalistic gatekeeping role by incorporating limited or no material from users, despite the inherently conversational and participatory nature of the format” (Singer, 2005). Some practitioners have also run into problems with their media companies for their blogs (see Hull, 2006/7). However, while there are understandable parameters that may carry over into blogs by journalists working for the media industry, the point is that blogs per se should be different in some ways (eg. more opinionated, more interactive).

In developing countries, the phenomenon of professional journalists blogging as part of their media work is still young, although a “Digital Indaba” (<http://dci.ru.ac.za>) organised by the

Highway Africa network put it on the agenda in Africa last year. To the extent that this form of journalism grows, and exploits the strengths of the platform, it will enrich the press freedom environment in affected countries. Meanwhile, it is not just the traditional mainstream media in cyberspace, there are - as noted above - also many other players who are not extensions of the old media industry.

## **5. Native new media**

Taking advantage of press freedom in cyberspace, there are a range of online-only media offerings without any link to an offline traditional media platform. In many cases, they represent broadened utilisations of press freedom, in that they present different content to what is in the mainstream media. A prominent example is Oh My News in Korea, which has been a breath of fresh air in a context where newspapers have historically been aligned to government. This model is well known for its mass of citizen reporters. In addition, the venture's lobbying played a part in changing the presidential press conferences from being restricted to the mainstream media, into an open-ended briefing room system (See Kim and Hamilton, 2006).

An example in a developing country is Malaysia's well-known Malaysiakini, which has successfully been a stand-alone medium providing audiences a chance to supply news and comment on local politics. It exists in contrast to the self-censorship of the licensed broadcast and print media. Interestingly, former prime minister Mahathir has been blamed by participants on Malaysiakini for this legacy control which is now widely seen as being used to exclude him. That under his leadership the government did not censor the Internet is now “a blessing in disguise for him”, reads one comment on Malaysiakini about the fact that erstwhile leader's views can now appear undiluted on the website.

A further example is Tehulka, the famous Indian investigative journalism site. There are other cases. What all of these demonstrate is how entry into new media can thereby taking advantage of online press freedom to create de novo media institutions operating with credible journalism. Also noteworthy is the way that these initiatives tend to go further than the mainstream in pushing the role and form of journalism - i.e. utilising and consolidating press freedom in cyberspace - to everyone's benefit. However, in developing countries especially, without any “parent” media platform to support them, their viability is flimsy, and new media journalistic ventures like [www.woza.co.za](http://www.woza.co.za) and [www.dispatch.co.zm](http://www.dispatch.co.zm) have faced crippling deficits.

Blogging by private persons is a manifestation of press freedom on an individual basis, and can push the boundaries of this freedom (even when it is not journalism as such). Such efforts can “inspire 'micro-activism' which can cause big change in a small community” - such as with the quasi-journalistic Mzalendo blog on Kenya's parliament that complements the inadequate coverage of this institution in the mainstream press (<http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/?p=983>). Even in developed countries, however, blogs diversify the range of journalism on offer. In the US, for example, as the established media became less critical of government early in the Iraq war, so blogs there were an outlet for dissident views, while increasing numbers of US citizens turned to the Web for a wider range of war news and views (Wall, 2005; Hull, 2006/2007).

Typically, private bloggers - whether producing journalistic content or not - differ from the gatekeeper model of mainstream journalism in that they entail linking, audience feedback and conversation, and they also inspire audiences to set up their own blog sites. This contrasts with much mainstream journalism being “about vertical communication, from journalist to user, rather than horizontal communication that positions the journalist as a participant in a conversation” (Singer, 2005). In short, private blogs are often about communication, not just information, and

this enriches those of them that entail journalism

Of course, these private bloggers who produce journalism comprise only a tiny segment of the blogosphere and not the most prominent segment at that (Singer, 2005). Personal diaries, hobbies or topics that do not bear on public power constitute the bulk of blogs. They are good for pluralism, diversity and democracy, but are arguably not at the forefront of press freedom issues. And, significantly, they often depend on the traditional media and thence indirectly on the wider quality of press freedom dispensations, for the bedrock of their content and commentary.

Where blogs are driven by a lack of press freedom, they reveal the possibilities of creating space for critical journalism. The Radio Free Nepal blogger explained, during the period of seizure of power by that country's king: "I write freely without fear because I believe the way I am doing the blogging, writing them and emailing them to a friend in US to post, is not traceable without some heavy measure" (RWB, 2005:53). In Bahrain, blogger Chan'ad Bahraini says he and his peers have broken the government's news monopoly. He set up his blog "for two main reasons: (i) it's fun to write without any formal restrictions, deadlines, or requirements, and (ii) to try to contribute to and encourage the discussion of topics in Bahrain that rarely get proper treatment in the local mainstream media" (RWB, 2005:40).

It is said that bloggers in some developed countries have been granted some legal protection and are agitating for more (Gillmor, 2004; Kirtley, 2003; both cited by Lowrey 2006). This is a far cry from many developing countries, where it is argued "bloggers are often the only real journalists in countries where the mainstream media is censored or under pressure", and consequently many have been harassed by governments as a result (RWB 2005). According to Reporters Without Borders, China, Vietnam, Tunisia, Iran, Cuba, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan are among the worst persecutors of bloggers.

In some cases, blogs from developing countries have been the means by which word has gotten out about violations of press freedom. Discussing media censorship at Kantipur TV, the Radio Free Nepal blogger graphically recorded: "We had aired international news, which had it that the Marxist guerrillas had killed 14 Colombian marines, in Colombia. We ran the news in three of our bulletins, starting in the morning. The army major [on the premises to censor news], very polite in his conversations, requested to remove that news as well. The reason: that could be detrimental to our security forces' morale. ... On the third evening, the army left. But before leaving, they cautioned us to follow the guidelines issued by the government while disseminating news. And we have been following that ever since" (cited by Glaser 2005).

Besides bloggers, as noted earlier, internetisation and mediatisation also creates a range of other players in online media whose *raison d'etre* is not media per se. If one considers the information put into cyberspace by certain NGOs, there is no dispute that this expands, sustains and contributes to press freedom in both developed and developing countries. These players are factors in the new media. To the extent that they contribute journalism as such to this landscape, their stake in press freedom is underlined.

In total, press freedom on the Internet is crucial to a lot of journalism that does not originate or exist outside of cyberspace, and which comes from stand-alone electronic publishers and professionals, private bloggers and social institutions whose core business is something other than media.

## **6. Intermedia and Agenda-setting**

An issue of interest from a press freedom perspective is how new media platforms relate to each other and to old platforms. It is salient to note that even while much new media is elitist, "information from the virtual sphere might be diffused to other spaces through mass media stories and interpersonal communication" (Polat, 2005). Even in developing countries, the limited reach

of new media can be expanded in a multi-step flow, depending in part upon the extent of press freedom and freedom of expression in these other environs. For instance, Tehulka's investigations were picked up by the mainstream media - even internationally.

More broadly, online newspapers can set the trend for other media platforms in some cases. A study in South Korea has showed that the agendas of the online version of one newspaper influenced the agenda of another online one, and also of a news agency (Lim 2005). It further revealed that online newspapers impacted on audience agendas as regards the highest-educated groups in society, although print newspapers were more influential down the chain. Research in Holland also found that very highly educated people widened their agenda and knew more about events by using online papers, although generally the online channel also served "primarily for (brief) updates, e.g. as an 'alarm medium'" (Schoenbach et al, 2005).

Independent bloggers creating journalistic content stand out strongly as a fifth estate watching the fourth. "Watchblogs" have developed to track news coverage and "shame journalists into doing their jobs better" (Glaser, 2004; Matheson, 2004; Smolkin, 2004; all cited by Lowrey, 2006). Bloggers also can and do influence the news agenda by "finding and flogging ideas and events until traditional media covers them in more depth" (Lennon, 2003:77, cited by Singer, 2005).

Although it is early days, as new media grow in strength around the world, so their role as inter-media agenda-setters leading the wider media pack will also grow. And the relevance of press freedom for this realm will therefore become even more important, even in developing countries.

## **7. Conclusion:**

This paper has, in effect, argued that new media should not be seen in isolation of old media, and that neither should press freedom be seen in dualistic terms. There are strong linkages between all.

Implicit in all this is that press freedom in both old and new realms is internationally significant, and indeed an interdependent terrain of contestation on a global scale. A violation of press freedom in regard to old media in one country deprives persons in that country of information, and all other countries indirectly. When there is a lack of press freedom on the Internet, with its international reach, then the globe is directly deprived of significant knowledge. When China censors the Internet, other regimes see they can follow suite. Conversely, when a blogger reports journalistically from a repressive country, or Malaysiakini survives and prospers, so elsewhere do others with a vested interest in press freedom take inspiration. The flame of press freedom in new media in developed countries, can also take heart from brave struggles for press freedom in the old media in many developing countries.

Looking ahead, given the higher penetration of cellphones than computers in the developing countries, the potential of these devices to become the primary platforms for new media (and thence a degree of journalistic content) is something to watch. The functionality of these handhelds continues to multiply, and it is likely that they will increasingly double up as one-to-many media receivers, peer-to-peer dissemination devices, and journalistic content creation tools (May and Hearn, 2005). Next generation phones will also enable wireless Internet access, introducing a mobile dimension to Internet media (and thence to press freedom). It will take time to develop journalistic content that is tailored to exploiting this particular platform and there are issues related to the small screen size of most portable devices. For example, there is sometimes scepticism about the prospects for television on cellphones, given the small size of the screen. However, picture this, literally: cellphones with built-in data-projectors able to cast large-size images of content received onto walls or other surfaces. Whether journalistic content for such communications then comes from mobloggers or TV companies or other players is not important.

Either way, the effect would certainly be to extend press freedom in developing countries in particular, especially in those where traditional broadcast content is tightly controlled. In conclusion, an holistic approach, nonetheless sensitive to distinctions, is what is called for in assessing new media and press freedom in the developing world. The pace of technology means that the world now seems unlikely to ever reach a historical stage where there is just talk of “media” and no such entity exists as “new media”. Even clothing, for example, may one day become a major medium for journalism. Nonetheless, what remains constant is that whether old, new or futuristic, the historical achievement of press freedom is of enduring importance for all platforms and for all countries.

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