



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension  
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom  
15 & 16 February, 2007  
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**Believe it: 20 Years of Progress in Resisting Censors**

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*At the conference "New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension,"  
February 16, 2007, Paris*

Twenty years ago, I wrote a book on the theme of this conference---the correlation of three elements: state power (particularly censorship), the role of the press in all its forms, and the influence of the new communication technologies on all aspects of life. The book was titled "Power, the Press and the Technologies of Freedom." It was largely optimistic, but warned that all so-called new technologies---through the ages---held potential dangers as well as great opportunities for free expression.

Freedom House has 66 years of experience in linking press freedom to democratic governance. Only democratic systems of state power enable the press to serve as free reporter, free analyst, and free channel of expression for the individual citizen. For, the citizen in society---any society, anywhere---should be the ultimate source of state power.

The proliferation of new communication technologies, these past 20 years, has produced limitless opportunities for communication, including interactive communication, accompanied by threats of newly-minted censors we have examined these past two days. As we conclude here, we should place both opportunities and threats in some historic perspective.

Recognizing that freedom of the press depends on the degree of *political* freedom in any nation, Freedom House began the first regular, comparative recording of dangers to the journalist and to press freedom.

We discovered in 1988, for example, that 62 nations owned their national or international news agencies, and only 28 countries had independent news systems. Censorship was all-pervasive in a country that controlled all the print or broadcast news. That same year, 115 countries or 72.4% practiced some of these restrictive practices: the government owned the media outright, the independent press was subject to censorship, the state licensed the press or journalists, or guided the news media in the choice of content. Not surprisingly, in the 1980s, press-control countries clamored for a so-called “new world information and communication order” that began with state control or supervision of the news media.

Ironically, such past statistics may be viewed today as reflecting movement toward *defeat* of censors. For, today, state-owned media are a small minority. To be sure, government pressures on independent journalists on all continents has recently increased.

But there are major differences today. UNESCO, for example, is no longer the venue for bitter debates over some “new order,” but is a primary defender internationally of the free press. When Freedom House began monitoring press freedom in all countries, there were no other such monitors. Now there are great press-freedom institutions represented here. They speak out globally to defend free expression. Then, the major news media generally ignored harm done to journalists; that was considered an in-house problem. Not any longer. Oppression of journalists is now properly regarded as an attack on the rights of citizens themselves.

Now, the number of practicing journalists---not to mention bloggers---has skyrocketed. Inevitably, more journalists armed with new technologies and expanded transportation can appear and report instantly from scenes of controversy or danger. And, drawn by the vastly more, and more diversified, communication networks, censors also turn their attention to the new technologies. Ironically, that new challenge facing today’s censors---and their response---also reflects the movement toward greater freedom of expression.

In my “Power” book, written before the Soviet Union imploded, I wrote that Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy of greater openness was desperately essential to jump-start the nation’s economic development. But, I added, the limited freeing of Russia’s news media---welcome as it was---would not necessarily guarantee the future freedom of the press. One Soviet journalist wrote then, “They watch all of us who speak out today...and make lists of our names, for when their day comes around again.” Today in Russia, state control of the media, once again, is rampant.

Proof that the present communication revolution is not a panacea though it is already altering every form of human, as well as international, relationship. As with all older forms of comm tech, this one has the potential to enhance or

constrain human freedom. But there is a major difference. The new tech are of greater scale and diversity. Their very speed and variety defy the controller who would ban or censor from a central point. The new tech need no "center" from which control can be mounted. The new tech are linked to the periphery as well as the center, often bypassing the center. Networks of information join other networks at a speed beyond the capacity of the human mind to monitor before a message has been delivered, though the same tech can enable a censor to determine that the message has arrived. To be sure, nations are already limiting uses of the Internet---as our first monitoring of Internet abuses recorded 10 years ago---but the new tech also provide their own mechanisms to bypass the controller. That is a hope for the future.

What of the future?

In all countries moving toward greater democratic governance, broadly supported civil society is needed before the press can be defended and, in turn, can properly defend citizen rights.

Many years ago, John Dewey, perhaps the most distinguished American philosopher, debated Walter Lippmann, then the most prominent Washington columnist and confidant of presidents. His column, appearing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, often swayed public opinion. Lippmann argued that world events had become too complex for the average citizen. Consequently, he held, democratic governance should depend on a few experts who would determine public policy and the journalistic coverage of policies. Dewey disagreed. He said that democracy was too vital a process to be limited because technology was advancing rapidly. Dewey insisted that both government and journalism had not adequately involved citizens in the continuing process of democratic decision-making.

Dewey agreed, however, that in order to educate American citizens, journalists should be well trained in the complexities of modern societies. This would apply to bloggers as well as mainline journalists. Today, both Lippmann and Dewey might be appalled to observe the dumbing-down of popular journalism, whether in print, broadcasting, or on the Web.

Today's interactive technologies are a clear response to Dewey's democratization and a rejection of Lippmann's elitism.

The challenge is to maintain the independence of the democratizing technologies---independence from statist controls and the monopolistic tendencies of commercial competition. Specifically, the Internet must be protected from some new authority that would monitor and influence the Web's global flows---no matter what the high-sounding rationale.

Have heart! Twenty years ago, there were 61 states considered “free”; today, 90. Twenty years ago there were 40 countries where the press was relatively free; today, 73. This, despite the fact that both political and press freedoms have stagnated in recent years, and killing of journalists is at a record level.

Futurists know there is no straight-line course to progress; only zigs and zags.

And, as on the ski run, there is no inevitably disastrous slippery slope; no unstoppable glide to press control.

Constant monitoring, therefore, is needed to reject even small restrictions on free expression.

Thomas Carlyle, the British author, put it well more than 100 years ago. “Printing,” said Carlyle, “is equivalent to democracy: Invent writing, democracy is inevitable.” For us, print, broadcasting, and blogging are democratizing. Invent the independent Internet, democracy is inevitable. Let us act on that hope and promise.

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\*Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1889, p. 134).

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