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The freedom of the press is a necessity to ensure public debate, a debate which secures the emergence of truth for the better good of all. The importance attributed to this argument is reflected in European constitutions. Since the French Revolution the freedom of the press has figured prominently in every democratic constitution. The understanding of the concept is important in defining journalism as a profession and its role in a democratic society. The importance for western democracies of a clear conception of what freedom of the press entails has increased in recent decades, as previously socially, culturally and ethnically homogeneous societies have become multicultural. The concept plays a key role in well recorded international cases such as the report of Aftonbladet in Sweden on the Israeli army stealing organs of Palestinian victims and of the Danish Mohamed Cartoons. However, as demonstrated in this paper by an examination of data on Icelandic reporting compiled for the Althingi Investigative Committee, the term also contributes to the understanding of more systemic issues such as why the Icelandic media did not critically report what was going on prior to the collapse of the banks in the fall of 2008.

Well known controversies

Freedom of the press seems to conflict with other values: In August 2009 the biggest daily newspaper in Sweden Aftonbladet published an article which implied that the Israeli Army stole organs from Palestinian victims (Leman & Wiberg, 2009). The Israeli government strongly condemned the publication as anti-Semitic and asked the Swedish government to interfere; a demand which was denied by referring to the freedom of the press.

A similar case took place four years earlier when the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. There Muslim organizations condemned the cartoons as racist and wanted the Danish government to interfere. Like the Swedish the Danish government refused to condemn the publication by referring to the freedom of the press.

In the debate which followed both controversies it looked as if freedom of the press was being challenged and threatened by pointing out a social responsibility of the press to refrain from any form of hate speech. Flemming Rose, the editor responsible for the cartoons made it clear: “This is about standing for fundamental values that have been the (foundation) for the development of Western democracies over several hundred years, and we are now in a situation where those values are being challenged” (Rose, 2006).

Historical view

From an historic point of view the conflict comes as a surprise, since the demand for freedom of expression arose in the context of the struggle for enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant called for the Enlightenment so that Man „emerges from his self-incurred immaturity” and in order to realize this, Kant asked for freedom: “And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters” (Kant, 1784, p. 484). The demand for freedom of expression figures prominently in the texts of the enlightenment but it has never been a means in itself but always a means to an end e.g. towards realizing truth and justice. In John Stuart Mill’s classic text *On Liberty* it was truth but not freedom which was the aim. Mill argues for the necessity of freedom, which allows also for wrong ideas, not for the sake of freedom, but in order to clarify the truth: “If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: If wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (Mill, 1947).

Freedom is asked for in order to achieve and promote truth. And truth is again necessary in order to help build the best possible society. If freedom according to Mill is used to threaten the best possible society he has no problem in demanding its limitation: “The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people.” [Mill, *On Liberty*] Mill provides an example of this:

An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn-dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard. Acts of whatever kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavorable sentiments, and, when needful, by the active interference of mankind (Mill, 1947 p. 55).

The difference Mill made between print and spoken word in front of an excited mass may have made sense before the invention of the yellow press with its millions of readers but it is difficult to maintain this separation today. For Mill freedom is a necessity in order to promote public debate and he would probably be surprised to see the argument of free press used to silence discussion on the content of an article.

At the end the fighter for the freedom of the press achieved a double-edged victory, freedom of the press had been established in the western societies of the 20th century as the fourth estate and their freedom had been enshrined in constitutions but the overall aim Kant wished to achieve to lead man out of his “self-incurred immaturity” had been lost along the way. Freedom of the press emancipated itself from the aim it once intended to realize and forgot whose child it was.

The different contextualization of freedom versus hate speech would not have constituted logic for representatives of the enlightenment, as their task was to fight for freedom in order to have the tools to allow the challenging of resentments and prejudice. Already in the beginning of the last century Walter Lippmann had complained about disconnecting the demand of freedom of the press from the ideas of the enlightenment. Lippmann argued: “If I lie in a lawsuit involving my neighbor’s cow, I can go to jail. But if I lie to a million readers in a matter involving war and peace, I can lie my head off” (Lippmann, 1920/2008, p. 23).

Lippmann was interested in a functional democracy and for this the freedom of the press is a necessity, but it is also this responsibility for democracy which for him should set the limits on freedom. Therefore he argued that the idea of freedom of the press for its own sake is misleading. The aim must be that the truth and only the truth justifies freedom. “The goal is never liberty, but liberty for something or others” (Lippmann, 1920/2008, p. 12).

Necessary context

As soon as one takes the demand for freedom out of its historical context and sees it as an absolute value in itself, it turns into a postmodern arbitrariness, instead of an historical value. Freed from any historical context freedom can be claimed for any purpose, be it Larry Flint as the editor of the *Hustler*, Dutch child pornography or defending the smoking of Gauloise cigarettes promising you “Liberté toujours”.

The 20th century is rich in examples, beginning with the representation of colonized people, the cartoons by Stürmer, showing dehumanized Jews to Radio Rwanda calling for the killing of Tutsis and actively supporting the genocide that proves that freedom of the press may turn very well against the ideas of the enlightenment. In the worst cases - e.g. Rwanda -, the radio becomes an instrument of genocide. Here it becomes obvious that freedom as an ultimate value is hardly to be desired for a society, except where one wishes for a world of Marquis de Sade where satisfying your own pleasure would justify any act.

Outside the context of the enlightenment, the claim for freedom of the press is a purely political argument that may sound plausible for yourself and your own interest group, but as soon one does not share the interest the argument sounds empty. If the Iranian prime minister Mahmud Ahmadinadschad defended his denying of the Holocaust with reference to the freedom of the press no western politician would defend him. On the contrary, they would denounce his argument as anti-Semitism.

In judging the article in *Aftonbladet* on the stealing of organs by the Israeli army the criteria should be the truth. If the article cannot claim this then it is nothing other than an anti-Semitic publication. Defending the publication by only referring to freedom does not constitute in this sense a coherent argument.

Of course there is also the danger that assumed social responsibility is used or misused in order to silence the press: “For the bourgeoisie, freedom of the press meant freedom for the rich to publish and for the capitalists to control the newspapers, a practice which in all countries, including even the freest, produced a corrupt press. For the workers’ and peasants’ government, freedom of the press means liberation of the press from capitalist oppression” (Lenin, 1917). For Lenin social responsibility of the press was clearly defined: the press had a task to fulfill as a tool to promote the idea of communism, probably something we do not want either. This historic review of the concept of freedom of the press is helpful to understand the two conflicts mentioned above. Furthermore, analysis of the reporting of the press prior to the financial collapse of Iceland, shows that the same lack of balance between freedom and social responsibility of the press contributed to unprofessional media coverage at the time.

Financial collapse in Iceland

The Icelandic media system has relatively recently moved from a political party dominated system to a market media system. As the media broke from the dominance of political influence the ideological emphasis was put on the role of journalism as reflecting reality in an objective and non-partisan manner. This transformation called for considerable skepticism among media people towards political domination and lecturing in the media. This sentiment was expressed by a celebrated but retired TV Journalist, Ólafur Sigurðsson, in a newspaper article after the publication of the Investigative Report (Ólafur Sigurðsson, 2010). Ólafur Sigurðsson pointed out as a response to criticism of the media in the Investigative Report, that it was not the role of the media to assume a position of power in society, but only to report that the pillars of power in society had failed in their duties. In this approach, which might be

called a liberal approach, it is stressed that it is the duty of journalism to report the truth accurately, and eventually by reporting all sorts of information - many fragments or pieces of truths - and release them on a sort to a media marketplace of truth-fragments, a reasonably complete picture of the whole truth would emerge. This approach therefore stresses the necessity of unlimited freedom to publish all information, irrespective of what that information is. By doing so they would be fulfilling the basic principles of ethical and professional journalism of truth telling. The danger of this approach is on the one hand its loose connection to basic democratic values and on the other hand that all pieces of information do not necessarily create the whole picture. As it is never clear whether a piece of information might become important in unveiling the whole truth, it becomes very precarious to impose any limitations on what is published. Indeed unlimited freedom is therefore in this view seen as an important virtue.

The Althingi Investigative Committee Report suggests that Icelandic society prior to the crash, tilted towards an understanding of freedom as emancipation from regulation of the social environment. Furthermore the Investigative Report draws attention to the *laissez-faire* ideology that seems to have penetrated all aspects of Icelandic political, economic and social life to the extent that traditional values of solidarity, modesty and responsibility gave way to new individualistic norms that were measured by monetary gain and material well being (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010).

The role of the media is criticized in several respects for failing to point out and alert the public what was going on. In the recommendations of the Investigative Committee several references are made to journalistic professionalism or rather to the lack of such professionalism (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010, p. 211). This in turn raises the question of the approach and understanding of professionalism within the Icelandic media? Or the question can be posed in a different manner: Is there a general understanding in the Icelandic media of the need to rethink the liberal approach towards a concept of freedom of the press and is there a balance to be found between social responsibility on the one hand and freedom on the other?

The Althingi Investigative committee bases its conclusion among other things on the findings of the Research Centre on Media and Communication at the University of Iceland. The Centre examined specifically, at the request of the Investigative Committee, two elements of Icelandic reporting on the financial system prior to the collapse of the banks in October 2008. First it examined the extent to which the reporting was independent, i.e. if it was critical of the financial system or if it in any sense took sides and was positive or negative. Secondly, the Research Centre looked at how analytical the reporting was, i.e. if the reports looked for expert opinion and sought to explain things and put them into context. In order to answer the former question data from the Media firm CreditInfo was analyzed, in total just under 18.000 different stories from the Icelandic media. But to answer the second question a sample of news two years prior to the collapse was selected by the Research Centre – in total some 3.637 articles. The Centre's experts content analyzed these stories and registered the number of sources used and the depth of the analysis, in order to map the working methods of the media.

The most important results of this inquiry with regard to the two elements of Icelandic reporting are the following. On the one hand there was extensive reporting on the financial system and most of it in neutral and detached form. However a considerable part of the reporting was favorable to the banks and financial organizations and the nature of the detachment of the reporting seems to have been based on reporting facts that the financial sector itself made public in news releases. On the other hand the news stories of the period do not seem to have been analytical on the whole. The results show that 4 out of 5 stories about a financial organization

“did neither build on independent sources nor were they analytical” (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010, p. 264).

Both the Investigative Committee itself and the Research Centre specialist in their reports drew attention to the way in which reporting on the financial sector was in the Icelandic media in the two years prior to the collapse. In other words, both draw attention to the suggestion that a lack of professionalism was a problem for the Icelandic media system. The Investigative Committee also suggests some explanations as to why this was the case, but offers only reasons that relate to the external conditions in which Icelandic media operates. Thus the Committee talks about things such as economic pressures on the media firms and the journalists, lack of ownership transparency, limited journalist education possibilities and the lack of some sort of a surveillance authority that monitors the media. All these reasons do matter, but the data strongly suggests that there are other reasons as well, more philosophical reasons that relate to the very understanding of the nature of professional journalism and the concept of the freedom of the press as a balance between social responsibility and freedom.

As the liberal ideological approach of most of the Icelandic media was centered on just reporting reality “as it was” or “reporting the facts”, an imbalance seems to have occurred. An imbalance between the freedom to report reality “as it was” and the social responsibility to report and critically consider reality as it “should be” which is also engrained in the traditional concept of the freedom of the press. As the ethical and value based principles of journalism were to a large extent absent and regarded as undesirable limitations on freedom the reports were by and large reports on the new economic achievements and successes of the new economic and financial tycoons. This imbalance can to a large extent constitute an important “why” behind the conclusion of the Investigative Report that the media failed in its professional role, because it portrayed the news to a large extent on the terms and conditions of the financial sector (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010 p. 265).

Ethical Journalism Initiative

Examples from Sweden, Denmark and Iceland have drawn attention to the fact that a balance has to be struck between unlimited freedom and the danger of a patronizing press where any moral norm can justify the restriction of that freedom. There is no need to see the two sides as antagonistic, one could also interpret them as two sides of the same coin. The core norm which defines a democratic society or for that matter the core values that define the profession of journalism, will define the social responsibility of the media on the one hand and the limits of freedom on the other. In the western democratic tradition these core values are concerned with truth. This is e.g. demonstrated in the initiative undertaken in 2008 by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called the Ethical Journalism Initiative. The very title of a book that comes with the initiative by the general manager of IFJ, Aidan White, underlines the point. The Book is called: *To tell you the truth*. In the book’s introduction White says:

The Ethical Journalism Initiative challenges particular threats such as those posed by a resurgence of racism or cultural or religious conflict. It is a call for renewal of value-based journalism across the entire media field and comes with a simple message: journalism is not propaganda and media products are not just economic, they add value to democracy and to the quality of people’s lives (White, 2008, p. iv).

As White is speaking on behalf of the IFJ, it is clear that the IFJ sees ethical, professional journalism as a means to an end but not an end in itself. In fact,

according to White, the journalistic pledge to the role of revealing the truth is one of the three main principles of modern journalism. The other two being that it is “Independent and Fair” and that it is characterized by “Humanity and Solidarity“ (White, 2008). In this way it can be suggested that the principles of journalist professionalism as elaborated in the IFJ Ethical Journalism Initiative, reflect the understanding that the freedom of the press is indeed a balance between freedom and social responsibility. Conversely, an imbalance can result in unprofessionalism with serious consequences for political, economic and social development of society.

Conclusion

The discussion of the Israeli story in Aftonbladet, the controversy of the Mohamed cartoons in Jyllands Posten and the drawbacks in the Icelandic reporting on the financial sector prior to the fall of the banks are important lessons for the understanding and the practice of professional journalism. In all these cases the historical and philosophical roots of journalist principles are instrumental in determining the quality and level of professionalism of modern day journalism. Therefore the discussion and understanding of the term “freedom of the press” is important as the term must imply both freedom and social responsibility. There has been a tendency to overemphasize the importance of freedom and at the same time downplay the role of social responsibility. Creating an imbalance between these two sides of the matter causes problems that can be detrimental for any democratic society. Thus a balanced conception of freedom that is embedded in social responsibility would probably have created more professional media coverage of issues as diverse as the Mohamed drawings, Israeli organ-trade or Icelandic finances prior to the collapse of the financial system.

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