

# FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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*An independent media sector ensures the free flow of information that is vital in a democratic society. Using examples from many nations, the author outlines four essential roles that a free press serves: holding government leaders accountable to the people, publicizing issues that need attention, educating citizens so they can make informed decisions, and connecting people with each other in civil society. Ellen Hume is director of the Center on Media and Society at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.*



When one sees how the news media can challenge and expose even the richest and most powerful leaders in the world, one might wonder, why put up with a free press? Why not go back to the idea

of a government-controlled media, with limits on what people can say and publish and with control over the right to assemble?

The answer is that it is impossible to maximize political stability, economic growth, and democracy without the free flow of information.

Information is power. If a nation is to enjoy the political and economic advantages enabled by the rule of law, powerful institutions must be open to scrutiny by the people. If technology and science are to advance, ideas must be openly shared.

And if government is to be valued because it is accountable to the people, free and independent news media are essential to that process. That is why Thomas Jefferson, the primary drafter of the American Declaration of Independence, insisted that the U.S. Constitution include the public's right to free speech, a free press, and public assembly.

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," he wrote in 1787. That is not to say that the

newspapers were kind to him when he became president. He had his share of embarrassing exposés.

But Jefferson remained steadfast in supporting even painful scrutiny by the media, because he recognized that without such accountability and unfettered flow of ideas, a nation's creative growth is stunted and its people are not free.

An independent media sector serves four vital roles in a democracy. First, it is a watchdog on the powerful, holding them accountable to the people. Second, it casts a spotlight on issues that need attention. Third, it educates the citizens so they can make political choices. Fourth, it connects people with each other, helping to create the social "glue" that binds civil society.

## HOLDING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

The watchdog function is often the hardest to perform well. Government agencies and officials are not always willing to be transparent, especially if there is no tradition of public scrutiny. In post-Soviet Georgia, for example, Rustavi II television broadcast verified investigative reports about areas of government corruption. When the government tried to close down the television station rather than correct the problems, citizens assembled en masse to protest. Their demonstrations in defense of their independent media forced the government to dismiss corrupt members of the cabinet and allow Rustavi II back on the air.

Another example comes from India, where Bhartiya Janata Party President Bangaru Laxman was caught on videotape by an undercover tehelka.com Internet journalist, accepting money for what he thought was a weapons deal. The public outcry, after the sting, forced the ouster of several senior cabinet ministers.

Media that do an honest job of holding the government accountable can help support the rule of law and thereby create more stability for the country. That stability will make the country more attractive to long-term economic investment.

"Freedom of speech and exchange of information are not just luxuries, they are the currency on which global commerce, politics, and culture increasingly depend,"



AP/WWP Efreem Lukatsky

By holding governments accountable, media can create stability. Ukrainian journalists hold a banner that reads “free speech” at a rally in Kiev in March 2004, demanding that then-President Leonid Kuchma reopen the independent media outlets he closed prior to the presidential election there.

observed David Hoffman, the founder of Internews, an international nongovernmental agency that helps train and develop independent media in 50 countries.

### PUBLICIZING ISSUES

Without a free and independent press sector, the full responsibility for public information and safety resides only in the government. This lack of public engagement can seriously undermine a country’s security and economic growth.

For example, the Chinese media did not report the unfolding SARS epidemic in 2003 accurately, because they were following their government’s wishes to minimize the crisis. Thus there were no warnings that the fatal disease was raging out of control in Beijing and other areas. Uninformed citizens continued risky



AP/WWP Photo

behaviors that spread the disease. Some people started to panic as the number of cases in their neighborhoods climbed. Tourists and

A Chinese teenager reads a newspaper near a billboard advising Beijingers to join the fight against SARS in Beijing, China, in April 2003. The Chinese media initially did not report the SARS epidemic accurately, and citizens unknowingly continued spreading the disease.

the international investment community grew jittery as well. When the independent *Wall Street Journal* newspaper went from hospital to hospital in Beijing, compiling the real numbers of SARS cases, some foreign investors lost faith in the Chinese government’s official line and started pulling their employees out of the country. The government realized belatedly that it needed to inform the public about the real hazards and scope of the problem in order to stem the epidemic and restore government credibility. In this case, the independent foreign media held the government accountable on behalf of the people when the local media were not allowed to do so.

### EDUCATING CITIZENS

When they are able to function freely, local newspapers and radio and television stations can be important building blocks of democracy. In addition to serving as a watchdog on local institutions and alerting the public to safety issues, they can help citizens understand and access their distant government.

When the four biggest banks in Uruguay closed during an economic crisis several years ago, for example, an elderly man in the town of Tucumán telephoned a local radio station for help. His wife was sick, and he could not get access to their bank account to pay the doctor. Radio Zorilla producers contacted his regional legislator, who put the man in touch with the finance ministry. The man learned that emergency legislation was being passed to give people like him access to their bank accounts.

It is routine for radio station producers in Tucumán to help connect the people of their town to government services and to each other. Listeners call in looking for hard-to-find books, lost dogs, jobs, and workers. Radio Zorilla is not just a community bulletin board and advocate with the government. It also offers newscasts, telephone call-in discussions, and interviews, according to Maria Martin, an American radio producer who spent time at the station and was impressed by its success.

Citizens in Angren, Uzbekistan, have a similar local media resource, a television station. They telephone TV-Orbita, which reports their complaints and other town problems on the television news. The news is watched by the authorities as well as the citizens. When the government tried to shut down the station at one point in order to control its political influence, the public and

sponsors protested, and the government had to let it reopen.

### CONNECTING PEOPLE

Access to the local news can even save lives. When Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on New Orleans, Louisiana, in August 2005, local Vietnamese immigrant families were alerted by their low-power, Vietnamese-language community radio station about where to go to reach safety and find their Vietnamese-American neighbors.

When the Sultan Dam, two hours south of Kabul, Afghanistan, was starting to fail on March 29, 2005, the journalists of Radio Ghaznawiyaan called the provincial governor, who then issued a statement on the air that all the villagers needed to evacuate. That report reached the people before the dam broke and destroyed many of the village's shops and houses. "I was listening to Radio Ghaznawiyaan, and when it started to talk about the Sultan Water Dam, I turned the volume up and I understood that we had to run," said a resident. The



AP/WWWP Marco Di Lauro

Parveen Hashafi auditions for a news reader job at Radio Afghanistan in Kabul in November 2001. Warnings broadcast on the radio just before the Sultan Dam broke in 2005 gave village residents time to evacuate, and days later, the radio station linked the two sides of the city that were separated by the flood.

quick action of the station saved many lives. Afterward the radio station continued to link the two sides of the city that were separated by the flood.

The World Bank tracks media openness as a positive factor in economic and political development. In its *World Development Report 2002*, it studied 97 countries and found that those with privately owned, local

independent media outlets had higher levels of education and health, less corruption, and more transparent economies.

To be sure, the free press does not always perform professionally, and there can be unintended consequences to opening up the media. But the more the news media offer balanced news and community discussions, the more the public values them. This civic information is the fuel of democracy. The people become better educated and take more responsibility for their own well being.

The media can act as a safety valve by offering a forum for diverse voices to be heard. This ability to broadcast and present various perspectives within a society is more important than one might think. Terrorism expert Jessica Stern has noted that terrorism is often fueled by humiliation, a feeling by people that they are not being included in the mainstream of society or treated with respect.

As David Hoffman of Internews points out, "There is ample evidence, from the Sandinistas of Nicaragua to the Albanian rebels in Macedonia, that bringing opposition groups into the body politic provides nonviolent alternatives to civil strife."

A second World Bank report, *Consultations With the Poor*, studied 20,000 poor people in 23 countries and found that what most "differentiates poor people from rich people is a lack of voice. The inability to be represented. The inability to convey to the people in authority what it is that they think. The inability to have a searchlight put on the conditions of inequality. These people interviewed do not have Ph.D.s but they have the knowledge of poverty, and the first thing they talked about is not money. It is lack of voice, it is lack of the ability to express themselves."

A vibrant media sector, with competing independent newspapers, radio, Internet Web sites, and television, allows those voices to be heard. These media can spotlight problems, encourage fellow citizens and government officials to address them, and empower even the destitute with real information. Everyone gains if the poor have a chance to improve their lot, taking part in the opportunities afforded by free speech, free press, and the right to assembly in democratic societies. ■

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*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*