

What Freedom of Press Means to Me

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To me, freedom of press increasingly spells danger. No, I am not an aspiring authoritarian leader wary of the threat that a free press poses to my plans for complete totalitarian rule. Quite the opposite: I am an ordinary young adult who, having been lucky enough to grow up in a functioning liberal democracy, wishes for his home country to remain as such for as long as possible. Why, in that case, am I making the deliberately provocative claim that freedom of press is dangerous?

Of course, a free press constitutes the foundation of the checks and balances upon which our democratic systems hinge. A free press should ideally encourage transparency and accountability, building an honest society free of corruption – that much is clear. Unfortunately, because of democracy's significant reliance on it, freedom of press is also a double-edged sword. With the recent proliferation of technological advancements rapidly transforming the very nature of press and how people interact with it, its integrity has come under attack. This threatens to undermine its ability to carry out the very tasks that have historically made it a safeguard of democracy. Allow me to elaborate.

The value that we assign to the freedom of press is derived from its usefulness in providing democracies with access to the truth. This much is, indeed, true. Radio Free Europe, for example, explicitly aims to reveal the truth, and it should be celebrated for having done so for the past 75 years. However, freedom of press is increasingly conflated with freedom of speech. In practice, this means that anyone has the potential platform to exercise their freedom of speech and be perceived to have the authority of 'the press'. It has never been easier for people – or bots – to post on social media or to run a podcast whilst self-proclaiming themselves to be members of the press. In this climate, Radio Free Europe and performative 'journalists' such as the controversial podcaster Joe Rogan are perceived by many as equally reliable sources of information. The free press has expanded, pseudo-journalists have become an inseparable part of the media landscape, and traditional press is being dwarfed.

Whether we like it or not, this transformation is now a reality. So what does this mean for us, citizens of a democratic country? In essence, it means that an entirely unrestricted free press now floods people twenty-four hours a day with more information than ever before. This is incredibly dangerous because accurate, reliable information is difficult to produce and is thus much rarer than false information, which causes the vast majority of our information environment to become filled either with misinformation or deliberate disinformation. To paraphrase scholar Yuval Noah Harari, more information does not lead to more truth magically 'bubbling up' to the surface. Proportionally speaking, it does the opposite. Truth gets drowned out. Thus, when we access the ocean of information that the combination of today's free press and unfiltered free speech makes available to us, we are at greater risk than ever before of building a distorted picture of the world – one that is based primarily on falsehood rather than on truth.

This raises a crucial question: How can our democracy remain healthy if the discussions that we are having are based on alternate realities? As we have been seeing in recent times, it is becoming incredibly difficult to sustain meaningful debates, because when we struggle to agree on simple facts, we have very little hope of ever coming to any form of consensus on the more complex and pressing issues, of which we seem to have no shortage. If I really was that aspiring autocrat determined to topple my country's democratic systems, the free press would be no threat. On the contrary, it would be a tragically valuable asset that I would be able to exploit, confusing and dividing the population by employing pseudo-journalists and bots on social media to flood people with mass disinformation. Unfortunately, as you may be realising, this is already something that many such politicians are capitalising on...

At this stage, I should acknowledge that highlighting the dangers of a modern-day free press must appear to be a rather unconventional method of expressing my gratitude for it. Nevertheless, there is a silver lining. For the reasons explained above, what I am truly grateful for is not the concept of a free press itself, but rather the journalists and media outlets that embody its best part. The part that makes the effort to search for, reveal and disseminate true, factual information.

It is this side of the double-edged sword of free press that stands up to the aspiring autocrats, fighting to ensure that no matter how polluted our information environment may be, true information continues to 'bubble up' to the surface for citizens to engage with. By maintaining at least some elements of truth upon which constructive discussions can be held, these journalists enable the principles of democracy – and thus the values of justice, tolerance and human rights – to remain intact. In other words, these journalists do not use our metaphorical double-edged sword as a dangerous weapon; they wield freedom of press as a force for good.

In a world where pseudo-journalism receives so much attention, the work of traditional, reliable journalists must never go unappreciated. If I could truly speak to people, I would urge them to watch, read and listen exclusively to these sword-wielding knights in shining armour. Ultimately, however, freedom of press is accompanied by freedom of choice. For better or for worse, it is up to each individual to discern informative press from performative press. Real journalism from pseudo-journalism. True information from falsehood.

In the coming years, deciding which voice we value more as a society will determine whether a free press continues to be a blessing, or whether it will overwhelm us and become a curse.