PRESS FREEDOM UNDER SIEGE

Effects of market forces, government controls and journalism practices

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ABSTRACT

The right to freedom of information and responsible journalism are fundamental to economic and human development. However these concepts are applied differently from country to country. It can be implied that press freedom is continuously under siege through either subtle or more emphatic means of pressure. The media also function as gatekeepers. The very first underlying cause of this siege is rooted in the process of news production in which we find concepts that determine how the news is "manufactured" prior to publication. In Asia, despite its remarkable economic development, the press continues to be controlled by governments' approach to journalism as a tool of "social responsibility" or to foster governments' objectives.

KEY-WORDS

Development journalism, media, Asia, social responsibility journalism.

Introduction

The right to freedom of information is generally accepted as necessary to participatory democracy around the world. Media theorists claim their rationale for this right based on the concept of open and transparent government, whose values are applied in democratic political systems mainly in Western countries. In countries such as the United States and Great Britain the philosophy is that a well-informed citizen is able to make wiser decisions, therefore, a free press helps to construct a better society.

Nevertheless, the practice of a free media varies from country to country. Even though the media in democratic societies enjoy freedom, they are in fact in all countries subject to a number of laws and regulations. Most press laws tend to be restrictive rather than granting

rights to journalists. Press freedom and Press regulation (nowadays media regulation) are two fundamental contradictory principles in modern democracies. Media freedom has been fought for and has been instituted because the press has been seen as an important player in the control of the government, and the political and economic system in general. By looking at media regulation we look at a very delicate system of checks and balances. Press freedom is continuously under siege through subtle or more emphatic means of pressure: by placing partisan people into influential functions in the mass media management, by controlling printing and distribution systems, or by invoking laws that protect the state security or market influence.

Journalists also have their own system of checks and balances through so-called "self-regulation" This self -regulation is found in numerous codes of ethics or practices that journalists have to accept as a part of their own professional guidelines. Some of the codes´ important features are truthfulness, honesty, accuracy of information; correction of errors; prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race/ethnicity/religion; respect for privacy; fair means in information collection, etc. Nevertheless, norms of accuracy, honesty or truthfulness are not perceived equally by all persons.

This paper attempts to look into the forces that are subtle and detrimental to press freedom. Firstly, I look into the concepts of news production shared by Western media scholars for whom the normative theory is based on "ideas of how media ought to or are expected to operate" (MCQUAIL, 1987:109). I briefly look into the concept of freedom in itself. However, I do not have the ambition to enter into the centuries-old theoretical debates on whether humans are free. Neither will I enter into the realm of debate on limitations imposed on the media in times of war. Secondly, the paper looks into the situation in some parts of Asia, where the normative theory is "*development journalism*", a model used to foster government interests. I argue that neither approach provides a framework for a free media. There might be more flexibility in some countries than in others, but the media is always under constraints from either media policy or market forces, including the mechanisms of news production.

Freedom

The concept of the free individual can be traced to the Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle who held that what was 'just by nature'

was not always the same as what was 'just by law'. Aristotle had the idea that laws made citizens just and that people should be rewarded justly or in proportion to what they have done or accomplished. He thought that the need for government rules and authority developed independently from nature. Then, the term "rights" came into use especially after the World War II replacing the earlier phrase "natural rights", which had been associated with the Greco-Roman concept of "natural law" since the end of the Middle Ages.

As understood today, human rights refer to a wide variety of values reflecting the diversity of human circumstances and history. Human rights have been classified historically in terms of three "generations" of human rights. The first generation of civil and political rights was associated with the Enlightenment[1]. The concept of the free individual was further developed by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who promoted the notion of self-determination of the personality as the highest good[2]. The second generation of the pursuit of economic, social, and cultural rights was associated with revolts against unregulated capitalism from the mid 19th. Century and it included the right to work and the right to education. The third generation is associated with the collective rights to political self-determination and rights that belong to an individual as a consequence of being human.

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[3] in 1948, many treaties and agreements for the protection of human rights have been concluded. Aspects of freedom are : (a) freedom of ownership - economy can be privatized; (b) freedom of belief - a person is free to believe in self-proclaimed saviors like the examples of David Koresh (WACO, 1993), or Shoko Asahara (1995), the leader of the Aum sect in Japan which used a chemical weapon against commuters in a underground train; (c) freedom of expression - people are free to say whatever they want; (d) freedom of the individual - a person is allowed to donate his biological organs for scientific studies or commercialize them.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression as it is known today has its roots in the period of the Enlightenment through the ideas of philosophers and political thinkers that inspired the liberal revolutions of the 18th Century. The basic concept of this liberal thought may be summarized in the premise that human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Liberal thinking later enriched with other strains of thought has emphasized

the importance of freedom of expression, in particular with relation to communication of information and opinions through the press.

John Milton (1608-1674) is usually regarded as the founder of the claim for freedom of expression. Milton belonged to the rising bourgeoisie of the 17th century that demanded the setting up of rights for the universal use of the new invention of the time, which was the technology of printing for the communication of ideas and interests (GUNNAR, 1993)[4]

Free Press

The concept of a free press emerged from the Reformation's emphasis on the liberty of religious expression. A complex history followed which ran from the first liberal revolution until the period after the Second World War when the international community proclaimed a set of fundamental rights and later supported them. The concept of free media became part of a broader assertion and defense of freedom of expression in general, with the media carrying special responsibilities to guard the public's right to know, as was later enshrined in Articles 1 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[5] (UN 1948). Although in principle this right is protected by the signatory countries of the Declaration, implementation practices of press freedom vary from country to country.

It is generally believed that free media is a right. The concept of "right" is understood as a need that is perceived by those who demand it as legitimate and therefore, the state has the responsibility to provide it. In other words, if citizens believe they have the right to freedom of expression or freedom of speech, it is also correct to understand that the state can limit that right. It is believed that free, fair and accurate media are essential for the healthy functioning of democracy. They give the public important information on electoral choices, review the public decision-making process, and have effective impact on public affairs, as well as, in some circumstances, holding public authorities accountable. However, the controversies around the British and American manipulation of documents reporting weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to justify the 2003 invasion raise questions about the kind of information governments' use.

It is also widely believed that a free press should make people aware of the issues and forces that have an impact on their lives, as was the case during the famine crisis in China in the 1960s that killed more than 15 million people. Theorists have argued that such a crisis would not have happened if the Chinese people had had free access to information

(CORONEL, 1999:4). China's media were under the communist rule of Mao Zedong and had the role of disseminating patriotism and anti-imperialist propaganda.

The case of the pneumonia-like disease later called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome- SARS, in China in 2003, is another example on how the lack of free media affects events. Rather than getting to the heart of the problem from the beginning, Chinese officials covered up the circumstances by repeatedly insisting that the situation was under control, only to admit the existence of the problem later when the situation had already reached epidemic proportions. China has since imposed tight rules on the media for future reporting of any new SARS epidemic. The Health Ministry has announced that the media could only publish information that had been approved by the authorities.[6]

Free media are supposed to help ensure that accurate financial information is available to investors. The 1997 economic crisis in Asia (which broke out in Thailand in July 1997 and quickly spread to other countries in Asia), has been attributed to the inability of the Asian media to operate in an environment of transparency and openness by Western standards. Since the economic crisis, institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have been emphasizing the virtues of transparency and free flow of information[7]. In January 2007, the official Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that China's central government was taking actions to prevent the provincial governments from rigging economic growth figures to look better than they really were (WEEKEND TODAY, 2007).

It is also assumed that economic growth promotes education, mass communication and political democracy as well as the corresponding press freedom. However, as prime examples, despite remarkable achievements in economic growth as well as in education, Singapore and Malaysia do not fare well in terms of press freedom. These two countries keep tight control on freedom of expression and flows of information. The 2006 Reporters without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index rated Singapore 146 and Malaysia 92 as some of the countries with the least degree of free press. In terms of education, 92 percent of the population in Singapore is literate whereas the literacy[8] percentage of Malaysia's population is around 88. Thus, we have a theory of free press that has been largely rhetorical.

In China, despite its increased economic liberalization and expanding influence around the world, journalists are expected to promote national cohesion, patriotism and collectivism; these are elements of the

"*development journalism*" model. China has been rated 163 in the 2006 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders, only slightly better than North Korea which has been rated at the bottom of the list in 168th place.

The thought that a free press contributes to better education is rather wishful, at least in some examples from Asia. Education does not seem to be a problem in China which has 90 per cent of population literacy whereas in India, the world's second largest democracy, only 59 percent of the population is literate. China is ranked as an authoritarian regime according to The Economist Intelligence Unit's whereas India is ranked 35 in the index of democracy. The other anomaly is seen in the Philippines; it has the freest media in Asia, 92 percent of the population is literate but the country is ranked 139 in the 2006 World Press Freedom Index and 63 in The Economist Intelligence Unit's index of democracy[9].

The Constraints

Commercial and political aspects contribute to the limitation of a free press. The first constrant is the need to comply with market factors, so as to provide information in the form of entertainment that the audience wants. The second constraint is political. The media are usually attached to a line of political philosophy. In addition, the very first underlying cause is rooted in the process of news production in which we find the concepts that determine beforehand how the news is "manufactured". These concepts are agenda-setting; news framing; construction of public opinion. They are followed by variants such as objectivity and accountability, which become secondary to the process of transmission of information

The functions of the media derive from democratic thinking based on principles such as majority rule while respecting the rights of minorities; representation; participation; and open discussion of public matters. Therefore, this basic ideology about the role of the free media in society highlights the media's role as impartial and objective, free of political biases and partisan consideration. Cohen-Almagor (2001 citing Carey[10] 1995) suggests that such an image is common among both journalists and politicians. For Cohen-Almagor this ideal type of media conduct does not exist in reality and its future existence is probably unlikely. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the impact of the social, economic, and political environment in which the media operate. The media are aided by news selection processes that are not and cannot be objective. These

procedures, in turn, are not immune to pressures and manipulations exerted by politicians and bureaucrats, advertisers, pressure groups, publishers, and media owners (FISHMAN, 1999). Hence, the perception of biased media existence is a predictable consequence of the normative realm that surrounds the media because it does not only determine what they report but also how they report it.

News production

While the debate on theories about models of press operation goes on, scholars and professionals should take into consideration the mechanisms that journalists, consciously or not, apply in their reporting. The agenda-setting, news framing, and formation of public opinion, objectivity and accountability are some of the embedded features in news production. These mechanisms do influence the content of the information, particularly when goals are to be reached such as to foster national unity, racial harmony, business interests. The content is shaped to meet specific goals, even though most journalists would argue that they do not select forms of narratives in news reporting.

Agenda-Setting

The question of how media organizations decide what stories are important and how to cover them is a matter of concern to all societies. Past studies tend to confirm that through research within the various disciplines of agenda-setting, it does in fact take place and media attention to stories is the most important factor involved in shaping the public's view of the stories' relative importance. The overriding emphasis given to Iraq in recent years by CNN International and BBC World is an example of this.

For McCombs (1992), two types of attributes have received attention from scholars: cognitive and affective. Cognitive attributes involve media providing information about individuals or issues; for example, in connect with a political candidate. The public will associate the candidate with the issue. Affective attributes involve opinions about issues or individuals in general, whether they are positive or negative. The readers will associate the candidate with the issue either positively or negatively depending on the tone of the media coverage. In Indonesia, the local media negatively portrayed not only former president Megawati Sukarnoputri but also her administration. The reason could be either because of the gender issue,

a female leader in a dominant Muslim population country, or Megawati's lack of political charisma. The point is that Megawati's administration and she as an individual were subject to media biases, possibly for cultural reasons.

Wolfsfeld (2001) suggests that news media are agents for amplifying political waves in two ways: when a wave begins and sometimes when it ends. Amplification usually comes with a considerable amount of space devoted but also with emotional tones. The decision of editors that a story is either "*hot*" or "*dead*" has significant consequences for leaders, activists, and the public. As Wolfsfeld (2001) points out, news media also provide narrative structure to political waves by supplying citizens with a fairly common view of the major events, actors and topics. Thus, the adoption of a particular media frame influences the construction of news stories. The news media construct stories that correspond with predicable public reactions to the event, such as sorrow over the loss of human lives, and anger at any who can be held responsible.

The reproduction of the same basic story in many different media leads the audience to accept it as a common point of reference. Once the wave has been identified, the news media work themselves into a frenzy looking for any information and events that can be linked to the story. A change in political context that is associated with political waves leads to a change in how the news media process information. Examples can be found in the reporting on the "war on terror", the "al-Qaeda" connection, "North Korea's nuclear threat" and so forth. These same processes, as Wolfsfeld claims, also take place within the context of routine reporting: the topic becomes intensified and the issue dominates news coverage to such a magnitude that few can avoid knowing about it. On the international level this phenomenon is seen in CNN International[11]. In one of Asia's examples, the same has happened with individual members of the alleged terrorist group Jemah Islamiyah[12] in Singapore.

News Framing

The concept of frame approach was first proposed by the sociologist Erving Goffman along with the anthropologist-psychologist Gregory Bateson, in 1974. Years later, Entman (1993) developed Goffman's idea and conceptualized framing. Entman's view is that framing involves "selection" and "salience". The process is to deliberately select a piece of information to report and obviate others. At the same time, this piece of information will be particularly highlighted and given more salience

while some others will be intentionally diminished or ignored. Frames then "define problems" by determining "what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits" or "diagnose causes" by identifying the forces that create the problem: Similarly frames may "make moral judgments" by evaluating "a causal agent and its effects" and suggest remedies for the problem (ENTMAN, 1993:52).

McCombs (1992) claims that through agenda-setting the media inform what to think about whereas through framing the media tell how to think about it. Thus, frames are active, information-generating, as well as steering devices. Therefore, since framing is founded on how information is processed and explained, how people talk about an issue, and how they form political evaluations, it can be argued that framing can be used to shape public opinion. In Asia, one of the examples of public opinion formation was when the American teenager Michael Fay was caned in Singapore in 1994 for vandalism. Local media in Singapore treated the topic as part of the legal system: the American teenager had vandalized cars therefore he had to be punished according to the law. The Western media framed the stories having human rights issues at the forefront.

A few characteristics can determine the formation of opinion. First, news mainly originates from decisions made in the newsroom rather than from events outside; secondly, statements by government officials represent the most common trigger for front page news. Thirdly, the press is becoming more thematic and interpretative in its coverage.

Public Opinion

Public Opinion is a phenomenon that exists because it is shaped by the media system. The process of framing – selecting, highlighting and sorting into a coherent narrative some facts or observations and deleting many others – is critical to the formation of this convenient phenomenon. Davison (1958) claims that the phenomenon of "public opinion" has been noted and described by writers in ancient, medieval and early modern times and the writers agree on two aspects: that "public opinion" is a consensus among a large number of people, and that this consensus somehow exercises force. Davison provides two common usages of the term "public opinion"; the first, refers to the findings of opinion polls as an indicator of public opinion, while the other usage of the term is as an agent that enforces social norms and taboos. Fagen (1960) suggests that public opinion is not only a technical concept used by social scientists;

it is also a concept used by practical politicians as a vital input in the political process. Politicians attempt to influence public opinion through the handling of the media.

Generically, when scholars or politicians talk about public opinion they are talking about mass opinion. Entman and Herbst (2001) claim that mass opinion is a framing process, which is a product of interactions between media, government, events, and pollsters. Entman and Herbst (2001:211) suggest that public opinion is the will of all mentioned by Rousseau in The *Social Contract* and is the result of adding citizen's opinions together, regardless of how informed or tightly held their beliefs happen to be. In other words, mass opinion is quite malleable and not reflective of thoughtful, informed citizen preferences. The media have great ability to shape mass opinion through framing issues in meticulous ways by limiting certain types of information in their reporting.

Objectivity

In the early period of the 1900s objectivity was considered the acceptable and respectable way of doing reporting; the ultimate discipline of journalism. Conventions of objective reporting were adopted as a routine journalists used to objectify their news stories. Thus, objectivity appeared as an ethic, an ideal subordinated only to truth (COHEN-ALMAGOR, 2001:70).

Objectivity is concerned with the way news is created and reported in the selection of facts, their arrangement, their framing and formation on the public agenda with or without relationship to values. Cohen – Almagor (2001) suggests that objectivity is generally defined as the view that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts are assertions about the world open to independent validation; they stand beyond any individual's personal preferences. Values are an individual's conscious or unconscious set of preferences for what the world should be; they are ultimately subjective and have no legitimate claims on other people. Gordon (1999), citing Walter Lippmann's groundbreaking book *Public Opinion* (1922:271), emphasized that the "function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality…" (73).

Thus, objectivity has to do with impartiality and with the facts (MARIANNE, 2002). However, in journalism objectivity carries another value that causes controversy, especially because it relates to the process

of transfer of information between those who send the information and those who receive the information.

Cohen – Almagor (2001) suggests that objective reporting free of biases is often rather wishful thinking because journalists often cannot help being subjective. In addition to cultural influence in the reporting, journalists operate under compulsions such as editorial pressures, time constraints, priorities of the publisher, accessibility to limited channels of information. Also, some journalists might find it difficult to remain objective when covering a sports team with which they identify, or a politician they appreciate. On the other hand journalists may be defending the view that they are objective in their reporting (FROST, 2000: 35).

Accountability

The natural sequence of the mechanisms in news processing draws attention to the critical aspects of media freedom and accountability. Plaisance (2000) argues that accountability should be understood as a dynamic of interaction between a given medium and the value sets of individuals or groups affected by the messages. Plaisance (2000) cites the example of the media criticism of American president Thomas Jefferson regarding the rumors about his relationship with his slave, Sally Hemmings.

Thomas Jefferson did not use his political power to curb the smear campaigns by editors. In Plaisance's view, Thomas Jefferson failed to reconcile the two notions of press freedom and accountability. He always reiterated the ideal of a free press "confined to truth, needs no other legal restraint" (33). For Thomas Jefferson[13] the offending editors should be left to find their punishment in the public´s indignation. Nearly two centuries after Jefferson left the White House intellectuals continue to search for the elusive middle ground. Scholars such as Hodges (1986) suggest that it is possible to have a press that is free and responsible but that it is impossible to have a press that is both totally free and completely accountable.

Accountability takes different forms based on the philosophical approach used to determine the nature of responsibility. The libertarians will view the concept of accountability linked to the free press ideals; whereas the communitarian approach will view accountability in a broader way to encompass social and cultural consequences of the exercise of ideals. With a few exceptions, most of the press in Asia practices the

communitarian approach that is to sacrifice the individual for the well-being of the majority.

To some, accountability is found in the marketplace where people will reward or punish the media. In the Philippines the approach is widely used as Coronel (2000) suggests that the threat of advertising withdrawals in retaliation for adverse reporting is fairly commonplace. Others argue that self-regulation within the media is an effective means of accountability. In Singapore and Malaysia, for example, the development model of journalism has created a culture of self-regulation; as a result, it has removed the need for obvious government interference. It has also functioned as a deterrent against investigative journalism. In other words, journalists´ self-regulation in Malaysia and Singapore arises from the active enforcement of accountability through legal action such as defamation and libel laws. In this way, the government interference is unnecessary because the process is linked to the justice system.

The position of newspaper ombudsman has been referred to as a function of accountability. However, in my view ombudsmen can be seen to serve a public relations role that is beyond the area of journalistic accountability. Therefore, the nature of the position of ombudsmen should not be considered as a reliable function of journalistic accountability; in fact, it can constitute a form of regulation.

Freedom and Accountability

Merrill (1989; 1999) claims that freedom and accountability are two sides of the same coin. Merrill identifies accountability as an authority that determines the levels of media freedom. The first level of freedom, "state freedom", is a kind of centralized freedom in which the state develops and controls journalism as it sees fit. In many parts of Asia, the press is used as an instrument for social stability, national progress and development. For example, in Bhutan, the government has consistently considered the media as tools for promoting development. In the Maldives, the conventional wisdom among journalists and the government elite is that any discussion on press freedom and press regulation should take into account the fragile and "homogeneous" structure of the society.

The second level of freedom, "free press" can lie only within the level of freedom also known as libertarian level. Freedom in this situation is in the hands of media owners and managers, with only some independence filtering down to the lower ranks of journalists. Coronel (2000) exemplifies that in the Philippines while most newspapers owners rarely intervene

in day-to-day editorial decisions, they can place real constraints on the freedom of journalists. The discouragement of reporting on topics that can affect their business empire and of reporting on issues that can stir up ire in the government is among the gatekeeper tactics the newspapers owners use to their own benefit (CORONEL, 2000).

John Merrill (1989) identifies the market force or the state as the locus for freedom. The first model, the market force, is generally applied to the libertarian media while in the second model the state authorities control the level of freedom. In the marketplace approach power is based on financial considerations. Merrill (1989) argues that in a very real sense we might say that everywhere in the world these two kinds of authority and freedom regulate journalism with individual journalists having little real freedom in any system. However they are probably most free in the market-libertarian countries.

Fitting Asia

The premise that journalists are probably most free in the market-libertarian countries can be challenged. Coronel (2000), for example, claims that those who wished to control or silence the press in the Philippines in the late 90s were using market forces rather than state control. "One of the methods for controlling or influencing the media is '*envelopmental journalism*' or the bribing of journalists by business and government agencies to ensure favorable coverage. Special pay-offs are made during periods like elections or the launching of new products"[14].

The Philippines' case illustrates not only the extent of the influence the business community can have on the content but also of the threat it poses to journalists´ lives. The Philippines is considered one of the most dangerous places for journalists to work according to Reporters without Borders; however Coronel (2000) suggests that the problems of the Philippine's media have less to do with state control than with the anarchy of a crowded and competitive market. Coronel (2000) claims that "respect for a free press is institutionalized and is deeply ingrained in the political culture. The killings of their colleagues in the provinces do not form a pattern of state repression but are isolated incidents". Coronel (2000) argues that these incidents have more to do with the configurations of power and the breakdown of law.

Despite the remarkable economic development in various countries in Asia, governments in the region maintain a strong hand on the press and, to a certain extent, on internet users. Malaysia, Singapore and China

are examples where journalists and bloggers can go to jail for their comments. Menon (2000) claims China has some 30 journalists behind bars making it the world's leading jailer of reporters for the eighth year in a row.

While there is no public information on journalists being jailed in Singapore, bloggers or cyber-dissidents have been sentenced to jail or heavily fined for bringing their views to the public sphere. As in Singapore, China seems determined to control independent news and blogs through elaborate and comprehensive regulations. In Malaysia as well as in Singapore the governments use the Internal Security Act against journalists, academicians, political opponents or any person the authorities consider to be a threat to the nation. Nonetheless, the press industry in Malaysia and Singapore is privately owned (TAY, 2000:10). Self-censorship is one of the most resourceful agents the governments of Malaysia and Singapore have been able to develop regarding media professionals and critics. In addition, defamation laws are a feature of Singapore's apparatus to deal with unsavory critiques. Journalists in Hong Kong are also finely tuned to avoid sensitive issues that could upset the central government in China and destabilize the political status quo. In South Korea, a country ranked 34 in the 2006 Reporters without Borders Worldwide press freedom index, a new law about the "social responsibility" of the media has been aimed at conservative newspapers.

In Indonesia, a country in democratic transition, some of the draconian laws regulating the press during the former dictator Suharto's regime are still in place. Even though the media in Indonesia is largely privately owned, business groups' interests overlap with many of those in the government. As Woodier (2006) has put it, "many journalists including the foreign media are under threat" (59), "the move to criminalize the work of journalists and the use of defamation laws to silence critics marks a concerted effort by the political elites to regain central control over the flow of information". Woodier (2006) furthers his assessments saying, "Already, new and closer political and business alliances are forming between regional commanders and provincial bosses, as decentralization changes the dynamics of Indonesian politics" (59). The Jakarta-based Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) registered some 100 cases of attacks and threats against the press in 2000. The majority of the cases involved angry mobs that rejected the premise that journalists have a responsibility to cover all sides of the stories.

In addition, in Indonesia, as Yamin (2006) suggests, the practice of "budaya telepon", which means the culture of the phone call, is back in use under the administration of President Susilo Yudhoyono. The practice was much used during the regime of Suharto. It implies that a story can be withdrawn or a journalist fired as a consequence of the call. For the last half a century, as Yamin (2006) puts it, the press in Indonesia has gone from "budaya telepon", to "journalism tiarap", which means avoiding sensitive issues that could upset the central government, to "budaya amplop" or culture of the envelope (journalists would receive a press kit with an envelop containing money among the press releases), and now back to "budaya telepon".

Thailand in recent years has become a victim of media control during the government of telecommunication tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, even though the country has witnessed increased economic development. The 2006 Reporters without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index has shown Thailand has moved from a country with immense media freedom in 2004 to a country with strong media restrictions in 2006. The level of press freedom in Thailand fell from 65th place in 2004 to 122 in 2006, according to the Worldwide Press Freedom Index.

A further example that economic development does not necessary implies press freedom is the case of Vietnam; the country is going through significant economic growth despite tight control on the media. Weekly meetings between supervisors of the Communist Party and newspaper editors result in journalists being coached into the ability to know what they can or cannot write. The tenet of Marxist ideology dominates the main goal of the press in Vietnam, which is to promote patriotism and national defense; even though newspapers are commercially funded they remain state-owned. In Brunei Darussalam, one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia, journalists can be jailed for up to three years for reporting "false" or "malicious" news. The May 2005 Sedition Act further restricted press freedom by expanding the list of punishable offenses to include criticism of the Sultan, of the royal family, etc. The private press is either owned or controlled by the monarch's family and journalists practice self-censorship on political and religious matters.

In China, despite changes in managerial mechanisms there are still strict off-limit areas such as the Communist Party's control over the media, the cadres who manage the media, the ideological direction of the media, and the ownership of media organizations which will not change (Pan 2005 citing Su 2004). The basic principles of the Communist Party press

system remain heavily protected. Nonetheless, in the past decade there has been a relaxation of media control with economic development and the "marketization" of the media, e.g. the inclusion of advertisements, entertainment, (HUANG, 2003), including some media privatization. But still newspaper editors can be punished for publishing "political errors", "fabricating stories" or "sensationalizing news".

In China as in Vietnam, foreign-based journalists face surveillance and restrictions. One of the restrictions requires foreign journalists to obtain permits to travel outside their city of residence; another limitation is that foreign journalists are banned from interviewing political dissidents. During the economic "boom" of the Asian Tigers in the 80s, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand all had controlled media. Since then, South Korea has become democratic with free media. However, *development journalism* continues to dominate the media environment in Malaysia and Singapore. The tenets of such approach have also been widely used by China and Vietnam.

Romano (2005 citing LOO,1995, LENT,1979) suggests that the concept of *development journalism* was that it could help support the process of development in countries with low educational levels, poor infrastructure development and struggling economies. "The aim was that journalists would focus on socio-economic and political processes" (ROMANO, 2005:1). More than a decade later, journalists and theorists realized that Asian governments "manipulated the press by promoting the proverb that the less is the freedom, the greater is the economic growth" (LENT, 1982:4).

Conclusion

There are chains everywhere: either in the mechanism of news production, market forces or government controls. News reporting is constructed from a set of connected concepts that organize the narrative. This includes cases of agenda-setting and news framing that can be applied consciously or unconsciously by people in the media, either using the development model of journalism, the libertarian model or the market forces´ influence. Therefore, the process of news production in itself works as a "gatekeeper". As Cole (2006:3) suggests, "press freedom does not necessarily ensure improved reporting".

Due to the effects of market forces, news is seen as a commodity and owners of media organizations are more concerned with financial gains

rather than with the ethical aspects of news production. There are cases in which market forces and media ownership exercise levels of influence over governmental decisions.

Furthermore, creative measures to reduce media freedom continue to be employed by governments in the form of national security laws, anti-terrorism acts and criminal defamation laws. Thus, the ideal type of media performance does not exist in reality due to the impact of economic pressure and the political environment in which the media operate. With the media becoming increasingly thematic and interpretative in their coverage, they can hardly be unbiased or objective. Therefore, what to think or how to think is no longer part of free media but offers mechanisms to enhance stakeholders' interests. The idealized principle of objectivity that existed in the early 1900s seems to have been eroded as a result of modern commercial pressures.

In the context of Asia, press freedom is not a priority; economic development is. Despite advances in degrees of press freedom in parts of Asia, such as in South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the regimes in mainland China, Burma and Vietnam, to mention a few, maintain strict control of the press. In other countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia, in spite of the presence of a number of democratic features, governments use authoritarian tactics to control the press. In addition, there are the examples in which the business community and newspaper owners use commercial maneuvers as gatekeepers of media content.

The mechanisms of journalistic practices are used to foster government and groups' interests, as is the example of Vietnam where the role of the press is to cultivate patriotism; in Malaysia and Singapore the role of the press is to promote national unity, racial and religious harmony, and economic development. It is fair to question whether the argument that economic liberalization brings about political liberties including press freedom is valid.

Similarly, the argument that a well-informed citizen is able to make wiser decisions, and therefore a free press helps to construct a better society, falls short within the Asian context. Nevertheless, if indeed a free media develops better citizens, then the public or journalist corps should elect the editors, news directors to make the process truly democratic. While it is important to push for a free and responsible press, it is also essential to de-emphasize the romantic approach to the need for press freedom and look critically at the real world of news making. It is time for media scholars, journalism educators and professionals to look beyond

the normative of media environments. The global media transformation is bringing in new theories, challenges and social changes and we should be ready for them.

NOTES

1   Enlightenment - A European intellectual movement of the 17th - 18th Centuries. The ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and man were blended into a worldview that inspired revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics.

2   In Rousseau's book 'The Social Contract', 1762, he attempted to create a society in which freedom for all was possible and the purpose of the state was to secure freedom of the citizens. Rosseau begins with the sentence: "Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains". Rosseau argued that a civil society based on a genuine social contract rather than a fraudulent one would provide people with a better kind of freedom in exchange for their natural independence.

3   " The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

4   Gunnar claims Milton emerged as the founder for freedom of expression in his work Areopagitica (1644). Gunnar claims that Milton's work was a response to the cultural evolution that resulted from the invention of the technology of printing.

5   Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood; Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers".

6   News World Media Briefing, October 17, 2003

7   ibid., pg. 2

8   Literacy: age 15 and over can read and write CIA factbook

9   http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/Democracy_Index_2007_v3.pdf

10   J.W.Carey, "The Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse", in T.L.Glasser and C.t. Salmon (Eds), *Public Opinion and the Communication Content*, New York: Guildfor Press, 1995: 373-402.

11   CNN provides a high level of saturation of repeated information on most events.

12   The media in Singapore provides a saturation of repeated information and speculation on the alleged terrorist suspect members of the group Jemah Islamiyah

13   T.Jefferson was subject to attacks on his personal character. In 1802, sensational charges against him were publicized but he maintained his policy of making no public reply to personal attacks. The abuse he suffered from newspapers weakened his confidence in a free press (PLAISANCE, 2000).

14   http://www.riap.usyd.edu.au/research/publications/coronel.htm

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