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## **Freedom of Information as a Tool for Empowerment** ***Good Institutions, the Public Sphere and Media Literacy***

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Access to information and the ability to share information empower people, regardless of who and where they are. Information can mobilize, increase transparency and accountability, and it is a stimulus to participation, active citizenship, lifelong learning and social change. In this way information becomes crucial to ensuring a democratic society.

This is hardly a new insight. The role of information has been formulated in these terms for decades. Perhaps especially in the literature of the 1960s, when information was accorded a central role in national development processes. Researchers elaborated various scenarios, outlining how information and communication would contribute to modernizing political institutions in the developing countries. Proponents of this 'modernization paradigm' saw mass media as the key element in this process. But in time, optimism about the potential of information and communication waned, and in some cases turned into pessimism. In the 1980s and 1990s – a time of afterthought on many fronts – there dawned a general realization that the enthusiasts had grossly underestimated the obstacles to making information and communications work for people's development. It was an era when the concept of 'the Third World' aroused both hopes and many unresolved political conflicts.

At that time Internet and mobile phones – personal computers, too, for that matter – were unknown to most people. We have witnessed the emergence of a new media and communication society which has transformed the social functions of media and communication. An interactive and mobile communication society is developing alongside traditional mass media. Passive spectators are becoming active participants. Once again, after several years of deep pessimism in the aftermath of 9/11 in 2001, there are some small signs of 'optimism' about freedom of expression and freedom of information.

We find freedom of expression and freedom of information high up on a growing number of international agendas. The focus is on ways to stimulate critical thinking about how these rights can be put to better effect in practice – not least in connection with the implementation of the Millennium Goals. And globalization processes force us not only to focus more on transnational phenomena in general, but also to be especially attentive to political, social and cultural differences between countries. About 60-70 per cent of the inequality that exists today is inequality between nations; two hundred years ago 90 per cent of the inequality was within countries. Thus, the gap between wealthy and poor countries has increased dramatically over the past two hundred years (Bourguignon and Morrisson 2002).

## Freedom of Information and Other Rights

Freedom of information or the right to information is a fundament in the protection of freedom of expression. Freedom of information is defined as the universal right to access information held by public bodies. Freedom of information laws reflect the fundamental premise that all information held by governments, governmental institutions and local authorities is in principle public.

As we all know, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lays down the Freedom for Information in 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 and regardless of frontiers."

The principles are further elaborated in such agreements as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Art. 19) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 13 and 17).

Some important principles are to be found in these universal articles regarding freedom of information: 1. It is the individual citizen and the media who are central to the freedom of information – the purpose is above all to protect individuals, journalists and media enterprises from interference on the part of public authority. 2. An important feature of the rules on freedom of information is the underlying belief in pluralism of information and ideas. It is the purpose of freedom of information to stimulate information and debate on issues of public importance. The media play a crucial role in this. 3. Those restrictions on freedom of information which are nevertheless allowed must be narrowly construed. Freedom should be the rule and constraint the exception. 4. Any restrictions of freedom of information should be applied with the requirements of a democratic society in mind – without freedom of information no democracy, without democracy no freedom of information... , and 5. Freedom of information is to be exercised regardless of frontiers. (Österdahl 1992)

Freedom of information is intimately related to the rule of law. Citizens – whoever they may be – have to know their rights and know how to use the judicial system in order to secure them. It is not enough that individual rights exist; people have to be able to enjoy and make use of them. In the words of Amartya Sen: "Individual freedoms can be seen to be a social commitment, and this requires the state to play an active role in advancing the substantive freedom of the people to do what they have reason to value, as well as to know what is feasible". Sen focuses on freedom as a person's actual ability to be or do something. (Sen 2010)

From that point of view citizenship has to be defined as a social practice grounded in everyday experiences - "a multi-dimensional concept which includes the agencies, identities and actions of people themselves" (Gaventa 2005). 'Inclusive citizenship', a concept introduced by Naila Kabeer, refers to the strategies of inclusion that people apply - a set of values and meanings, with cultural, social and economic rights that provide substance to both political and civil rights (Kabeer 2005).

With such an actor-oriented perspective freedom of information implies that a society is open and free:

- when governments and authorities act simply and straightforwardly in compliance with freedom of information principles – thanks to appropriate and well-implemented legislation - a trustworthy service to the people;
- when citizens have the capability to request information and then use the information provided;
- when free and independent media report information of relevance to people's lives, train a critical eye on all who have power over others, and stimulate public debate.

Together these factors will create processes, or a sort of circuit, based on accountability and participation. Such social, legal and public communicative processes form the basis for a public sphere and from that perspective information can be a real tool in the hands of people in their struggle for civil, political, social and cultural rights.

*Civil rights* include people's rights to be treated equally, to hold property, to have due process of law, to enjoy freedom of speech and religion, and to have their privacy protected. Citizens have these rights by virtue of being autonomous individuals.

*Political rights* concern the right to vote, to run for public office, and to organize politically and socially.

*Social rights* include such benefits to wellbeing as the right to health, education, and a social safety net.

*Cultural rights* include the right to participate in and enjoy a wide range of cultural expressions. These rights have become especially relevant in the new multicultural societies that are now developing.

Rights are not bestowed once and for all, but rather must be created and secured through work and struggle.

Helge Rønning 2009

But in order to be able to make use of their right to information, citizens have to have some education and be of good health. Thus, many groups of people are unable to use their rights. The number of people living in slums are now 830 million and that figure will increase to 900 million in 2020. Their life conditions are a "violation of human rights" the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon noted in his message to the World Urban Forum 2010. Marginalized groups that are communicationally illiterate – poor and vulnerable women, youth and other groups may suffer disproportionately from lack of information access. They often face social inequality, poor schools, gender discrimination, unemployment and inadequate health systems. People caught up in war and violent unrest are especially vulnerable. Millions of people have been driven from their homes and have no civil rights whatsoever.

### **The Importance of Good Institutions**

All people have the right to freedom of information. They are right-holders, and when a country has ratified a treaty including the principle of freedom of information, individuals move from

being a right-holder to being a claim-holder with a 'claim-duty pattern' in which the state most often is the duty-bearer. Such a human rights-based model implies a society characterized by equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

Many of the researchers who have devoted themselves to problems of development and what can be done to eradicate poverty and corruption – two prime 'enemies' of freedom of information – are agreed as to the importance of good governance and quality of government – with its focus on 'good institutions'. These terms refer not only to formal political institutions, but also to informal institutions having to do with trust and traditions of cooperation. Political scientists have shown that the level of social trust correlates positively with a number of political, social, and economic conditions that are normatively desirable in a democracy (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, Rothstein and Uslaner 2005).

Empirical studies have found that developing countries that were equally poor in 1960 have attained remarkably different standards of welfare today. The differences seem to be due to no other factors than qualitative differences in the countries' political and social institutions (Holmberg and Rothstein 2010).

Why do some states develop 'good institutions' and others do not? There are neither theories nor empirical studies that explain how a country can create good political and social institutions. But we know that public education – not least the education of girls and young women – and independent and pluralistic media play crucial roles. This, by the way, is a reminder of the value of good statistics, indicators that measure development and capabilities, and cross-disciplinary research.

Sweden, where I come from, was the first country in the world to grant its citizens the right of access to information. That was 250 years ago, in 1766. The same law, the Freedom of the Press Act, protect individuals who report information to journalists and other publicists from prosecution or persecution. Journalists need not reveal their identity. The Act is one of four laws that make up the Swedish Constitution. Other countries in the Nordic region – Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway – have similar laws. The Nordic countries were also the first to set up national Press Councils, in which media owners, editors and journalists together draw the guidelines that aim to ensure media accountability. That was in the early years of the twentieth century.

Provisions for openness and transparency in the law create a conducive climate for a more general 'culture of transparency' whereby realms of the private sphere too, are open for scrutiny, as well – in practice and in the law. The example of the Nordic countries supports such a conclusion, in any case. Unfortunately, there has been very little research that documents how the countries of Northern Europe went about it, when they freed themselves from the bonds of poverty, corruption and clientelism (Holmberg and Rothstein 2010).

## Media and the Public Sphere

Information from governments and authorities – so-called vertical communication – is not sufficient. Information sources, ‘watch-dogs’ and fora for debate – in short, a ‘public sphere’, a space for horizontal communication, is necessary, as well. When speaking of the public sphere we tend to think of media. Mass media constitute the infrastructure for the modern public sphere – from conventional media to a variety of platforms on internet. But when speaking of the public sphere we should also think of the civil society. “There is no public sphere without civil society, but there is also non without the public” (Splichal 2010).

Freedom of information is – as UNESCO puts it – “fundamentally connected to freedom of expression and press freedom, representing a crucial element to enable media to strengthen democratization, good governance and human development through its roles as a ‘watch-dog’ over the abuse of power - promoting accountability and transparency: as a civic forum for political debate; and as an agenda-setter for policymakers. In turn, complete realization of the right to know cannot take place without free, independent, plural, ethical and professional media” ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)).

So, the media are more than a link between government and politics, and the citizens. They play dual roles: together with other actors, sources and audiences, they create media content; secondly, their output influences both sources and audiences – and the media themselves (Asp 2007).

Journalists and media have a key role in scrutinizing those in power and revealing irregularities and social ills. The security and safety of journalists is, however, a crucial factor – to be able to work free of political censorship and free from threats of violence. The safety of journalists is an issue not only in theatres of war and violent upheavals. Murders of journalists and threats against their lives are on the increase, according to a UNESCO report published a couple of months ago (IPDC, UNESCO 2010). Most victims, says the report, are targeted in countries that are at peace, but where revealing sensitive information – about drug trafficking, violations of human rights or corruption – can mean risking one’s life. Poorly trained and poorly paid journalists are severely handicapped when it comes to defending professional ethics. Lack of security is a source of corruption and self-censorship among journalists.

But, we shall also remember that producers and distributors of media content often are concentrated in a few hands. A more democratic distribution of communicative power within the public sphere is a forceful argument for dispersed media ownership – a structure that militates against abuses of the media's power. Research suggests that a lower degree of concentration of media ownership means that there will be more media owners who support more socially responsible kinds of journalism, rather than focusing single-mindedly on ‘the bottom line’ (Baker 2006).

Great hopes are attached to Internet as a vehicle for innovative and more democratic forms of journalism. So far, however, the various websites do little more than to collect and reproduce

existing journalistic work that has been produced by so-called conventional media. It is difficult in these days in any case to foresee a business model, or combination of models, that will support a renaissance in journalism on the web. Digitization can contribute to democratic development and higher standards of journalism, but only provided that there are qualified news editors who produce the material to the various web services. The survival and evolution of these newsrooms is therefore of crucial importance to the development of democracy.

In this connection there is reason to mention the public service broadcast media and their potential to empower people – when considering the media users as participants. Such media can provide an independent range of programs characterized by quality, breadth and depth that give the public access to information, social debate and not least education - particularly programs that involve people themselves. Radio especially plays an important role. Unparalleled in many parts of the world, radio is effective and cheap, yet far-reaching.

In view of the pace of technological progress and the fact that there is limited scope for funding public services with tax revenues or licence fees in developing countries, it is important that researchers and policy-makers try to formulate new frameworks for public service media, both the conceptual frameworks and their operational practicalities. The points of departure for these efforts are theories of democratic development, the public sphere, media pluralism, cultural diversity and tolerance. In focus are media audiences – the citizens.

### **Empowerment through Media Literacy**

Democratic rule is not possible without informed citizens, and informed citizens cannot exist without reliable, trustworthy journalism. Journalism and the media need to be worthy of trust - they need to be accountable.

Regulation and self-regulation are not enough to ensure that media companies fulfill a widespread assumption of moral responsibility for “the other person in a world of great conflict, tragedy, intolerance and indifference” (Silverstone 2007). Media and information literacy is a key factor at all levels.

Better and more widespread knowledge of the media will be a stimulus to participation, active citizenship, competence development and lifelong learning. In this way media and information literacy becomes crucial to ensuring a democratic society.

It is recognized that media and information literacy consists of a number of kinds of knowledge and proficiencies. In addition to the essential precondition, namely, access to media, people need an understanding of how the media work, how they create meaning, how the media industries are organized, how they make money, and the goals toward which they work. Not least they need to understand the importance of a critical treatment of sources. The ability to sift through and sort out information from the tremendous flood of data and images in our digital information and communication society is a key skill. As is the capability to analyze and evaluate the information made available by media and via various platforms.

The importance of an awareness of, and sensitivity to, political censorship and commercial barriers cannot be overstated. Media literacy also means knowing how media can be used and being able to express oneself or express one's creativity using them, i.e., to generate media content. Users also need to be able to avoid and manage the risks media, especially internet, imply. So, there is – once and for all – a need for more knowledge and new skills in the area of privacy, integrity and data security, and copyright aspects of media use.

The challenge today is to develop policies that balance two somewhat conflicting goals – especially regarding young people: maximizing the potential of new information technologies and minimizing the risks they entail (Livingstone and Haddon 2009). This is a challenge facing many different actors – policy-makers, media companies, Internet content providers, the schools, the research community, and so forth, civil society organizations, as well as young people, their parents and other adults. It is particularly important that young people themselves be engaged in this work.

We should do well to recall that throughout history, young people have often been active participants in the manifestation of social change, and most times their creative uses of media and innovative practices of communication have been crucial in the process. Consider, for example, the key roles young people play in citizen media, or in campaigning for political freedom, freedom of expression, fair trade, HIV/AIDS prevention, etc. (Tufte and Enghel 2009).

At the core of this creativity and these innovative practices is media and information literacy. Different Internet platforms like Facebook, Youtube and blogs are rapidly growing virtual sites that give shape to new forms of social networking, communication and mobilization, primarily amongst youth. Young people's competence in using media and their ability to produce, understand and interact with the multiplicity of both new and old media formats and technologies have been instrumental in the manifestation of social processes of change.

### **Freedom of Information: The Digital Public Sphere, Governance and Media Policy**

Media are the focal point in discussions relating to World Press Freedom Day. With regard to Freedom of information our point of departure has to be a recognition that access to information lies at the core of the democratic process, as it transfers vital knowledge to the people – empowerment is the word. And in that context it is relevant to ask “whose media, whose freedom” (Satheesh 2010).

Over the past ten years, the right to freedom of information has been recognized by an increasing number of countries, both in the Southern and Northern hemispheres, through the adoption of a wave of legislation providing for the right to information. But, still, less than 45 per cent of the countries of the world have any form of legal provision for freedom of information. That points up the dire need of national legislation, but it is also a reminder of how important it is for countries that do have such provisions to live up to the letter and the spirit of the law. And, of the importance of free and independent media and flows of communication,

not least at local levels. We have to remember that local media, e.g. small radio stations, help to foster diversity and pluralism, and boost popular political and social debate in many societies.

Faith in the communication channels that Internet offers arouses great hopes from the perspective of democracy. But, both governments and social organizations in many different quarters are demanding more extensive control over the free flow of information via Internet and other electronic channels of communication. There is an ongoing battle against unlawful control and censorship on the web – that struggle is addressed to both governments and private corporations.

Many pressing issues facing politicians and policy-makers today have to do with digital media and phenomena in cyberspace. International and regional organizations as well as national governments and civil society - and the media - have to debate the Internet of the future and issues relating to on whose terms the web should operate and whose needs it should fill. The protection of human rights and freedom of expression, ensuring universal access to the Internet as a public service, and promoting media literacy are key priorities.

In order to shed light on these important issues we need research – and not least thoughts and reflections. Research communities need to create multi-disciplinary platforms to achieve long-term goals through national, regional and international collaboration. We have to build on past work, but break new ground – we need unexpected insights and new comparative research questions – with much more collaboration between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. There is an urgent need for the agenda to become sensitized to different cultural contexts and intercultural approaches to a much higher degree than has been the case to date. We need to learn more from one another, to share knowledge, ideas and context.

And we should not lose sight of the fact that power, identity and inequality are still concepts of vital relevance (Golding 2005). Neither should we lose sight of the fact that the ‘arteries’ in the media landscape - not least the routes that communication takes – are creations of political will. This is true of internet and mobile telephones as well as television and, even earlier, radio. Without a political will, there will be no development. (McChesney 2008)

In our messy world there seems to be an urgent need for both a global plan of action as an expression of well-defined global leadership and plans of action, country by country, based on local conditions and experiences – with clear and unequivocal assignment of responsibility. The global level has to be characterized by good governance if it is to be able to help bring good governance to other levels – and vice versa. Independent and pluralistic media are integral to good governance and have a measureable impact in strengthening peoples’ political, economic and social rights, thereby alleviating poverty. Freedom of expression and information is as effective as education and investments are when it comes to promoting development (Novel 2006).

Perhaps it is time that we dare ask ourselves what exactly is required not just to alleviate, but to eradicate poverty in the world. This question actualizes vital democratic values - what kind of society do we want, and just who is this 'we'?

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