

# Press freedom and development

By Amartya Sen

THE press is not always an easy object to love. It is not, of course, hard to see why authoritarian rulers have reasons — mostly terrible reasons — to hate the free press, and that is perhaps a part of the glory of the press. But frustration with the press is by no means confined only to dictators and potentates. There is the issue of invasion of privacy which can ruin some lives, but no less importantly there is also the more common problem of being misrepresented.

Indeed, when we are wrongly reported in a newspaper, as happens from time to time, it can be extremely upsetting, since the false attributions typically communicate a lot faster and much more prominently than any subsequent corrections can. I have had the experience, for example, of saying that the world civilizations are *not* in conflict with each other, and being reported in a prominent newspaper that I believed that the world civilizations are in tremendous conflict. It was not, I have to confess, much of a consolation to be told that the diligent reporter had only missed one word — the word “not.” If we tear our hair in frustration, it is mainly because we cannot find suitably accessible journalists to tear their hair in comforting abandon.

There is also a more serious reason — indeed a different type of reason — for us to be upset with the media. Given the power of the press, it

“The power of the press is very great, but not so great as the power to *suppress*.” But we have to understand what the world loses as a result of authoritarian exercise of the power to suppress.

I would argue that press freedom is important for development for at least four distinct reasons: (1) the *intrinsic importance* of freedom of speech and public communication which are inescapably linked with the freedom of the press; (2) the *informational role* of a free press in disseminating knowledge and allowing critical scrutiny; (3) the *protective function* of press freedom in giving voice to the neglected and the disadvantaged, and thus providing greater human security; and (4) the *constructive contribution* of free public discussion in the formation of values and in the emergence of shared public standards that are central to social justice.

Let me briefly discuss each in turn.

*Drawn 3/12/61*

It is not astonishing at all that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. The Chinese famine of 1958-61 could decimate people — tens of millions — over three years without leading to a rapid policy revision not just because the government had wrong information, but also because people were kept in the dark about the crises and the mortality, since no newspaper was allowed to criticize the government.

orate on them.

I shall presently discuss the protective function of press freedom in giving people a hearing and a voice. But in the context of the present discussion of the informational role of a free press, let me comment that rapid dissemination of information can also make a contribution to protection and security. Consider, for example, the Chinese famine of 1958-61, in which between 23 to 30 million people died.

Despite the fact that the Chinese government was quite committed to eliminating hunger in the country, it did not substantially revise its disastrous policies (associated with the ill-advised “Great Leap Forward”) during the three famine years.

This was possible because of the lack of a political opposition and absence of an independent critique from the media (on which more presently), but the Chinese government itself did not see the need to change its

policies partly because it did not have enough information on the extent to which the Great Leap Forward had failed.

Because of the absence of an uncensored press and other modes of public communication, the local officials across China were under the impression that while they themselves had failed, the other regions had done well.

This gave incentive to each local unit — collectives or communes in various formations — to concoct their agricultural data to pretend that they too were doing well enough. The totality of these reported numbers vastly inflated the Chinese government's own estimate of the total amount of food grains that the

We have occasion enough to be disappointed at the unfulfilled promise of the free media and the corresponding loss of a potential benefit. This is a serious enough issue, and I shall come back to it later.

I have, I fear, started off on a somewhat negative vein, and the organizers of the General Assembly of the International Press Institute may well be wondering whether they have made a dreadful mistake and have got the wrong man to give this lecture.

My recently deceased friend, Isaiah Berlin, used to recount the story of his being invited to a performance under the mistaken impression that he was Irving Berlin, the musician, not Isaiah Berlin. Apparently, the assembled gathering was extremely disappointed at Isaiah Berlin's total inability to sing some melodies from *Annie Get Your Gun* or *Call Me Madam*.

But I do believe it is important to take a critical attitude towards the press even as we defend and fight for the freedom of the press. It may not be quite a "quid pro quo (it must not be), but it is a necessary connection to which journalists in particular have reason to pay attention. Having got these sceptical, somewhat negative concerns right into the arena, let me now turn to the positive merits — indeed the critical significance — of the press.

Why, in particular, is the freedom of the press crucial for development? I think this is so for several distinct and basically separable reasons, and it is important to distinguish them clearly, so that we can adequately assess what is at stake. Indeed, we have to know what may be lost when censorship is imposed and press freedom is suppressed. Lord Northcliffe may have been right to grumble nearly a hundred years ago,

cannot be divorced from the lives that people can lead and the real freedoms that they actually enjoy. Development cannot be judged merely by the accumulation of inanimate objects of use, such as a rise of the gross national product (GNP) or technological progress.

For responsible human beings, the focus must ultimately be on whether they have the freedom to do what they have reason to value. This makes freedom the crucial end of development, and given that basic recognition, it is easy to see that freedom of speech and communication must be among the constitutive components of development.

Freedom of speech, in this perspective, does not have to be justified by its indirect effects, but can be seen to be part and parcel of what we value and have reason to value. It must, therefore, figure directly in any accounting of development.

The absence of a free press and the suppression of people's ability to speak to — and communicate with — each other directly impoverishes human freedom and impairs development, even if the authoritarian country that imposes this suppression happens to have a high GNP per head or have accumulated a large mass of physical wealth.

I turn now to the informational function of the press — a part of its instrumental role. This function relates not only to specialized reporting (for example on scientific advances or on cultural innovations), but also to keeping people generally informed on what is going on where.

Furthermore, investigative journalism can also unearth information that would have otherwise gone unnoticed or even unknown. All this is so obvious that I hardly need elab-

100 million more metric tons of grain than they actually had.

The information that is lost as a result of censorship of the press by an authoritarian government can devastatingly mislead that government itself. I do not wish to make the press more swollen headed than it already is, by invoking William Cowper and saying that the press, like God, "moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform." But whether or not the press is swollen headed, it is certainly true that censorship of the press can not only keep the citizens in the dark, it can also starve the government itself of vitally important information. I turn now to the confrontational role of the press in giving the government the political incentive to respond to the needs of the people. The rulers have the incentive to listen to what people want if they have to face their criticism and seek their support in elections.

It is, thus, not astonishing at all that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. The Chinese famine of 1958-61 could decimate people — tens of millions — over three years without leading to a rapid policy revision not just because the government had wrong information (itself connected, as I have just argued, with press censorship), but also because people were kept in the dark about the crises and the mortality, since no newspaper was allowed to criticise the government.

### To be concluded

*The writer is a Nobel Laureate for Economics. This paper was read out on the concluding day of the four-day World Congress of the International Press Institute held in New Delhi last week.*