

The Saint in the Office: How to Help the Government to be Right

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Journalism in Retreat

Journalism is in retreat. Journalists, those brave men and women who inform and enlighten us about the things that matter, have chosen to step back from a responsibility entrusted by their readers, viewers, and listeners. They are invited to the rooms where policy is made, but their observations and assertions with regard to the unwise, and sometimes disastrous, policies are not made available for public debate. They are entertained with champagne at high-profile press conferences, but their sharp and informed opinions are not available to the general public. They risk their lives and reputation to cover wars, plagues, torture, violations of laws, the most unimaginable crimes committed in broad daylight and the most indiscernible plots under the cover of darkness, but there are no more stories.¹

We must acknowledge that the same species did not shy away from grave dangers in time of war, which, much to our disgust, have been recurring since the last century, the last decades, last years, and well into the present day. It really is a shame to think that those men and women with the same courage and experience, with the same sharp eyes and wise minds, were able to make their voices heard when there was no stage, just an audience, and who are now increasingly silent when the means of communication have expanded tremendously. But whose fault is it?

Ever since the onset of the refugee crisis and the outcry over human rights violations in the troubled areas such as Syria and Turkey, media coverage has been faced with threats from political power and business interests. In addition, the terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, and Cologne have also met with only partial media coverage.² Complaints about the infringement of free speech are justified, but it would be unwise to place the whole blame on government which, for various reasons, tends to manipulate the press and command the allegiance of the media. Overpowering government and the compromising media have both played a part.

In light of the fact that Hungary, a full democracy like any other, has deteriorated to such an extent that the integrity of the media is compromised, keen observers of political science should be on their guard. Hungary's track record is worrying: the media environment has suffered from increased state regulation and other interferences since 2010 as the government has continued to "exert pressure on private owners to influence coverage" and utilised advertising tax disproportionately to "a major private television station."³ Notwithstanding the fact that the media have been serving the public good, the political authorities insist on imposing their power over free media and turn them into mouthpieces. Among those authorities that have tried (and many have failed), Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's administration is a newcomer. However, his tricks are hardly new to any informed minds: suppressing private and independent media by levying taxes, curtailing freedom of speech by imposing regulations,⁴ and worst of all, licensing private media, which is just one step away from total censorship.⁵

The negative impact of such suppression is telling: without freedom of speech, misinformed ideas will spread; hate speeches will run rampant; and the absence of opposing arguments in public debate will result in the demise of human rationality. Will political powers triumph in this scenario? Of course they would think so, finally becoming the saint on centre stage with everyone either silent or cheering them- for being right about every aspect of society.

Freedom of Speech as a Fundamental Human Right

When we talk about freedom of speech, we need to reiterate its importance as a fundamental human right, among other inalienable rights to property, pursuit of happiness, one's safety and liberty. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "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."⁶ In this light, the underpinning assumption is that a responsible person should hold himself accountable for any potential consequences. As Tocqueville writes, "In America, the majority draws a formidable circle around thought. Within these limits, the writer is free; but woe betide him if he dares to go beyond them. It isn't that he has to fear an auto-da-fe', but he is exposed to all

types of distasteful things and to everyday persecutions.”⁷ However, this should also be built upon the basis that there is rule of law to guarantee that such “distasteful things and everyday persecutions” are only undertaken within the bounds of due procedure.

There are always cases where the ruling party or some political forces believe there’s freedom of speech only when you say “the right thing,” – of course, the criteria for being “right” or “wrong” is defined by them. In fact the contrary should stand true, because there is freedom of speech only when people are allowed to say something different, something “wrong”. There is grave danger in the former case. Once freedom of speech is lost, other human rights are likely to be jeopardised, and even the rights of those who impede freedom of speech could face harm to themselves. If history does teach us something, it’s that errors should be corrected with constant reflection and scrutiny. Otherwise, history does repeat itself.

Two tragic examples from China should serve as a reminder of how the loss of freedom of speech could, and would, lead to grave atrocities. The first one is The Great Famine of 1958-1961 when over 36 million people died.⁸ The institutional factors such as “food stamps” and the biased arrangement for rural residents led to the immense death toll.⁹ But what’s more worrying is the absence of this tragedy in historical rhetorics today. Any mention of this tragedy is still banned in the public sphere because the current administration of China refuses to distance itself from its predecessor.¹⁰ The result has been the accumulation of lies in order to cover it up and wipe it from the media. Another example concerns the widely-known and exhaustively researched Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), ten years of anarchy, ten years of chaos, ten years of friends and family turning against each other. Reflection on this tragedy is also censored and often erased from the media for very obvious reasons. Chinese intellectuals worry that in a few years’ time, the younger generation may forget what dictatorship has done to this country, and the errors of the past may occur again.”¹¹

These two examples serve as an illustration of how important freedom of speech was back then, and is at present.

Helping the Government to be Right

In those countries where the meaning of democracy and republicanism is constantly the subject of debate to such an extent that they become watchwords for publicity purposes, the lack of supervision by the media has nurtured a mentality amongst the general public that the government is always right. The blind faith, first in public ownership and communism in the 1960s, and later in the effectiveness of government intervention, have led countries like China to create bigger gaps between different walks of life.

If the government, “even in its best state, is but a necessary evil”,¹² what really matters, then, is how to help it, push it, and sometimes coerce it into doing the right thing and staying on the right track. This is the case in most democratic countries where various channels, from the most benevolent form of media supervision to the most violent form of protests and demonstrations, are effectively influencing the decision making process and bridging the stances and opinions of the government and the people. If such channels are blocked, communication between the government and the people is cut off. The consequences are as telling as those troubled years in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s.

A good government should be, first and foremost, an informed government. Those who run the government, either professional politicians, civil servants, or bureaucrats, should be informed about the outcome and feedback of their policies. This is the first step towards solving any problems, or mitigating any issue arising from exacerbation. And freedom of speech is the best way to achieve it.

In the case of a bad government capable of measures aimed at silencing its aides we have, of course, seen too many ill-advised actions, such as blocking the key channels of information,¹³ arresting those who dare to expose the truth,¹⁴ and directly interfere with the integrity of the mass media.¹⁵

Freedom of speech, therefore, guarantees the communication between those governing and the governed in the most utilitarian sense. The free expression of the people informs the government of their opinions on certain issues, thus sparing the government the need to mull over the public’s reaction to a certain policy. On the other hand, without such articulation of the people’s opinions, even policies of great importance are revoked by the public.

How to Realise Freedom of Speech

Dr. Tom Palmer writes, “True freedom is not merely to say ‘whatever just came to our lips.’ True freedom is to be unimpeded, not in our pursuit of the truth, or of happiness, or of virtue, but in its attainment.” It illustrates how freedom of speech is an end in itself as well as a means to either truth, happiness, or virtue.

As we properly understand freedom of speech, we are able to create the means to realise it. Ideas have power: to champion the dissemination of ideas is to champion freedom of speech. That’s why I find value in the job I do as a fledgeling economist, as a researcher, and as an ordinary citizen. Through the research we do, the reports we put on our websites, thereby providing public access to everybody, and by holding events such as seminars and forums, ideas of freedom prevail. And, sooner or later, such ideas will come across and shape the awareness of the public that will take action against the constraints imposed on freedom of speech.

The importance and proper role of the news media is to provide a platform for different perspectives. It is these different voices that constitute a more comprehensive understanding of certain events and trends. If there is nothing but unanimous opinion, or only one mainstream voice, then we should be warned that there is a danger of slipping into illusion and falsehood.

As spokesperson for the public, news media shoulder an important responsibility to keep the public informed, to supervise the government, and to sound the alarm before danger. As the celebrated Fourth Estate¹⁶, news media has a mission to maintain its independence from tyranny, from political threats and blackmail, and from coercion to comply with the government.

However, I regret to see that self-censorship has expanded from authoritarian countries to democratic ones alike. The media only used to be checked by governments in countries like China, the Philippines, and other southeast Asian countries, but now it is under constraint even in Turkey and the US. A movie called “Spotlight” reveals how fragile freedom of speech is.¹⁷ Freedom of speech stands alone, while there are many forces that try to hinder it, such as political forces, economic forces, and religious forces.

In order to defend freedom of speech, caution should also be exercised with regard to such terms as “safe-spaces” and “trigger-warnings”.¹⁸ If certain areas can be singled out to be excluded from discussion and de-

bate, then it can be expected that such areas will increase in number. Even if this situation does not go to extremes and deprive us of our rights to express ourselves freely, the bondages imposed on freedom of speech only end up becoming heavier and suffocating free souls who wish to articulate their ideas. If an unexamined life is not worth living, then how can we be sure an unexamined idea is good and worth believing? Debate, therefore, is the only way to find out.

In order to realise freedom of speech, especially in those countries where the authorities have a tight grip on the media space, the fight begins with speaking the truth. “Calling a spade a spade” is the recognition of the situation, whether this be the rage against political manipulation, misinformation, or air-pollution or loopholes in the legal system. A basic education of the people is enough to create such a culture where everyone holds truth and honesty as the best virtue. When enough of the people begin to speak only the truth and spread opinions based on solid facts, it is difficult for any political force to ignore it. That’s when freedom of speech takes hold and expands.

Today, the EU is faced with multiple challenges, and it is impossible to count on governments alone to solve all the problems. The European people must be advised and informed that once and for all, it is not the liberal values that caused the problems, rather it is the liberal values that provide a remedy. History has proved that liberal values are a remedy to the madness caused by misleading ideas, and malicious schools of thought. I think it is about time to restate liberal values and uphold freedom as a way out of the current crises. And to do that, freedom of speech is key.

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Footnotes:

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