

Exploring the Impracticability of Press Freedom during a Political Transition

Emmanuel Duh, University of Antwerpen, Belgium

Abstract

This article examines the conceptual approaches to press freedom and delineates the impracticability of both the Western libertarian and development models in post-communist Eastern Europe and democratic evolving Third World societies such as those in Africa, where the *ubuntu* approach is embraced by many of the countries. The article explores the impracticability of the Western libertarian model of press freedom that emphasizes on the absence of government intervention in a media system. In situations where such interventions exists, as is the case with the development and *ubuntu* models; I examine how these ideologies are unrealistic in either promoting press freedom or the development goals, which they aim to achieve. The article argues that press freedom in its real sense is impracticable to be achieved anywhere in the world because of some unaddressed lapses under different contexts and circumstances in its theories.

Keywords: Press freedom, Ubuntu, libertarian models, development models

Introduction

It is commonplace for different societies to conceive the notion of press freedom in ways that bodes well with their socio-economic, political and cultural realities. This diversity of perceptions has triggered a multitude of definitions of press freedom; thereby making it difficult and impracticable for a realistic perception of press freedom to be instituted in many countries undergoing political transition. Even in some Western societies, there are disparities in the conceptual approach to press freedom, most commonly on the issue of the role of the government.

Many communication scholars examine the concept of press freedom more on the relationship between the government and mass media. On this basis, the definition of press freedom often tilts towards the libertarian ideology involving the absence of government intervention and control. This article establishes itself within the scholarly debate of the controversies of instituting a common and practicable approach to press freedom that meets the socioeconomic, cultural and political realities of each society. It also argues that some forms of government intervention are required to contain the excesses of a market-oriented liberal press system in societies undergoing political transition. It harps on the fact that freedom cannot be absolute in becoming an end in itself, but rather a means in achieving other goals of a society such as economic, political and cultural development. Consequently, government interventions depend on the diversities and peculiarities of a society. In many Third World transition countries of Africa, the governments do not offer an enabling condition to accommodate the libertarian model of a free press. This is exemplified by the conceptualization of the *ubuntu* model used alongside the development theory to define the meaning and approach to press freedom. These models, like the libertarian approach are not without complexities, thus this article offers new insights on its challenges and weaknesses in allowing for press freedom. It argues the fact that there is no befitting model of press freedom not saddled by various conditions.

In this article, I present the libertarian model of press freedom enshrined in the four theories of the press by Schramm et al., (1956) and trace the collapse of the socialist ideology and acceptance of the liberal market oriented model in many of the former communist societies such of Central and Eastern Europe. I also discuss the media system in Third World societies of Africa by examining the development and *ubuntu* models that impact on the levels of press

freedom. It is my purpose to highlight the impracticability of these conceptual approaches in allowing for an independent and objective press.

The article is structured as follows; after giving an overview of the complexities associated with the definition of press freedom, I review the basis of the theoretical models that patterns its direction and understanding. Next, I provide the challenges affecting press freedom in Western and Third World societies. Finally, I conclude that the notion of press freedom is ideological and its achievement in the real sense is an illusion.

Concept of Press Freedom

Press freedom is a topical issue of great relevance not only to private individuals and the media industry, but also to governments in their efforts to achieve a democratic society. A free press plays a critical role in informing electorates and serving as a check on government's activity, as well as giving meaning to public opinion. It provides a framework for public authorities to be held accountable and as a means for citizens to freely express and exchange their views on public issues. Conceivably, freedom of the press and of expression constitute the foundation on which a democratic system is built (Hardy, 2008:80)

Despite the relevance of press freedom in a country's democratization process, its definition and applicability is shrouded in controversies and disagreements. Amidst these discrepancies, the practice of press freedom worldwide is closely monitored by several organizations such as Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, International Research and Exchanges Board and Committee to Protect Journalists. In measuring press freedom worldwide, these organizations assess the effects of the legal, political and economic conditions on media development and security of journalists.

What is seemingly intriguing is the extent of the validity of the measurements of a concept whose definition means different things to different people, especially among communication scholars from varying cultural backgrounds. Such diversities in perceptions are also manifested in different societies and circumstances, which in their distinctive rights influence the meaning and notion of press freedom. This is evidently glaring in most Third World societies of Africa which have sought to differ from the Western liberal ideology by conceiving their own models based on the ideology of "interventionism and cultural

essentialism” within which the theories of *ujamaa*, *ubuntu* and oral discourse journalism models (Skjerdal, 2012) are founded. Interventionism ascribes to the need for journalism to contribute to change in society, while cultural essentialism advocates for a journalism model that reflects the values and essence of society as embedded in its tradition (Skjerdal, 2012: 637).

Ubuntu journalism is an African model of media practice based on “Afrocentric” values. It is deeply rooted within the context of “Afriethics” and draws on the significance of the community as the basis of its focus, though it advocates for a journalism practice that supersedes community journalism (Skjerdal 2012:644). Morphologically, “Ubuntu” refers to “respect for any human being, for human dignity and for human life, collective sharedness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, communalism” (Kwamwangamlu, 1999). The word *ubuntu* is derived from the Zulu maxim, “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, signifying that “a person is a person through other persons” or “I am because of others” (Fourie, 2007:210). In some African societies, this interpretation is given an even wider meaning to the effect that a person is a reflection of his or her community. Its centerpiece is partnership, negotiation, acceptance and tolerance. In the media context, the *ubuntu* ideology depicts freedom of expression in terms of freedom of the community to express and debate its opinions and views. Freedom is perceived on the basis of how a community, rather than an individual is affected. Unlike the Western libertarian ideology, *ubuntu* transcends individual rights by focusing on the shared values and collective participation in a community. Contrarily, the Western libertarian ideology emphasizes on freedom of an individual from interference by others. The *ubuntu* ideology of journalism is based on shared community responsibility and this underpins a major difference in the conceptual approaches to press freedom between the Western and African societies.

This global division and distinction of media systems in different societies of the world could be traced in the 1950s, following the idealization of the four theories of the press (Siebert et al., 1956), which divided the press systems into three parts: the Western free world of liberal democracy (characterized by both libertarian and social responsibility models); the “Soviet-totalitarian” Socialist society (which in the contemporary sense has phased out) and the authoritarian model of Third World societies. Generally speaking, the notion of press freedom is widely understood and translated based on the libertarian theory by Siebert et al

(1956), and constitutes the underlying basis on which several other definitions, particularly by Western scholars are crafted. The theory characterizes press freedom in terms of absence of government's intervention, media independence and access of the public. It defines press freedom as "a free flow of information unimpeded by any intervention by any nation" (Hachten 1999:21). The theory draws on the importance of the market in resolving and determining the mechanisms through which media freedom can take place. In specific terms, a typical market oriented Western definition of press freedom refers to "the right to speak, broadcast or publish without prior restraint by or permission of the government, but with limited legal accountability after publication for violations of law" (Stevenson, 2004:68). This depiction of press freedom is fundamentally against government's restriction of any form, and is in stark contrast to the perceptions held by most Third World societies which embraces some forms of government control.

Based on the aspect of government control, there is evidently a dichotomy between the conceptual approach to press freedom in the West and that of non-Western societies. The market dictated press system tends to bode well in Western societies because it is generally an important element of the capitalist or *laissez-faire* type economies. In the real world, this hypothesis is untenable and flawed because of growing government's intervention and control. A press system that is solely dependent on the market without any form of direct control runs the risk of plunging a country's media system into a chaotic competition among private owners for greater profit maximization, and often results in less emphasis being placed on social responsibility. Under this system, freedom of expression in the media is restricted to the wealthy class who can afford to pay the price. As a result, it could be conceded that the liberal theory of the media is "conceptually flawed and that their objectives cannot be realized through a free market programme" (Curran, 2002:232).

Apparently, it can be argued that government intervention either through the creation of public media or controlling the profit motive of media owners is important in freeing the media system by providing access to a wider section of a country's population and encouraging greater expression of views and opinions. In this case, there is a manifest unrealism of the postulations of press freedom as advanced by Weaver (1977) who conceives of press freedom as the relative absence of governmental and nongovernmental restrictions on the media, and that of Piccard (1985) who subscribes to lack of legal controls in his

definition of press freedom. The definitions by Weaver and Piccard are not only unrealistic and impracticable in Third World societies marked by fragile economic and democratic institutions, but are contrasted by the postulation of Rozumoliwicz (2000) who underpins the basis of press freedom as requiring both control and access maintained by legal institutional, socioeconomic and cultural factors. The liberal market oriented model of press freedom is also debunked by Feldman (1993:585) who argues that “political liberalism requires a degree of control over the operation of markets in order to protect liberal values against market-expressed preferences”.

Conceivably, submission to the legal status-quo, socio-economic, political and cultural affinities are dimensions that underpin the perception of press freedom, especially in most Third World societies such as those of Africa and the emerging post communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. In these societies, the media are subjected to being partners in achieving the economic and development goals of government. This approach to how the media are used broadly corresponds to Hachten (1987) definition of press freedom who maintains that the media should play a role in nation-building, economic development, poverty and illiteracy alleviation. As a result, the relationship between government and the mass media constitute a major dimension in determining the barriers affecting press freedom in transition countries.

In several of the post communist Eastern and Central European countries, there exists widespread government control of the press, which in extreme circumstances is translated into authoritarianism. Examples of these countries are Hungary, Macedonia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which according to Freedom House 2011 index are rated as having a press system that is “not free” (Freedom House, 2011). In many transition societies, there are laws that define the frameworks of media operation that cannot be circumvented under the guise of press freedom. This explains the ensuing debates and requests among journalists and legal experts for an explicit demarcation between the point where the right of a free press ends and those of legal prerogatives begin. This complexity of sorting out the status-quo of press freedom in different societies is underscored by McQuail (1987:114) who noted;

The question of whether a free media is an end in itself, a means to an end, or an absolute right has never been settled. Once freedom is abused, it is no longer

freedom and should be restricted. Absolute freedom is in fact anarchy. Libertarian societies therefore all more or less agree with Mill's contention that the freedom of the individual is defined-and thus constrained-by the freedom of other individuals.

In most cases as is the situation in many Third World societies, determining the border -line where the legal imperatives end and that of press freedom begins is a daunting task. The obvious outcome has often been that the law supersedes the practice of press freedom. This is exemplified by legal systems, which criminalize press activities that infringe on the privacy and integrity of individuals or national security. In such instances, most governments are quick to hold a media organization accountable for violations of the law.

The dimension of social responsibility in allowing for the existence of press freedom has often been a challenging issue. The social responsibility theory effectively blunts the ideology of a press system devoid of interference. It assigns to the press the obligation of social responsibility in the dissemination of information, which if not discharged; someone has to be empowered to enforce its abidance. It underpins the need for media freedom to be matched by a corresponding obligation to serve the public good. Compliance with these obligations is ensured through self regulation or public interference. In this sense, the social responsibility theory transcends the values of market competition by incorporating some degree of control by public authorities and other institutional entities. It challenges the aspects of absence of government control and censorship in instituting press freedom. This requirement for the press to be responsible to society in empowering citizens broadly corresponds to the perception of John Merrill, who conceives a responsible press as one not ducked in the ideology of libertarianism, but is rather responsible to society. His observation is based on the paradigm shift that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century in which he pointed out that “the shift is basically from the press to the people (or to national rulers)-from press libertarianism to press responsibility” (Merrill, cited in Voltmer 2006:45)

Despite the enshrinement of freedom of expression in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its applicability in Third World societies has often been ignored. The Article stipulates 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 regardless of frontiers” (Article 19, UDHR).The

enshrinement of a provision on press freedom in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights has so far not triggered the level of international press freedom expected because there are no legally binding mechanisms that guarantee its implementation. Many transition countries that are signatories to the declaration have often defaulted in implementing the requirements of press freedom.

Conceptual Approach to Press Freedom in Capitalist Western Societies

In many stable Western democratic societies, the libertarian ideology of press freedom based on market forces is deeply entrenched. Western societies such as Britain and the United States exemplify some degree of press freedom and the media play a major role in educating the public on their rights in a democracy. Individuals are free to own media outlets and to publish and debate their views without fear of harassment or interference. As Oloyede (2005) points out, such individuals enjoy the right to protect their source of information within the limits of the criminal law. However, the prevailing right of freedom is conditioned by the regulation of “self-righting process of truth” in “free market place of ideas “with the courts being the guarantor of “fair-play”(as obtained under libertarianism and community opinion), action and professional ethics (as required by the social responsibility concept). The general principles that characterize press freedom in the stable Western democratic societies are; restraint on government interference with the press in the form of censorship, though in some limited circumstances, this could take place (Nam, 1983), restrictions on press freedom are subject to review and imposition by the courts (Wei, cited in Oloyede 2005:105) and private individuals are guaranteed the right to own print media outlets and a considerable proportion of private broadcast media.

Impracticability of the Libertarian Western Model

In Western societies undergoing political transition such as those of post-communist Europe, the practice of press freedom is subjected to several challenges. There exists the challenge of reorganizing the media system that allows for press freedom without government intervention. This is evidenced in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland and Romania where concentration of media ownership is commonplace. This is the case with the public television service that is largely influenced by government interference (Czepek et al, 2009:14). Besides government influence; commercial goals are driving concentration of media ownership much at the expense of democratic goals and values. For example, the

Dichand group in Austria has taken over several newspapers in Eastern Europe. In many of the Baltic States, several of the newspapers have also been taken over, thereby resulting in the creation of more concentrated media ownership arising because of lack of adequate finances caused by the small size of the market. This poses severe challenges to press freedom.

The impracticability of press freedom is not only restricted to transition counties in Eastern Europe, but also those witnessing a stable democracy. In Germany, for example, Czepek et al (2009) explore cases where email communication activities of journalists are monitored both by the state secret service and private companies. In France, the independence of journalists is highly questionable because of the direct and indirect influence of the state on media activities. For example, journalists in the French media are required to have a “Carte de Presse” and to be officially registered in order to operate in the country. In other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, anti-terrorism measures have given rise to increasing state monitoring and regulation of the press. It is such interferences that Czepek et al (2009:10) characterize as “new challenges to the European media, their autonomy and their capabilities in providing a platform for free, pluralistic exchange”.

Even in the United States which purports to represent a classical liberal democratic society, the autonomy of the press is compromised by the influence and powers of large private media owners. Peterson (1978) aptly points out the short-comings of the American media by submitting that:

.....the mass media are not really autonomous but are adjuncts of other orders. Looking back through history, one sees how various dominant institutions, unwittingly or by conscious design, have used the media to maintain and strengthen their power. So it was when the church used the printing press to reinforce and extend its influence. So it was when the crown held the press of England in thrall. So it is today in.....[the socialist states] where the mass media are an adjunct of the political order, or in the United States where they are adjunct of the industrial.

Concentration of media ownership is increasingly becoming well-entrenched in Western societies created by the US-spearheaded worldwide promotion of free-market philosophy

(Gunaratne 2002:348). The 21st century has brought in its wake the domination of the global media market by a few large media conglomerates such as AOL Time Warner (CNN), AT & T Broadband, Disney (ABC), General Electric (NBC), News Corp (Fox TV), Sony (Columbia pictures), Viacom (CBS) and Vivendi-Universal. These media corporations exert a domineering influence on several aspects of the mass media; newspapers, radio, broadcast television, cable systems and programming, movies, music recordings, video cassettes and online services. This mode of practice in media ownership and influence has shifted the focus of freedom of the press from individuals to media conglomerates.

A relative challenge to press freedom in several European countries arises from subsidies provided by the governments to the press, thereby allowing for state interference with the media system. This is evidenced in Finland, Romania and Austria where the various governments provide subsidies to bolster the activities of the press. Generally, the approach by the EU to subsidize markets in Europe affects the competitiveness of small media markets in some European countries, while encouraging larger multi-national media enterprises.

Even in the more democratic Western European societies such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland and Austria, there exists a strong public service approach to media policies that impact on a free press. Apparently, the notion of press freedom in much of Europe is more idealistic than realistic in its practicability.

Collapse of Socialist Media System Model and Extension of the Libertarian Market-Oriented Approach

Before its demise, the socialist model of media system, as was idealized in the Soviet Union, China, and the former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe emphasized on greater state control of the press as basis to achieve rational and collective benefits for the population. The press was required to play the role of building a strong society by putting in place a mechanism for socialization, informal social control and mobilization that allowed for planned social and economic goals. A socialist individual or journalist perceived freedom of the press as freedom from class (bourgeoisie) domination and control and freedom to access the media in promoting unity (Okunna 1990). The socialist ideology was inimical to profit maximization and media organizations were required to subject themselves to the ultimate control of the organs of the states and other political institutions (McQuail 1987). In line with

the Soviet media theory, the working class otherwise referred to as the “proletarian” maintained power over all the means of “mental production”. This implied that the media had to subject themselves under the control of the working class, which was mainly the communist party. The press was restrained from indulging in political conflicts that arose from class division since socialist societies were considered to be classless in nature and not subjected to conflict of interests.

The collapse of the socialist model of media system came in the wake of the end of the cold war, and was largely precipitated by the policy of *Glasnost* propagated by Russia’s former president, Mikhail Gorbachev. He was an ambitious president with reforming ideologies and saw the rapid changing global media environment as a threat to the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of the Soviet Union, which at the time was witnessing a declining economic situation. Gorbachev conceded that the socialist ideology was no longer relevant in keeping pace with the rapid changing global economic and communication technologies (McNair 2000:80).

Faced with the growing turn of events globally, Gorbachev vigorously confronted the sweeping upheavals in the global economic and media environment by adopting the policy of *glasnost* involving the use of the media to enforce changes in the socialist values based on progressive political and socioeconomic dimensions. He aspired to bring into existence a degree of pluralism and dynamism in the Soviet society (McNair, 2000:81). Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy marked the revolutionary collapse of the Soviet state and a replacement with an economic and political system that was fashioned in the like of the free-market capitalism. This led to the birth of the Russian capitalist society and a media system based on free market capitalism. It also signaled the end of the cold war and collapse of the socialist ideology of media system in several communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s. The collapse of communism gave impetus to the fact that the free market ideology of the libertarian model was the only available option of organizing a society. It meant that governments that were organized on state-ownership of the economy had failed, while those based on capitalist principles had blossom. As a result, the market became the parameter in determining freedom of choice.

Impracticability of the Defunct Socialist Model of Press Freedom

The socialist model of press freedom was doomed to fail right at its outset for several reasons. The model operated without a clearly established theoretical framework, despite its reference to Lenin, its propagator. This shortcoming is clearly contextualized by Spark (2000:37) who argues that there was never a “Leninist theory of the press”. This implies that much of the ideology that influenced the practice of the socialist media system was based on a tactical response to Lenin’s writings and perspectives. This represented an unstructured governance pattern that was not scientifically tested and proven; hence it was bound to be contradictory. This explains why in some instances, as was the case in the former Soviet Union, press freedom was encouraged and enshrined in the constitution, but was contradicted by the rejection of media autonomy. Lenin’s view of press freedom justified the aspects of a rigidly centralized, controlled and politicized media that was obliged to be subservient to the country’s party leadership.

The “Soviet Communist theory of the press” on which the media systems in socialist societies were fashioned was far from conforming to reality. The political events that unfolded in much of the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1980s exemplified the weaknesses and impracticability of the Socialist ideology of press freedom. The political events revealed that not all communist countries adopted the socialist media system ideology and this underscored the lack of cohesion in achieving a universally recognized approach. For example, Gross (1996) observes that the Romanian media system was in the 1980s a replica of that postulated by Schramm (Gross, cited in Sparks 2000:38). In another case of defiance, the Polish media system had witnessed a series of changes and modifications dating back to the 1950s during which it pursued a path which was different from the Soviet communist proposition. In Hungary, Kovats and Tolgeysi (1990) report that the country’s media system had long embraced a process of liberalization that dates back to 1956. Several of the Central and Eastern European former communist states did not abide by the socialist model of media system. Some of them had embraced the Western media system. For example, the former East Germany exposed itself to TV signals of its neighboring country, the Federal Republic of Germany (Sparks 2000:38). It was the same scenario involving the importation of Western programmes. According to a report by MTV (1991:19), the former communist country of Hungary imported in 1986, 70 percent of its programmes from the West and the regime posed no resistance to the installation of Western satellites

(MTV, cited in Sparks 2000:39). Conceivably, the collapse of the socialist media system in many of the former Eastern and Central European communist countries had begun even before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, given the fragmentation of communist regimes that subsequently embraced the Western media system.

Transition from Socialist to Market-Oriented Media System: The Case of China

Since the early 1990s, there have been marked transitions from centralized socialism that involved severe state control and censorship of the press to a market-oriented profit maximization approach. Many of the initially subsidized and regulated press are now self-financing through sponsorship, subscription and advertising. Radio and television stations are widely established from advertising revenues accruing from partnership between local business investors and foreign media organizations (Sparks, 2000:3). Wide ranging press titles addressing various topics of public interest from computing to pornography are now published and aired on TV in many of the socialist societies.

In China, the government intensified the market oriented economic approach by extending it to the media system through the policy of “marketization”, based on the views of its revolutionary leader, Deng Xiaoping who said, “poverty is not socialism; to be rich is glorious” (Curran, 2002). The policy of “marketization” of media operations was designed to ensure the withdrawal of state subsidies to media owners and sought to encourage privately sourced revenues. Media operators in China embraced the “marketization” programme by relying on advertising revenue and this marked a significant transition from socialism to a considerable degree of Western liberal media system involving the independence and autonomy of the private media. This came in the wake of the government’s relaxation of control of private media and dissemination of non-political information, but maintained a tight grip in censoring political news.

On an even more transformational scale, the flow of revenue to private media organizations from commercial activities has ushered in new journalism practices and culture. The economic vitality of the country’s media organizations has prompted their freedom to hire the services of freelancers, increase their pay scales and introduce new technologies and organizational practices. These changes have led to wide scale decentralization and multiplication of media production processes. The market-induced transition in China’s

media landscape since the 1990s has encouraged greater freedom of expression than had been the case under the authoritarian rule of the country's past decades (Kit-Wai, 2000:26).

The transition of the Chinese media system from a socialist to a somewhat capitalist model is a major turn-around, but is not without some shortcomings, one of which is the fact that the process is not full-fledged in its dimension. In the Western liberal press model, the state has limited or no control over political information, while in China, party and other types of political information is severely censored, arising from the fact that the Chinese government is deeply involved in controlling the media dynamics of the country. The question arises as to the kind of media system China, like many other former socialist states practice, given that they are neither fully socialist nor Western capitalist in nature. It is somewhat a complex mix of aspects of the socialist ideology of state control and the Western approach of market orientation.

Conceptual Approach in Developing Societies

The press system in Third World societies such as in Africa and Asia are not broadly unique in their model because they basically take the coloration of those of the Capitalist West. Individuals are offered the right to express their views and opinions through the mass media, but the state simultaneously reserves the means to control and censor such media access. Historically, Post-independence Africa was confronted with three theoretical approaches to its media system; “revolutionary” or neo-communist, authoritarian and libertarian (Hachten, 1971:44). Under the neo-communist ideology, the press was subjected under direct government control and ownership as basis to achieve the government's interest and policies in a revolutionary dimension. This is illustrated by the views of former Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah who declared at the second conference of African Journalists in Accra in November 1963 that;

The truly African revolutionary press does not exist merely for the purpose of enriching its proprietors or entertaining the readers. It is an integral part of our society, with which its purposes are in consonance. Just as in the Capitalist countries, the press represents and carries out the purposes of capitalism, so in revolutionary Africa, our revolutionary African press must present and carry forward our revolutionary purpose:

this is to establish a fromwant and every form of injustice, enable them to work out their social and cultural destinies in peace and ease (Hachten 1971:44)

The revolutionary context in which many African leaders perceived the press was based on its crucial importance in fostering nation building and government policies. The media was not seen as an independent source of information and “watchdog” of government but as a collaborator and tool of the government, and in extreme cases, “of the political leadership” (Hachten,1971:45).Despite being contextualized within the neo-communist norm, the operation of the media systems in Africa was not related to any communist governments. It was mainly the rationale of direct state control of the media that identified the system as neo-communist.

In contrast to the communist approach to the media system in parts of Africa, other countries embraced aspects of the libertarian model involving the independence of the press from government in serving as a “watchdog” and to provide dependable and objective information about the nation to the public. The operation of a free press was impracticable because of the absence of a multi party political system, an enabling legal framework and private enterprising environment. During the post independence period of the 1960s and 70s,many African governments were skepticalof an independent press and were rather preoccupied with galvanizing all sectors of societyin achieving economic development. Consequently, not much room was allowed for a free and independent press that reflected the Western standard (Nam 1983:106).Nam, like many other communication scholars have been explicit in characterizing the path taken by most Third World countries in prioritizing their focus on socio-economic development and national integration. This stance of idealizing the priorities of economic development over press freedom is aptly shared by Altschull (1984) who posits that; “To the struggling, insecure nations of the advancing world [his preference for ‘developing’ or ‘Third World’], abstract principles of press freedom are less important than the viability of their nations”.

In situating the priorities of the press in Third World countries, Kenyan journalist and publisher, Hilary Ng’weno notes in graphical terms that;

The challenge to the press in young countries is the challenge of laying down the foundations upon which future freedoms will thrive..... [A]nyone who has lived or travelled widely in Africa, Asia or Latin America cannot fail to be appalled at the enormous amount of poverty, illiteracy and disease that are to be found everywhere. Under some of the conditions in which Asians, Africans and Latin Americans live, it will be sacrilegious to talk about press freedom, for freedom loses meaning when human survival is the only imperative principle on which a people lives (Ng'weno, cited in Oloyede 2005:106)

This depiction underlines the fact that presses freedom in Third World societies is based on the definition and values of development media/development journalism theory. The theory was propagated to accommodate the socio-economic, cultural and political exigencies of Third World societies, such as those in Africa. For example, the Pan-African News Agency (PANA) founded in 1979 was based on the ideology of development journalism (Ochs, cited in Skjerdal 2012:643). This is journalism that focuses on news designed for long-term development rather than day-to-day events. The ideology of the development theory considers the priorities of government as paramount and beyond and above individual freedom. This means that in Third World transition societies, journalists are conditioned to subject their freedoms for the benefit of achieving the development goals of societies they represent. The assumptions of the development theory as stated by McQuail (1987:119-123) recommends the need for the media to contribute productively to national development and that the state can restrict media freedom if it is at the expense of the development priorities of society.

The role of the media as partner in socio-economic and political development was expounded by Daniel Lerner who sought to establish how a modern communication system can assist in the transition from “tradition” to modernity. He underlined the importance of the media in informing people on issues beyond their village horizons and in enabling them to express their opinions on public affairs, thus underscoring the fact that “the connection between mass media and political democracy is especially close”(Lerner, 1963:342). A further theory, democratic participant theory was propounded to define media-government-public relationship, which according to Fourie (2007:191) came into being to preempt the deficiencies of corruption and misuse of power that characterize the traditional democratic

and free market societies. The development and democratic participant theory can best be understood within the context of the African conceived theory of “ubuntu”, which emphasizes on community participation, pursuit of shared values and economic development. The *ubuntu* theory depicts the role of the media in protecting and defending democratic values and moral literacy. It serves as a platform on which political authorities justify their argument on the responsibility of the media in promoting development policies of the government, rather than positioning themselves as watchdogs.

A further ideological boost to the coercive action on the media to be development oriented is underpinned by Skjerdal’s (2012:646) models of “interventionism and cultural essentialism”, in which he refers to “interventionism” as “the extent to which journalism should take a stand in socio-political issues and purposely work for change”, while “cultural essentialism” denotes the extent to which the media identifies with the intrinsic and traditional values of society. These models of “interventionism” and “cultural essentialism” is an extension of the argument that the media cannot afford to stay aloof from supporting government’s development priorities, hence the basis for a framework of media regulation for this goal to be achieved.

Generally, the freedom of individuals to express or publish their views in media organizations is encouraged; so far it does not compromise the development goals and priorities of the country. The rule of law, control and censorship by government becomes obvious when it is perceived that the higher development and security priorities of the state are circumvented. This action was vigorously defended by Jawaharlal Nehru, a protagonist of liberty in Third World countries, who recognized the need for states to be “armed with the authority to deal with” derogatory language and news content in the press.”We cannot”, he posited, “imperil the safety of the whole nation in the name of some fancied freedom which put an end to all freedom” (Altschulls 1984).Such recommended highhandednessfor the government under the guise of promoting the rule of law tends to be inimical to press freedom. In such an instance, it is not the absence, but the presence of government’s intervention that stifles press freedom. Since there is often a disproportionate level of political and legal interventions in the media systems by most governments of Third Worldsocieties, the prospect of achieving press freedom tends to be extinguished, particularly if the mode of governance is one of authoritarianism. Consequently, an unlimited and unmeasured government intervention in the

media system has an adverse effect of stifling press freedom as exemplified in much of Africa.

Impracticability of the Theoretical Approach in Third World Societies

The modernization development theory, which many Third World societies embraced was targeted to support government's activity to achieve socio-economic development and was inimical to freedom of expression. This is because it was not the sort of "modernization" that was instituted in "pro-Western" Third World countries. As Curran & Myung-Jin Park (2000:5) affirm, the media system in pro-Western Third World countries was instituted to exercise control and not to provide education on democracy. The modernization theory for Third World societies also had the weakness of not appropriately addressing the issue of plurality of media. This deficiency of the theory in addressing the peculiarities of press freedom and media pluralism was endorsed by Wilbur Schramm, an exponent of modernization theory who noted, "it is wrong to expect a country which is trying to gather together its resources and mobilize its population for a greater transitional effort to permit the same kind of free, competitive and sometimes confusing communication to which we have become accustomed in this country" (Schramm, cited in Curran & Park, 2000:5).

The development theory on which the policy decisions of most governments in Third World societies are based is anti-press freedom. The theory justifies government control of the press in the interest of fostering socio-economic and political development. This has often provided a pretext for clamp downs on press freedom. The focal ideology of the development theory involving the notions of "nation building" and "national development" within the context of a fragile economic environment as obtained in most Third World societies are often explored as basis to downplay the importance of press freedom. This is exemplified by the view of Ghana's former minister of information, Kofi Totobi Quakyi who declared in 1990 that, "What we need in Ghana today is a journalist who sees himself as a contributor to national development. This country does not need watchdogs" (cited in Eribo and Jong-Ebot, 1997: X). In such and other instances in much of Africa, there exists the problem of what the status of the media is when under state control and regulation.

In most cases, political authorities subvert the watchdog role of the press and deprive them of their freedom through direct and legal measures such as intimidation and harassment of

journalists. This phenomenon is aptly typified by Gabriel Baglo, Director of the African regional office of the International Federation of Journalists who observed, “criminal libel suits throughout sub Saharan Africa are used ruthlessly by governments seeking to break the back of the media and to place tremendous financial burdens on the independent press” (Baglo, 2008). He posits that “a single libel conviction can force a newspaper to stop publishing or go financially bankrupt”. Such a depressed media environment is commonplace in many sub-Saharan African countries most notably in Cameroon, Cote D’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Gambia and Sudan. In other instances, self-censorship arising from threats tends to be the order of the day among journalists. Editors are obliged to treat government related issues with maximum care and caution. In Nigeria, which some perceive as a beacon of hope in Africa’s level of media evolution, Kerina (1999) observes how the dictatorial government of the late military leader, Sani Abacha clamped down on press freedom by noting that;

The 139 year-old Nigerian press is the continent’s most prolific and vociferous, setting standards for media practitioners throughout the region. This decade, they met their match in the Abacha regime, which set new standards of abusive treatment of the press with tactics such as indefinite detentions without charge, secret trials by military tribunals, torture by police and state security agents, disappearances, office bombings and bans and seizures of publications.

In Cameroon, the government explores several strategies that adversely impact on press freedom. It uses direct political censorship by restricting the release of certain public information. In other circumstances, the government uses surveillance and control whose enforcement is carried out by security agents. This form of censorship helps to sustain the achievement of political censorship and is usually aimed at imposing state authority. Another form of government influence on the media is the use of ‘campaigns of disinformation’. This involves the use of media propaganda by politicians and is aimed at positioning the government in a positive light. More commonly used are news conferences in which government officials put a positive spin on its policies and activities. In its strictest sense, most of these practices do not constitute aspects of censorship, but are tactical measures through which the government influences the information journalists can access. These scenarios affirm the views of Kelly and Donway, who argue that any actions or

measures which target the media, despite its desirability are unacceptable if it is “at the cost of the watchdog function”. They go further to underscore the fact that “a press that is licensed, franchised or regulated is subject to political pressures when it deals with issues affecting the interests of those in power” (Kelly & Donway 1990:97).

Evidently, when the press sacrifices its watchdog status, it tends to hide the truth about the misgivings and atrocities of government authorities and this keeps the public uninformed and unable to express its opinions on public issues. In some cases, media organizations are lured to give up their watchdog role in return for cash-gifts (bribes) from political authorities as a means of influencing their news coverage and reports. This is common in Cameroon where journalists go after politicians and vice-versa for financial inducements or bribes, a practice often termed as “gombo”. In this case, journalists forge collusive ties with politicians in return for bribes to manipulate political information. Another form of collusive ties is the recruitment of journalists by government authorities as political bureaucrats. For example, many African governments often assigned the post of minister for information and communication to journalists. Also, it is common to find journalist serving as information officials in foreign missions, government spokespersons and presidential and prime-ministers’ secretaries. More revealing of the collusive ties between the media and government is the increasing accession of journalists as lawmakers in national parliaments. Many of these political appointments and positions to journalists are often a compensatory measure for their collusive ties with government. This practice stifles the dissemination of truth, which is an important aspect of press freedom.

The policy requirement of many Third World governments for a “responsible approach to journalism” in which media organizations are required to abide by the standard of “constructive criticism” is an ostensible tactic of abating and suppressing press freedom. A glaring example was the case in Zambia where the then foreign affairs minister, Simon Kapwepwe imposed a check on press freedom by observing that “my government upholds the freedom of the press but I would add a quantification.....the editorial columns of our newspapers.....should be constructive and responsible” (Wilcox, cited in Banda 2007:73). Such political expression is eloquent justification of intolerance to press freedom. This form of intolerance is similar to that manifested by the government of former Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, who despite his struggles against the colonial government for

press freedom despised its practice upon becoming the country's president as illustrated by his aide, Hofi Baako who conceded;

The Convention People's Party, whose platform is Nkrumah's socialism, will ensure.....freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and freedom of individual activity in public life. But it will not allow freedom to retard the growth of life. It will not allow freedom to destroy freedom. It will take such measures as are morally and politically appropriate to ensure national security under which alone, individual freedom is possible (Cited in Faringer, 1991:44)

Nkrumah's advocacy of press freedom was more of rhetoric than he could practically do. During his tenure as president of Ghana, the mass media were severely controlled and this became an institutionalized practice (Faringer 1991). The example of Bankole Timothy, editor of the *Graphic* who was deported in 1957 for inquiring "What's next, Kwame" in relation to the minted coins that bore Nkrumah's effigies is illustrative of his government's intolerance to a free press. A further defiant move was the expulsion in 1961 of two British journalists for reporting on the strikes by railway and port workers. The restrictive measures continued when Nkrumah subjected the broadcasting media under his personal control (Faringer 1991:45). His clamp down on a free press was legitimized by the introduction of a preventive detention act which criminalized anyone who defamed the president or subject him into "hatred; disrepute or contempt, orally, in writing or in print" (Faringer, 1991:46).

The ideology of "national unity" used by political authorities, especially those of most African countries in cozying up the media is controversial. Such ideological enunciations run the risk of impeding ethnic and cultural diversity, which are important pinnacles of media pluralism and freedom of expression.

The much trumpeted African theoretical framework of *ubuntu* and its enshrined emphasis on moral rectitude constitutes a fundamental deterrent to freedom of expression. Political authorities who thrive on dictatorial machinations misconstrue the moral philosophy of *ubuntu* by being intolerant to critical and opposing views. The *ubuntu's* ideology, which requires citizens to be morally upright and to share communal values in promoting development is exploited and interpreted by some African governments as an act of

submission to decisions and policies without any objections. Such seduced intolerance tantamount to a suppression of freedom of expression and of the press. In this sense, the *ubuntu* ideology is tainted by the need to define the context that allows for the existence of independent media, freedom of expression, provision of a diversity of content and choice. Also, *ubuntu* journalism is not completely devoid of some of the peculiarities of the Western libertarian model such as in its adherence to civic and public journalism. *Ubuntu* journalism appears to be a floating ideology of a media system since it is not explicit about the issue of media ownership, which is important in defining press freedom.

Generally, the complexity of establishing a universally acceptable notion of press freedom is accentuated by the imprecision of whether its practice is a human or moral right. Neither the Western approach nor that of Third World societies has been elaborate and specific about its clarification. Without the required precision, press freedom will always be an issue of choice rather than a legally binding obligation. Nonetheless, article 19 of the Universal Declaration of human Rights alludes to freedom of expression for individuals as human right and not of the press. This then raises the question of whose press freedom is it given the fact that the alternative outcome of moral right best relates to press freedom because of its lack of a universally established endorsable code, which leaves its implementation based on ethical values. These debatable questions of “human rights” and “moral rights” constitute some of the lingering exigencies not clearly conceived by the libertarian ideology of a free press. This explains why it is impracticable to institute a system of press freedom that could benefit every member of a society to the same extent and degree.

Conclusion

The practice of press freedom in ways that are acceptable to everyone is highly problematic. Evidently and given the disparities in its conceptual approach in different societies, it can be stated that the notion of press freedom is a highly ideological and impracticable to achieve. In this article, I have attempted to make the point that press freedom is not necessarily contingent on the absolute absence of government interference and control. In today's Capitalist world where the market determines the allocation of resources, the problem of concentration of ownership is fast becoming a major factor interfering with press freedom. It is such monopolistic practices in the media industry that spells the need for some form of government regulation and control. This argument does not negate the effects that might



occur from excessive government control, which may result to authoritarianism as evidenced in many Third World societies of Africa where there are often clampdowns on press freedom.

References

- Alstschull, J.H. (1984) *Agents of Power: The Role of the news media in human affairs*. New York, London: Longman
- Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accessed on April 20, 2012 from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>
- Baglo,G.(2008)The journalists working conditions in Africa. Paper issued on UNESCO world press freedom day. Accessed on 12/10/2012 from http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/WPFD2009/pdf/wpfd2008_Background+paper+Baglo.pdf
- Banda, F. (2007) *The Media in Africa*, in P.J.Fourie(ed), *Media Studies: History, Media and Society*. Cape Town: Juta & Co Ltd
- CliffsNotes.com.*The Structure of the Mass Media and Government Regulation*. Accessed on 27 September 2012 from http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/topicArticleId-65383,articleId-65497.html
- Curran, J. (2002) *Media and Power*. London: Routledge
- Curran, J & Park, M. (2000) Beyond globalization theory, in J.Curran & M.Park (eds) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Czepak, A., Hellwig, M., & Nowak, E. (2009) Press Freedom and Pluralism in Europe. Concepts and Conditions. *European Communication Research and Education Association*: 10-314
- Eribo, F & Jong-Ebot, W. (1997) Introduction, in F.Eribo and W, Jong-Ebot (eds) *Press Freedom and Communication in Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World press.
- Faringer, G. (1991) *Press freedom in Africa*. New York: Praeger
- Feldman, D. (1993) *Civil liberties and human rights in England and Wales*. Oxford: Clarendon press.
- Fourie, P.J. (2007) The role and functions of the media in society, in P.J.Fourie (ed) *Media Studies: History, Media and Society*. Cape Town: Juta & Co Ltd
- Freedom House; *Freedom of the Press 2012*.Accessed on 20 September 2012 from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Booklet%20for%20Website.pdf>
- Gunaratne, S.A. (2002) Freedom of the Press: A World System Perspective. *The International Journal for Communication Studies* 64 (4):343-369
- Hachten, W.A. (1999) *The World News Prism: Changing Media of International Communication*. Arnes: Iowa State University press.



- Hachten, W.A (1987) *The World News Prism: Changing Media, Clashing Ideology*. Ames: Iowa State
- Hachten, W.A. (1971) *Muffled Drums*. Ames: Iowa State University press
- Hardy, J. (2008) *Western Media Systems*. London: Routledge
- Hutchings Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) *A Free and Responsible Press*. The University of Chicago
<http://archive.org/stream/freeandresponsib029216mbp#page/n27/mode/2up> (accessed on July 25, 2012)
- Kelly, D & Donway, R. (1990) Liberalism in free speech, in J, Lichtenberg (ed), *Mass media and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University press.
- Kerina, K. (1999) Introduction. In CPJ Special Report. Accessed on 17/10/2012 from <http://www.cpj.org/attacks98/1998/Africa/NigeriaSR.html>
- Kit-Wai, M.E (2000) Rethinking media studies, in J.Curran & M.Park (eds) *De-Westernizing media studies*. London: Routledge
- Kwamwangamalu, N.M (1999) *Ubuntu in South Africa: A Sociolinguistic perspective to a pan-African concept*. Accessed on 10/10/2012 from <http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=237892375&DB=p>
- Lerner, D. (1963) “Toward a communication theory of modernization” in L’Pye (ed) *Communications and Political Development*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University press
- MacBride, S., et al. (1980) *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society, Today and Tomorrow*. Paris: UNESCO
- McQuail, D. (1987) *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. London: Sage Publications
- McNair, B. (2000) Power, Profit, Corruption and Lies, in J.Curran & M.Park (eds) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Nam, S. (1983) “Press Freedom in the Third World”(pp 311-321) in L. Martin and A. Chaudhary (eds), *Comparative Mass Media Systems*. New York: Longman
- Nerone, J.C. (1995) *Last Rights: Revisiting Four Theories of the Press*. Accessed on 29/07/2012 from http://books.google.be/books?id=VtclooATFawC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false

- Nossek, H & Rinnawi, K. (2003) Censorship and Freedom of the Press under Changing Political Regimes. *The International Journal for Communication Studies*, 65(2):183-202
- Nyamnjoh, F.B. (1990) How to “Kill” an underdeveloped press: Lessons from Cameroon. *Gazette*, 46, 57-75.
- Oloyede, B. (2005) “Press Freedom: A Conceptual Analysis”. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 11(2):101-109
- Okunna, C.S. (1990) “Freedom of the Press in the Third World: Freedom for Whom?” *Nigerian Journal of Mass Communication*, 1(1):140-149
- Rao, S & Wasserman, H. (2007) Global media ethics revisited. A postcolonial critique. *Global Media and Communication*, 3(1):29-50
- Rozumilowicz, B. (2002) Democratic Change. A theoretical Perspective, in M.E Price, B.Rozumilowicz & S.G Verhulst (eds), *Media Reform: Democratizing the State*. New York: Routledge.
- Siebert, F, Pieterse, T & Schramm, W.(1956) *Four Theories of the Press. The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Skjerdal, T.S.(2012) The three alternative journalism of Africa. *The International Communication Gazette*, 74(7) 636-654 .
- Sparks, C. (2000) Media theory after the fall of European communism, J.Curran & M.Park (eds) *De-Westernizing media studies*. London: Routledge
- Stevenson, R.L (2004) Freedom of the press around the world, in J.C Merrill and S.Arnold (eds), *Global Journalism: Topical issues and media systems*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon
- The American Spectator (2010) *A Free Press means Free from Government control*, accessed on September 20, 2012 from <http://spectator.org/archives/2010/10/04/a-free-press-means-free-from-g>
- Weaver, D. (1977) “The Press and Government Restrictions: A Cross National Study over Time”. *International Communication Gazette* 23:152-170
- Voltmer, K. (2006) *Mass media and political communication in New Democracies*. Oxon: Routledge