

# Power and the Monopoly of Information

PHILIP E. CONVERSE  
*The University of Michigan*

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The links between power and information are numerous and, for the most part, very obvious. I shall not apologize for returning to the obvious at many points in my remarks, on the grounds that at least a few things that are obvious are also deadly important and deserving of repetition from time to time.

It was about a generation ago that both constructs—power and information—became prize targets for more formal definition and measurement. Indeed, it is a charming coincidence that the publication of Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), dealing with power and information, coincided exactly with the watershed study by Shannon and Weaver (1949) on the measurement of information and the "mathematical theory of communication." The impact of such measurement has been enormous and continues to grow. Regrettably, however, this form of measurement will be of relatively little use to us here, because its bite is lost in open systems. That is to say, the lanterns in the steeple can convey to the knowledgeable one crucial bit of information—whether the British are coming by land or by sea—but they do not mean much unless the viewer is already apprised that this is a special communication device and knows in advance the full code of potential alternatives. We shall be operating in more open systems, where these helpful constraints are missing.

The numerous attempts from the same period to formalize the treatment of power will be no more helpful, even though most competing definitions of "the power of A over B" did have a similar ring about them, suggesting substantial convergence. We can, however, use one part of that literature to say what we are *not* talking about. Scholars have frequently differentiated among the various bases on which power may rest, and one base that customarily emerges on such lists is expertise. This is, of course, a classic

point of intersection between information and power, and one whose implications have yet to be fully catalogued. This will not, however, be my focus here, although the same phenomena will lurk in the background. Instead, my attention is upon the flow in the opposite direction: the use of power, such as the power of the state, to control information in ways designed to maintain and enhance power. Censorship is what we usually call it, in the small. Writ larger, we talk on the positive side of the "freedom of the press," and larger still in this country, of "First Amendment freedoms."

We cannot expect here to address more than a corner of this large and troubling subject.<sup>1</sup> Discussions of First Amendment freedoms typically come to center upon the expression of opinion and most naturally on those opinions that are unsettling to a regime because they stand in some form of opposition to its policies or premises. I hardly question the importance of such matters. But my primary interest here will be less upon suppression of opinion than upon the suppression of the flow of information about what is going on in the political world of observers both common and uncommon: in short, the suppression of news.

I do not pretend that it is easy to distinguish what I would like to discuss as facts and incontrovertible events from opinions and interpretations, because of course a wide sea of gray lies between these ideal types. "Facts" shade rapidly into "factoids," and on to powerful embroideries of judgment and construction. But shades of gray cloud most First Amendment issues, whether we are asking where pornography begins or "clear and present danger" ends.

So let us take a common-sense view of facts versus opinions. It is likely that government censors do. For example, a revealed copy of the censorship guidelines used 10 years ago by the Polish government makes this distinction routinely. Quite naturally, pure attitudes, in the form of praise of things the regime disliked or criticisms of things it liked, were forbidden, and numerous in-

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At various stages I have profited from aid and suggestions from Kenneth A. Bollen, Ada Finifter, Fred Greenstein, Harold K. Jacobson, Seymour Martin Lipset, Mitchell A. Seligson, and William Zimmerman. Responsibility for flaws, however, rests with me.

<sup>1</sup>A panoramic view, covering the myriad challenges posed by the flood of new information technologies, is provided by de Sola Pool (1983).

stances are mentioned in detail. But at least an equal share of the required deletions refer to what is called instead "information," to be expunged although its factual accuracy is not challenged. The list of banned topics here is lengthy, and I can only give a glimpse of it. To be obliterated were references to the sheer "existence" of many things, ranging from noted people to detailed forms of trade between the Polish government and other countries. News was not to be conveyed about the actual building or rebuilding of churches, nor was any information about "anti-Semitic excesses." Likewise any hint of the political rights and liberties enjoyed by Polish emigrants in other countries was to be deleted as well as mention of donations they had made back to Poland. Various data compilations were forbidden, such as those that would permit accurate deductions concerning relative international currency values. Also to be deleted was information about industrial accidents, relative rates of occupational disease, and especially information about what were called "direct hazards to human life through the use of chemicals in agriculture" and elsewhere (Pastecka, 1978).

In truth, it will not matter greatly that I prefer to move into the discussion from the side of fact because much of what I have to say can cover both fact and opinion. However, some of the wonderments I shall express remain more compelling where facts are at issue. Hence I shall assume, for example, that there really was a Khrushchev speech before the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, even though it has yet to be reported to the Soviet public, and in that sense remains a complete nonevent. I shall also assume, and now with the retrospective agreement of all parties, the reality of the United States bombing of Cambodia in 1970, despite official efforts first to conceal the operation and then to deny its rumored existence, less for military security than from fear of public reaction. These events were real, whatever the state of reporting about them.

Now different vocational subcultures have different views of such questions, and it may be a characteristic of the political life to insist on blurring fact and opinion. Perhaps the most vexing triangle of subcultures in the social order is made up of religion, science, and politics. The great misunderstandings along each leg of this abominable triangle are notorious, and no few of these arise from different ways of viewing facts, opinions, and Truth. What distinguishes science is the presumption that there *is* some core Truth out there which, although never fully knowable, can be approached as a limit, on a staircase of facts. What distinguishes religion is that it is exactly the core Truth which *is* known, and from within any particular religion, the main problem is the

residual one of deducing the implications of the fixed core of Truth for practices of daily life.

When we come to politics, it must be admitted that the subculture of practicing politicians is not always esteemed for the ways in which it views facts and Truth. Harold Lasswell once put together a collage of quotations about politicians by nonpoliticians over the centuries. Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first century A.D., likened politicians and statesmen to ventriloquists and sorcerers, "men skilled in juggling . . . and tricks of all kinds," and talked of the varied web of political affairs where, "along with the 'smallest possible portion of truth,' falsehoods of every shade of plausibility are interwoven" (Lasswell, 1949). Although Philo may have suffered from an advanced case of political cynicism, his is a view that has echoed down the ages. Facts and Truth are simply viewed more conditionally in the political subculture than in the others, and the conditions are clear: they have to do in the obvious way with whether facts and Truth are agreeable to other ambitions or threaten them.

Nor is it hard to understand the pressures that generate these distinctive views. One is sheer vocational survival. Truth *must* follow function, which is the maintenance of power. At times these postures toward information have an innocuous face. We can admire the agility of the candidate in explaining why an election disaster was actually a triumph, or other forms of blarney and buncombe, especially when accompanied by a twinkling eye. It is said that one inalienable right of the politician is obfuscation, and it may indeed be a necessity.

But there is a darker face to this trifling with information, and it goes well beyond the fact that politicians do not understand why scientists hold raw information sacred, whereas scientists have trouble understanding that the main utility of information is for competitive advantage, be it military or commercial. Add some brute power up front, and we find ourselves moving in the most direct way toward the Orwellian nightmare. What Truth is, is what Headquarters says it is. And if expediency demands, down is up, hot is cold, and white is black.

Before we proceed to a broader canvas, let me add a fourth one to our triangle of subcultures. Undoubtedly the journalistic fraternity is tired of endlessly being counted as the postscript of the Fourth Estate. But it falls to that fraternity to explain the other subcultures to one another. Moreover, journalists from the free media have been at greater pains than anybody else to maintain professional distinctions between fact and opinion. They would prefer first to "tell it like it is," and comment editorially in a separate department. This effort at separation has never been a run-

away success, as I think most journalists would agree. On the other hand, it is hard to argue that there is anything unhealthy about the effort, and once past the first commandment of journalism that the truth not be dull, the views of reality within the Fourth Estate often seem to fit more comfortably with those of scientists than any other.

In politics with a free press, the routine tensions between government and press, once past the peculiar problems posed by wartime, need little detailing. For governments, the media are regularly thought to lack sufficient appreciation of the genius of the administration. They are also, in democracies at least, resented as having power out of all proportion to their nonelective status. How powerful the media actually are is a question that even third parties have not succeeded in defining very well.

We now have collected our main ingredients. With these ingredients in hand, it may be hard to see that there is any mystery whatever in this subject matter. Most Americans would, I suppose, consider the institution of a free press an excellent thing, so there is no particular normative issue to be settled. We might not all be willing to go as far as Thomas Jefferson's celebrated remark, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter" (Hulteng & Nelson, 1971, p. 2). Nonetheless, aside once again from the obvious limitations set by security in wartime, it is rather hard to think of appeals to higher values which could possibly underlie the routinized denial of a system of free media. After all, the free press doctrine is a modest one. It does not question the right of governments to broadcast their versions of the news or to justify their ways and good works to their citizens. The government enjoys all of the natural resources of the incumbency advantage, and this is not at all challenged. All that a free press doctrine says is that the power of the state should not be used to prevent other flows of information to its population on matters of public interest.

If there is no normative mystery whatever here, neither is there any motivational one. It is manifestly easier to govern without competing information flows. Still better than having the last word is having the only one. In a world where the only interest is government interest, and it is inconceivable that any citizen or grouping might depart from it even in small ways at the margin, then such prohibitions on media freedom are understandable if, by construction, quite unnecessary. Hence motivation is no mystery.

Finally, there is no capability mystery either. Governments anxious to prevent competing flows

of information typically have the power to do so and make it stick.

And yet, from this cascade of nonmysteries, I found myself plucking one residual mystery. I have already stated it in passing when I noted that it was hard to think of appeals to higher values which could possibly justify the use of force to prevent free media. In wartime, yes. Or if we are satisfied that might makes right, yes. But if there is anything else to be said, I found I could not recollect it.

I regarded even this bit of mystery with some doubt. After all, I am a child of my own political culture, with its great reverence for the Founding Fathers, the mania for checks and balances against absolutist government, and all the rest. I also am saturated with those scientific values that consider direct and unmediated contact with the raw information of reality something quite sacrosanct. Hence for me personal ignorance was as good a hypothesis for this mystery as any, and therefore I set out on a quest aimed at remedying my ignorance. In due time, my quest split into several subquests. The rest of my remarks are a report on these subquests, although most of them can be mercifully brief.

## II

My first quest lay toward the classics and history. By classics I mean simply those works that would appear on most lists of the 10 great books in the political philosophy section. These I had largely left untouched since reading them long ago, and it was an interesting exercise to dip back into them with such a sharp focus in mind, and one obviously independent of the reasons why any of these classics were composed or of the historical context that generated them.

I can describe this first quest briefly because it produced little answer to my question. Perhaps a more extensive search could uncover richer lodes than I found. One of the sharpest impressions I received is that in remarkable degree, the whole construct of information seems largely a twentieth-century notion. Plato did develop his celebrated metaphor of cave shadows, addressing the deterioration of information as it is reproduced, but he was dealing with a more general problem. Of course information pervades all of these classic texts by implication, but merely because it is to cognition as air is to breathing. It is scarcely isolated as an entity until studies of propaganda began in our century. I did not, for example, expect much ethical justification from Machiavelli, but I did think he would at least treat deformations of information as an explicit tool of statecraft. In a sense he does, but only as imbedded in

more overloaded concepts such as "flattery" or "fraud."

This relative silence, at least in the major texts I reviewed, may speak to fundamental changes in recent times in the whole macroprocess of information. In an earlier, less interdependent world, persons perhaps witnessed directly many of the events and trends most likely to effect the terms of their lives, and where direct witness did not occur, the means of diffusion, usually oral, were indeed diffuse. It is in the modern world that the events impinging most heavily in a political way upon a citizen's life occur remotely for most people most of the time; furthermore, media channels certainly provide a tempting sort of bottleneck which makes routine government intervention much more feasible than it once was.

The advent of the printing press provided one such handy bottleneck and invited government responses ranging from licensing to confiscation. Such acts helped to crystallize many issues about flows of information and generated a vigorous, if largely unanswered, protest literature. The fact that the Bible was being printed engaged the religious counterpart to the power/information nexus, the ancient question of direct access to the Truth by the rank and file or laity, as opposed to a doctrine that access must be mediated by certified ecclesiastics. Thus, information in sacred texts could in the latter view only be known as revealed by the priests, a proscription that is of course simply the religious version of the issue that is our subject here.

But the concern for direct access, expressed in this period by a whole succession of figures from Martin Luther to George Fox, was hardly new under the sun. You may be aware of the startling view of the early Christian world that scholars have been bringing into focus with the discovery of the trove of Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. We are all aware that the early centralized Roman Catholic church spent a great deal of time fighting off exotic heresies. What was less obvious was that these heresies were not always isolated challenges, but in part formed a semi-coherent alternative religious community that extended from Lyons in France to Ethiopia, with central norms favoring the direct access of the laity, as well as a participation in ritual so democratic that it even included women on an equal footing (Pagels, 1981). After several generations of hostile coexistence, the hierarchical church at last acquired the police power of the emperor and not only beat down its opponent but also, by outlawing possession of competing gospels, managed to root out most of the information that such a frightening community had ever existed. The Roman bishops were, to draw from Huntington

(1968), "so good at making governments." The Egyptian collection of illegal texts was buried in the sand in the nick of time.

All things considered, my historical quest had brought meager returns. It was clear that the issue was both ancient and central, but I was still without any considered statements justifying the use of power to cut off access to information by the governed. The closest approach, perhaps, was in church governance, where something approaching an appeal to higher principle or authority could be discerned. However, the principle here pivots on a diety and a vigorous appeal to pure faith, much as does the doctrine of the divine right of kings. These terms may be of great importance in theocracies, but did not much satisfy my more secular quest.

### III

Moving to the current period, we might first refresh our memories about the distribution of institutions of media freedom in the world today. The picture here is so simple as to be stark. Media freedom co-occurs at a very strong level with a whole series of other familiar political institutions that make up the syndrome we call "democracy." In fact, the co-occurrence is so overpowering as to make it awkward to deal with media freedom as a separable entity. If a government prohibits freedom of the press, it is likely to deny as well a whole waterfront of civil rights and any organized political opposition or independence of the judiciary. This bundle of civil rights is closely tied empirically to another constellation of institutions having to do with the presence of contested elections. If a government denies freedom of the press, it is very unlikely to have elections, or if some are permitted, either the government reserves the right to disqualify candidates it dislikes, or there is rampant government fraud at the polls.

The civil rights bundle and the elections bundle of institutional traits correlate at a level of about  $r = .9$  for approximately 140 countries successfully coded in these terms in the most recent *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (Taylor & Jodice, 1983). Such a correlation undoubtedly errs somewhat to the high side in view of likely contaminations in the original coding (Bollen, 1980). But even with some discounting,

<sup>2</sup>The Huntington citation has a different referent: "The real challenge which the communists pose to modernizing countries is not that they are good at overthrowing governments (which is easy), but that they are so good at making governments (which is a far more difficult task)" (1968, p. 8).

the polarization of nations of the world into two distinctive patterns is sharp where fundamental relationships between governors and the governed are concerned. We are guilty of very little caricature when we sort the world simply into "open" and "closed" polities. The "open" polities are the conventional democracies. The "closed" polities are the residual assortment of military dictatorships, socialist states of Marxist-Leninist persuasion, theocracies, and other uncharacterizable traditional states.

Such firm monopolies of public information by governments have a variety of other ramifications; I shall take brief note of only two. I assume first that governments of all kinds, both open and closed, are often tempted to take repressive action against inconvenient minorities, actions that at their most brutal extremes are monitored by an organization like Amnesty International. Let me also assume that rectitude and virtue are randomly distributed across governments of the world. Then if it is at all costly before world opinion to be discovered in any human atrocity, it follows that the commission of such atrocities in the fish-bowl of an open political system is a good deal riskier than it would be behind the windowshades of a closed system and hence should occur less frequently.

At the same time, however, closed systems should be able to hide their atrocities more effectively, so it is not clear how a list of *known* atrocities (always a subset of all atrocities) would differ from open to closed systems. If we take a known list, such as may be culled from Amnesty International's recent report on torture (1984), grading the reports for variations in scope and complicity of the central government, and then compare the list with countries arrayed from closed to open by the *World Handbook* measures, the correlation runs in the mid-.30s, meaning more atrocity reports from closed systems. Moreover, such static correlations would surely be outshadowed by dynamic ones for those numerous polities that oscillate between open and closed, because system closing is often a prelude to government-sponsored brutalization and is motivated by it in an obvious way. All told, more information seems to escape from closed systems than their governors would prefer, or perhaps even expect. If the reach for secrecy exceeds the grasp, it is possible that the penetration of a growing world press is in part responsible.

Another nontrivial characteristic of closed polities is their resistance to any domestic research, especially of a social kind, which is not exclusively controlled by the government, and thereby subject to the possibilities for falsification or at least deletion which that power preserves. Within the past 20 years I have been involved with cross-

national research operations of a public kind, collecting data in both the Soviet Union and in the right-wing dictatorship of Brazil during its most repressive phase. In both cases the local part of the research was supervised by established native scholars operating from well-credentialed indigenous research institutions. The panicked responses and threatening pre-emptive measures taken by officials in both countries to the possibility that the raw materials might be accessible to an international research community were indistinguishable.

This is, of course, hardly surprising for anybody who has tried to study closed systems. But among other implications is the obvious difficulty of knowing what truth value to assign to any self-descriptions, such as government statistics, that do see the light of day, particularly on matters dear to national ideology.

The problem of maintaining at least minimal credibility may suggest one fortunate limit to prevent governments from having their unfettered way with flows of public information within their national boundaries. At least since Socrates, there has been sensitivity to the great watershed between what I think of as first- and second-order ignorance, that is, between not knowing something, and not knowing that you do not know it. Intuitively, the behavioral implications of the difference should be substantial: if you are aware of your ignorance in a matter, you will proceed less blithely and will either stop to search for the missing information or, if it is unattainable, will at least behave in a more tentative manner, out of respect for special uncertainty.

This watershed is of importance for closed systems, given a variety of casual evidence at least that there is a certain leaven of cynicism in such systems about official government information, and no little awareness that there is a good deal that the common citizen is not permitted to know. At the same time, we would expect a certain stratification of public opinion in these regards, and skepticism may run out rather rapidly as we move down into these populations. Indeed, working with our data, collected at the height of the Brazilian repression, Geddes and Zaller (1983) found patterns of susceptibility to the anti-democratic rhetoric of the government-controlled media which nicely parallel work we did on information flows many years ago. That is, the relationship between susceptibility and exposure is basically curvilinear, with susceptibility gaining as exposure increases, but only up to a point: it begins to drop off again as we approach the highest-exposure people, who are the best educated and presumably the most sensitive to what they are not being permitted to know. Nonetheless, the population showing sophisticated indif-

ference to government rhetoric was quite limited, and in general, we must suppose that it must take an uncommonly educated populace before governmental control of information flows begins to boomerang in any serious way.

These are some of the empirical patterns. Before I return to my quest for higher normative principles that justify government deflection of information, let us pause to consider what scholars make of these patterns. If we stay global with the open-closed distinction, rather than focus on media freedom alone, then of course a great deal of analysis and interpretation has been carried out. For example, it is well known that closed systems tend to be less economically developed ones, as well as more "traditional." One popular thesis in recent years has been that open institutions are luxuries that polities struggling to modernize can ill afford, both in the sense of up-front administrative costs, and, in the Huntington (1968) formulation, because open institutions encourage an upwelling of public participation that modernizing political institutions may be too weak to handle.

If such theses are correct we could discern one answer to my quest: closing the system may not be a good thing taken alone, but it is better than not modernizing. This answer is worth jotting down, but it is a rather marginal response unless we can also demonstrate that it is impossible to disengage media freedom from other open institutions, since most of the reasons why such institutions are alleged to be a luxury turn out to be a very poor fit for media freedom taken alone.

This poor fit is obvious where up-front administrative costs are concerned. To be sure, to conduct competitive elections fairly costs something, as do some of the other open institutions. But for media freedom the cost issue is exactly reversed. Maintaining the security forces, censorship offices, and other bureaucratic apparatus to ensure unchallenged state mediation of information is remarkably expensive. Letting public information flow as it will is the obvious cost-free default option.

Of course the costs that are more troubling to the regime, although less certain, occur down the road if uncontrolled flows of information about the government become so very unfavorable that the citizenry tries to replace these leaders with others. Once we add a strong *ceteris paribus*, I accept the doctrine that such alterations of leadership can be dysfunctional for progress in development, although the case is clearest where such alterations are, either in the attempt or the completion, bloody and destructive. We are not without social inventions to permit alteration of leadership without bloodshed.

However, if we continue to restrict our focus to

media freedom, it is worth factoring in other costs to development that state control of information is likely to entail. One cost is a loss of government credibility. From our Brazilian data I would suspect that this cost is not visible in more than a small stratum of the population, but that is the group most crucial for development, including parts of a scientific community most offended by state distortions of information. Another kind of cost can arise if the elite insulated from any alteration comes to believe in its own version of the news and, without normal feedback, drifts off into a delusional system that is clearly maladaptive. Surely in recent decades we have seen some spectacular instances of modernization badly derailed because of eccentric convictions about how to proceed with it on the part of elites shielded by their strong political control from the kinds of new information that are unwelcome and hence demand mid-course corrections.

I cannot weigh these costs against any destabilization that minimal respect for independent information might generate. But if the redeeming goal is truly the noble one of development rather than mere maintenance of power, then it is worth pointing out that these other costs do exist, and that they distort badly any simple balance sheet. At the very least, it seems worth matching a concept of political control too weak for the modernization task, with another concept of overcontrol that can become dysfunctional as well.

We should not leave these empirical patterns without recognizing another cultural justification, which says that subject populations in long-term closed systems are not to be pitied because they actually lack any expectation of voice in the system and would be uncomfortable if suddenly given any. A sophisticated version of the same argument is the Leninist doctrine of the vanguard party, which says in effect that party leadership makes the decisions, not the rank and file, because the rank and file do not understand their own real needs, at least in a short run, although a short run that historically, we must add, has never seemed to terminate. From either version it follows that accurate public information is unnecessary, since there is no public decision-making function.

How real people feel about such matters is so obviously an empirical question that it is a pity it cannot be more directly examined. Nor does it inspire confidence that the rulers of closed systems who give these glib assurances are at the same time the most committed to preventing any actual test. This situation produces an astonishing run of public gibberish. This spring, for example, the Iranian government announced that a number of candidates could not be permitted to run "because they had fallen out of touch with the

people." Even counterelites of some popular liberation fronts, whose main claim to legitimacy is representation of the people against tyranny, threaten to shoot up the countryside to prevent actual people from being asked their preferences at the polls, and escalate threats of disruption even farther when it is suggested that some outside party, like the United Nations, be brought in to assure the fairness of the election.

My own speculation is that these accounts of real people gladly abdicating their own preferences because cultural or ideological arguments tell them they must are grossly false. The scattered instances of relevant data I have seen would certainly bely such descriptions. At least some common subjects in closed systems are feistier than elites often want to make them out to be, and while my documentation is sketchy, I read in the fright of elites and counterelites at any actual test that they share my intuitions.

Is it not this feistiness which translates in the most direct way into the kind of penchant for disorder that Huntington and others find detrimental to development? In one sense yes, but in another sense, not necessarily. There is some truth here because subjects do become aggrieved, and if given any opening, are glad to support counterelite cadres who will do battle for them. On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that in many of these episodes, the common people tire of vicious public disorder much more rapidly than the elites locked in the struggle over power. There is surely nothing to astonish us that this might be so: the common people often suffer much more trauma in such disorder than the elite combatants do. So the elites carry on the power struggle, now quite autonomously, agreeing on little save that the actual people are not to be consulted in the matter. In the degree that this version of the scenario does take place in some cases, it is a pity to say generally that open institutions invite a paralyzing disorder. Their absence can also help prolong the agony.

Another current arena that seemed worth examining in search of ethical justifications for government suppression of public affairs information is the heated debate which has persisted over the past eight years or more, especially within UNESCO, concerning what has been championed by a large number of Third World countries as a "New World Information and Communication Order" (NWICO). One impetus behind this movement is a discouragement within many developing countries at the fact that all of the large international press services are headquartered in the developed countries and thereby report news from the developing countries in what is seem to be an unflattering and often alien perspective. What is sought is better balance in the reporting of world

news. The problem is how to move toward such balance within the framework of a United Nations committed from the outset to freer flows of information in the world, including freedom of the information media.

In abstract principle, when an imbalance develops because A has outrun B, it may be redressed either by expanding B or by constricting A, or some combination of the two. The expansionary redress in this instance, which involves helping with the enlarging of communication infrastructures in less developed countries through both technical aid and the reduction of economic and financial obstacles, is not subject to controversy and has been an explicit element in United Nations programs more or less from the beginning (see Green, 1956). Such expansions are part of the NWICO vision. Some countries however seem less interested in such expansionary solutions than in resolutions that constrict the flow of news by establishing various forms of local political control over it.

Debates over the NWICO vision are rather more confusing than might appear because although a set of general goals has been proposed, actual steps of implementation have frequently been left to be worked out, and therefore their potential meaning remains unclear (Sussman, 1984). Moreover, these debates generate less in the way of ethical justifications for governmental interceptions of information than might appear because the goals usually stated for the establishment of controls are ones of promoting freer flows of information rather than constricting them. Thus one of the clearest tangible proposals to date in the specification of NWICO is for the licensing of journalists by governments. It is billed as a step that would liberate information because the journalist, once licensed, could work "secure" from government harassment. The fact that interest in what seem actually to be restrictive proposals comes predominantly from member states whose governments flout United Nations ideals of media freedom in their own domestic practice does not reassure the observer about the actual intent of steps proposed. However this may be, we search again in vain here for ethical justification of governmental media control. Most countries express support for UN ideals of media freedom, but there is marked variability in views of how such noble goals are best implemented.

#### IV

The last stage of my quest is again brief, and in a sense, light. I had genuinely imagined at the outset that I could be guided to some rationale beyond naked power for state prevention of independent media. Lest this seem naive, let us

remember that Mosca and other sage observers have argued convincingly that elites have a great capacity for justifying institutions they find useful. Granted that this takes time and routinization: governments are often thrown by circumstance into quick aberrations that are left unexplained. Granted also that the Mosca view is cynical enough as it stands: the dirty grit of necessity comes first, and the pearl of justification only forms in due time to reduce friction. Nonetheless, sooner or later some justification is to arise, and given the importance that information access would seem to have for human dignity, I wanted to see what such justification might be.

Or, to put the matter more simply, imagine a friendly backyard conversation in which a government member sets out to explain to his next-door neighbor why it is in everybody's interest to use part of the citizen's taxes to prevent him from receiving some kind of information about his world. In such a conversation, by construction friendly and relaxed, just what would be said?

I had not searched everywhere for justifications. After all, military dictatorships, while keen on monopolizing public information, tend to come and go in rather short stints and in any event rarely feel much obligation to look beyond naked power as a reason for governance. Human dignity is just not the highest priority. I did not look much to theocracies either, because as we have seen, that answer was not too satisfying for the modern world.

What this left as the most definable residue of closed states were Marxist-Leninist governments. These seemed ideal. They are not as transient as military interludes, so that justifications have had time to form. Moreover, these states place great emphasis on human dignity, and insist on a basic role for normative theory in matters of politics and society. Finally, state monopoly on information flows is a very central part of the blueprint for governance in these states, not just in wartime or under duress, but as a routine matter. Indeed, if one takes what are usually called the stable governments of the world, strict state control of public information is a more sharply distinctive characteristic setting apart Marxist-Leninist governments than anything else commonly coded, such as economic distributions. In practice, if not necessarily theory, this information control is simply the defining signature of such states.

Therefore I sought references to the relevant theoretical literature from colleagues familiar with and, more often than not, personally sympathetic to, current Marxist thought. This turned out to be a remarkably blank wall. One sympathizer could hardly understand my question. After second and third rephrasings, he asked in return with some impatience how there might conceivably be any

justification for such practices. He went on to say that undoubtedly some East European apologist must have written something on the subject, but it certainly was no part of the central Marxist literature. I also received directions to sympathetic descriptive material on the structure and practices of the Soviet press, but with forewarning that it would not address my questions. It did not.

Other efforts at more substantive answers to my query tended to be one or another form of non sequitur. For example, I was told I should not worry about Communist citizens being shut off from world news because much of that simply defied control, for reasons ranging from sailors in foreign ports to European airwaves. I have already assumed this to be true: individual citizens, in an implacably Protestant way, do have their own unmediated interactions with the environment. They do find news and pass it on, and governments, however hard they may try, cannot always stand fully in the way of it. Nonetheless, the limitations on success scarcely address my question about what principles are induced to justify the effort.

I have saved one other response for last because, while again a non sequitur in its own way, it provided as much food for thought as all of the rest of the responses put together. I encountered a television interview between a western journalist and a high official of the Soviet news hierarchy. The journalist more or less asked my question, wondering why the Soviet government permitted no domestic press freedom. The official responded that this was not a very constructive question, because capitalist societies had no free press, either. The journalist began to protest, but the official went on to say that it was self-evident there was no free press, because what was claimed to be a free press was not in fact dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism.

This provides us with a fascinating definition and perception which may explain a good deal, albeit of little help to my quest. It seems to be presumed that a free press is some monolith in ideological terms, instead of the enormous scattershattering of positions and nonpositions that arises in the West, with a spectrum ranging from organs indeed dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism at one pole all the way to organs that are its staunch defenders, with the great middle range occupied by organs that accept the basic structure of capitalism but, as businessmen bitterly lament, carp persistently at its excesses. Across all of this spectrum, the survival of specific voices depends, if not exclusively at least in significant degree upon maintaining a clientele that resonates to its posture, or upon not offending that large clientele that hopes to order mere news, going light on the ideological garnish.

The official has a totally different vision of what institutions of media freedom actually mean. If we see things from his view, it is clear that accepting media freedom would open his system to information organizations single-mindedly dedicated to ripping Communism out root and branch. If that is the conception of the challenge, then it is not hard to see why it would be unwelcome on the face of it. But my own prediction of what would happen in such an improbable event are quite different. I would wager very heavily that such a true opening would produce not just one voice, but at least several and probably very many. I would also wager, although more cau-

tiously, that the great middle of such an emergent spectrum of free voices in his country would accept communism as a basic structure, but would carp persistently on its excesses and would in general make governance more difficult.

Perhaps this is a prospect sufficiently sinister that it could not be considered. On the other hand, I for one would appreciate hearing the normative side of the rejection, rather than the pure defense of acquired power. To me, the choice implied in a varied stream of information about one's environment is a minimum requirement for human dignity, and one that power should not be used to eliminate.

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