

Is freedom of the press required for a liberal democracy: A case study of Mexico's freedom of the press and democracy

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Abstract

Democracies within states have become more predominant than at any other point in history. Whether this shift is directing towards liberal democracies, however, has yet to be determined. This article focuses on freedom of the press and how it is required for a liberal democracy. Using Mexico as a case study, this paper identifies how a state is unable to excel in its democratic principles without the virtues of a free press. Using the Freedom House dataset, countries are categorized by their level of democracy against their level of free press. Although Mexico holds many democratic values, this paper concludes that a country cannot be truly democratic without adequate freedom of the press.

Introduction

Freedom of the press is central to liberal democracies throughout the world. Limpitlaw (2011) defines liberal democracy as a representative democratic government which operates under the tenants of liberalism such as protecting the rights of individuals; free, fair, and competitive elections between multiple distinct political parties; a separation of powers between different branches of government; and the equal protection of civil liberties and political freedom from all individuals. A free press allows media, such as radio, television, or print, to relay information to citizens, put pressure on governments, and hold governments accountable. However, in some cases (such as Rwanda), media has been used as a deterrent to promoting freedom and democracy within a state. This paradox raises important questions over whether a free press is always a positive feature of democratization. To answer this question, this paper uses a comparative analysis to examine information on countries provided by Freedom House to determine if there is a relationship between media rights and democracy. It also provides an explanation as to why certain countries, such as Mexico, do not have laws to protect freedom of the press but are seen as democratic states. This paper concludes with a discussion of how freedom of the press can positively influence democracy.

Methodology

To address the central question of the relationship between free press and democracy two fundamental methods are used in this paper. First, information was drawn from Freedom House's data set on 2013 freedom of the press. Freedom House is an independent organization that is dedicated to expanding freedom around the world. Their mission is to influence democratic political environments so that governments are accountable to their people, that the rule of law prevails, and the rights of women and minorities are guaranteed (Freedom House, 2013b). It is a reputable organization that initiates programs and provides reports on democracy

levels around the world, gathering data for key democratic indicators such as religious freedom, media freedom, and elections.

The other dataset for the comparative assessment was obtained through The Economist Intelligent Unit’s (EIU) 2012 Democracy Index (2013). As a British organization, EIU has provided research and analysis of economies around the world for the past 70 years. One drawback with using EIU’s dataset is their adherence to a certain ideology while ranking economies, such as neoliberalism. They still, however, provide significant contributions to the work on democratization and the global economy and are respected and frequently used by scholars such as Sarah Cook, Arch Puddington, and Vukasin Petrovic (Freedom House, 2013b).

This paper categorizes data in a comparative study to determine the cases that may undermine the theory of free press (Diamond, 1999; Park, 2002; and Williams and Pavlik, 1994) positively correlating with a liberal democracy. Table 1 is divided into 3 columns including country, freedom of the press, and level of democracy. In the freedom of the press column, countries are ranked from 1 to 3. A country with a free press is ranked as 1 because a free press plays a key role in sustaining and monitoring the democracy of a nation, which contributes to the overall accountability of a government. A non-free press is ranked as 3 because a country without a free press represses the views of individuals that attempt to provide outlets for governments to be accountable. Finally, a partly free press (ranked as 2) lies somewhere in the middle where governments provide some access for media, but continue to play an active role in limiting media rights (Freedom House, 2013b).

Similarly, the level of democracy is divided into four categories: full democracies (ranked as 1), flawed democracies (ranked as 2), hybrid regimes (ranked as 3), and authoritarian regimes (ranked as 4) (Diamond, 2002). The EIU states that, “the Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture” (EIU, 2013). Although ambiguous, the assumption is that a full democracy portrays these attributes consistently throughout the facets of their state, whereas an authoritarian regime neglects any or all of these aspects.

Table 1. The level of free press against the level of democracy of the world’s states.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Press</i>	<i>Democrac y</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Press</i>	<i>Democrac y</i>
Afghanistan	3	4	Kyrgyzstan	3	3
Albania	2	3	Laos	3	4
Algeria	3	4	Latvia	1	2
Angola	3	4	Lebanon	2	3
Argentina	2	2	Lesotho	2	2
Armenia	3	3	Liberia	2	3

Australia	1	1	Libya	2	3
Austria	1	1	Lithuania	1	2
Azerbaijan	3	4	Luxembourg	1	1
Bahrain	3	4	Macedonia	2	2
Bangladesh	2	3	Madagascar	3	4
Belarus	3	4	Malawi	2	2
Belgium	1	1	Malaysia	3	2
Benin	2	2	Mali	2	3
Bhutan	2	3	Malta	1	1
Bolivia	2	3	Mauritania	2	3
Bosnia- Herzegovina	2	3	Mauritius	1	1
Botswana	2	2	Mexico	3	2
Brazil	2	2	Moldova	2	2
Bulgaria	2	2	Mongolia	2	2
Burkina Faso	2	4	Montenegro	2	2
Burma (Myanmar)	3	4	Morocco	3	3
Burundi	3	4	Mozambique	2	3
Cambodia	3	3	Namibia	2	2
Cameroon	3	4	Netherlands	1	1
Canada	1	1	New Zealand	1	1
Cape Verde	1	2	Nicaragua	2	3
Central African Republic	3	4	Niger	2	3

Chad	3	4	Nigeria	2	4
Chile	2	2	North Korea	3	4
China	3	4	Norway	1	1
Colombia	2	2	Oman	3	4
Comoros	2	4	Pakistan	3	3
Congo, Democratic Republic of (Kinshasa)	3	4	Panama	2	2
Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville)	3	3	Papua New Guinea	1	2
Costa Rica	1	1	Paraguay	3	2
Côte d'Ivoire	3	4	Peru	2	2
Croatia	2	2	Philippines	2	2
Cuba	3	4	Poland	1	2
Cyprus (Greek)	1	2	Portugal	1	2
Czech Republic	1	1	Qatar	3	4
Denmark	1	1	Romania	2	2
Djibouti	3	4	Russia	3	4
Dominican Republic	2	2	Rwanda	3	4
Ecuador	3	3	Saudi Arabia	3	4
Egypt	3	3	Senegal	2	2
El Salvador	2	2	Serbia	2	2
Equatorial Guinea	3	4	Sierra Leone	2	3

Eritrea	3	4	Singapore	3	3
Estonia	1	2	Slovakia	1	2
Ethiopia	3	4	Slovenia	1	2
Fiji	2	4	South Africa	2	2
Finland	1	1	South Korea	2	1
France	1	2	Spain	1	1
Gabon	3	4	Sri Lanka	3	3
Gambia, The	3	4	Sudan	3	4
Georgia	2	3	Suriname	1	2
Germany	1	1	Swaziland	3	4
Ghana	1	2	Sweden	1	1
Greece	2	2	Switzerland	1	1
Guatemala	2	3	Syria	3	4
Guinea	3	4	Taiwan	1	2
Guinea-Bissau	3	4	Tajikistan	3	4
Guyana	2	2	Tanzania	2	3
Haiti	2	3	Thailand	3	2
Honduras	3	3	Togo	3	4
Hong Kong	2	2	Trinidad and Tobago	1	2
Hungary	2	2	Tunisia	2	3
Iceland	1	1	Turkey	2	3
India	2	2	Uganda	2	3
Indonesia	2	2	Ukraine	2	3

Iran	3	4	United Arab Emirates	3	4
Iraq	3	3	United Kingdom	1	1
Ireland	1	1	United States	1	1
Israel	2	2	Uruguay	1	1
Italy	2	2	Uzbekistan	3	4
Jamaica	1	2	Venezuela	3	3
Japan	1	1	Vietnam	3	4
Jordan	3	4	West Bank/Gaza Strip	3	3
Kazakhstan	3	4	Yemen	3	4
Kenya	2	3	Zambia	2	2
Kuwait	2	4	Zimbabwe	3	4

Key Findings

Based on this analysis, there are two key findings that warrant further discussion; countries that rank high in both democracy and free press, and countries that rank high in democracy but low in free press. All 25 countries listed as full democracies (1) were also listed as having free media (1). The 16 other countries listed as having full freedom of press were only listed as flawed democracies (2), the second highest score a state could receive (these are highlighted in dark grey in Table 1). There were no hybrid regimes (3) or authoritarian regimes (4) that correlated with having full freedom of press. In four cases, states actually received a higher score in their level of democracy than their freedom of press. Malaysia, Mexico, Paraguay, and Thailand were all ranked as flawed democracies (2), yet they received the worst ranking available for freedom of press – no freedom (3) (these are highlighted in light grey in Table 1). This clearly contradicts the belief that freedom of press is necessary for promoting democracy. The Democracy Index 2012 report (2013) indicates the rankings of democracy in countries Mexico, Thailand, Malaysia and Paraguay as 51, 58, 64, and 70, respectively. Mexico is viewed as the most democratic between the four countries, yet it does not have adequate provision of media. Given this paradox, it will be highlighted as a case study in the following section.

Case Study: Mexico

Mexico is an intriguing case to examine for many reasons. When compared to the United States and Canada, Mexico is often viewed as a poor state. The country is, and has been dealing with violence, drugs and corruption for many years. The economic development of the country

historically has not yielded substantial optimism for a prosperous future. Despite this, there are many indicators that show how Mexico is shifting towards a full democracy and enhancing its clout as a powerful state in the years to come.

In 2000, Vicente Fox, leader of the National Action Party (PAN) was voted to office through democratic elections, ending the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) 71-year dominance. This regime haunted the country for decades as it engaged in many authoritative principles (Reséndiz, 2006). However, with the PRI defeat, the country has gradually adopted more democratic principles. In 2006, PAN was re-elected to office, winning by a narrow margin over the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The 2000 and 2006 elections indicate Mexico has ended its history of one party rule with several parties now engaged in the democratic process (ibid).

Mexico's economy is also rapidly growing. As of 2012, it was the tenth largest oil producer and the largest silver producer in the world. Economists consider Mexico as a regional power, middle power, an emerging power, and a newly industrialized country (Scott, Hau, and Hulme, 2011; Bozyk, 2006). It also has the fourteenth largest nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the tenth largest GDP by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) with GDP valued at 1.186 trillion USD in 2012 – more than doubling its GDP level in a span of thirteen years (World Bank, 2012). Some believe that by 2050, Mexico will be among the fifth to seventh largest economies in the world (PwC Economics, 2013).

Mexico has also been investing in their health care sector and education systems in recent years. Beginning in the early 1990s, Mexico entered a transitional stage in health care, resulting in medical infrastructure in the major cities being upgraded to similar standards as developed nations (World Bank, 2012). Similarly, literacy rates have soared since the Mexican Revolution, with rates of over 97% for youth under 14 and 91% for people over 15 (ibid). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México is also ranked 190th in the top 200 World University Ranking as of 2009 (Symonds, 2009). These indicators show Mexico is shifting towards a more liberal democracy.

Even with Mexico's shift towards a liberal democracy, it continues to be one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists (Freedom House, 2013a). In many cases, governments have threatened – or as some speculate, killed – certain individuals in the media that write in favour of the opposition. Moreover, drug cartels continue to play an active role in influencing and corrupting the government and local businesses (Cevallos, April 2014). Cevallos further argues:

In the last seven years in Mexico, 35 journalists were killed and six went missing, 84 media workers filed complaints of insults or attacks in 2007, and in the first few days of 2008, the prestigious independent radio commentator Carmen Aristegui, who has often criticized the powers that be, was fired. Given that outlook, many analysts wonder whether the media in Mexico is really as free as the government of conservative President Felipe Calderón claims.

Despite the fact that media personnel are being killed because of their work, Articles 6 and 7 in the 1917 Mexican constitution guarantees freedom of the press. However, even after Mexico's declaration of independence, the traditional practices of government controlling the press are still

evident. Mexican broadcasting is not completely commercial, but rather includes a mix of both private and public companies (Schneider, 2011). Due to the long reign of the PRI, the state and the private sector were able to make long-term relationships to develop private broadcasting companies. The situation became more politically heated in the 1960s, when the government signaled a takeover of broadcasting service. After several broadcasting companies merged, Televisa, a private company won the battle over the monopoly of media in Mexico. In spite of this, Televisa continued to have a strong relationship with the PRI, allocating 80 percent of their election coverage to the party compared to granting PAN only three percent of airtime (Schleicher, 1994). Given these examples, it appears as though democracy was struggling to develop during the PRI regime.

To determine if the relationship between freedom of the press and democracy illustrated in Mexico is present in other jurisdictions it is useful to examine a second state. Malaysia is approaching a liberal democracy, yet does not have a free press to determine if the results are consistent. The country holds elections every five years to select a new government; their GDP has been growing 6.5% on average for close to 50 years; and their education rates are well above average (FITA, 2006). However, the government and political parties own most of the country's newspapers, and current legislation creates numerous restrictions for knowledge dissemination (Ahmad, 2010). Unfortunately, even with Malaysia progressing towards a liberal democracy, their lack of a free press hinders their ability to become a true liberal democratic state. This parallels with the findings in Mexico as both countries struggle to provide freedom of the press in their jurisdictions.

Analysis: Does freedom of the press influence democracy?

Mexico is a unique example as it is taking significant steps towards becoming fully democratic state, yet it lacks appropriate laws for media freedom. A major issue in Mexico is the interdependence between politics and media, whereby the mass media market is highly concentrated and is arguable the most concentrated private sector system in the world (Hughes and Lawson, 2005). As noted above, having a concentration in media leads to skewed airtime when it comes to politics and advocates issues that benefit certain parties.

While the changes in media may not occur in the next few years, there is optimism for the future. It is important to remember that Mexico is shifting towards a democracy and not authoritarianism. The change of government in 2000 ushered in the development on new media legislation, including the 2003 bill, "The Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Government Information" (Schneider, 2011). It also renewed Article 41 of the constitution in 2007, which removed the rights of any political parties to buy airtime on radio or television (ibid). While it is clear that there is much work to be done in promoting freedom of the press in Mexico, it appears the country is moving towards an independent and free press.

As depicted in the case study and Table 1, there is a relationship with freedom of the press and fully democratic countries (Williams and Pavlik, 1994). From this perspective, it would appear that freedom of the press does positively influence democracy.

There are several reasons that explain this connection. It is believed that citizens of a nation that vote in elections must be informed of the issues at hand, the candidates that are running for office, and the right to participate freely in public discourse (Limpitlaw, 2011).

Having media outlets that skew information by perpetuating governmental bias may not appropriately deliver the information registered voters need to make informed decisions. This goes against one of the underlying attributes of a democracy: that people have a right to elect a government, where part of the right is to understand who they are voting for (ibid).

The press can also play the role of an advocate for democracy and good governance. In many situations, the press will show how the decisions of the government can improve or worsen the life of ordinary citizens. Media can report on not only what is happening, but also what should be happening. This is important, especially for developing nations, as decisions made by an authoritative figure or party can play a direct role in improving basic human living conditions. Pressures exerted by the press can help provoke optimal solutions. There are many ways the press can influence democracy in this capacity. For example, the media can identify which authorities are using clean administration versus corruption and nepotism, appropriate use of public resources versus mismanagement and waste, as well as other areas (Bratton, 1994).

Lastly, and most importantly, the press can act as a catalyst for democracy and development. Even if the press is only able to authentically perform the most basic function of reporting on the matters of public interest, it is still acting as a promoter of transparency, openness, and accountability. The 2002 World Bank president, James Wolfensohn, expresses in a report that:

A key ingredient of an effective development strategy is knowledge transmission and enhanced transparency. To reduce poverty, we must liberate access to information and improve the quality of information. People with more information are empowered to make better choices. For these reasons I have long argued that a free press is not a luxury. It is at the core of equitable development. The media can expose corruption. They can keep a check on public policy by throwing a spotlight on government action. They let people voice diverse opinions on governance and reform and help build public consensus to bring about change (2002: 14).

Acknowledging these points, it is evident that the provision of media does positively influence democracy. Mexico has made a powerful pursuit in becoming a more democratic country. However, they can never be truly democratic unless they allow media to report on controversial ideas without repercussions.

Conclusion

Although today's world may not be dominated by democracies, it has the largest percentage of states that are in the transitional stages of becoming democratic than ever before (EIU, 2013). As this paper has described, freedom of the press is a significant right when becoming democratic. Without exception, if a state has full freedom of the press, they are either a full or a flawed democracy. The case of Mexico depicts the recent trend the country has been following to initiate democratic principles throughout their policies and practices. However, without appropriate media rights to advocate controversial and oppositional views, a state cannot be an authentic democracy. Therefore, the provision of media does influence democracy, and flawed democracies working towards obtaining media rights are moving in the right direction.

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