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Evaluer la liberté de la presse : les médias sociaux ont-ils changé la donne ?

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Introduction

The concept of media freedom has a long history both in the political science and in the mass communication literature. Freedoms of association, information, and communication have been listed as essential components of democracy. Researchers have argued that, without the freedom of communication mass media provide, the foundation of democratic rule is undermined. More recent studies have suggested that definitions of media freedom should include other concepts, such as the role of media in nation building, economic development, overcoming illiteracy and poverty, and building political consciousness.

Whether mass media lead or follow change, whether they mirror or mold society, and whether they should be treated as agents of change or of the status quo are questions that permeate the discussion of media freedom.

Media freedom is recognized as a fundamental human right in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet the extent to which nations enjoy freedom of expression through media varies considerably. At present, more than 100 organizations around the world are engaged in monitoring and publicizing the differing levels of press freedom at national and/or regional levels. Three of them - Freedom House, Reporters sans Frontières and International Research and Exchanges Board – currently are producing quantitative measures of media freedom at a global scale, based on the work of professional or elite evaluators. These evaluators assess characteristics of the media systems, such as whether the media in a country are able to operate independently of political or economic pressure and whether they actually do operate in service of the democratic goals of societies. Recent research has shown that these established, systemic measures of media characteristics are internally consistent and highly intercorrelated, thus providing initial data on their reliability.

Historically, evaluations of media freedom and assessment of the role of media in the process of democratization have focused on print and broadcast media. More recently, researchers have brought the Internet into the equation. The Arab Spring in particular has suggested that social media might have a crucial role in informing and mobilizing audiences, especially in countries with limited press freedom.

This issue of *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies* has had the ambitious goal of investigating new trends in press freedom evaluation and in assessing the role of the press in the process of democratization in the context of the changes that the new media have brought to the field of mass communication.

ESSACHESS has brought together contributions from Freedom House, Reporters sans Frontières and from International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). The first two of these have the broadest range of countries studies. The Media Sustainability Index has expanded in recent years to cover a broader sweep of countries.

In *Adapting concepts of media freedom to a changing media environment: Incorporating new media and citizen journalism into the Freedom of the Press index*, Karin Deutsch Karlekar and Courtney C. Radsch of Freedom House discuss how the new category of “citizen journalist” fits into the overall media environment and how the Freedom House Freedom of the Press methodology has been changed to incorporate this category. Gilles Lordet of Reporters sans Frontières in *Aperçu sur l'Index de Reporters sans Frontières: historique, méthodologie et perspectives* provides a brief history of the Press Freedom Index of Reporters sans Frontières, its methodology, and how it is different from the of Freedom House and IREX measures. Leon Morse and Eleeza V. Agopian of IREX, *In Measuring Press Freedom and Media Sector Performance: How Social Media have Affected the Media Sustainability Index*, explain how the Media Sustainability Index has refined its instrument and procedures to better capture the impact of social media.

In her study *The Relevance of People's Attitudes Towards Freedom of Expression in a Changing Media Environment*, Teresa Naab argues that the citizens' individual attitudes towards freedom of expression have become more important in the Internet era and, in addition to the measurements used by Freedom House, Reporters sans Frontières and IREX, should be included as an indicator in the measurement of media freedom.

Norman Landry's study *Médias, technologies et droits humains: notions concurrentes. Cas canadiens et internationaux* uses a variety of cases to examine the most important concepts and legal debates regarding human rights and communication, making a distinction between the communication rights and the access to communication, on one hand, and the right of expression on the other hand. Arne Hintz, in *Challenges to Freedom of Expression in the Digital World:*

Lessons from WikiLeaks and the Arab Spring, examined current attempts to control information, and to restrict access to critical resources and applications.

Michael Palmer and Jérémie Nicey's study, *Social media and the freedom of the press: a long-term perspective from within international news agencies (AFP, Reuters)*, examines how the Internet (and especially the social media) have modified professional journalists' attitude regarding their business model and the process of news ideation and news production.

Two studies focus on the role of media during the Tunisian revolution. Zouha Dahmen-Jarrin concludes in his chapter, *Les aléas de la libre circulation de l'information dans les "nouveaux médias" en Tunisie*, that Twitter was instrumental in mobilizing and coordinating the protesters during the Arab Spring and in creating an archive of the repression that alerted international public opinion. Zeineb Touati describes in *Presse et révolution en Tunisie : rôle, enjeux et perspectives* the minor role of the print press during the revolution in Tunisia, due to censorship and lack of credibility, and argues that the traditional media in the country should improve the professionalism of their journalists to regain the audiences.

Abderrahmane Amsidder, Fathallah Daghami et Farid Toumi, in *La mobilisation sociale à l'ère des réseaux sociaux: Cas du Maroc*, reports on a survey of two subsets of the population of the Moroccan city of Agadir to show how people used the Internet and social networks to get information and to communicate about the social movements.

In her chapter, *The impact of social media on press freedom in Greece: Benefits, challenges and limitations*, Katerina Serafeim examines how social media have changed the press landscape in Greece, how they have reshaped the news flow patterns and how they impacted the concept of press freedom.

Ilya Kiriya's study, *Les réseaux sociaux comme outil d'isolation politique en Russie*, argues that in Russia, contrary to the theory that presents the Internet as an opportunity for alternative voices, the configuration of new media and their interactions with the traditional Russian media system have contributed to an isolation of the opposition and to social control that favored the dominant power coalition.

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The volume advances our understanding of the basic concept of press freedom and its measurement in this period of dramatic changes in the media landscape. The Internet has changed that landscape immensely, and its evolution will force us to continue to reassess what is meant by media freedom and freedom of expression generally and to evaluate and reconsider how we measure that concept.

Tudor VLAD and Lee B. BECKER