

Worldwide News Freedom in a Digital Age  
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Thirty years ago an MI5 secret agent named Peter Wright, who'd moved to Australia to retire, began writing his memoirs. He had been a senior MI5 operator during the sixties when Sir Roger Hollis, then head of the agency, was suspected of being a Russian spy and Wright himself, together with a bunch of like-minded colleagues, suspected the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, of being one, too. Think plots and potential coups. Wright called his book Spycatcher.

There was an immediate, inevitable buzz of excitement amongst journalists. Spy stories equalled big stories. And two papers - the Guardian, which I was editing, and the Observer - both ran preview tales saying that an interesting book was nearing publication.

Imagine our surprise, then, when we both received sweeping injunctions forbidding us from reporting anything further about Spycatcher. Imagine our surprise when Mrs Thatcher - a Prime Minister nobody ever accused of being in bed with the Soviet Union - dispatched her Cabinet Secretary to Sydney to give evidence in an action designed to stop the book ever being published anywhere. And imagine our utter incredulity as the British government initiated similar actions across America, across Europe - and, of course, in Britain.

Mrs Thatcher kept losing as trial followed trial and costs order followed costs order. The book was published in Australia. It was published in America. It was available across Europe. It was even - as months and years rolled by - available in Scotland, which has its own legal system. In the end, Number Ten Downing Street was utterly humiliated. Washington DC, the book safeguarded there by the the first amendment to the constitution, was scornful of such British idiocy. The world was too big and too open a place to try banning books like this - how ridiculous when you could just buy a paperback at an airport and train station and carry it over a border? But Margaret Thatcher only realised that much later. Perhaps only five years later when the European Court of Human Rights finally condemned her absurd antics and upheld the right of the British press to publish a book that, by then, everyone had read.

I only recount the details of this distant debacle to show that, even then, the suppression of press freedom in one country wasn't a facile matter of a prime minister calling in the lawyers. Even then the world was a much more complicated place. And baby, look at it now...

A few weeks ago the BBC in Britain showed a documentary programme about the terrible rape and murder of a young Indian woman on a New Delhi bus. They called it India's Daughter, and they interviewed one of her rapists in his prison cell. At which point the Indian government erupted with anger. The Home Affairs minister of the ruling party professed his shame over the incident and declared the film banned. There would be no freedom to show something that reflected so badly on the nation.

But what happened? India's Daughter was shown in Britain (far beyond New Delhi's control). The banning led the front pages of India's press for days on end. And social media explosions - including the wonders of Youtube - made sure that any Indian who really wanted to see what the fuss was about could switch on a computer and do just that.

It was, if you like, the Spycatcher saga replayed as a digital short story. It showed us, yet again, that no nation is an island. And it drew attention to a social and moral malaise - not to some terrorist plot or security edict.

And yes! I'll be coming to Turkey in a moment....

Of course there are perennial incidents, plots and related edicts. I could be talking today about Julian Assange and his WikiLeaks stories that sped around the globe. I could, slightly less contentiously, be talking about Edward Snowden and his quite extraordinary revelations of covert surveillance. Actually, though, there's no need to deal with such matters only in the context of national or international security - for the point about India's Daughter is that, like so many other stories that cause problems, it is yet another example of the fact that, today, we live in one digital world. There are secrets that no-one thinks worth keeping. There are doors that fly open at the push of a button.

And just examine these instant connections at the most humdrum level - on questions of behaviour, of conduct, of the way we live our lives.

There has been no more contentious and damaging an issue for the press in Britain over the last ten years than the business of phone hacking (as exposed, at some risk, by my old paper). That prompted a Government-ordered inquiry led by Lord Justice Leveson - and Leveson delved deep into the very-British business of prescribing self-regulatory codes and tribunals for newspapers. It seemed that there was such a thing as "British privacy". It could be maintained by orders from the Law Courts in the Strand. But one courtroom encounter

during the proceedings revealed much more than expected. The editor of the Daily Mail online, Martin Clarke, was giving evidence and Leveson was asking about how you banned pictures and stores that offended him, or his projected code of conduct, when they didn't offend the American version of Mail Online as regulated by American law?

The judge appeared, magically, to think that the British site and the US site were somehow totally separate and distinct. It was the greatest joy to hear Martin Clarke lecturing the supposed grand vizier of information regulation on how one click of a button, in London or in New York, or indeed Ankara, could shift the material on your screen in a milli-second. We weren't, Clarke patiently explained, talking slow separation. We were talking instant unification. Judges and lawyers, with their weighty boxes full of documents, might still in some old world where information could be wiped from view in one country. But that wasn't true any longer. The world had changed.

Today, I'd like to explore some of the ramifications of that change. Today, I'd like to walk, with you, around the pathways of that new world. Today, I'd like to see what works - and what can never work.

Examine, for instance, the laws of personal privacy as they affect Europe (including Britain and of course Turkey) and the United States. In Britain - influenced though not entirely decided by article eight of the European convention - privacy is the right of every human being.

1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

But this particular right, as I'm sure we all recall, has to be balanced by Article Ten.

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

This article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises. Or much else, alas. But that isn't the way things work in America, though.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

And so, over decades, indeed over American centuries, we see a totally different interpretation of personal privacy taking hold. In short, and very roughly, public figures in American life -senators, congressmen, judges, baseball players, writers or film stars - have no automatic right to privacy. Because they are public figures they, and their conduct, are public too. Their children, their wives, their parents, may still enjoy privacy if they have never put themselves in the spotlight. But if you are famous, you stand and fall in the glare of that first amendment and all that hangs on it.

Is this justice? It depends. If you are, say, François Mitterrand, President of France, seeking to hide the fact that you have fathered an illegitimate child, then European law - bolstered by French law - will keep your secret till your dying day. If you are, say, Hillary Clinton, seeking to keep secret the personal emails you wrote whilst Secretary of State, then you're doomed to disappointment. And if you are, say, the golfer Tiger Woods, seeking to hide a string of love affairs from your wife and then from public gaze, it depends where you are physically when your incensed bride starts smashing car windows. If that happened in Britain, there are plenty of lawyers ready, for a suitable fee, to find a judge and see a gagging order on the press imposed. But since it happened in Florida, Woods stands exposed. The public has a right to be informed.

And, crucially, the British public, the French public, the public of a wider world have a de facto right, a practical right, to know as well. The Internet brings them the story in a trice. The myriad gossip sites of New York and Los Angeles churn away. There is no effective right to privacy in one country any longer. And though the British courts may not quite admit as yet, they know that injunctions and their old apparatus of enforced silence are fading into history.

BUT – and here I reach to the heart of today's lecture – if all this is true of privacy law, and its attendant rights, surely it must be true too about the freedom rights of the press itself? Surely the growth of the internet, the spanning of the world in a moment, means that media freedoms are similarly liberated?

To which the answer is yes: but perhaps not quite yet. If you're the leader of Communist China you have as many as 30,000 cyber police at your beck and call. You can take down web sites; you can intimidate service providers; you can lock up bloggers and throw away the key. And the situation in other countries - such Saudi Arabia and Iran - isn't so very much better. Yet there is always an escape hatch. There is always a hole in this

wall of repression.

Consider one cliché word: Globalisation. It's a word which means that the business of doing business stretches along trillion dollar highways from Beijing to Baltimore - and can be done just as easily as putting up a new page on Mail Online. Huge cash flows ring the earth. It's word which means, too, that we need to know each other's business, that political stability - amongst other things - is one test of investment ability. The point is that, in so many, many ways, we are all bound together - and, in particular, that the norms of democratic behaviour and tradition bind those notions who like to think of themselves as part of the free world. Quite apart from which, of course, world travel on business and world travel for tourism expand exponentially. If you can't access a website in Beijing, you can do it in Bombay. If Bulawayo is closed to you, Bratislava will always open your eyes instead. The richer billions of people in our world, the people of money, influence, education and ambition, are also the mobile people. Have curious mind: will travel. Have ears: will hear. Have eyes: will see clearly.

In much of the world, to this day, poverty and lack of education create their own frontiers of information. In some of the world - say China again - there's a public trade-off between acquiescence and enrichment that may or may not endure. I was struck, last month, by the warmth of business tributes to Lee Kwan Yew's sanitised, almost lobotomised Singapore, a Stepford state. But nothing in governance is forever. Light, like restless boredom, is always close by. The dynasties of Chinese history did not topple by accident. And meanwhile change sweeps on.

Africa, increasingly, is united by mobile phone, by smartphone, by laptop and tablet. If I'm in Tanzania and want to read what the South African press thinks, then I need only go digital. India, at least in its major cities, is already a digital hub and opportunity as English and American newspapers ponder where to move their online editions next. One tweet, from anywhere on the globe, can send a hitherto hidden story viral. And this, in turn, produces a new context for newspapers and broadcasters themselves as well as the countries they serve and the governments they are supposed to invigilate.

You can, for a while, keep your societies and your readers in the dark. You can omit to tell them things they ought to know. You can straightforwardly censor, order web pages taken down and other conventional steps. But there is a price to be paid as you do so. A cost in trust lost, motives questioned; a cost in cynicism and disbelief; in a growing democratic deficit.

I've often written, these past few years, about the problems of trust. Journalists like to be trusted, to be believed and even revered: but the whole thing can go too far if it becomes obsessed by self-image, by respectability. Trust is earned by telling necessary truths. And, for governments, trust is earned by openness, transparency, a reputation for fair dealing. Thus the imperatives for trust on both sides come together. Reporters and editors need to be able to push at the frontiers of freedom in order to show that freedom exists - and governments need to define those freedoms, because their freedom to be elected, like the legitimacy of their rule, depends on the popular will.

Our world online, a world connected, poses those challenges more starkly than ever before. Of course social media can be manipulated - by powerful commercial interests, by governments. Good morning, Belarus! Of course some issues and some threats in notable parts of the globe pose difficult questions for administrations. There's no point in reading high moral lectures without mentioning the existence of low practical problems. But this doesn't mean there can't be - indeed, must be - that great highway of digital information set flowing free and easy. It can't be stopped. It can only be partially staunched for a short futile time. So, in reality, it has to be embraced.

A newspaper which claims that black is white faces the immediate question of tweets, blogs, of Facebook and Linked In, of the gathering weight of social media, undermining all trust in a trice. You can lie or self-censor for whatever reason. But you will be exposed. You will be despised and tossed away. If you write or publish to be believed, and thus to have influence, you can and will see the reason for your existence demolished. And, of course, the same penalties are there for governments round the world as well. Trust means understanding and acceptance; trust undermined, in the end, means resentment and defiance; distrust means trouble.

Let's go back for a moment to Spycatcher and Mrs Margaret Thatcher. Then, defeat came infinitely slowly over years -through long court battles fought and lost. In the beginning, Mrs Thatcher played the national security card. She said that publication of this book would make us all less safe. And, of course, it's a claim that ordinary people listen to - at least at first. But gradually, as copies of Peter Wright's revelations began to spread from country to country, as more and more people in more and more nations knew what the book said and could assess it for themselves, so that feeling of respect evaporated. This was all ludicrous, wasn't it? This was a bad joke. And today, via the internet, it doesn't take months or years to see the joke. You can have the punch line in your lap within seconds. The gap between respect and ribald laughter comes in a heartbeat. Freedom of real information isn't some slow burn on the statute book. It is instantaneous reality.

And, naturally, there are big questions to be answered. One, within national contexts, is how governments will deal with this change in the information game. Do you abandon the norms of democratic behaviour and move further and faster towards autocracy - bullying a cowed press to follow suit? Or do you, as a matter of conviction

and consideration, choose to go with the flow of information, to treat your citizens as free, independent people in a free, independent state?

The latest assessments of direction from around the world are none too encouraging. Twenty years ago you might have said democracy was on a roll and dictatorships were slipping back. Today that balance looks rather more muddled. But look a little closer and you'll see that the failures and the frailties are amongst poorer, smaller nations affected by world economic crisis, whilst the struggle to sustain freedoms in bigger, more pivotal states remains closely engaged. In short, if you have ambition to gain respect and wealth, then you need your digital connections. And those connections have - obviously - to be connected to the wider world.

Now, what I'm arguing here about the relationship between the digital revolution and the business of print and broadcast journalism is a universal point because it applies in country after country - in Britain as much as Brazil, in Germany as much as Argentina. The pressures to take the same route forward, and eventually to begin to harmonise legal bases so that the law moves in step, are formidable. Maybe we don't always think that when we talk about "globalisation" - but it is, in fact, a powerful driver of media freedoms.

However, I'm here today in Turkey celebrating the memory of a great Turkish journalist, Mehmet Ali Birand. So obviously there are immediate relevancies all around me now - not least in new measures to exert instant political control over internet postings, against a broader context of growing concerns about Turkish attachment to the media necessities of democracy. Government bans on Twitter, Facebook and the rest in the tragic Kiraz case and other crises too - not to mention the moves against a free print press - were reported right round the world.

I want to put those concerns in a context - the simple context of looking at a map or opening a newspaper. Turkey has a turbulent history and is ringed by turbulent borders. It is, perforce, having to play a role in the terrible conflicts raging on its southern borders. It is bearing astonishing burdens. I don't like to think how Britain, far, far away, would cope with these pressures. I know that context matters.

Yet the broader context of modern Turkish history matters too. I've been visiting Turkey occasionally for three decades now: sometimes attending press freedom conferences, sometimes as a lecturer, sometimes - indeed the last time - leading an inquiry delegation from the International Press Institute. I've had a chance, then, to contrast the old, vulnerable days of democracy with the spasms of military rule - and to fit the present day into that framework. And one thing both impresses and frustrates me. Turkey has nurtured many fine journalists, operating to the highest world standards. Mehmet Ali Birand is one amongst many, past and present. It can boast a newspaper scene with the capacity to be as vibrant as any in Europe. Its broadcasters compete with rare energy. In short, there is much to envy, and huge potential for success.

Turkey, standing where it does, reflecting the interests it does, is wonderfully poised to become a new media hub for vital areas of the world. It is a tiger in waiting. Potentially, it is a strong and free regional power of huge importance. The record of its great movie-making - just think *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* or *Winter Sleep* - commands deep admiration. Its writers, too, have global reputations. Artistically, creatively, Turkey stands tall.

But what about politically? Too easily the promise of the future can be snatched away, lost in prolonged bouts of internalised anxiety and repression. Once you begin to look only inwards, the ability to lead and inspire fades away - and the practical risk of derisive laughter grows. Leaders and governments who become figures of fun - the natural objects of laughter - have a real problem. Mrs Thatcher found that out over *Spycatcher* - as her attempts to ban it turned to farce. The Modi government's attempts to ban India's *Daughter* followed the same path to comic defeat. And what about hashtag [#Twitterisblockedinturkey](#) as a symbol of instant fun? Who wants to be defied and defeated within seconds? Who wants to be condemned round the world? Who wants to be the middle aged leader of a middle aged government that - like Lord Justice Leveson - hasn't quite come to terms with the internet yet? Who wants to be laughed at by the young on their smartphones? Practically, it's a no-brainer.

Perhaps, as is argued, the Turkish government is cleverer than that. Perhaps its overall aim is to demonise social media rather than mismanage endless bans. Perhaps ordinary, trusting will learn to distrust the affairs, the tapes, the commentaries them see tweeting down the line. Perhaps. But it's a intellectual, educational *cul de sac*, a defence going nowhere.

And so there's one more reason why I view the struggles of Turkish journalism with alarm: not just because anti-freedom legislation and the self-censorship of pressurised proprietors aren't real problems on any stage, not just because the clamour of creative voices should never be stilled - but because of the waste you find down this road - the waste of talent, the waste of passion, the waste of aspiration. The ever-expanding internet, the ever-increasing linkage of information between nations, isn't a threat. It is opportunity.

It's the opportunity to grow in reputation and influence. The opportunity to export ideas, initiatives, approaches. The opportunity to do great work. The internet offers us all a chance for openness and communication the like of which we have never experienced. That chance must be rooted in freedom. It will be lost if it founders in covert deals between politicians and the giants of service provision. The stakes here, for nation after nation, are huge,

the opportunities are great and alluring. Turkey, clinging to freedom, can be the sort of place that new Mehmet Ali Birands can flourish in, an empire of excellence and ambition. Freedom isn't the barrier here. Freedom is the key.