

Attacks on the Press are now global.
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Throughout history, the legitimacy of rulers had nothing to do with behavior, but with bloodline or conquest. Kings and emperors ruled, sometimes with the guidance of counselors, but more often with no overt opposition. There was opposition, of course, but clandestine, coming from rivals for the throne or (rarely) from public outrage.

We must consult folk tales to glimpse how ordinary people might have felt about their rulers. Many tales talk about evil rulers, who are eventually overturned by a hero. My favorite, however, is the tale of the little boy who was part of a crowd watching a silly, vain, king march down the road in his underwear. His royal tailors had told him that they were producing extraordinary clothes for him, and their con convinced him that these invisible garments were beautiful. As he walked down the street in his underwear, a child piped up: "Why is the King naked?" The public hesitated and then roared with laughter. This is the first case in history of speaking truth to power.

The British were the first to actually permit freedom of speech (except in war) and came up with the phrase "loyal opposition." The profession of journalist emerged in the 18th century and newspapers came into being. Our country's founders followed the British system of permitting loyal opposition, which our newspapers provided. President Jefferson thought so well of journalism that he said that if he had to choose between press freedom and the country itself, he would choose press freedom.

Of course, this was idealistic. In reality, even this good institution can be corrupted by money and politics, which Jefferson himself employed, to his discredit.

Today, however, the press around the world has been reminded of its duty to speak truth to power. Main-stream journalists everywhere are walking on eggs to expose truths that citizens need to know. Journalists, particularly those who investigate issues needing airing, are being harassed, jailed, and murdered in alarming numbers. The world's most authoritarian rulers have borrowed a leaf from our own anti-press president in calling anything they do not like "fake news." In reality, however, the only "fake news" being disseminated is the eruption of conspiracy theories created by these very rulers.

The most dangerous countries for investigative journalists are Mexico, Russia, and Turkey. In Mexico, drug cartels do the murdering. In Russia and Turkey, journalists are jailed and not infrequently murdered. In countries without any pretense of participatory governance, China and most Muslim-majority countries, journalists and newspapers are intimidated into obedience, toeing the government's line. Journalists risk their freedom, if not their lives, by speaking truth to power.

Two disgusting press intimidators are Duterte, the elected (but now dictatorial) president of the Philippines, and General Sissi, dictator of Egypt. Duterte calls all newspaper reports of his violations of the law "fake news." It is now open season on journalists who dare expose his lawlessness. General Sissi, locked up an academic economist who wrote a book critical of Sissi's economic policies. "Fake News!" said Sissi. This goes beyond attacking the press, but is the beginning of a new campaign, muzzling academics.

In a number of studies about how fascism can overturn a democracy, the best case studies are how Germany, a democracy after World War I, lost its freedom when a populist, vulgar loudmouth, Adolf Hitler, first intimidated the press and then the justice system (removing judges and installing his choices instead).

The institutions that protect freedom are an elected congress, a professional and independent judiciary, a professional press, and public vigilance in voting. Tampering with any one of these is a warning sign of an authoritarian takeover.

We must not avert our gaze from a president who regularly trashes the press, claims all news he dislikes "fake news," and condemns any institution that criticizes him: the entire Democratic party, judges who rule against him (or he claims will not be fair because of their ancestral heritage), and his own Justice Department. The only fake news comes from his daily torrent of lies and conspiracy theories.

Only vigilance can protect our remarkable freedoms.

680 words

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