

The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Challenges of British Press Freedom

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Abstract. This paper discusses the history of press freedom in Britain. The article first defines the importance of the freedom of the press, and then reviews the history of the development of the freedom of the press in Britain. From the censorship of the press in the 16th century to the stamp duty in the 18th century, the government restricted the freedom of the press in various ways. After the 19th century, with the development of journalism, the government gradually relaxed its control over the news. In the 20th century, with the emergence of new media, press freedom was strengthened. But the government still tries to influence news content, such as limiting coverage of terrorism. The advent of automated journalism has also affected press freedom. In general, press freedom in the UK is still under the influence of government control and commercial interests.

Keywords: British Press freedom, government control, commercial interests, automated journalism.

1. Introduction

In a democratic society, the press performs a vital role. It disseminates a wide range of information and viewpoints to the general public and aids in informing citizens about political, economic, and social events. However, the press has never been truly free. Throughout the history of the British press, many limits and repressions have been imposed on press freedom. This paper will look at the history and current situation of press freedom, as well as how it affects society and democracy. To begin, the essay will build on the concept of press and media freedom, using the definition of the press and media to better comprehend the need for and value of media freedom. The article then places press freedom in the context of the history of the development of the British press and discusses changes in media freedom during several key periods in the press's development, focusing on the impact of censorship and paper and stamp duties on the press to better understand why the press has never achieved true freedom. In addition, the article will look at the new advances and limitations of press freedom in today's society. Second, the study will look at the causes behind press constraints, such as political, economic, cultural, and technological considerations. It will also compare and contrast the media in different countries. Finally, the paper will underline that while the press has never truly been free, greater freedom and justice may be reached in the future as the media continues to reflect and evolve.

2. Challenges to Press Independence: Balancing Truth, Government Control, and Commercial Interests in Journalism

In theory, the news media should be independent, with the freedom to publish the truth, uncover wrongdoing, and monitor government actions [1]. However, many news organisations confront a variety of constraints and demands. Governments, financial interests, and other power structures can all have an impact on how the news media reports. On the one hand, governments can limit press freedom by filtering and controlling media content in order to achieve political goals. Commercial interests, on the other hand, can affect news coverage. For example, the news media may choose to cover select specific events while ignoring others for the advantage of advertising and sponsors. Furthermore, the news media is vulnerable to defamation and litigation, which may limit their ability to convey the truth. Throughout the history of journalism in the United Kingdom, the media has faced

governmental and economic constraints. Although the United Kingdom has traditionally been regarded as a free and open country, the press has not been entirely free. Previously, the government enacted a slew of rules and regulations to stifle media development and freedom, including the Newspaper Publication Act, the Press Act, and censorship [2]. The 1649 Act against Unlicensed and Scandalous Books and Pamphlets, which increased control over books and newspapers, was also included [3]. These laws and regulations restricted the content and form of the press, as well as freedom of expression. It stopped the press from exercising its proper job. Citizens are unable to monitor their government and learn the truth about social events, compromising citizens' access to knowledge in a free and democratic society. This is why press freedom is so important.

3. Evolution and Challenges of Media Freedom in Britain: From Censorship to Contemporary Constraints

Britain is a liberal democracy with a centuries-long legacy of liberty and openness. However, despite the vital role that the media has played throughout British history, it has never been truly free for a long time, and democratic liberties and a constrained press have always developed and suffered at odds. Curbs on media freedom can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when the British Parliament passed an act that prohibited the printing of any publication that had not been approved by the government and imposed strict controls on the number of publications, requiring publishers to apply for prior permission from the government [3]. This act resulted in the regulation and control of the publishing business in England, as well as the government's ability to regulate the media. As politics and society changed in the 17th century, censorship of books and newspapers became more stringent. In 1655, Oliver Cromwell ordered that all publications be censored by the government and closely controlled by the army, and he strictly outlawed news books. The public had little access to political news events that were genuinely reported by the media under his regime. Following that, the British government continued to restrict all publications, including books, newspapers, and pamphlets, among other things. As journalism and publishing increased in the 18th century, censorship of books and newspapers encountered increasing obstacles and was gradually shifting away from government authority. The public's need for news could not be supplied, resulting in a flood of news and publications. The government found it difficult to regulate and filter all of this material, which resulted in a gradual loss of authority over the publishing and journalism industries through censorship. Censorship, a system that restricted the substance and scope of news coverage, hampered press freedom. The nomenclature of the system may have changed, but the thrust of media control has not. The media had to avoid reporting on politically sensitive and other sensitive themes, and it was difficult to depict social reality and public opinion realistically, which harmed the media's credibility and reliability. Second, it limits the media's freedom and autonomy. Censorship permits the government to intervene at any time in the work and administration of the media, affecting the media's independent analysis and assessment of events and occasionally leading to skewed reporting [4] Most importantly, being subjected to stringent censorship raises the expense and strain placed on the media. To prevent censure and punishment, the media must incur additional expenditures and efforts, such as hiring more editors and lawyers to undertake audits and reviews, which adds to the media's operational costs and burdens.

In the twenty-first century, the constraints on press freedom in the United Kingdom are mainly reflected in the legal framework, the establishment of regulatory bodies, and the specific regulations on the behaviour of the media. These constraints are designed to protect freedom of expression while ensuring that individual rights are not infringed, public order is maintained, and the quality and accuracy of journalism is safeguarded. These include several acts: Defamation Act 2013: Defamation law is an important aspect of the restrictions on press freedom, aimed at preventing false or misleading information from damaging the reputation of an individual or organisation [5]. The 2013 legal reforms attempted to balance freedom of expression with the protection of an individual's reputation by creating a clearer defence for news organisations. explicit defences. Data Protection Act 2018: this

law regulates the way in which personal data is processed, placing restrictions on news organisations when collecting, using and storing personal information, particularly in stories involving sensitive personal data [6]. These legal constraints find a balance between protecting freedom of expression and upholding other values in society. Through a combination of legal, regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms, the UK attempts to ensure that freedom of reporting and responsible journalistic practices is simultaneously supported.

4. The influence of British tax law on press freedom

4.1. Paper Tax and Stamp Duties: The Economic Burden and Government Control in British Journalism

The paper tax and stamp duties were another notable press regulation in the history of journalism. Newspapers were carefully controlled and restricted in circulation in the eighteenth century, and a tax on paper was introduced to boost the price of newspapers, the cost of which rose considerably. This Act imposed a tax on all printed paper, the rate of which was determined by the quality and size of the paper. The manner in which the tax is collected has also altered, with the collector being able to inspect and collect it straight from the printer or publisher. As a result, the economic cost of newspapers climbed, and news media companies had to find ways to better their economic foundation if they wanted to continue, allowing governments to exert greater influence over the media. Some governments provide financial incentives to media outlets that create politically sympathetic pieces, resulting in many newspaper articles that are favourable to the government. Politicians, for example, would provide attractive funding to newspapers in order to cover up their own scandals. Furthermore, these statutes included penalties for breaching the paper tax laws, such as fines or closure for printers or publishers who broke the requirements. These actions reinforced the government's hold over the media even more. This bill has resulted in certain changes in the ownership of some news media. Some significant media organisations were owned by a few affluent families or corporations as a result of escalating economic costs [7]. Through their control of the media, these families or companies can mould public opinion. Curran contends that if newspapers were owned by businessmen, they would be unable to address the requirements of the public while reaping the benefits of advertising. However, this scenario persisted for a long time, until the paper tax was repealed in 1861. The paper tax and stamp duty increased the cost of all printed products substantially, particularly for media such as newspapers, which required a large amount of printed paper. Many small newspapers were unable to bear the cost strain and were forced to close, limiting the number and diversity of media. On the one hand, this has resulted in more government control over the media, with the Paper Tax Act providing the government more influence over the media and the potential to silence specific media outlets by taxing them. As a result, the media's independence and freedom have been limited, and the media's position has shifted from that of a watchdog to that of a tool of the government. On the other side, the adoption of the paper tax has resulted in a major decline in circulation for many media outlets, resulting in a loss of influence and social standing for the media. This has had a negative influence on media freedom because the range of information broadcast by the media has narrowed, the public has fewer outlets through which to obtain information, and the people's right to information has been weakened.

4.2. 21st century UK tax law

In the 21st century, UK tax law for journalism has become significantly different from the paper and stamp duties that were historically used to restrict press freedom. Paper and stamp duties were designed to restrict the flow of information by taxing newspapers and other publications, which posed a significant barrier to press freedom and public debate at the time. However, with the rise of digital media and the relative decline in the influence of print media, the UK's tax laws on journalism have changed. It is now more focussed on supporting the growth of the media industry and promoting the free flow of information. Examples include VAT relief. The UK has introduced a zero VAT rate on

print publications such as books, newspapers and journals to support education and the dissemination of knowledge. From 2020, the UK government has officially announced a zero-tax rate on e-books and online news publications [8]. By reducing the tax burden, these measures encourage diversity and quality in news content. Lower costs mean that smaller and independent publishers are able to enter the market more easily, which promotes a diversity of views, topics and styles of reporting. Such price reductions contribute to the free flow of information and enhance the public's ability to access, share and discuss news. In addition, news organisations can reinvest the savings in investigative reporting and the production of high-quality content, raising standards across the industry [9].

Although direct taxation of news publications has been abolished, the government still taxes online advertising and digital services. An example of this is the digital services tax on large tech companies [10]. Against this backdrop, the government and industry organisations have explored a variety of support measures, including tax incentives, financial grants and training programmes, to promote media diversity, journalistic quality and sustainability in the industry. Overall, UK tax law and policy in the 21st century is more orientated towards supporting the news industry by reducing the tax burden, providing incentives and promoting technological innovation, rather than restricting press freedom through taxation. This reflects a recognition of the importance of freedom of the press and public debate, as well as the need to support journalism in the digital age.

5. Twentieth Century British Media: Evolution, Challenges, and the Quest for Freedom and Ethics

The character of British media changed during the twentieth century. More and more newspapers became loosely linked with political parties, and many newspapers' contents became mostly entertainment-oriented, although the purpose of most newspapers remained to disseminate political events. Press criticism and government advice remained confined to an ideology that upheld capitalism, and no newspaper ventured to attack society too harshly. Only in the late twentieth century did media independence become more secure. People may also increasingly express themselves on a multitude of venues with the emergence of new media. However, a number of events have demonstrated that new technologies and politics have hampered media freedom in the United Kingdom. For example, the Newsworld affair, which revealed that the newspaper had reportedly unlawfully tapped mobile phones in 2011, sparked broad public concern about media ethics and freedom [11]. The publication was accused of obtaining personal information and privacy through illegal techniques, such as tapping the victim's phone and accessing his or her private emails. These claims and allegations were sparked by reports from members of the Royal family, but it was later proven that this unlawful eavesdropping extended to politicians, celebrities, police officers, victims' families, and other persons. A number of people were arrested and tried as a result of the incident, including newspaper editors and executives. The probe also uncovered allegations of bribery of police officers and others engaged in order to get additional information and exclusives. These actions violate not only the right to privacy, but also journalistic ethics and professionalism. Freedom of the press is inextricably linked to human rights, and freedom of the press is also carried out in order to better protect privacy, which cannot be achieved if people's privacy and security are not secured. Through this tragedy, the government has also reinforced media sector regulation and censorship in order to restore public faith and respect for the media. Furthermore, the British government has attempted to limit some media coverage, such as terrorism coverage during the London Olympics. Similar incidents may not have been intended to undermine citizens' trust in the government or provoke public fear, but they did damage citizens' right to know the truth about events. These occurrences demonstrate that media freedom in the United Kingdom continues to confront obstacles and limits. However, media freedom has evolved, and changes in social ideals have had a significant impact on this. Women's liberation, LGBT rights, and multiculturalism generated criticism of the press in the late twentieth century for its inclination to maintain traditional beliefs while ignoring the

need for diversity and inclusion in society. This critique has been more pronounced in the twenty-first century, as the media has been pushed to re-examine their ideals and positions, as well as seek a more objective and comprehensive approach to reporting.

6. Automated Journalism: Impacts on Media Freedom and News Quality in the Digital Era

The rise of automated journalism in today's society has also prompted new thoughts regarding news media freedom. Automated journalism is the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning technology to generate news material autonomously [12]. Although automated news has some advantages, it has better efficiency and lower costs. Automated journalism represents technological innovation that can expand the reporting capacity of news organisations, increase productivity, and enable news to cover a wider range of topics and events due to large databases. From this perspective, automated news technology helps to enhance the freedom of expression of the news media and provide the public with a wider range of information and perspectives. For starters, automated journalism tends to standardise and homogenise news information. Because algorithms construct news material based on previous data, they frequently overlook critical subtleties and elements such as culture, history, and context. As a result, certain news items may lack depth and variety, as well as crucial facts and explanations, influencing the public's comprehension and judgement. Algorithm-generated news may be stiff and devoid of emotional content. Second, because algorithms tend to forecast the future based on existing data, automated news might provide distorted and deceptive news information. If there are flaws or biases in earlier data, automated news may repeat these faults and biases and perhaps increase the likelihood of making errors. This can result in inaccurate and misleading news content, undermining public trust and the media's reputation. Finally, computerised journalism may result in newsroom layoffs and the commercialization of the news industry. Because automated journalism can considerably lower the cost and time of news production, some media firms may be tempted to employ it to save expenses and boost efficiency, resulting in the loss of some news professionals. Furthermore, automated journalism tends to make news media more commercial because it is easier to generate big amounts of information to attract advertisers and viewers without having to examine the content's quality and value.

It is worth thinking about the issue of editorial control and attribution of responsibility for automated news. When the news generation process is automated, editorial control over the content may become blurred. In the case of errors or disputes, the attribution of responsibility may be unclear [13]. While a bot does not have "true malice," its designers may have. The stories published by robots may appear to be fair and objective, but humans often implant their own biases in automated systems. This poses a potential risk to media organisations. And when news generated by algorithms is published but goes awry, the designers have a reason to escape liability replacing it with a computer problem. Some laws may not apply in such cases.

The BBC conducted an experimental project called "Juicer", which crawled articles from the BBC and other news websites, automatically extracting key information and reassembling it to generate new news content (bbcnewslabs.co.uk, n.d.). This project demonstrates the potential of automated technologies to process large amounts of data and deliver fast news, but it also sparks debate about content originality, quality control and algorithmic transparency. These technologies can help news organisations process large amounts of information more efficiently, discover and explore connections between news stories, and provide richer, more diverse content to the public. But the downsides of automated journalism have also been identified in this practice. For example, automated capture and reuse of content involves issues of copyright and intellectual property rights.

Clear accountability and regulatory mechanisms can help maintain the quality and accuracy of news content, which is essential to maintaining public trust and press freedom. The development of automated journalism is a megatrend, and ensuring both media freedom and high-quality journalism will require measures from multiple sources, including media organisations, technology providers

and regulators.[14] For example, improving the transparency of algorithms and data-processing processes so that the public and regulators understand how news is being generated by automation. Secondly, regular algorithm audits should be conducted to identify and correct possible biases or errors. Most importantly, legal and policy frameworks should be developed and updated to clarify the responsibilities and obligations of all parties in the automated news generation process.

7. Challenges to Press Freedom: Economic, Political, and Legal Influences on Global Media

As a result of the preceding discussion, it is evident that the press has not been fully free for a variety of reasons. Organisations in the news media have economic, social, and political relationships that cannot be removed. On the one hand, economic and commercial interests restrain the press. By monopolising the market and regulating the flow of information, large media conglomerates impact the content and coverage of the media. Media conglomerates have some control over popular perceptions of social and political issues, and their owners and managers shape these perceptions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a huge number of newspapers were controlled by politicians and wealthy businesspeople, which meant that they were used to promote specific views or policies rather than just give news. In order to safeguard their political and financial interests, these newspapers tend to limit their coverage of politically sensitive themes, while stories that favour the government and commercial interests receive more attention. Restrictions on the news media, on the other hand, can be both legal and illegal. Legal constraints may include restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, as well as censorship and media regulation. Governments in some nations may overtly restrict press freedom for political reasons by banning and restricting media content. In Pakistan, for example, the press is still tightly controlled by the government and the military and is exposed to criminal threats [15]. Violence, threats, and defamation are examples of illegal restraints. Journalists may experience physical attacks or threats in some situations, which may dissuade them from reporting on controversial issues or occurrences. The news industry has faced numerous obstacles, and governments and companies may attempt to limit press freedom in order to defend their own interests.

8. The Role of a Free Press in Uncovering Truth: A Reflection on the Film 'Spotlight' and Its Portrayal of Investigative Journalism

Social media can quickly propagate misleading information and inaccurate news in the digital era, which may have an impact on the free development of the news industry. *Spotlight*, a 2015 American biographical drama, chronicles The Boston Globe's Spotlight Team, an investigative team that revealed the truth about a series of clerical child sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in Boston between 2001 and 2002[16]. The Spotlight Team members spend a significant amount of time and effort in the film gathering evidence, interviewing victims and witnesses, and studying documents, ultimately exposing the dark side of the Church's years of covering up clerical child sex abuse. The film also shows how some of those involved are accused of concealing the facts, allowing these crimes to continue. The film as a whole underline the value of a free press and the critical role it plays in revealing the truth and disseminating information [17]. The video is a fantastic example of how the news media faces significant obstacles while reporting on real-life incidents, and how few people stand up for the truth and dare to speak up.

9. Interconnection of Media Freedom, Human Rights, and Freedom of Expression: Ensuring Transparency and Accountability

Human rights and freedom of expression must also be mentioned while discussing media freedom. It is clear to see that the stronger a country's regard for human rights, the larger its media freedom.

Freedom of the press is an important component of human rights and a fundamental instrument for human rights promotion and protection, and the two interact. Media freedom is a crucial guarantee of freedom of expression and information. The freedom and independence of the media is critical to ensuring that people have access to accurate and true information. When the media is restricted or controlled, the public does not have access to a diverse range of information, preventing people from exercising their right to free expression and information [18]. Transparency and accountability for human rights are aided by media freedom. The media can help to hold governments and other authorities accountable by reporting on and researching issues such as corruption, abuse of authority, and violations of the law [19]. Governments and other power structures can hide the truth and cover up problems if the media is restricted or controlled, undermining human rights transparency and accountability. The media can reflect and express the voices and interests of many social groups, encouraging understanding and inclusion among them. When media freedom is restricted or regulated, minority groups' rights and interests may be disregarded or suppressed, undermining the diversity and inclusivity of human rights. According to Dawes (2014), the press and the public can only be truly free if they consider how the press and the individual are free from the market and the state, emphasising the active freedom to be accountable to political and economic power and the passive freedom from political and economic intervention [20].

The case of Julian Assange is one of the most controversial and high-profile examples in recent years of the debate over press freedom and human rights. Assange is the founder of WikiLeaks, a website that since 2006 has released a large number of classified documents revealing sensitive information about governments and corporations, including the U.S. Some of WikiLeaks's most famous series of leaks include the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs of 2007, the leaks of U.S. diplomatic cables in 2010, and the later the most famous series of WikiLeaks leaks include the 2007 Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, the 2010 leak of U.S. diplomatic cables, and later the "Surveillance Revealed" documents [21]. These publicly available documents revealed important information including war crimes, political manipulation, and espionage, sparking global concern and controversy.

Assange's actions are seen by some as a victory for freedom of the press and transparency, as they expose opacity and misconduct in government behaviour and promote public scrutiny of government actions. Assange himself has defined the work of WikiLeaks as a form of journalism designed to promote democracy and transparency by exposing hidden truths. However, another segment of the population has criticised Assange's actions for endangering national security, personal privacy and diplomatic relations, arguing that the large-scale, unscreened leak of sensitive information is irresponsible. These critics emphasise that freedom of the press should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility, especially when dealing with information that may pose a threat to personal safety [22]. In 2010, his extradition was sought in Sweden on sexual assault charges, although these charges were later dropped. More importantly, Assange faced the threat of extradition for his WikiLeaks-related activities to the U.S., where he could be sentenced to a lengthy prison term for espionage and other charges. In 2012, Assange evaded extradition by entering the Ecuadorian Embassy in London to seek political asylum, where he resided for nearly seven years until his arrest in 2019. His supporters have argued that the hunt for Assange and potential extradition is an attack on press freedom, especially for journalists and activists who expose government misconduct. They also point to Assange's living conditions and deteriorating health inside the embassy, as well as the legal pursuit of him, as violations of his basic human rights [23].

The relationship between press freedom and human rights is complex. And through this case, it highlights the challenges that press freedom faces in the 21st century, especially in the digital age when information can circulate quickly across national boundaries. The debate it has generated centres on how to balance freedom of the press, the public interest, national security and individual privacy [24]. At the same time, the case demonstrates how, in the quest for transparency and accountability, the rights and freedoms of individuals who take personal risks to reveal vital information can be protected.

10. Conclusion

Overall, in the history of British journalism, the press has never truly been free. Government limitations, business and political interests, and changes in social ideals have all hampered press freedom to some extent. This essay begins with a meditation on media freedom through some of the most significant incidents in journalism history. It then investigates the new advances and constraints of freedom in today's society in light of the rise of the news media. It also examines the various reasons why media freedom has been restricted. It is possible to conclude that both government and commercial interests have imposed limits on media freedom in order to influence media content and coverage. However, because the media is a crucial source of information and independent thought for citizens, its freedom and independence should be safeguarded. Media freedom is still an essential issue in today's society, and there is a need to investigate better ways to protect media freedom while also upholding citizens' rights to knowledge and independent thought. As it continues to reflect and progress, the media will be able to achieve greater freedom and impartiality in a broader societal context.

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