

Is world media freedom in retreat?

By Lydia Polzer

If someone had asked me to name the greatest threat to media freedom 15 years ago, I might have replied: a socialist regime, a dictatorship. I grew up on a remote farm in socialist East Germany. My father had decided to move the family home there, and to within the limited area of reception for West German television. He had never been someone to keep his opinions to himself - his belief in free expression had cost him his own freedom on one occasion when it landed him in a Stasi prison for some days.

From the remoteness of our rural existence, out of the way of the prying eyes of spies, we would watch the West German TV broadcasts. It was the only way to get a sense of what was going on in the world.

Everyone knew that the national newspaper hardly did anything but announce the great successes of socialism - yet another five-year plan target exceeded, yet another delegation of friends from our socialist neighbour countries welcomed. It all bore very little resemblance to the realities we knew. Too little resemblance to be believed.

The content of this newspaper - Neues Deutschland (New Germany) it was called - betrayed a concept of truth that had become seriously warped. But to some, the paper's version of events, the socialist truth, was still something they believed or wanted to believe - just as God might be the truth to a devout religious believer. My father chose not to believe.

As a consequence, news media played only a small role in my early years. That was far from a bad thing. Surrounded by a general distrust of the media of my own country, I realised that fact was not always fact, truth not always truth. It made me grow wary of most information broadcast to a wider audience in print or on radio or TV. It made me question facts and figures by default, made me look for the other side of the story - because there always was one.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was the long-awaited ticket to freedom, a happy day. Finally, everyone would be able to speak their mind without fear. Finally, we would always know the truth about everything. I do think that was part of what most people imagined as they walked unhindered through the checkpoints into the West for the first time in 40 years.

One must forgive us such naivety. How were we to know any better? But we learned fast. With four million people becoming unemployed in the wake of privatisation, we learnt that the fear of speaking your mind was gone, only to be replaced by the fear of unemployment. For many East Germans, the realisation dawned that you weren't very likely to use your freedom of speech while waiting in the dole queue. You had other things on your mind.

And, while we were wary of anything that came under the mantle of socialist truth, we seemed to have endless trust in anything coming from the West. Forty years of institutionalised lies had made us gullible to the simple twisting of the truth that a second-hand car salesman might use, or a politician after his share of the vote.

From the other side of the Iron Curtain, the West had seemed pure, honest and free. When Helmut Kohl spoke of "blooming landscapes" in the parliamentary debate about the Two Plus Four Agreement on 21 June 1990, which paved the way for reunification, it instantly became a media buzzword.

And even though I'm sure we knew he wasn't the Messiah, we were prepared to follow him into the promised land. Somehow, the fact that what he had said was printed in the free, uncensored press and repeated again and again on West German television turned his promise into something that would definitely become reality. If there were doubts, then surely the democratic and free media would be voicing them, we thought.

My West German uncle gave my father gift subscriptions to the major national newspapers, but my father chose not to renew them after they ran out a year later. Again, he chose not to believe.

By now, we were beginning to understand that it didn't take a dictatorship to curtail the freedom of the press. Was a newspaper under economic pressure to survive in a free market economy really going to print what needed to be said, or would it say what would sell the largest amount of copies?

So there is no government official hovering over the editors in the newsroom making sure they toe the party line - but is the absence of political censorship synonymous with media freedom?

Maybe when we are asking what threatens a free media, we are really trying to establish what the media needs to be free from. It is not just the political but also the social and economic context in which the media are operating that determines the extent and nature of its freedom.

The media will always be a reinforcing part and a reflection of the political and economic system within which it operates. The hopes pinned on the media as a tool for a more democratic society should not be too high.

I for one still make sure I see any media output in its wider context and take it with a pinch of salt, always bearing in mind the complex process behind producing it.

But that is not to give the media carte blanche and absolve them from all responsibility. In the light of the increased, indeed global, reach of media messages, everyone involved in producing these messages has a great responsibility to their own understanding of freedom and to their own conscience to make sure what they publish or broadcast, hand on heart, is as free of ulterior motives, as free of bias and as free of vested interests as it can be.