

Chapter 5

The Relationship between Press Freedom and Corruption

The Perception of Journalism Students

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‘Without journalists working all over the world, we hardly would be able to expose corruption’, one employee at Transparency International (TI) says, addressing one of the biggest threats to welfare and prosperity within nations and societies – corruption. But the relationship between corruption and a free and independent press is complex, and the safety of journalists reporting on corruption is an issue for concern and deeper reflections.

In February 2012, two television journalists, Sagar Sarwar and his wife Meherun Runi, were murdered in Dhaka, Bangladesh, while they were investigating corruption within their own governmental institutions (BBC News 2012). The murderers have never been prosecuted, and journalists who have tried to dig into the situation have been threatened, harassed and lost their jobs.

The same year, 2012, the Tunisian blogger Olfa Riahi went to court because she reported that Tunisia’s foreign minister, Rafik Abdessalem, had spent public money for private purposes (the ‘Sheraton gate’). Abdessalem’s father in law, Ennahda’s party leader Rachid Ghannouchi, urged flogging of the blogger (*Al Arabiya News* 2012). According to Reporters sans Frontières (RSF), four years after initiating ‘The Arab Spring’, Tunisia’s journalists experienced threats (RSF 2017).

In Norway in 2005, three journalists in *Aftenposten* revealed that the head of the Romerike Waterworks, owned by the nearby municipalities, was guilty of corruption. He was later sentenced to almost eight years imprisonment and the journalists were awarded the SKUP prize¹.

William Horsley reports that between 2006 and 2009 a total of 244 journalists in 36 countries were killed, yet only eight convictions related to those deaths were recorded (Horsley 2014:149). Hence, impunity is the rule not the exception. Looking at the last twelve years, more than 1,100 journalists, including media staff, have been killed in the line of duty worldwide, according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)². The International Federation of Journalists reports that the killed journalists were covering conflicts, investigating crime, and exposing corruption in politics, and

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were often murdered by contracted assassins. ‘A press freedom violation can be an assassin’s bullet, aimed to kill an investigative journalist’ or ‘it can be a knock on the door’ (the IFJ website). Journalists and civic organizations, especially those who reveal corruption and crime, are the main target of violence, Norris writes (2010:117, 315).

Comparing a high rank on the corruption scale (TI’s Annual Reports) with the level of press freedom (RSF’s Annual Reports) demonstrates the relationship between these issues.

In this chapter, two research questions are at the fore: 1: Do the students have the same perceptions, ideals and values about press freedom? 2: Do the students make any connection between press freedom and corruption? (For methodology and material, see appendices.)

Press freedom and corruption – what do we know?

One dictionary definition on press freedom states that it is ‘the right to publish newspapers, magazines and other printed matter without governmental restriction and subject only to the laws of libel, obscenity, sedition, etc’ (Dictionary.com Unabridged 2016). This dictionary’s definition does not take into account broadcast and digital media, which beside the printed press, are the main subjects of the annual Freedom House reports covering 199 countries and territories (2016).

Published since 1980, these reports have on an annual basis evaluated the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence reporting, and economic factors that affect access to news and information.

According to Brunetti and Weder (2003), restrictions of press freedom come in many disguises. In many countries, the press is regulated through an array of laws, many of which claim to protect national security, personal privacy or even the truth.

The global coalition against corruption, Transparency International, defines corruption as ‘the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. It can be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amounts of money lost and the sector where it occurs’ (TI 2016).

Mancini debates the relationship between media and corruption and lists certain variables and contextual conditions that can affect such a relationship: the ‘socio-economic structure, political and religious culture’ (Podumljak 2014). He also mentions that corruption in a European context more often occurs in Catholic countries than Protestant ones (ibid).

However, as demonstrated above, corruption also occurs in a wealthy, Protestant country like Norway. In 2012, Transparency International Norway (TIN) made the first national study of the country’s system of integrity. This was one of 23 Transparency International studies in Europe at the time and resulted in individual profiles on corruption for the countries involved. The report on Norway, noting the small extent of corruption in its institutions, legal systems and business sector, had the subtitle: ‘not

quite perfect' (TIN 2012:33, 3). One of the findings was that although the Norwegian media did not have special programmes with explicit objectives to inform the population about corruption and its impact on society, 'there is a good reason to assert that the media succeeded well in informing the population about this' (ibid:265).

Out of 154 countries scrutinized by Transparency International in 2015, Bangladesh was ranked 139, Tunisia 76 and Norway 5 (TI 2016). Reporters sans Frontières' index on press freedom 2015 demonstrated a similar placement in the ranking system: out of a total of 180 countries, Bangladesh was number 144, Tunisia number 96 and Norway number 3 (RSF 2017). The three countries can be understood as one far out on the negative side regarding press freedom and corruption (Bangladesh), one approximately in the middle (Tunisia), and one near the very top of the indexes (Norway).

High levels of press freedom are often associated with low levels of corruption, a so-called negative connection, although the causality is debated (Bolsius 2012:20). Chowdhury, for example, refers to an analysis done by Brunetti and Weder (2003) who found that democracy did not have any effect on corruption (Chowdhury 2004:1). Nevertheless, Chowdhury discusses a protracted link between press freedom and reduced corruption: 'The presence of press freedom brings public corruption cases to the voters while voters in a democracy in turn punish corrupt politicians by ousting them from public offices. Hence, elected politicians act to the voters by reducing corruption', Chowdhury asserts (2004:93f).

Freille et al. believe that the relationship between press freedom and corruption 'simply picks up wealth effects and the institutional environment more generally' (2007:839), and that rich countries can afford a free press and are likely to be liberal across a wide range of activities not just media activities' (ibid). The Norwegian position may be an example of that.

In 2010, Pippa Norris edited an extensive report – *Public Sentinel: News Media & Governance Reform* – on behalf of The World Bank. Among the contributors, several dealt with the link between democracy, press freedom and corruption. 'The most plausible systematic evidence is derived from cross-national comparisons testing whether press freedom and levels of media access function as external control mechanisms on corruption', Norris and Odugbemi wrote (Norris 2010:380).

Cross-national comparisons were also made by Brunetti and Weder, who studied whether the relationship between press freedom and corruption was driven by outliers or by the difference between developed and less developed countries. In their study the empirical evidence 'shows a strong association between the level of press freedom and the level of corruption across countries' (ibid:1820).

Not everyone, however, agrees about such a causal relationship. Graber writes: 'The importance of a free press has been so axiomatic that its presumed benefits have seldom been questioned, at least not publicly' (1986:257). Graber concludes that the effects of the free press on corruption should not be overstated and press freedom might even increase corruption (Graber in Bolsius 2012:20). Also Färdigh et al (2011) question the link between press freedom and the media's ability to curb corruption:

'the knowledge as to how effective media and a free press actually are in combatting corruption is still limited, albeit growing' (ibid:4).

Moreover, corruption may affect media and journalism more directly, as 'the media themselves might be corrupted and might therefore decide not to publish about corruption' (Bolsius 2012:20). Freille et al. (2007) refer to the Global Corruption Report 2003 which confirms such an observation:

Corruption also exists within the structure of media organisations and in the way journalists carryout their reporting tasks. Many engage in a host of corrupt practises, ranging from 'check book journalism' to news tailored to suit advertising or commercial needs (ibid:839).

While corruption most likely has negative connotations and consequences, some economists point out that it may not always be damaging. For instance, Jakob Svensson (2005) has surveyed the literature on the economic effects of corruption and requests more research on this field, using China's fast growing economy as an example: 'Would China have grown even faster if corruption was lower?', Svensson asks (ibid:40). China was in 2015 number 83 on the Transparency International's Corruption Perception List (TI 2015), and its place on Reporters sans Frontières' Press freedom index was 160 (RFS 2015).

Blattman writes about how economists have generally been unable to link levels of corruption with growth rates in different countries of the world. There is, according to him, very little evidence that corruption leads to slower economic growth:

Why might this be so? Most of us fail to imagine that corruption can also grease the wheels of prosperity. Yet in places where bureaucracies and organizations are inefficient (meaning entrepreneurs and big firms struggle to transport or export or comply with regulation), corruption could improve efficiency and growth. Bribes can act like a piece rate or price discrimination, and give faster or better service to the firms with highest opportunity cost of waiting (Blattman 2012).

Neither Blattman nor Svensson delve specifically into the media's role, and Freille et al (2007) state that there are very different ways in which the media is controlled across countries, which may also lead to very different outcomes for corruption:

Restrictive legislation, threats, physical harassment, verbal abuse, financial extortion, censorship, media concentration, intimidation, violent assaults, high entry costs and access restrictions to the media market are some of the most common restrictions to press freedom (Freille et al: 2007:839).

Freedom House (2016) reports that press freedom declined to its lowest point in 2015, as political, criminal and terrorist forces co-opted or silenced the media in their broader struggle for power. Bangladesh was among the nine countries suffering the largest decline, mostly because of the killing of four secular bloggers in 2014 and 2015. In 2016, one more blogger was assassinated. Another factor is government

sanctioned economic pressure on certain media outlets and attempts to censor social media (ibid).

The students' perceptions of press freedom and its limitations

Press freedom is basically defined as the right to gather, publish and distribute information and ideas without government restriction, and this right encompasses freedom from prior restraints and freedom from censorship.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the students' answers to one of the 25 questions in the survey: 'Do you have press freedom in your country?'

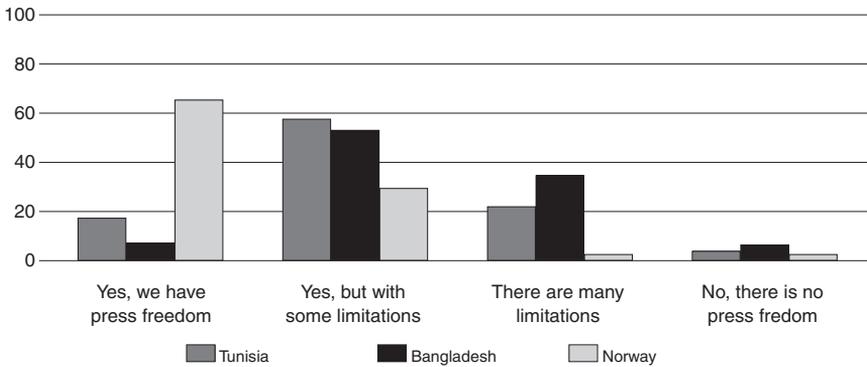


Figure 1. The students' perceptions of the existence of press freedom (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents were 99 (Tunisia), 202 (Bangladesh) and 133 (Norway).

A common perception among the students in the three countries is that very few of them think that there is *no* press freedom in their country. However, while the majority of the Norwegian students express that there is press freedom in their country, the majority of the Tunisian and Bangladeshi respondents say there is press freedom with some or many limitations.

Following this basic question about press freedom, the survey asked an open-ended question: 'What kind of limitations to press freedom exists in your country?' Here, the answers showed profound differences between the three countries, especially with regard to what kinds of limitations that are mentioned.

Bangladeshi students cited a wide range of limitations: 'there is restriction for religious characteristics' (Respondent 9), 'media house policy' (Respondent 6), 'false news' (Respondent 27), 'sometimes our press cannot express what they want' (Respondent 46). However, most of the limitations in the Bangladeshi students' opinions are connected to political power or the government itself: 187 of 202 Bangladeshi respondents (93 per cent) think that the main obstacle to freedom of the press is politicians on

different levels. Moreover, 22 of them single out corruption as a hindrance to press freedom. 'Media owners are propagandists here because they have political power' (Respondent 94). Another respondent puts it this way: 'Our media is often controlled by owners who mainly are political leaders: They do not allow the media to publish real facts' (Respondent 90). Nepotism or oligarchy may also be a hindrance for the development of a free press and make the watchdog ideal remote (Coronel 2010). One student says:

In my country, most of the media are hostage to politicians and businessmen. They act like gatekeepers and regulate what is to be published or not. Sometimes, a few media publish pure propaganda, which creates problems on the path to press freedom (Respondent 108).

In Tunisia the same tendency is in evidence – 43 of the Tunisian respondents to the open-ended question describe political decision-makers and their power over the media as a big obstacle to press freedom: 'Authorities try to control the journalist's work and decisions in order to serve their [the politicians'] own interests' (Respondent 212). This is an observation Freille et al (2007) confirm when describing corruption both in media structures and in the way journalists act in their own reporting (2007:839).

Some of the students also look for more media regulations and codes of ethics: 'The problem in Tunisia is that we now have to control the media, mainly TV and the radio stations, given the amounts of mistakes committed by journalists' (Respondent 207).

The Tunisian media professor, Larbi Chouika states: 'Threats to freedom of expression can also come from journalists themselves if they lack professionalism and ethics' (Belhassine 2015). Corruption within the media organizations themselves is mentioned by some of the respondents – one from Bangladesh says: 'In our country the press is seriously corrupted because most of the media are owned by political leaders. They always try to enforce power into the publications' (Respondent 178).

In Tunisia, the students' views, as reflected in their answers, are quite diverse, and sometimes even conflicting. One respondent says that 'there are no limitations' on press freedom (Respondent 267) and that 'freedom of speech does exist'. However, another states: 'Press freedom is absent in Tunisia, and the word freedom has a lot of meanings, as such the press in Tunisia is biased in service of the ruling regime' (Respondent 251).

The survey was conducted barely three years after the revolution and in a post-revolutionary era. In 2010 Tunisia was ranked 164 on Reporters sans Frontières' press freedom index, which demonstrates its progress on press freedom after the revolution, as the country reached 76 in 2015. However, a majority of the respondents claimed that there still is a strong presence of politics within the media, and that the authorities and politicians try to use the media to serve their own interests.

In general, the students in Norway consider that there is a very high degree of press freedom. Journalists meet few restrictions in their work, the media landscape is diverse, and there are very few threats to journalists from political or other sources. However,

according to the respondents, some limitations exist and these are connected to ownership, professional sources, legal regulations and ‘The Ethical Code of Practice for the Norwegian Press.’ Several respondents also point out that recent cutbacks and staff reductions, due to a downfall in the media economy, are leading to fewer permanent jobs and uncertainty among journalists – and hence a turn to more entertainment, and less enlightenment, in order to appease and please the public.

Some also consider a strong concentration in ownership, the domination of a few big media companies, a more indirect limitation, even if editorial independence from owners has a very strong tradition in the Norwegian press. The balance between the journalist and professional sources like communication advisors and PR-companies is also seen as a problem. The Ethical Code also put limitations on what and how a journalist can report and publish. This is not seen as problematic, since the vast majority of the students agree with the need for ethical regulations.

Investigating corruption and the fear of risking lives

In the first of the two questions on corruption, the students were asked: ‘You are digging into corruption, and you also interview different persons about this. If you publish your story, could your sources risk danger for their own safety?’ How the students answered to this question is shown in figure 2.

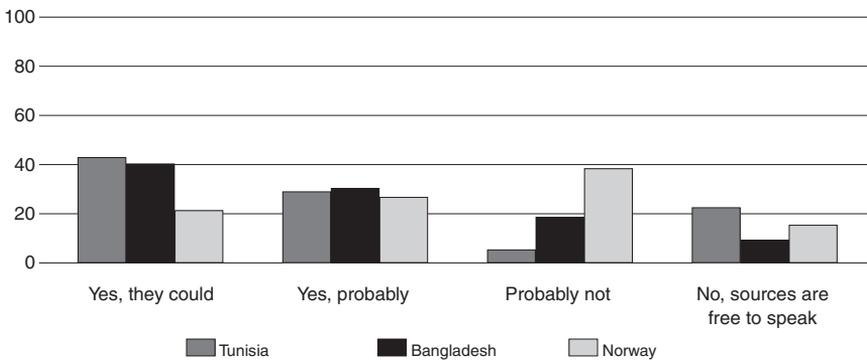


Figure 2. Perceptions of whether sources could be at risk (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents were 99 (Tunisia), 201 (Bangladesh) and 112 (Norway).

As shown in figure 2, a clear majority of the students in both Tunisia and Bangladesh believe that sources providing journalists with information on corruption may be in danger (merging ‘Yes, they could’ with ‘Yes, probably’). And whereas the situation is believed to be better in Norway, almost half of the Norwegian students, 46 per cent, believe that sources in corruption stories may be at risk.

However, the question of safety is relevant also with regard to the journalists themselves, and the second question on corruption was: 'You are on the same story about corruption. Could you as a journalist risk danger for your own safety?' How this question was answered is shown in figure 3.

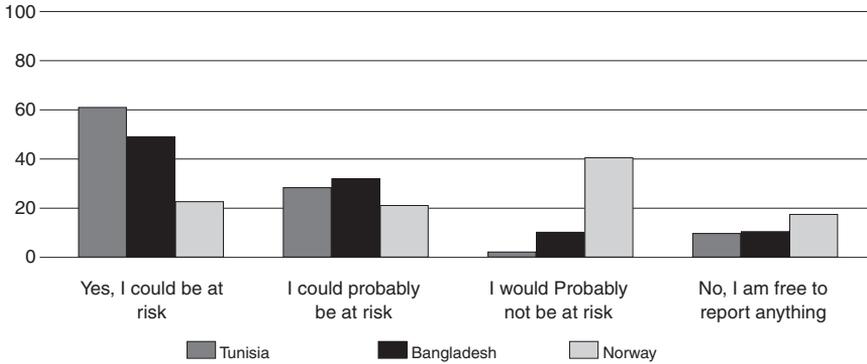


Figure 3. Perceptions of whether respondent could be at risk (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents were 100 (Tunisia), 201 (Bangladesh) and 121 (Norway).

Fear of the range of their work is a challenge to some of the journalism students. They are not provided with necessary protection from abuse or physical threats, and this limits their work, out of fear of retaliations or attacks. For instance, one Bangladeshi respondent refers to 'torturing journalists' (Respondent 89), another to 'killing of journalists exists in my country' (Respondent 141). Some say that harassments and political threats are common.

The context in Bangladesh and Tunisia, where journalists are threatened and can find themselves victims of many kinds of aggression, provides the foundation for answers of this kind. In Tunisia for instance, the Tunis Centre for Press Freedom (CTLJ) releases monthly reports on violence against journalists.

The trap in which journalists find themselves, between government forces and the extremist groups it is vowing to fight, can only have a negative effect on press freedom. [...] And the atmosphere of legislative threat and impunity in attacks on journalists by security forces and other actors appears to already be having a chilling effect at some news outlets (CTLJ 2015).

Even in Norway the safety of journalists reporting on corruption seems to be an issue for debate. The survey's respondents demonstrate that the risk of danger is closely distributed among the three countries. 47 per cent of the Norwegian students fear to put their sources in a potentially risky position. For themselves as journalists, the corresponding figure is 43 per cent. This could be interpreted as a surprisingly high score considering the Norwegian standards and the relatively stability in working conditions for journalists. The fact that almost half of the Norwegian students are

afraid that sources may be at risk does not correspond with the relatively calm situation in Norwegian society, nor with their comments in the open-ended question about press freedom.

Censorships and other threats to journalism

Despite the political and historical differences between the three countries, the students in Tunisia, Bangladesh and Norway agree on what they regard as the most serious threat to journalism: a lack of press freedom.

However, also censorship and self-censorship are regarded as threats for the practicing of journalism in all the three countries, and the psychological aspect of self-censorship must not be underestimated.

In countries where journalists have been killed, a certain level of self-censorship may be seen as natural. One of the Bangladeshi students says: 'Journalists cannot express the correct news because these sometimes go against the government' (Respondent 201). Hanitzsch et al point out that journalists that face legal uncertainty, weak jurisdiction and a more hostile climate towards press freedom will 'focus more on the potential consequences of their decisions' (2010:288). There are some examples of this tendency from the survey's open-ended question. One student from Tunisia says: 'The government is trying to end press freedom and get us back to the pre-revolution period' (Respondent 271).

Sensitive issues, and issues that are deemed to tamper with the sovereignty of the nation, restrict the freedom that citizens, and hence journalists, have. There are some articles of the Penal Code in the Tunisian Constitution of 2014 that can still get journalists convicted for 'undermining public order' (Belhassine 2015).

Instead of acting as watchdogs in the society, a metaphor describing the media's role in society for the last 200 years (Coronel 2010), some of the respondents express that the opposite takes place: 'The government always plays the role of watching and controlling the press' (Respondent 7).

The consequences of writing and publishing journalism which can offend or reveal criminal acts like corruption may lead to the holding back of information and important news from the public. Self-censorship, or 'auto-censorship' as one Tunisian respondent (Respondent 262) calls it seems to be seen as a threat to journalism across the three countries, even if there are differences in the ways of practicing journalism.

A partial press freedom places challenges on the way journalism is conducted, whether in a new-born democracy like Tunisia or in Bangladesh. Editors-in-chief are seen as a problem, imposing limitations and control over the editorial line. On the other hand, some Tunisian respondents think that the media is somewhat out of control, in part because the journalists do not know how to handle their relative freedom.

In Bangladesh, the students consider political ownership and censorship, together with corruption, as the main obstacles to press freedom. But many also perceive of

a nuance when the government acts in a heavy-handed fashion, because they think this is done with the nation's interest in mind: 'Sometimes our government creates some limitation for some information. But our government is obliged to protect people's welfare' (Respondent 84). While tax revenues are almost 35 per cent of GDP in OECD-countries, in Bangladesh they are only around 9 per cent and decreasing (Zaman 2017:1). Zaman writes about how developing countries like Bangladesh are particularly vulnerable to tax evasion because of the implications for social welfare, but also because of its impact on corruption – taxpayers cannot be certain whether their taxes are being used to finance public goods and services (ibid:6). The country's tax payments may end up in the pocket of some bureaucrats, a process described by Freille et al as 'bureaucratic corruption' (2007:848).

For 66 per cent of the Tunisian students in the survey, corruption is one of the largest threats to journalists and their sources. The combination of black money and politics in the Tunisian media scene has been singled out by many researchers as one of the challenges for the freedom of the press (Chouikha 2015:104). Tax revenues in Tunisia are about 21 per cent of GDP (The World Bank 2016). In Norway tax revenues decreased from 29 per cent of GDP in 2006 to 23 per cent in 2014. This may, among other circumstances, indicate an increase of the black market and the shadow economy, and hence, maybe often more space for corruption.

Conclusion

The perception of the importance of press freedom seems to be common, and a vast majority of our respondents means that lack of press freedom is an obstacle to revealing corruption. Moreover, the students seem to share the perception that corruption may paralyze their own performances as journalists, in addition to putting their sources in danger. A common view, it seems, is that corruption hinders incentives to actively investigate corruption and other wrongdoings – one can sense a slightly resigned or ironic attitude among many of the Bangladeshi and some of the Tunisian respondents: 'There is no absolute freedom. Freedom only exists in the jungle' (Respondent 207).

None of the students seem to share the approach to corruption which some economists have – that it may have a positive impact on development in some third world countries (Blattman 2012, Svensson 2005). In contrast to this, the students in Bangladesh regard corruption as a big problem and a limitation to their safety.

Brunetti and Weder write (2003:1805): 'The more involved a corrupt arrangement, the more fame an investigative journalist can earn by uncovering it.' This may be a fact for the Norwegian journalist students. But the journalists who have the possibility to reveal wrongdoings and crimes like corruption, seem trapped in a vicious circle – instead of, through their work, giving their government incentives to improve policies for the further development of the country, they feel captured in the limitations of their role as journalists because of threats and violations.

Censorship from the authorities and media owners, but also from within themselves, through self-censorship, is a common experience shared by the students, although in different contexts. Bangladesh is a country of multitudinous dangers for journalists. Even if Norwegian journalists and journalism students do not have to fear for their lives through the conduct of their profession domestically, they share a sense of fear for themselves and their sources with their co-students in Tunisia and Bangladesh. Because of the different experiences and preconditions for this fear, it is not possible to conclude that it derives from common suppositions between the survey's three participating countries. But sharing of knowledge about what happens globally also indicates sharing a perception of fear about being a journalist, an occupation William Horsley describes as 'the most dangerous profession' (Horsley 2014:147).

Notes

1. SKUP is a foundation dedicated to promoting investigative journalism in Norway. It was founded in 1992 and awards prizes to investigative journalism/journalists every year.
2. The International Federation of Journalists monitors press freedom violations and campaigns for greater safety among media workers. It was established in 1926.

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