Freedom of the Press in the Arab World

By Abdel-Qader Yassine

Coming from the land where two thousand years ago, four men named John, Matthew, Mark and Luke exercised a form of journalism never equalled since, I begin with the quotation: "Know ye the Truth and Truth shall make thee free." Indeed, those three words: Knowledge, Truth, and Freedom, are interrelated concepts crucial to the understanding of our topic.

Of course, very few of us are given the chance to preach the same sort of Gospel that the four illustrious predecessors have preached. I am not even sure that we all ambition their type of career. Yet it is strange that in the Arab World, truth has always been considered "divine" and revealed in form as well as in content, to whatever god or prophet it is attributed.

The knowledge of truth is therefore considered a privilege. People who possess this privilege necessarily claim a monopoly of freedom – the freedom of those who know and alone have the right to tell others what they must know and believe. A phenomenon accentuated by the sacred charter of the written word, be it written in the most perishable fashion: the newspaper, destined never to survive the very day of their publication.

In such a context, it is natural and logical that the press should assume a very particular role. Instead of being a "mass medium" in the sense commonly held, it becomes the instrument of transmission of the official truth, authoritatively communicated to the masses. The freedom of the masses is thus considerably reduced; for having no means of knowing other
truths—and thereby of questioning, comparing and selecting—they can only be free to believe ... and never to disbelieve.

Such dogmatism is not the monopoly of developing societies. In fact, if our thesis is philosophically correct about developing societies, it is not always historically accurate. Quite to the contrary, an examination of the evolution of the press in our part of the world reveals the following patterns: the press is, in the first stage, an expression of freedom; it then becomes the instrument of its defence, to finally reach a third stage where it becomes a crisis of freedom due to the unavoidable confrontation between dogmatic journalism and freedom of information.

Let us know speak of the first stage. What do we actually mean by “the press as an expression of freedom?” Let’s take the history of the Arab press as a case study. When, in the middle of the 19th century, the first newspapers were published in the Arab world, we were still living under Turkish rule. Liberal ideas were however flowing in through the West, sometimes through trade, sometimes through distinguished travellers such as writers or missionaries, let alone the indirect contagion started by Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt.

The names of the pioneers of journalism in the Arab world hardly mean anything to us today. But the titles of their publications were very eloquent, and so were, in their naivety, the editorials by which they explained why they were publishing. The Garden of News, the earliest publication, addressed itself to those who were curious of what was happening in the world....The Mirror of Events was keener on explaining what was happening inside the Ottoman Empire. Reform and Progress was eloquent enough as a title, as was The Dawn and most of all Freedom.

The publishers of these brave newspapers were what we would call in modern terms the intellectuals. Dedicated to the cause of freedom and preaching national self-determination, the
newspapers were an elitist phenomenon, a product of the minority – a product designed, not for the general public, but for those who felt the urge to express themselves with the hope of consolidating their ranks to awaken the dormant masses.

Such was the determination and effectiveness of this press that Sultan Abdel-Hamid, when asked in exile what would be his first act of government if he were to return to the throne, answered laconically: "I will put the journalists in a furnace until they all melt and burn..." Needless to say that Sultan Abdel-Hamid never returned, but other sultans governed whose sentiments towards the press were not much kinder. Persecution continued in many forms and fashions, but the press continued to flourish and grow more determined every day. The Arab society was developing. There had been a war, new conquerors, and also new forms of resistance.

The role of the press then acquired a new dimension, and entered what I would consider as the second stage of the historical pattern: the press as a defence instrument of freedom. But what freedom was there to be defended? In the first stage, freedom, as a claim and a right, was solely expressed by the press. The press was a solitary phenomenon, facing Leviathan alone, a lonely cry in the wilderness.

Later followed the response. Reading newspapers was no longer the privilege of the elite, nor were the ideals of progress and self-determination the literary exercises they used to be. The masses became more and more aware of their rights in all walks of life, social as well as political. They reacted directly to what the journalists wrote, and were directly influenced by it.

Whenever freedom was threatened, or its development hampered, the press was there to protect it and enhance it. The political structure of the Arab society was such that the newspapers assumed the role of the parties. Over and above
leadership, they directed public opinion. Bound to their readers by a compact stronger than the law, as well as the “carrot and the stick” practices of the advertisers, the newspapers felt no responsibility to any third party, not even to the state.

The press had become the public censor of the state. A censorship growing in severity, as readership was growing in size, and the groups of readers acquiring greater influence. Abstract ideas have now become concrete realities. Freedom was now a tradition, a historical reality, almost an establishment of its own, now represented by the press.

At this point of the argument, we may all want to ask whether the press had not become too strong? In fact, it had… Too strong, yet nonetheless very weak, for it often turned out to be a slave of its own power: A myth launched by the press unleashed such a strong current of opinion that it could no longer be refuted, and the very press that had created it was forced to accept the myth as reality and force it on others, as a national demand. Hence the third stage, the press as a crisis of freedom.

At this stage, the confrontation is no longer between the press as a defender of freedom, and an oppressor Leviathan, but rather between the press and its own offspring: the independent, self-determined yet still developing polity – the government of which soon becomes an entrepreneur in the field of information, resenting any communication media that escapes its control or disputes its authority.

To the new Leviathan, freedom, having fulfilled itself, the press has fulfilled its mission.

In the beginning was the word, but now was the time for action. We can all think of the thousand and one objections that governments in the Third World can oppose to freedom of the press, from endangering the economy of the country, to
becoming a tacit accomplice of saboteurs and traitors. The internal enemy can easily be exposed as more dangerous to national security and welfare than the external enemy.

So much that one would be tempted to say that such is the keenness of developing societies to develop freely, according to their own norms and rules, that it becomes almost legitimate to suppress any form of dissension or opposition that may delay the course of progress or dare to question its success. But can there be development and progress without freedom: freedom to think, freedom to know, freedom to live on or leave one’s own country, and freedom to act? And can anything protect freedom but freedom itself .. ?

Is freedom of the press in the Arab world possible? Is it necessary? I do not believe that we can disagree on the latter question. Indeed, development is not an absolute value, not an end in itself, but rather a process resulting in the bettering of society. And the more freedom there is, the better the society, as the independence of nations cannot be divorced from the liberties of their individual members. But is this possible, and how? I believe that freedom of the press is possible in a developing society when the following conditions are fulfilled:

- The existence of a long-standing, deeply entrenched tradition of liberty, and a constant communion between the press and its public.

- The ability of the press to project images of development, and to generate, around these images, current of public opinion that will not question development but, on the contrary, establish a general frame of reference in which all options remain legitimate including criticism.

- A sense of responsibility upon which the press will hold itself, in such a fashion that governments will find it difficult and unnecessary to repress information and to engage
in it directly.

- A diversification in news and attitudes that will encourage dialogue and establish the law of persuasiveness, where governments are tempted to resort to coercion.

By fulfilling these conditions, the press would have preserved its dynamic and creative nature. It would have avoided being frozen in its role as a defence of freedom – a role that can soon become static and thereby negative. History being what it is, a phenomenon of development, knowledge must be continuous and perpetual. Such knowledge should permanently communicate new truths, in constant confrontation and challenge. No freedom can acquire a historical reality if it has chosen to halt its course at the discovery of any given truth.

Seven thousand years ago, a starving philosopher in Ancient China said: “Of all holy virtues, one comes first: the right to speak your mind.” Seventy centuries later, Voltaire, agitating for the French Revolution, said: “I may disagree with you, but I am prepared to die fighting for your right to speak your mind.” Unfortunately, in the “Golden Age of Civilisation”, the written word is still the most feared.

Having been born 2000 years later than John, Matthew, Mark and Luke, let us carry high the torch of freedom by contenting ourselves with the destiny of freely informing ourselves and our readers of what is true, good and just today, thus showing governments what could and should be true tomorrow.

- Dr. Abdel-Qader Yassine is a Palestinian writer and social scientist living in Sweden. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.