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This chapter traces the emergence and development of two distinct phenomena: the idea that media should be legally protected from state interference; and the conception of access to media as a human right. Although it treats primarily discourses about media, the chapter also addresses historical episodes during which media were mobilized in campaigns for press freedoms, human rights and humanitarian causes. Finally, before we begin our survey of how human rights and media have intersected historically, a note on historiography: In the past decade, a recurrent tension has emerged in scholarship on the history of human rights, between a quest for origins (as early as the 17th century) on one hand and, on the other, an emphasis on the quite recent emergence (as late as the 1970s) of the contemporary human-rights regime. While this chapter does not attempt to adjudicate definitively between these competing approaches, it does aim to point readers towards major references in the scholarly debates.

Origins

The historical relationship between human rights and media in the modern world can be traced to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment ‘rights of man’ discourse, nineteenth-century discourses of ‘humanitarianism’, and the earliest articulations of the ‘liberty of the press’, though we should be careful in all three cases to avoid anachronism. As Samuel Moyn has argued, neither the rights of man nor humanitarianism, in their pre-twentieth-century manifestations, carried with them implications central to the post-1970s idea of ‘human rights’, that is that rights are inherent in all humans and transcend state sovereignty. A similar comparison can be made about post-1945 claims to media access as a human right. As David Copeland has pointed out, the earliest advocates of press freedom, including John Milton in *Aeropagitica* (1644), did not assert a general ‘right’ to a free press, but rather advocated it for instrumental religious reasons, and were motivated chiefly by concern for their own freedom to practice a dissenting Christianity. At the same time, what we would today call the ‘mass media’ was limited to books, pamphlets, broadsides and fairly rudimentary newspapers and magazines. Censorship was general in Europe, while even in a relatively freer England, which had seen pre-publication censorship eliminated in 1695, extensive licensing requirements and the threat of post-publication punishments constituted a significant barrier to press freedom until the early 19th century.
Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century demands for ‘liberty of the press’, even when expressed in secular rather than religious terms, usually remained instrumental in focus, and did not articulate a universal ‘human right’. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, issued in 1789 during the French Revolution’s constitutional monarchy phase, exceptionally included in Article XI a robust defence of freedom of expression, including speech, writing and printing, as ‘one of the most precious rights of man’, though during the subsequent radical phase of the Revolution, press controls were reintroduced. More importantly for present purposes, most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century advocates of press freedom focused less on abstract universal rights to a free press than on more tangible and practical goals. The United States famously enshrined press freedom in its constitution’s First Amendment, and its political elites regarded a properly functioning press as sufficiently important for facilitating republican political discourse that they used public money to subsidise the distribution of news, chiefly through the Post Office. For Britain’s Whig reformers, campaigning less against overt censorship than against licensing requirements and ‘taxes on knowledge’ that kept newspapers’ prices deliberately high, the press was cast alternatively as a vehicle for educating both the restricted political nation and the working classes who in principle could join it, and as a vehicle for exposing tyranny and corruption on the part of the state.

If ‘liberty of the press’ was rarely cast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in terms of access to media as a human right, media were arguably central to the development of concepts of the ‘rights of man’ and humanitarianism. According to Lynn Hunt, human rights claims – that is, the articulation of rights that are ‘natural (inherent in human beings); equal (the same for everyone); and universal (applicable everywhere)’ – entered European discourse in the late 18th century, specifically in the contexts of the American and French Revolutions. For Hunt, the emergence of the very concept of ‘human rights’ depended upon a change in mentalities, indeed to the physical composition of the brain as a result of reading epistolary novels and descriptions of torture. In her words, ‘New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)’.

Hunt has focused on explaining why ‘human rights’ discourse retreated in the 19th century, but similar links can be found between media and the development of humanitarianism. Michael Barnett notes that ‘for many students of humanitarianism and human rights, it all began with the antislavery movement’, and highlights the role of pamphlets (and lecture tours) in spreading the anti-slavery message in the early 19th century. The slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1807 and slavery itself in 1837. Across the Atlantic, newspapers were central to the Abolitionist campaign in the United States, with Elijah Lovejoy’s St. Louis Observer (later relocated to Illinois) and William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator as two key examples. As Barnett defines it, humanitarianism, like ‘human rights’, focuses on individuals beyond the borders of one’s own country, and in this regard, key examples of media promotion of humanitarianism include W. T. Stead’s ‘Bulgarian atrocities’ campaign in the Darlington Northern Echo (1876) and E. D. Morel’s journalistic campaign in the early 20th century against forced labour in the Belgian Congo. The former case centred on the brutal response by the Ottoman Empire to an uprising by its Bulgarian subjects, and the Disraeli government’s continued support of Britain’s traditional Ottoman ally. Though this campaign often invoked universal liberal values against tyranny, the campaign simultaneously highlighted the Christian character of Britain and the Christian identity of the Bulgarian victims, as opposed to the tyrannical character of an
Islamic government; in much of the press, Disraeli’s supposed indifference to the plight of the Bulgarian Christians was linked to his Jewish origins. In this campaign, not only the editorials of Stead, but also the London comic press’s use of caricature, contributed to the articulation of a humanitarian cause.8

Morel’s campaign against the Belgian King Leopold’s Congo began when Morel, a clerk for the Liverpool-based Elder Dempster company who had long been writing articles critical of the treatment of African colonial subjects, observed the discrepancy between the flow of weapons on ships from Belgium to the Congo and valuable commodities (ivory and rubber) on ships going the other direction, and inferred an exploitative labour regime tantamount to slavery. In 1902 he quit his position with the company, becoming a full-time journalist and founding the West African Mail in 1903. Over the next several years, Morel worked with the Congo Reform Association, whose members published several books and pamphlets exposing the atrocities committed by Leopold’s regime, and with missionaries who provided photographic evidence (including images of maimed Congolese). This campaign helped lead to the Belgian government’s formal incorporation of the Congo (i.e. removing it from King Leopold’s personal control).9

All of these campaigns occurred in the context of media environments in which basic press freedoms were legally guaranteed, albeit within certain constraints such as laws pertaining to indecency or libel. At the same time, as already noted, the language of ‘human rights’ retreated significantly in the post-revolutionary period in the face of nationalist claims. When humanitarian advocacy groups, above all the International Committee of the Red Cross (established in 1863), focused on abuses overseas, moreover, they concentrated on the immediate ‘emergency’ more than the underlying causes (as a later type of humanitarianism, one that Michael Barnett calls the ‘alchemical’ branch, would highlight). In large part this reflected an attempt to remain ‘apolitical’ so that they could have access to enemy territories or territories controlled by absolutist governments. For these reasons, discourse on the press focusing domestically did not typically centre on the language of human rights, while nineteenth-century humanitarian engagements with territories beyond Western Europe and North America typically did not address the lack of press freedoms in such territories.

Transformations and threats, 1914–39

The outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 would mark the beginning of three decades of profound uncertainty as to the role of press freedoms in the modern world, and ultimately those of liberalism and democracy tout court. The war would usher in an era of restrictions on the media even in the relatively liberal United States and United Kingdom, exemplified by Britain’s Defence of the Realm Act (1914) and the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1919 decision articulating a ‘clear and present danger’ test for justifying limitations to the First Amendment. The British government’s pioneering approach to information management during the war raised uncomfortable questions about the fate of liberal press freedoms. So, too, did the interwar arguments of influential American intellectuals such as Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell, who contended that ordinary people were easily manipulated by propaganda and that governments should therefore pursue the enlightened management of public opinion.10 The repressive post-war atmosphere was typified by the red scare that swept the United States in 1919 and 1920, following the Russian Revolution. Yet the aftermath of the First World War also saw the birth of the American Civil Liberties Union (created in 1920), devoted to protecting civil liberties against governmental abuses within the United States. On the international plane, new institutions were meanwhile emerging to address the unprecedented upheaval occasioned by the global conflict. The historian Keith David Watenpaugh has called the League of Nations’
efforts to locate and resettle survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 an early instance of ‘modern humanitarianism’, based on secular principles of scientific management and ostensibly permanent administrative structures. Humanitarian organizations’ use of mass-circulation advertisements and posters to reach far-flung audiences during this episode would foreshadow the ways in which later human-rights organizations sought to publicize their causes.11

But by the 1930s, both internationalism and liberal democracy were in retreat, in the face of worldwide economic depression and rising fascist and Stalinist alternatives. Many predicted the definitive eclipse of older notions of individual rights and liberties, as Mussolini and then Hitler shrewdly manipulated the ‘new media’ of the interwar era – film and especially radio – in the service of their exclusionary and expansionist programs. It was only with Hitler’s attack on Poland and the abandonment of appeasement in the fall of 1939 that Allied leaders would begin to offer a more robust defence of the individual against the state.

The institutionalisation of human rights in the 1940s

The depredations of the Axis powers would spur widespread – if belated – recognition of the need to reinvigorate individual liberties and democratic values in the 1940s. In the United States, President Franklin Roosevelt emphasised ‘freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world’ as one of the essential ‘Four Freedoms’ in his 1941 State of the Union address, as he advocated for US intervention in the war. The progressive cast of much Allied wartime propaganda – which in Britain stressed the theme of the ‘people’s war’, and in the United States highlighted interethnic and interracial cooperation – amounted to a rejection of Nazi racial hierarchies and the xenophobic excesses of the First World War, with the important exception of the United States’ treatment of persons of Japanese descent. Reportage documenting the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, disseminated in photo-magazines like Life and in eyewitness accounts such as those broadcast on the BBC, shocked international audiences and confirmed the importance of civil liberties before a broad public. When the New York Times asked a group of American middle-school students in 1946 whether press freedoms could help to avert future wars, one student concluded, ‘Hitler would have been stopped in his tracks with one free paper’.12

Press and speech freedoms would be institutionalised in a range of international initiatives from 1945 onwards, notably in the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) three years later. Article 19 of the UDHR presented a sweeping guarantee of expressive liberties: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’. While histories of human rights in the 1940s have highlighted the work of UN Human Rights Commission chair Eleanor Roosevelt and French jurist René Cassin, they have also demonstrated the contributions of figures from outside the United States and western Europe. Prominent actors on the UDHR drafting committee included Republican China’s P. C. Chang and the Lebanese Christian Charles Malik. The Filipino diplomat Carlos Romulo, meanwhile, helped to push ‘freedom of information’ onto the agenda of international institutions, where states would debate its scope and applications in the years ahead.13

The symbolism of the post-war human-rights moment aside, its practical significance has been the subject of lively historiographical debate. Investigating great-power politics at the United Nations, Samuel Moyn and Mark Mazower have argued that the post-war international institutions in reality had little immediate impact on respect for human rights, including press and speech freedoms. The world’s two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, refused to cede sovereignty to international institutions, while the European colonial powers
sought to exclude their empires from UN oversight. The UDHR was, by design, a statement of principle rather than a legally binding agreement, and the United Nations lacked the power to enforce its lofty provisions. Efforts to craft a binding freedom-of-information convention would falter in the late 1940s and early 1950s, stalemated by the emerging Cold War and by widespread concern that such an agreement would abet cultural imperialism. The UN Conference on Freedom of Information opened in Geneva in March of 1948, shortly after the Soviet Union began jamming Voice of America radio broadcasts. Four years later, the United Nations would disband its Sub-commission on Freedom of Information, having made little progress on convention proposals.

Positive freedoms and media development in the 1950s and 1960s

In addition to diplomatic snarls, debates over media and human rights during the early Cold War also reflected dissension over the substance of media freedoms. Did these freedoms signify the absence of governmental interference in the media, the ‘negative liberties’ favoured by liberal anticomunist intellectuals like Isaiah Berlin? Or could states encourage human rights through their media policies? American policymakers in the late 1940s and early 1950s tended towards the former view; and much contemporary Anglophone scholarship takes this approach. But others imagined a different political economy of rights. In Latin America, many of the foremost champions of international human rights in the 1940s wedded civil liberties to social citizenship. Among the United States’ closest allies in Europe, too, there was widespread consensus that post-war reconstruction demanded active governmental management of the economy.

Social-democratic and regulatory approaches intersected with media during the newsprint shortages that recurred in western Europe from 1945 through the early 1950s. In Britain, the average newspaper in 1950 was six to eight pages long, versus twenty before the war. One French legal expert who had been involved in post-war newsprint negotiations, capturing the mood of many in austerity-wracked Europe, wrote that government intervention was essential to surmounting ‘economic obstacles’ to freedom of information: ‘Liberty is a hollow word if we do not give the means of its exercise to those in whom we purport to recognize it’.

During the ‘Development Decade’ of the 1960s – so named by President Kennedy and the United Nations – a loose consensus would emerge regarding the positive role that states might play in enhancing media rights. UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) functionary Tor Gjesdal reported to the UN Human Rights Commission in 1962, ‘No less than 70 per cent of the world’s population lack information media. They are without a “window on the world” and are thus denied effective enjoyment of one of the basic human rights – the right to know’. UNESCO proposed new development standards for global media capacity: ten daily newspapers, five radio receivers and two cinema seats per one hundred people in every country. Although the particulars of media-development projects varied widely, these sentiments appealed to diverse constituencies, including media industries in the United States, eager to expand their foreign markets; European powers desirous of maintaining influence in the decolonising world; and new states seeking aid.

Human rights and the cultural-imperialism debates

The 1970s and 1980s would focus increasing attention upon persistently uneven media flows between the global North and the global South. The failure of the Development Decade to live up to the expectations it had raised would fuel frustration as well as a search for new paradigms in the fields of media and communication studies. Critical communication scholars such as...
Herbert Schiller would argue that information liberalism was cover for western – particularly American – cultural imperialism elsewhere in the world. This scholarship dovetailed with the concerns of a coalescing Third World bloc, which rallied to the cause of ‘cultural sovereignty’. UNESCO’s controversial International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, also known as the MacBride Commission (after its Irish chair, Seán MacBride), would attempt to broker a compromise through a new ‘right to communicate’, intended to encompass media ‘access and participation’ as well as more traditional civil liberties. But such a compromise would prove unacceptable to the United States and Britain, which withdrew from the organization in the mid-1980s.

**Mediating human rights in the 1970s and beyond**

Shifting the focus away from international institutions and towards non-governmental activism, recent scholarship has emphasized the 1970s as a ‘breakthrough’ moment in human-rights history. Contrasting the elite diplomacy of the 1940s to 1970s activism, Samuel Moyn writes that it was in the latter period, not the former, that liberal human rights became a genuinely ‘delocalised’ and ‘grassroots’ cause. This could happen only after UN-based advocacy, as well as the alternative ideologies of Marxism and Third Worldism, had proven disappointing in practice. New non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International, established in 1961, and Human Rights Watch, founded in 1978, would play an important role in publicising the human-rights violations of states around the globe.

While Moyn’s periodisation has provoked debate, there is broad consensus that the increasing public-sphere prominence of human rights in the 1970s was bound up with evolving media coverage. Kenneth Cmiel has noted the dramatic increase of information about human rights which became available around this time – an ‘explosion’ of new books and periodicals, in the words of one university librarian trying to stay abreast of the field. This information did not remain cloistered in the ivory tower, moreover. NGOs and policymakers would begin to mobilize human-rights rhetoric – and research – to put pressure on authoritarian governments ranging from Shah Pahlavi’s Iran to the Soviet Union to Latin American military dictatorships. After two-plus decades in the United States during which conservative Republicans had associated human rights with international commitments that compromised American power, by the late 1970s even Ronald Reagan was invoking human rights, albeit in the service of his own hardline anti-communism and antistatism.

Form also mattered in the popularisation of human-rights causes in the 1970s and beyond. While Amnesty International’s early activism involved grassroots letter-writing campaigns on behalf of political prisoners, the organization would soon begin to market its work through everything from magazine advertisements to pens and T-shirts bearing its logo. Likewise, televised events like the ‘Live Aid’ concerts of the mid-1980s would promote human-rights and humanitarian causes in a stylish new format, bringing them into people’s homes around the world. Such media innovations have helped to make human rights user-friendly. The American NGO Freedom House’s easy-to-digest surveys of political and civil liberties around the world, which rank each nation as either ‘Not Free,’ ‘Partly Free,’ or ‘Free’, have been published annually since the early 1970s. Today the rankings are instantly available through interactive online maps.

**Contemporary questions**

The question of how effective media are in promoting human-rights causes remains a contentious one. The American intellectual Susan Sontag famously wrote in a 1973 essay that the
potential of atrocity photographs to mobilize popular conscience diminishes with prolonged exposure to them. Other scholars of visual culture have more recently presented qualified defences of the ethical and civic potentialities of documentary photography and visual artefacts. Less controversial is the notion that historically contingent media forms shape popular epistemologies. Kenneth Cmiel has usefully conceptualised human rights as one of the ‘lingua francas’ of our contemporary era of rapid transnational media flows, which can stimulate bursts of public sympathy for people in distant places and societies. But Cmiel also notes that rights talk provides only ‘thin’ knowledge of these places and societies, and can quickly fade from the headlines.

For many recent commentators, the discourse of human rights signifies a welcome retreat from the political radicalism and grandiose modernisation schemes that plagued the 20th century – a refreshingly minimalist ‘utopia’, as Samuel Moyn has written. For others, contemporary liberal applications of human rights to media, such as the internet freedoms championed by Hillary Clinton’s State Department around the Arab Spring, seem to reproduce the contradictions of an earlier, imperial, humanitarianism. Even in the historic heartlands of empire, deep disagreements persist over the proper relationship between economic freedoms and public-interest media regulations. Recent Euro–American spats over whether internet users should enjoy a ‘right to be forgotten’ have exposed rifts between the Silicon Valley, which loathes the concept, and the European Union, which has embraced it. If nothing else, these disagreements and divergences indicate the ongoing relevance of scholarship on the relationship between media and human rights.

Notes


19 Tor Gjesdal, ‘Statement by Tor Gjesdal, Director of the Department of Mass Communication, UNESCO, to the 18th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 15 March – 14 April, 1962’, [spring 1962], William Benton Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Box 393, Folder 11.


Select Bibliography


