



From *The Post* to Reality: The Decline of Freedom of the Press in the US

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Abstract

Spielberg's movie *The Post*, which was adapted from the real history, showed vividly how journalists fought for freedom of the press against the government in 1972. Stipulated by the First Amendment, the freedom of the press has been greatly valued by American society. However, the past few decades has seen the decline of this significant principle in the US, which includes strict controls and the emergence of tremendous fake news. Inspired by the contrast between the circumstance shown in the movie and the reality, this paper aims to figure out the reasons of the decline of freedom of the press based on facts. Evidences show that the nature of media, political manipulation and capital penetration are the main causes. Not only the disappearing of free press may damage people's right to learn the truth, leading to undermining public trust in the media, but it could also bring negative international impacts.

Keywords

Freedom of the press, decline of freedom of the press, the First Amendment, media

1. Introduction

The movie *The Post* is adapted from the Pentagon Papers case. In the story journalists who worked in the Washington Post and the New York Times exposed the truth of Vietnam War. Under the pressure from the White House, they pursued free press and finally won the lawsuit against the government. The movie highlights the importance of freedom of the press in the US. But things had changed when it comes to the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, during which the free press in the US suffered an alienation. Facts show that what media did in recent years seems to betray the rule of freedom of the press. By comparing the situation shown in the movie with the reality, we may want to look for the answers of the following three questions: What are the manifestations of the decline of the freedom of the press? Why does it happen? What are the influences it may cause? These issues are complex, and related researches are most vague. Hence this paper tries to clarify the facts that show the decline, and find out the reasons and the impacts of the change.

2. Freedom of the Press in the US

To get a clearer picture of the topic, this section is supposed to introduce the definition of freedom of the press through its history and legal basis in the US. Also, the form of it in the movie and real history will be reviewed.

2.1 Brief Introduction: Perspective of History and Legal Basis

The spirit of free press originates from individual rights and liberties. Some scholars consider that freedom of the press dates back to medieval England when Magna Carta was released (Bao, 2020). However, the concept was first put forward formally by John Milton, a great poet, thinker and political commentator in British history (Ye, 2017). In

1644, Milton published a pamphlet about divorce without examination of the authorities, which enraged the committee on publication of the Parliament. Therefore, he was summoned for questioning. Milton gave a long speech in the Parliament, systematically illustrating his ideas on free press. Then he published his speech *Areopagitica*, in which the slogan of freedom of the press was put forward for the first time in human history (Zhou, 2021).

The idea was then spread over the Atlantic. During American Revolutionary War, leaders of each state made free press one of the rights they strove for. After the country got independent, freedom of the press was gradually valued by society in United States. In 1791, the Congress ratified the First Amendment, stipulating that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” This amendment became the legal basis of freedom of the press in the US (Chukwu, 2018).

In United States, freedom of the press is usually defined as the right to convey intentions, opinions and information through printing without government restrictions (Wang, 2016). With the developing of the mass media, the concept of this rule has expanded. Nowadays, freedom of the press not only refers to print media, but also applies to radio, television and the Internet. Journalists have rights to report the facts and express their viewpoints freely.

2.2 Freedom of the Press in *The Post* and real history

In the movie *The Post*, Ben Bradlee, chief editor of the Washington Post, acquired a secret document about the reality of the Vietnam War. However, in order to protect government image, Nixon administration had prohibited the New York Times, another famous press, from printing the related materials. Ben and his colleagues may lose their jobs and even be put into prison if keeping on revealing the secret. To let the public know the truth and practice the First Amendment, Mrs. Graham, president of the Washington Post, together with her employees determined to publish the document under the huge stress. Finally, they won the lawsuit against the government and protected the freedom of the press successfully.

In fact, the story of the movie is adapted from real history. Such an event promoted the spirit of free press and defended the First Amendment from attack. Another similar event in American history is Watergate scandal. On June 17th, 1972, five men who snuck into Watergate complex and bugged in offices of the Democratic Party were arrested. Two journalists from the Washington Post reported the event and kept tracking it under the pressure from Nixon administration (Bao, 2020). Finally, they revealed the political scandal successfully and prompted the president’s resignation through the power of the media.

In these two events, journalists reported facts which went against the administration. Under the huge stress, they still pursued free press and chose to reveal the truth to the public. The above events are prominent manifestations of the free press in the United States. The 1970s witnessed the prosper of freedom of the press in the US.

3. The Decline of Freedom of the Press in the US: Based on Facts

However, the past few decades have seen the decline of the free press in the US. It is mainly reflected in the following two aspects.

First is strict control of news. This is especially obvious in coverage of war which United States participates in. During Iraq War, all the journalists who wanted to report the front were required to obey instructions for field interviews published by United States Department of Defense, or they would be cleared out. Peter Gregg Arnett, a senior journalist who had won the Pulitzer Prizes, was fired by National Broadcasting Company during that time because he reported the facts of the war (Liu, 2020). Nowadays in America, all war reporting must be arranged by the military, and press release related the war must be reviewed by the military in advance. This is very different from the situation during Vietnam War, and violates the principle of freedom of the press.

Secondly, fake news emerges in large numbers. This phenomenon appeared in different types of reports. In 1980, a journalist from the Washington Post reported that an 8-year-old black boy got addicted to drug because of his mother’s lover, which helped the journalist win Pulitzer Prizes. But it turned out to be fake after the news was verified. In 2003, reports about saving Jessica Lynch, an American female soldier, were popular around the US. But it was considered fictional later. In 2016 United States president election, a lot of fake news about the two candidates was spread crazily on mass media (Bao, 2020). After the outbreak of COVID-19, many media in the US produce artificial reports to attack China and other countries. The increasing fake news in America seems to be produced “freely”, but it offers false information to the public and breaks the original intension of freedom of the press.

The above aspects show the decline of free press in the US. On one hand, reports can no longer be published free-

ly. On the other hand, reports themselves are hard to keep true. The spirit of the First Amendment has been broken.

4. The Reasons and Impacts of the Decline

The reasons of the decline are complex, consisting of internal and external factors. The following mainly three cause the change and have a significant impact on American society.

4.1 Nature of Media

The internal reason of the change is the nature of media. Each medium has its own ideology and value orientation. Journalists would have various opinions on the same event because of their different background, educational level and experience of life. That means it is hard for media to be completely objective and neutral (Dennis & Merrill, 1991). Actually, more and more mass media in the US are choosing to stand by the government (Ming, 2005), especially when the issues they report are related to state interest. For example, lots of fake news about COVID-19 and human rights issues in Hong Kong and Xinjiang were produced by American media to attack China and other countries although they knew the facts were completely different. The nature of the media means that the spirit of freedom of the press cannot last for a long time.

4.2 Political Manipulation

Political manipulation is a main reason of the decline. The last 30 years has witnessed a much stronger control over the media from US administration. A survey shows that in 1990s, 78% of the articles printed by New York Times and Washington Post are based on officials' remarks. American government has different means to dominate the news. On one hand, the authority could exert pressure on the news monopolies and control their capital. On the other hand, government is good at inciting people and use popular will to control the media (Altschull, 1994). Besides, the authority is becoming the largest source of credible news (Ye, 2017). The media must be obedient, or they may have no news to reports. Such political manipulation not only restricts free reports, but also forces media to speak for the authority and even produce fake news which is beneficial to the governors.

4.3 Capital Penetration

Another important reason of the decline is capital penetration. During the recent 40 years in United States, the news resources are gradually monopolized by large media groups, and these large media groups are mostly controlled by consortiums or large families. Statistics show that over 90% of the media in the US are controlled by the following six companies: General Electric Company, News Corporation, The Walt Disney Company, Viacom, Warner Media and Columbia Broadcasting System. This brings the media groups tens of billions of dollars' income each year, and results in high degree of monopoly of information and resources. It means that media would just speak for the interest groups while most people lose their rights to express freely (Tan, 2018). To maximize commercial profit, much manipulated news and even fake news is produced. Most of the presses in America now work for the capital and lose their freedom.

4.4 Impacts

The most direct impact of the decline is preventing people from getting the true information. Since the public can only get the news which has been modified to cater to the ruling class, it's difficult for them to think independently and form correct cognition (Liu, Zhang & Chen, 2018). The public perception will be at the mercy of politicians and the rich.

The decline of freedom of the press also leads to undermining public trust in the media. A 2014 research showed that in America, The Daily Show, a comedic talk show and entertainment program, turned out to have more credibility than Microsoft/National Broadcasting Company, one of the most famous news giants in the US. Another survey in 2015 reflected that only 40% of the public chose to trust in the mass media. American media are losing their function and original mission in recent years with the distrust of more and more people.

The negative international impact caused by the change is often overlooked. The untrue international news produced in the US is usually used for realizing its political purposes, which may damage relations to other countries. For example, defamatory news about countries like China and Russia does harm to international cooperation and world peace.

5. Conclusion

This paper shows the reality of the decline of freedom of the press in United States by using facts and statistics. Stricter control over the press and increasing untrue news are the main manifestations and features of the decline. Self-factor of the media and external factors including political and economic aspects together bring about the significant change. The decline of free press not only violates the First Amendment, but also has negative public and international impacts.

Through the paper a fact can be concluded preliminarily: the complete free press has disappeared in United States. The so-called “freedom of the press” has been limited strictly and manipulated easily. Understanding of this phenomenon can contribute to clearer reading of the basic condition of American politics, economy and society, which is helpful for other countries to absorb experience and handle the relation between media and power.

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