

**ON DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNICATION: THE DILEMMA OF
FREEDOM AND THE CHALLENGE OF EQUALITY**

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore, through a conceptual analysis and rational argumentation, some theoretical implications of the principles of freedom and equality for a democratic state. With conceptual analysis an investigation is conducted into the use of certain concepts in a given, or in all kinds of, contexts. It is an operation on concepts, contrary to operation with concepts which occurs with the spontaneous application of concepts. Conceptual analysis comes into play particularly when confusion exists or can arise about concepts. The concept of democracy is discussed followed by its relation to the principles of freedom and equality respectively. The basic communicological ideas governing the principles of freedom and equality are offered. It is also briefly argued in conclusion that vexing questions that relate to freedom and equality tend to be overlooked in public debates in South African communities about issues that range from press or media freedom to the plight or silence of the have-nots, or to the pervasiveness of violent crime in the land.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the communication science discipline formally emerged in the United States and Europe in the late 1940s (Schramm 1983; Rogers & Chaffee 1983) much has been written about communication practices which govern democratic states. For long, analyses of communication arrangements, patterns, and outcomes that are most likely to promote or block the realisation of democratic values — or to show how far they have been attained — have been part of programmes of (functionalist) communication research into democracies (Blumler 1983).

The intelligible presentation of choice is vital to the role of communication in democratic states (for a concise, insightful summary of the role of communication in democracies, see Davison 1976). This right to choose or freedom, along with equality, are the foremost principles underlying a mainly Western conceptualisation of democracy, and have been used to shed light on for example how open or closed a state or a particular system or subsystem of a state functions.

The celebrated promise of freedom and equality in a democratic state has not been accepted unconditionally. Much of critical theory research for example (emanating from among others the Frankfurt School), which systematically analyses communication practices for its hidden assumptions and implications, have questioned the exercise of freedom and the reality of equality in democratic states. Critical theory research predominantly asks which structures of domination prevail and whose interests are being served by communication structures and themes.

In France where (along with the United States) the modern idea of (Western) democracy has its origin, renowned French scholars such as Jacques Ellul had warned throughout the second half of the twentieth century (see Ellul 1964; 1967; 1973; 1981) that the pervasiveness of propaganda practices, misinformation and the abuse of power in an advanced democratic and technological state would spell danger for the promise of freedom and equality in such states.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The primary purpose of the article is to explore some theoretical implications of the principles of freedom and equality for a democratic state.

Secondary purposes are to determine the underlying communicological ideas inherent in the principles of freedom and equality; and to point out briefly, through the use of examples, the relevance of these principles for South African communities.

METHOD OF RESEARCH AND PROCEDURE ADOPTED

This article is largely theoretical and exploratory. Conceptual analysis and critical and rational argumentation are employed. With conceptual analysis an investigation is conducted into the use of certain concepts in a given, or in all kinds of, contexts. It is an operation on concepts, contrary to operation with concepts which occurs with the spontaneous application of concepts (Kistner 1982: 64). Conceptual analysis is particularly appropriate when confusion exists or can arise about concepts.

The exploratory nature of the article is acknowledged, because a conceptual analysis, as Du Toit (2005) points out, “is potentially infinite — there are always more lines of inquiry to pursue”. Despite the limitations of a conceptual analysis, the lines of argumentation offered in the following paragraphs, attempt to produce pointers which hopefully will stimulate further research.

Sources used include academic books, original reference texts, articles in journals, audio-visual material and mass media reports.

The article proceeds to discuss the concept of democracy, followed by its relation to the principles of freedom and equality respectively. The basic communicological ideas governing the principles of freedom and equality respectively are offered. The article concludes with a brief commentary on a few vexing questions that relate to South African communities in light of the underlying principles of freedom and equality governing the South African state.

ON DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a contested term — there are endless disputes about its proper use. It is most often used in the sense of it being a form of government, even though, and strictly speaking, it is more of a procedure destined to place a government in office and to establish a public legal order in which diverse legal interests are harmonised and balanced (Strauss 2006).

Democracy or *demokratia* is derived from the Greek *demos* (the people) and was taken in Ancient Greece to mean literally “the power of people who qualify as citizens” — it is necessary to qualify the idea of “people”, because the Greeks never thought of, for instance, including slaves in their conception of people (see Van Zyl Slabbert 1991). Furthermore, for the Greeks *demos* meant the people in the sense of “the common people” or “the ordinary man” or, simply put, “the poor” — not in the modern sense of “the people as a whole” or “every member of society”.

The Ancient Greeks are often regarded as the founders of democracy, when the concept is used in the sense of a form of government, but note that antiquity ultimately rejected this form of government (Wolheim 1975: 109). It did not last even in Athens, and in the realm of speculation such famous thinkers as Plato and Aristotle opposed it. This is because equality of political opportunity and freedom for the individual *to do as he/she likes* are for Plato and Aristotle the salient characteristics of democracy.

Basically, democracy — as a form of government practised today — is a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Authoritarianism of some type prevailed throughout the world until after the American and French Revolution of the late eighteenth century. One characteristic peculiar to all authoritarian systems is the denial of significant political rights or privileges to most members of the body politic. As a consequence minority rule prevails in the sense that ultimate as well as immediate control of the government is confined to a small proportion of the total adult population. Policies are

decided by officials who are neither legally nor politically responsible to the general public — only to the minority who enjoy a monopoly of governmental power.

However, the Western conception of democracy as a form of government created by the will of the majority of citizens was not accepted unconditionally during the nineteenth century. In fact, a feature that runs through nineteenth century thought is a fear of democracy — that it could lead to a “tyranny of the majority” (see Arblaster 1984: 264-283).

Nowadays and in general, the term “democracy” is usually reserved for governments that accept certain basic normative assumptions. These may be divided into three broad categories (Scruton 1982: 115-117; Raphael 1979: 146ff):

- (1) That government should reflect the people’s electoral will and choice — hence the constitutional provision for regular elections, usually under universal suffrage, by secret ballot, with representatives of at least two parties standing for election.
- (2) The basic individual freedoms (other than political rights) be recognised by government. These freedoms include freedom of speech, information and of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, religious freedom, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment.
- (3) That the basic individual freedoms referred to in (1) and (2) above be exercised according to the rule of law. The rule of law may be described as a doctrine which prescribes that no power can be exercised according to procedures, principles and constraints contained in the law (the law must obviously be directly or indirectly representative of the people’s will) and that any citizen can find redress against any other, however powerfully placed, and against the officers of the state itself, for any act which involves a breach of the law. This would imply that there must be a separation of (governmental) powers; that is, an *independent Judiciary* and an *Executive* separately elected or responsible to an elected *Legislature*.

The added idea of an independent political public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state or government and society in a democracy has long been propagated by the German sociologist and philosopher, Juergen Habermas. In a recent paper, Habermas (2006) notes that the political public sphere should be instrumental in the formation of considered public opinions through, among other matters, diversity of independent mass media and through general access of inclusive mass audiences to the public sphere. Habermas (*ibid.*) suggests that “the different weighting citizens of different nations assign to either rights and liberties, or to inclusion and equality, or to deliberation and problem solving, determines how they see themselves as members of their political community”.

“Democracy” itself is also an ideology. Along with nationalism and socialism, democracy may be regarded as a fundamental ideology in our contemporary age.

Ideology generally means *a system of socio-political ideas which social groups aim to implement practically in a given society*. These “ideas” are characterised by (1) an element of valuation (cherished ideas); (2) an element of actuality (ideas relating to the present); and (3) an element of belief (believed, rather than proved, ideas) (Ellul 1973: 116).

The socio-political ideas connected with democracy have to do with the individual’s natural right to control the government of the day (a cherished idea relating to the present) through regular elections and the exercise of basic freedoms in accordance with the rule of law. The idea that this natural right is recognised only in a democracy, and that democracy is therefore the best form of government, is a believed, rather than a proved idea.

In African philosophy, according to Kwame Nkrumah (Murobe 2002: 583), democracy is “a matter of socialist goals and aims”. Communalism is identified as the “social ancestor” of socialism by H. Odera Orika (2002: 59), a renowned African intellectual.

Similarly, Leopold Senghor argues that “Negro (sic) African society is collectivist, or, more exactly, communal because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals... Africa had realized socialism before the coming of Europeans but we must renew it by helping it to regain a spiritual dimension” (Murobe 2002: 583).

Murobe (*ibid.*) notes that Senghor found the spiritual aspect, which he saw as embedded in African collectivism, lacking in Western socialism.

In Thabo Mbeki’s (see Mbeki 2001: 149-157) definitive speech on the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), democratic principles and institutions, and popular participation and good governance for the continent are clear objectives. In his call for African leaders to adopt the true spirit of democracy in which, among other matters, human rights are protected and people-centred development and market-oriented economies predominate, a mixture of traditional Western and African approaches to democracy comes to the fore.

The description of democracy given thus far has focused mainly on its governmental and ideological nature. However, democracy’s distinctive aims are most clearly concerned with a person’s quality of life as manifested in human freedom and equality and, concomitantly, as manifested in a person’s ability to communicate freely to others and the world. It is to the respective principles of freedom and equality that underlie the Western concept of democracy that we now turn.

DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

Freedom is absence of restraint. The principle has *negative* and *positive* connotations: the former conveyed in the expression “freedom from” (for example, legal restraints), the latter in “freedom to” (for instance, realise one’s aims).

All too often the negative side of freedom has dominated concerns. One feels that a mere “freedom from” is not enough for freedom to prevail. The quest on the road into the unknown, the uncertain and insecure, is also part of freedom. After all, since we do

not always know what is best for us, we explore to find solutions. Freedom (as the absence of restraint) is therefore always freedom *from* some possible restraint and freedom *to* do what you want or choose to do provided that you do it responsibly, that you do not encroach upon another person's freedom (cf. Raphael 1981: 81; Scruton 1982: 180-181).

Individual freedoms and democracy

It has been argued above that certain individual freedoms are indeed essential to democracy. These freedoms include rights of direct or indirect participation in the process of government; freedom of speech; information and of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and religious freedom.

These freedoms are granted because they conform to basic *liberal* ideas associated with Western democracy, such as (see Beck 1979: 47-64):

- (1) Belief in the supreme value of the individual (and thus not of the state).
- (2) Belief that the individual has natural rights (rights which belong to all human beings by nature — such as the right to life and to control government) which exist independently of government, and which ought to be protected by and against government.
- (3) Recognition of the supreme value of an individual's freedom.

Note that the relationship between *democracy* and *liberalism* is not as natural as one may expect, despite the fact that “liberal democracy” is such a common phrase that one is inclined to imagine that there has always been a harmonious marriage between the two constituent principles. In fact, throughout history there has been constant tension between the advocates of democracy and liberalism. Democracy in its original sense of rule by the people or government in accordance with the will of the bulk of the people emphasised *equality* of people and was regarded by liberals as a bad word, fatal to individual freedom and to civilised living which liberalism stands for. However, since the twentieth century liberals have come to view Western democracy not as an end in itself, but as a means of preserving freedom of the individual, to secure a maximum of freedom for citizens (see Arblaster 1984: 75-79).

By “freedom” (of the individual) is also implied that to which one has a right (with its concomitant obligations), and “right” in turn implies “right to choose”. (Note that “freedom” and “liberty” are sometimes used interchangeably. However, liberty is normally used in English to refer only to “social freedom”, that is, freedom from restraint by the action of other persons; it is not used in the sense of freedom to choose — see Raphael 1981: 82.)

This right to choose (or freedom) also distinguishes human beings from animals. For instance, a human being can choose to commit suicide, an animal cannot. Choice is the selection of one possibility among others. More than one possibility or courses of action must be open to a person before that person can be said to have a choice — one must

not be prevented by physical or psychological causes from having at least two genuine options open to one.

Absolute freedom, however, is an unattainable ideal — legal constraints and societal constraints such as custom, tradition and public opinion prevents it. Also, to the extent that one is “duty-bound” to respect the freedom of another, freedom is limited rather than absolute. Moreover, if all persons were absolutely free to do as they pleased, the extent of an individual’s actual freedom would be measured by his/her *power* to do what he or she wanted and by his/her ability to resist invasive action by others and the law — power is used broadly here, in the Weberian sense, as the chance of an individual realising his/her own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who participate in the action (Weber 1982: 80).

Freedom of thought and discussion

A person’s “freedom to choose” in a democracy would also imply that one has a right to think whatever one wants — hence the principle of freedom of thought. Any attempt to impose thoughts on an individual or to prohibit him/her through law is doomed to failure.

This right to think whatever one wants does not, however, mean that such thoughts are entirely one’s own. In fact, one’s thoughts can never be regarded as a product entirely of one’s own deliberation, free from external influences of any kind. For instance, one’s thinking is conditioned by one’s social circumstances and by various propaganda practices that flourish in a democracy. Although it is true that many of one’s thoughts are not one’s own, one can make them one’s own by living them, by attaching meanings to them.

In theory, a democracy, by corresponding to the principle of freedom, will attempt to provide the individual with a wide variety of viewpoints which in turn would give him/her an opportunity to choose whichever viewpoint pleases him/her the most, through, *inter alia*, the doctrine of the freedom of the press. However, freedom of the press, understood broadly as meaning that the mass media should not be under governmental control, does not *guarantee* that the individual can choose a particular viewpoint among many. Private media groups may all propagate the same viewpoint (on the merits of the free enterprise system, for instance) to the exclusion of others in society.

Freedom of thought is an evasive ideal, but necessary ideal for a democracy. Let us turn to Mill’s (1975) classic argument in this regard.

In his essay *On Liberty* written in 1859, Mill advocates complete freedom of thought and discussion within the political order. Mill (1975: 50-51) bases his argument on four grounds:

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds.

And not only this, but fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct; the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.

As Levi (1959: 37-46) suggests, Mill advocates such freedom of thought and discussion in order to foster free development of individuality. Individuality incorporates the elements of spontaneity, diversity and the latitude of choice provided by the very freedom of thought, expression and discussion (mutual criticism).

Consciousness of individuality is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history. Historically, human beings have been regarded as social animals. It was only at the Renaissance that the individual and his needs began to move closer to the centre of human thought, and Mill was thus in line with post-medieval tradition, which he carried forward when he stressed the unique importance of the individual. In doing this, he did not imply that the individual was something apart from, and unrelated to, the society in which he lived and of which he was a product. His point was that each individual is a unique constellation of personal qualities significantly different from those of his fellow men, qualities which must be prized and encouraged for their creative potentialities.

For Mill, there is no real freedom for a person in a democracy if conflicting interests cannot be recognised without victimising the individual either in his/her relations with the institutions of government or in his/her personal claims against the pressures of mass sentiment.

Mill, as Tocqueville (1951) before him expounds in his *Democracy in America*, emphasises that the threat to individual freedom in a democracy lies not so much in the mandates of law, but from the pressures of *public sentiment*, which he fears will also lead to intellectual stagnation. On the pressures of public sentiments which enhance *conformity*, Mill (1975: 15) warns that this is not one of the evils which tend to disappear spontaneously but, on the contrary, it tends to grow more and more formidable. People, whether as rulers or as fellow citizens, impose their own opinions and inclinations *as a rule* on others, and this is so energetically supported that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anything but want of power, and that the power is not declining, but growing.

Mill's pointed remarks in *On Liberty* seem to suggest that an individual's freedom in a democracy could also be dependent on his/her ability to demand and receive the right to seek alone (if necessary) the truth about any matter that interests him/her. Dahrendorf (1979) would say that such ability would increase an individual's "life chances" in a democracy — also see Borraine's (1991) reference to "life chances".

Dahrendorf (1979: 34) describes *life chances* as opportunities for individual action arising from the *interrelationship* between "opinions" (possibilities of choice) and "ligatures" (bonds which the individual has been born into or has acquired — such as family or community bonds). An individual's life chances could increase or decrease, depending on the relationship between his/her options and his/her ligatures — the fewer his/her ligatures and the more his/her options, the greater his/her life chances. Although Dahrendorf does not equate freedom with life chances, he notes (1979: 38) that they are "closely related", in that freedom is about giving an individual opportunities to choose.

Freedom in a democracy: the underlying communicological idea

Theoretically, then, in a democracy, *freedom* (as a principle with active connotations) revolves around providing an individual with opportunities to make meaningful choices about his/her existence.

The democrat is prepared to make his/her own mistakes rather than to be *directed* by someone else, even though that person may have superior wisdom. The basic idea of freedom here is that self-direction, choosing and expressing for yourself in a *responsible* manner, is far preferable to having decisions made for you and imposed upon you by another (see Dewey 1963: 53-55).

DEMOCRACY AND EQUALITY

Some degree of equality is essential to a democracy (see Schultz 1977: 110-114; Hook 1944: 48-51; Raphael 1979: 183ff.). It is generally seen as including the following:

- (1) Equality before the law. This means that the rights of all individuals in a democracy are subject to a sovereign body (such as Parliament) which legislates, and to no other factor (such as race or class). Naturally there is never full equality before the law. For instance, children and lunatics are treated differently from adults of a sound mind. Neither does legal equality guarantee that all individuals will be equally able to take full advantage of the rights conferred. For example, some persons, by reason of superior education or greater wealth may be in a better position to exercise their legal rights than the poorly educated or the many persons with severely limited economic resources. This has given rise to the distinction between *de jure* equality and *de facto* equality: both rich and poor have equal rights in law, but it would be wrong to claim that they have equal power to enforce those rights.
- (2) Political equality. This means that there should be equality in the ability to vote someone into office, and to stand for election to office oneself. Such political

rights should not, for instance, be confined to the rich and the well-born. Political equality, like legal equality, never exists absolutely. For example, children never have the vote — universal adult suffrage is usually the norm. Also, in the United Kingdom, for instance, certain offices of state (notably that of sovereign) are hereditary and not open to everyone, while in the United States, one can become President only if one was born in that country. In conferring the vote on “all” adults, democracy presupposes the view that all adults generally have the ability to exercise the vote. A form of factual equality is implied; that is, that every adult (excluding lunatics) has the ability to form a political judgement and to make a rational political choice — which, of course, may not in fact be true.

- (3) Equality of opportunity. This means that all individuals should be given the same opportunity (for instance, in the field of education) to develop whatever personal talents they possess and to make whatever unique contributions their capacities permit. Equality of opportunity lies in the very spirit of democracy. Of course, despite favouring equal opportunity, there are still many inequalities within a democracy, such as inequalities of income, wealth and power.

Some kinds of equality, it seems safe to assume, are unattainable. Differences among individuals in intelligence, in talents, in temperament and in physical characteristics, so far as we know, are inherent in humankind.

Tocqueville’s warning

In writing on the principle of equality in his much renowned treatise on nineteenth-century American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville pointedly warns in *Democracy in America* (1951) that equality can be taken too far and could result in a situation where persons are prone “to be lost in the crowd” of their fellows; they lose respect for their own freedom and soon become grossly indifferent to the free expression of individual thought.

As legal, political and social conditions became more equal for persons in nineteenth-century America, Tocqueville notes that Americans seemed more and more to take pride, not in their individuality, in their freedom, but rather in their sameness. He says this is because the principle of equality is partly based on the notion that there is more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men united than in a single individual and that the interests of the many are to be preferred to the few (1951: Vol. 1: 255-256).

Moreover, Tocqueville (who had a definite aristocratic bias — he argues throughout that uniformity, conformity and mediocrity are fixed returns of egalitarian (democratic) society — see Aron 1970: 9) suggests that democracy in nineteenth-century America had, in the sacred name of the majority, raised up a tyranny over the minds of men as oppressive and as formidable as any in history: the tyranny of the majority.

On specific tendencies which the principle of equality creates, he notes that “the one (tendency) leads men straight to independence and may suddenly drive them into anarchy; the other conducts them by a longer, more secret, but more certain road to

servitude. Nations readily discern the former tendency and are prepared to resist it; they are led away by the latter, without perceiving its drift” (1951: Vol. 2: 288).

Equality in a democracy: the basic communicological idea

Theoretically, in a democracy the principle of equality conventionally relates to equality before the law, political equality and equality of opportunity, bearing in mind that there will always be differences in, for example, the talents and temperaments of persons. The idea of these forms of equality seems to be that all persons should be treated with “fairness” in a democracy. A truly democratic society would then, as Dahrendorf (1961: 182-185) suggests, combine a maximum of equality of circumstances with a minimum of equality of character.

Equality in a democracy would prevail if persons had equal opportunity to participate and to be involved as self-conscious subjects in the communication process. Mutual respect, spontaneity and an awareness of the other as an individual would be prerequisites for persons to participate in communication in this way.

FREEDOM VERSUS EQUALITY

One of the essential conditions of a democratic state is the free play of conflicting opinions, the right of all persons to freely disagree.

Consequently one would expect that a democratic state would also respect the line between the power of the majority and the rights of minorities, also dissident minorities. In fact no state can afford to disregard individual differences, conflicts of interests, and diversity of needs in devising satisfactory solutions for the many problems that arise in all communities.

Equality is a great leveller. Equality makes it exceedingly difficult for one person or a few persons to oppress the many, but in turn it makes it just as difficult for one person to be free from the oppression of the many.

Equality by itself is not ideal. If all persons were equally wretched, equally poor, or equally powerful, the equality would be no boon; in this sense persons may be more equal under a totalitarian regime than under a democracy.

The point is that if persons say they want to be *free and equal* their demand for freedom often puts a limit on their demand for equality. For example, any attempt to achieve equality in wealth for all citizens would surely result in a form of totalitarianism — to keep persons equal in wealth, in spite of their unequal abilities, work performance and varying aptitudes, would require a degree of all-round regimentation surpassing anything that a dictator has yet achieved.

Although democracy implies that certain freedoms, such as freedom of speech, are conferred equally on all persons, it has, in the final analysis, to decide which is the more important: freedom or equality.

In this respect one would be inclined to agree with Dahrendorf (1961) that a person’s *freedom* must be the supreme goal. Applying equality (of persons) as an all-embracing

principle leads to the degeneration of humankind: It prevents one from developing one's personal capacities (which are always qualitatively unequal) to the greatest possible extent — thus sacrificing individuality for the sake of equality.

In communicological terms, applying equality as an all-embracing principle would obstruct a person's power of *individual* expression, since it aims to make persons think and do alike. Persons tend to become the same, rather than becoming self-conscious subjects. It would be in order if *equality* implied that everyone could communicate on an equal subject footing so that they are able to actualise themselves.

IN CONCLUSION: A QUESTION OR TWO FOR SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

While it has been argued above that the principles of freedom and equality should reign supreme in a democratic state, it must be emphasised that the right to freedom is not an absolute right and that absolute equality is unattainable.

The principle of *freedom*, from which freedom of expression, press freedom and religious freedom are derived, bears limitations, obligations and social responsibilities in a democratic state. There is no legal or moral escape from them.

Broadly-speaking, communication practices in a democratic state are always influenced by social circumstances which include the prevailing politico-ideological climate at a given time. Let's take the recent furore over the Prophet Muhammad cartoons as an example.

The furore has its origin, in short, when the author of a Danish children's book was unable to find anybody to illustrate a book about Prophet Muhammad. A local Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, regarded this as evidence of a Muslim threat to free expression, and decided to commission and publish cartoons of the Prophet to make a point (Krüger 2006). In South Africa, the weekly *Mail and Guardian* published one of the cartoons and was vehemently criticised by the Muslim community. The editor later apologised after she and her family had received death threats. A High Court interdict was granted preventing any further publication of the cartoons in South Africa. Many commentators shouted that press freedom was under threat in the land.

The point is that the press or mass media are also bound by constraints on freedom in a democratic state because they are part of that state. They do not function outside of it. This would apply to any communicative practice which for example promotes "hate speech" [see Gelber's (2002) work on the subject-matter] or the ridiculing, insulting or denigration of a widely-practised religion.

A position, albeit a conservative position, on the issue suggests that an apology for publishing the Muhammad cartoons or other insulting material does not have ramifications for freedom of expression or press freedom. Freedom sometimes has to be balanced against other values such as intercultural harmony which make it legitimate to encroach on it.

When choosing to rely on (press) freedom to defend particular communicative actions, individuals and institutions need to consider true human responsibilities in the process of verbal and nonverbal communication, also with regard to religious issues. Too many wars have raged, and are still raging, in the name of one or other religion or religious denomination.

Intercultural sensitivities are rife in South Africa. Communication practitioners should know this and strive to take their own and other's viewpoints into consideration. Balance is an overriding concern. In communicating interculturally, use of the "free word" or illustration must be approached circumspectly. The free word can cause, and has caused, major conflict. Those who use the free word to wound the honour or pride of others actually shoot with words (Esterhuysen 2004).

One says this fully appreciating that without press freedom a democratic state cannot exist. Citizens must be kept informed about socio-economic and political circumstances which influence their lives. Public opinion is mainly formed by events which the press and other media have made publicly known. Citizen involvement in the interpretation of news is necessary for the effective functioning of public opinion. And an active public opinion steers democratic practices. The press as the Fourth Estate is irrevocably part and parcel of this process.

This implies that the press must be able to do its work fearlessly: in freedom but also with the necessary responsibility to achieve the democratic ideal. The press must be the watchdog and not the ragdoll of government.

As Merrill (2004: 17) notes, press freedom usually leads to best journalism practices. Freedom is necessary for maximum news coverage. Freedom is needed for the discovery of truths. Freedom is needed for diversity of information.

The challenge facing the principle of *equality* in South Africa does not lie in the idea of political equality previously discussed in this article or in equality before the law, but in the idea of equal opportunity in the land.

Stories of the deep division between the so-called haves (in-groups) and have-nots (out-groups) in South Africa abound. For example, winning entries in the 2005 Vodacom Journalist of the Year competition, one of the foremost journalism competitions in South Africa (Sullivan 2006), show that the South African state is grappling with inequalities. The exploitation of the poor by the rich; the plight or hardship of disabled persons; the plight of the poor in informal settlements and rural villages; and the devastating effects of HIV/Aids on especially the poor are realities (see Vodacom 2005).

Inequalities will have to be bridged as soon as possible if political stability is to be maintained over the medium and long term. The divide between rich and poor is not simply, as in apartheid South Africa, a racial one. It is also class-based. While political transformation has been implemented in many spheres, the challenge of economic transformation for the benefit of most, if not all, has yet to be realised.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the new democratic South African state is the pervasiveness of violent crime, which makes a mockery of the principles of freedom and equality.

South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in Africa. In 2006 alone, there were 18 528 murders, 54 926 rapes and 119 726 cases of violent theft. Violent crime against especially children is horrifying (Raubenheimer & Du Toit 2007: 1). During the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005, 22 486 cases of rape, 24 189 cases of assault with the intent to do grievous bodily harm and 1 128 cases of murder against children were committed (Internal Question Paper No 1/2006). Other contact crimes against citizens of all walks of life continue unabated. Among many citizens, there seems to be very little respect for law and order, and for the life of another human being, when it comes to violent crime in South Africa.

The principle of freedom in this context has been seemingly operationalised as doing what you want without taking the other person into consideration. With such freedom comes a climate of unhappiness where “communities live in fear, closeted behind walls and barbed wire, ever anxious in their houses, on the streets and on our roads, unable freely to enjoy our public spaces” (Mbeki 2007).

Likewise, the principle of equality is distorted in the land. With regard to violent crime, criminals have become more equal than others through their disregard for another’s dignity or property and for their (often) escaping punishment for such crimes.

Poverty among large parts of the population and the lack of equal opportunity in the developing South African state is, of course [as President Mbeki (2007) repeatedly suggests], a complicating factor for bringing down the rate of certain crime such as theft, and to build the new democratic South African state.

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