

# Why Intellectual Freedom Matters

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Delivered at BOBCATSSS Conference, Tallinn, Estonia, Jan. 2006.

## **Abstract**

Although intellectual freedom is treated in the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 19) as a human right, some people still argue that it is a luxury or even a 'complete and utter irrelevance' when compared to basic human needs such as those for food, shelter, education and health. In response to this, there is actually a case for saying that freedom of expression and freedom of access to information perform a basic function that is as significant as any other response to fundamental human need. The evidence of neurophysiology suggests that human brain function develops from the earliest stages of infancy in response to external stimuli rather than exclusively to some genetically programmed sequence of growth. In the absence of stimuli not only is the brain's initial development inhibited, but it may never develop fully even if later provided with a full flow of sensory data. The brain has been described as a 'plastic', or mouldable, organ in which various areas although essentially dedicated to a particular mental function can adapt and change according to need. It is the flow of data into the brain that demands and triggers such responses and little more is required than that the flow should be full and uninterrupted. Such mediation, by parent, other carer or teacher, as is needed, is informal and responsive rather than directive or restrictive. The emergence of a mature human being from the experiences and learning opportunities of childhood is essentially a process that continues to be fed by the information that is received. If the information is rich, varied, full of apparent contradictions and sources of confusion, the brain is both required to, and has the capacity to, develop and use a critical faculty to give order to the apparently chaotic, find ways to construct explanations, and devise responses and courses of action. This operates most effectively in conditions of freedom, where the mind is not limited to one set of data or one intellectual approach selected for it by some external authority, be it an educational system, religion or state ideology. The first consequence of this is that mature human beings are better equipped to satisfy other basic needs such as food and shelter for themselves and their families, through the use of the knowledge and skills that they acquire as independent learners. Mature human beings are not easily transformed into victims or dependents. Furthermore, a mature human being is fitted, both by previous access to information and the ability to obtain current knowledge, to hold independent opinions and function effectively as an actor in society. Citizens with this information-fed independence are essential to democratic political organisation, a successful modern economy and a fair and decent society. By promoting intellectual freedom, library and information professionals, in alliance with civil society organisations, serve not only the range of basic human needs, but the broader requirements of humanity.

## **Introduction**

Some people regard intellectual freedom (freedom of opinion, free expression and access to information) as a kind of luxury that is only relevant in comfortable, established economies. Since 2003 I have been the Chair of IFLA's Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) core activity and the role naturally calls for frequent statements on, and in favour of, various aspects of the intellectual freedoms. A recent assertion of mine in an Internet discussion that the intellectual freedoms represented fundamental human values was challenged. The challenger called these freedoms a 'complete and utter irrelevance' asserting that there are more fundamental human rights: 'food, shelter, education and health'. Without being foolish enough to challenge the centrality to human life of nourishment and a warm and secure place to live, I would suggest this line of argument is inadequate. The role of intellectual freedom is much more important in the functioning of the individual and society than you can see if you only concentrate on the more obviously basic rights.

The case for intellectual freedom arises out of a fundamental characteristic of human beings. This characteristic is an urge to know, and therefore to find out, that is part of the biological equipment of every individual. The need for survival requires all creatures to respond to stimuli in ways that will enable them to nourish and protect themselves. Obvious examples are the more complex life forms, dolphins, primates and dogs, in which this reaches great heights of sophistication and produces considerable ability to adapt to perceptions of external change and threat. In humans this is taken a significant step further in that the information processed by the human mind can be used not merely to adapt for survival, but to change external circumstances in ways that are intended to bring improvements. What follows explores this by looking at the development of childhood cognition, before examining the other side of the coin: the systematic distortion of the developmental process that is known as 'brainwashing'. The implications of this approach for human beings in society and how it points towards a key role for intellectual freedom in the development of an innovative democratic society will then be indicated.

## **Childhood cognition**

The argument for the universality of intellectual freedom as a set of values is, first of all, rooted in the development and functioning of the human brain. The flow of sensations into the brain that range from tastes and smells through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, number and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, it develops and supports the ability to think. For a newborn baby there is initially no set of data against which to check its new perceptions, no patterns into which something newly perceived can be fitted. However, the baby immediately begins to identify sensations, recognise them when they occur, and even predict their recurrence. Babies can be observed responding to the messages from their senses as early as the moments when they first seek to attach their lips to their mother's nipple. Very soon they will know their immediate surroundings and recognise those who care for them. A process of change in the brain is central to this development of understanding, but that in turn is reliant on the reception of a flow of stimuli.

The processes that are taking place in human learning are now much better understood through the use of technology such as electroencephalography, positron emission tomography (PET scanning), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and magnetoencephalography (MEG). (Winston, 2003) It is now possible to examine brain function down to the level of the single neuron. The functions and interrelation of different areas of the brain have become increasingly apparent through this type of research. It is possible to show that certain areas of the brain perform certain functions: the frontal lobe area handling planning and decision-making, for instance, or the brainstem dealing with involuntary functions such as breathing and heart rate. But the idea that the specialisation of areas of the brain is utterly fixed seems not to be correct. Despite the popular notion that brain tissue is progressively lost over a lifetime, the brain is a 'plastic' organ that renews, changes and adapts to a surprising extent according to the stimuli it receives. Such change is apparent in people whose brains have suffered some damage that requires the reallocation of functions to areas originally serving other purposes. Thus in an important sense, the brain is actually formed, or re-formed, by the stimuli that it receives. Our picture of the questioning mind that emerges from neurology-related studies links our awareness of intelligence, personality, and learning to actual brain function.

The increase of brain activity in the areas associated with the various senses can be measured during the early months of human life. The development of the baby's physical coordination and its perception of distance and space develop markedly during the first few months and before the end of the first year the frontal lobes become active. At this stage, the baby can choose to concentrate on particular visual or auditory stimuli to the exclusion of others and to make other choices based on this observation. All of this activity is dependent first on a flow of sensory information and then, after the child has developed the ability to understand and use language, of the encoded messages passed on by other humans. (Kuhl, 2000) It is this dependence on what is effectively a flow of unfiltered information that justifies an assertion that the human being is a learning creature, programmed to ask questions and needing to find out, almost as a condition of existence.

### **Cognition and learning**

The important thing is that this process of finding out, building understanding on what is identified, and then basing actions on that understanding is not merely a learned response. The neural equipment of the infant human has the basic capacity to cope with the information that reaches it through sensation, and what is more, the brain requires it. We could regard this as the state of being wired to discover. As Koren (1998) puts it:

In essence, the child is an information seeker. Information affects the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development of the child and this fact has far-reaching implications for the child's providers of information.

The truth of this can be appreciated by looking at the negative case. A child that is deprived of sensation visibly suffers in consequence. Occasionally children are discovered who have been shut up for years on end by their parents or carers in spaces that allow them hardly any access to external stimuli. These children's ability to learn has on each occasion been severely damaged and if the incarceration has continued

too long they have proved incapable of progressing beyond very limited understanding and communication. Similar evidence has been available since early times. Experiments in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (*Stupor Mundi*) caused some children to be brought up in isolation by deaf mute carers. Their capacity to learn was so stunted that the assumption that they had basic mental equipment that would be revealed when they were denied a full range of external stimuli was effectively refuted.

Later speculation employed a similar device to the isolation experiment. Eighteenth century philosophers imagined a child isolated by some disaster in a remote place that completely isolated it from other human beings. How, they asked, would that individual develop without social example and the direct guidance of others? In consequence there was enormous interest generated by the discovery of children, such as Victor the wolf boy of the Aveyron, who seemed to have actually experienced this. (Shattuck, 1980) Even though the idea of the wild child is almost entirely a misunderstanding of the actual circumstances in which someone like Victor was living, the question is, at an abstract level, still an interesting one. The most pressing needs, for food and shelter from danger and the weather, might be expected to dominate the mind of the wild child, drive its curiosity and form its most highly developed sets of ideas. But after that, would there be any development of the mental capacities of the isolated individual? The most convincing speculation is that the wild child would be intensely curious about a narrow range of matters arising from urgent physical needs and more or less untroubled by a wider desire for knowledge. This was certainly the case with Victor, who never fully developed a capacity to function above this level. Exposing the child to a wide range of sensation and information from its earliest days, so that it can continue to develop, thus becomes a necessity rather than a luxury. To understand what happens in the process of learning how to find out, and the actual business of finding out, we still need to turn to the area of educational theory.

Still the most widely known and accepted approach of this kind is Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. (Piaget, 1953) He came to understand the development of the mind as a process of the same kind as biological growth. His intensive observation showed him the child constantly defining and redefining its understanding of what it perceived as it experienced more and more exposure to external stimuli. He saw this as the child actually thinking and reasoning in different ways at different stages in its life, an insight on which he elaborated his theory of cognitive development. The argument that the child is inherently structured and oriented towards discovery is given specific shape in Piaget's explanation of the four main stages he identified. What matters in each of the stages of cognitive development is that in all of them the child is engaging with sensory data, and using it to construct the beginnings of its own personality and way of relating to the world. Central to the whole process is the information of many kinds that the child must have if it is to become a mature human being.

Piaget's theory overwhelmingly suggests that learning is not passive: learners must actively construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. He argued that for a child to learn it must be ready: that is, it must have reached the appropriate developmental stage. This placed a requirement on formal education to respond to the needs of the child, not to feed the child with highly structured information, ready or not, according

to the pre-set structure of a curriculum. As Maria Montessori, one of the other great pioneers of modern educational theory, put it,

Education is not something which the teacher does, but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child. (Montessori, 1949)

This conclusion that the child needs to experiment and question, to be an active searcher for answers has been the basis of a multitude of experiments with child-centred learning in schools and provides the rationale for the provision of responsive information services of all kinds and levels. It is the basis for the argument that adults, as successors to the actively learning child, also have a fundamental need to discover.

### **Brainwashing**

On the other hand, the deliberate selection and restriction of the content of information flow into the mind of the individual is possible and its effects can be devastating. The subjection of the members of social institutions, beginning with the family, and including churches and other faith-based organisations, political parties and governments, to a consistent and carefully calculated flow of messages, is observable throughout history. The aim of the process of influencing the minds of others has been to develop a mentality of unquestioning loyalty and unswerving intention. An iconic instance, the Assassins, disciples of the Old Man of the Hills, were portrayed by the chroniclers of the Crusades as fanatical killers, sent out to do the will of their master and made doubly dangerous by their unconcern over their own personal fate. In the second half of the twentieth century the development of such levels of influence over individuals was brought to a peak of perfection and was given the name 'brainwashing' by an official of the US CIA, Edward Hunter.

The essential characteristics of brainwashing have varied little throughout history. (Taylor, 2005) Five aspects recur in modern accounts of brainwashing and can be identified in historical accounts of the exercise of the deepest levels of influence over the individual human mind. They are:

- Isolation. This functions to limit access to precisely the naturally occurring or self-selected flow of information and ideas that enables the individual to build up a personal perception of the world.
- Control. In the first place the flow of information is controlled, and then a process of flooding the mind of the subject with messages that point in a certain direction is begun.
- Uncertainty. Doubt in what has previously been accepted is introduced, whilst at the same time the authority of a new ideology is asserted.
- Repetition. There is constant repetition of the message using a distinctive vocabulary and set of rhetorical structures.

- Emotional manipulation. Happy sensations are encouraged when the subject shows signs of understanding and accepting the ideas, but harsh and unrelenting treatment is offered to those who persist in holding on to previous ideas and values.

This deprivation of access to information and ideas, and the presentation of a simple, apparently coherent, alternative are diametrically opposed to the principles behind intellectual freedom. The illogical, uncritical, self-destructive thinking that the brainwashed subject can exhibit is, in its own way, one of the strongest arguments for intellectual freedom that can be adduced. The mental processes of the subject suffer damage that may not recover with time and may not be susceptible to the kinds of ‘reprogramming’ that is sometimes offered to release adherents of cults from their attachment. In a free society the individual may seem a prey to the sheer volume of information and ideas available, but the evidence is that this potentially bewildering profusion is actually the best guarantee of effective thought processes, capable of solving problems independently.

### **The social function of intellectual freedom**

It is in the context of society that the need to know, inherent in all humans, develops towards its full capacity. In the society of the hunter-gatherer or the agriculturalist, the human desire and capacity to find out flourishes richly, but in a limited context. The San people of the Kalahari Desert examining the ground for almost imperceptible signs of the passage of game, learning the food potential of plants, alert to the signs that water might be found in the vicinity, are almost a metaphor for the intelligent inter-reaction with scarce resources. The peasant farmer acquiring the most detailed understanding of local soils and rainfall, learning how to select seeds for the next planting, aware of how to breed the most successful herds and flocks and treat their diseases, is likewise working with knowledge in the most intense of ways. Yet at the same time the insecurity inherent in the modes of governance normal for such societies constantly threatens the results of the process of discovery.

Society organised on the basis of chieftainship, or history’s many variations on dictatorship, is always a prey to the fallibility of rulers. Oppression, injustice, war, famine and the other manmade consequences of bad governance have been more common in world history than the happier periods of civilised comfort that have interspersed them from place to place and time to time. Only gradually did the organised workforce in industrialised and urbanised societies assert rights through legislation passed in semi-representative parliaments, obtain the vote for increasing proportions of the population, and begin to take a share in the profits of industry sufficient to enable the majority to live lives of at least basic comfort. The role of intellectual freedom was crucial in this. Under conditions of freedom, mature human beings can conduct dialogues and discussions that have the potential to turn their attention to matters of general public interest. The public forums that emerge as a consequence of this grow in size and take on structure, so that their continuance requires guarantees of the right of freedom of assembly and then the right of freedom of expression. (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Police, 2005)

At that stage the conditions exist for a political public sphere that has the potential to exercise control of the state. As Habermas (1974) puts it:

Only when the exercise of political control is effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public, does the political public sphere win an institutionalised influence over the government through the instrument of law-making bodies.

This political public sphere at its most basic relies on actual physical spaces: the Athenian agora, or market place, and Speaker's Corner in London for example. Democratic assemblies of all citizens, as in the kgotla of Botswana, the assemblies of some Swiss cantons, or New England town meetings, take this basic equation of public information commons as place one step further by awarding those assembled the power to advise rulers or make decisions for the community. Representative democracy has its parliaments, congresses and other assemblies, which adopt similar rules of debate and allow issues to be thrashed out, at least partly, in public. A healthy civil society in a country mirrors this pattern of public debate in miniature through hundreds or thousands of clubs, societies and associations each of them providing structures for free speech and decisions made by the majority. When we add communications media - the newspaper with its seventeenth century origins, radio and television in the twentieth century, and the electronic media of the twenty-first – a fuller picture emerges of what Habermas meant. Yet this optimistic equation of intellectual freedom, information commons, and democracy still requires the reinforcement that political science and economics can offer.

### **Democracy and the information society**

Intellectual freedom is inseparably bound to democracy as a political environment, but the social effectiveness of this linkage still requires illustration. The economist Amartya Sen, by taking India as his chief example, is able to show that even an extremely large and diverse country with hundreds of millions of citizens in deep poverty can make democracy work. He rejects the idea that authoritarian governments are better able to deliver economic development and memorably argues that no substantial famine has ever occurred in an independent and democratic country with even a relatively free press. This claim, which he substantiates with examples, is perhaps the best claim that can be made for intellectual freedom and its democratic context. The argument with which he supports this is that democracy has a plurality of virtues:

First, the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights and duties. (Sen, 1999, p.11)

The first of these points is a matter of principle, but it is a principle that arises comfortable out of what has been argued here: that there is a fundamental human propensity to know. The natural consequence of knowing is the desire for freedom to continue finding out and for participation on the basis of the knowledge obtained. Democracy both springs from the diffusion of knowledge and is fertilised by it. The

second point is the practical need for governments to be widely accountable, and the basis for effective accountability is the citizen's access to information. Finally, the formation of values and understanding in the context of democracy occur precisely because democracy demands the openness and transparency that fosters learning. Sen characterises this aspect of democracy as involving the exchange of information, views and analyses. He argues that

Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the process of generating informed and considered choices. (Sen, 1999, p.10)

But democratic values including freedom of access to information can be seen acting on society in a much wider fashion than the mere election or criticism of governments. Access to information transforms society much more fundamentally.

Today this would be taken to mean that access creates an information society. In the post-industrial age that emerged in a number of European countries and North America during the second half of the twentieth century information-based economic activity was substituted for industrial production. Industry is outsourced to the newly-industrialised countries, particularly those of the Pacific rim. What replaces it deals in intangibles: intellectual property, market intelligence, cultural tourism and other tradable forms of knowledge. Described thus, it may sound as though an information society merely deals in information packages that are first and foremost commodities. In business terms, this may be the case. What that ignores, however, is the way in which an information economy is dependent on a creative, independent minded, information using population. The information economy is rooted in individual intellectual freedom, and the protection of information freedoms thus becomes an economic and political necessity as well as a matter of individual human rights. A society that recognises the right to opinions, information and expression provides conditions in which thinking individuals can emerge and thrive. This is essentially the nature of democracy. The opposite applies in a society that projects official messages that individuals are obliged to accept and discourages dissent, and that restricts and censors the flows of information. This is a society that cultivates dependency, encourages victimhood and discourages change that emerges from outside its boundaries and ideological parameters. Modern democratic society has the potential to be an information society precisely because it is founded on intellectual freedom.

## **Conclusion**

We can thus trace the indispensable nature of access to information from the earliest development of human cognition through to the creation of fair and decent societies, based on a democratic system. Such societies have the potential for the continuing development that is the essence of the twenty first century information society. The continuing campaign for the enlightenment of all and the achievement of a better society through the free flow of information and ideas is therefore an enterprise of the very first importance. IFLA's FAIFE is fully active in that campaign and I am unashamed to present intellectual freedom as a universal human value and an issue of crucial importance to all human beings. I believe that intellectual freedom matters and all library and information workers should embrace it as their guiding principle.

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