

Freedom of Speech—European Tradition and New Challenges [†]

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Abstract: The problem of freedom of speech caught the attention of thinkers from the very beginning of our civilization, but it was only in the modern age that it became a central issue both in theoretical philosophy and in social practices. Freedom of speech is not only a matter of the individual's private rights but also one of the fundamental conditions for the proper functioning of the public sphere. The space of mutual communication has gone through extremely dynamic changes in the last decades—we live in the proverbial “global village”, where the possibilities seem unlimited. However, parallel to these possibilities, extremely real threats appear. The aim of my paper is the presentation of the idea of freedom of speech in traditional understanding and describing new challenges. The question arises: to what extent can traditional values be transferred into a new “digital reality”?

Keywords: freedom of speech; philosophy of communication; digital reality

1. Introduction

The problem of the freedom of speech caught the attention of thinkers from the very beginning of our civilization, but it was only in the modern age that it became a central issue both in theoretical philosophy and in social practices which aimed at organizing a rational political community. This elaboration will discuss the conditions under which this freedom can be exercised effectively. The reason for approaching this problem lies in at least two arguments. Firstly, the dominant political system, i.e., liberal democracy, assumes the participation of citizens in making decisions important for the entire community. To make this participation rational, citizens must have access to information and the possibility of its verification through communication with others. Therefore, freedom of speech is not only a matter of the individual's private rights but also one of the fundamental conditions for the proper functioning of the public sphere. Secondly, the space for communication has been going through extremely dynamic changes for the last decades—we live in a proverbial “global village”, in a total network [1], where the possibilities of accessing information, storing it, analysing and exchanging views with others seem unlimited. However, parallel to these possibilities, extremely real threats appear: the danger of being manipulated by entities that are difficult to identify, as well as the phenomenon of excessive “crowds of information” and the inability to distinguish the fact from the appearance, the essential from the banality. In this culturally new situation, the question about the effective and rational use of traditionally understood “freedom of speech” becomes highly dramatic. The aim of my paper is the presentation of the idea of freedom of speech in traditional understanding (in academic tradition, classic media) and describing new challenges in the new “digital reality”.

2. Freedom of Speech in the “Pre-Media” Culture—The Academic Seminary as a Model of Free Communication

However, also in the “pre-media” culture, the functioning of the space in which people would be able to communicate with one another effectively was not easy, and such communication did not just happen spontaneously. Apart from the obvious condition of eliminating violence and repression, when communicating, individuals must use a certain



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tool to formulate thoughts that are understood by both sides. This function is served by a language with all its rules which must be obeyed by anyone who wants to make use of the freedom of speech. Another type of rigor which conditions meaningful communication is logic. It is easy to imagine the exchange of “flighty” statements which lack the discipline of logical thinking. Such freedom has nothing to do with the discussed freedom of speech. The exchange of thoughts also needs certain formal prosaic rules: ordering the succession of utterance, listening to one another, accepting arguments presented by others. In the tradition of the Western European civilization, the culture of the free exchange of thoughts was developing for centuries, first in Greek philosophical schools and later at universities. The academic seminary seems to be a nonpareil model of the space in which the rules allow the participants of the discourse to exercise the freedom of speech and the communication enriches the participants.

3. Rules of Communication in Traditional Media

Although nowadays this tradition is continued mainly at universities, “the balance point”, or rather, the main direction of communication, has shifted. For nearly two centuries, we have been observing the growing popularity of media culture, and we associate the freedom of speech mainly with the communication via mass media and, in the most recent decades, on the Internet. In this “space”, the discourse is totally different. First of all, it is an open communication, and the number of individuals who participate in it has been growing very quickly, starting from the first printed newspapers and through the radio and TV. What is more, in the era of the Internet, the discussion is practically “total”, as every person can become a sender or a recipient of any content.

It seems that, initially, the activity of traditional media was characterized by an ethos formulated in the academic space, i.e., communication as objective as possible. The job of a journalist was associated with carrying out a special mission so, by definition, journalists worked in favour of the public interest and were obliged to present a state of affairs in a reliable and impartial way and present the arguments of different standpoints in an honest way. One of the fundamental rules was strict separation of fact description from formulating comments and opinions about them. A word spoken in a public sphere was to “serve the truth”. It also needs to be highlighted that due to the creation of the space for interpersonal communication, so called fourth authority, i.e., journalists and publishers, has a huge influence on public opinion and decision makers.

4. Deconstruction of the Traditional Communication’s Rules

This specific ethos of media and journalism has been gradually becoming weaker and weaker. Nowadays, media are often interested in taking part in a fierce battle for popularity which results from massification, the greater number of senders and a battle for recipients. Unfortunately, the rules of this rivalry have not been set in such a way so that the word “closer to the truth” would have a higher price than half-truth or even an obvious lie. What further destroyed this traditional ethos was the realization that a spoken word can have a great impact. This phenomenon was already contemplated on by Greek sophists and later by Machiavelli, who may be considered as the real protoplast of modern propaganda. The theoretical philosophy of the 20th century, especially analytical school, proved that the meaning of a word does not end with reference to a fact. An act of speech also has a performative meaning [2], often serving an analogical function as direct actions [3].

5. Technical Progress versus Regress into the “Communication Jungle”

A lot can be said about the process of the civilizational, technical and cultural changes of the last century. Mediatization of the social space is defined as the process of creating media images and transposing them into the minds of recipients in such a way so that they seem to be objective images which help to explain and get to know the world [4]. At the same time, media often take over the socializing functions from a family and make it impossible to get to know and feel the real world in a traditional way. The other aspect is

the egalitarianisation of public opinion leaders. In the pre-Internet times, journalists enjoyed social trust, and they had to accept the professional, civil and penal responsibility for what they said. The emergence of the Internet as a medium and blurring the boundaries between a sender and a recipient had an impact on blurring the responsibility for the published content. In the subject literature, a contemporary media participant is called a prosumer. The term is the combination of the words *professional* or *producer* with *consumer* and was first described by Alvin Toffler, who points out that a prosumer is not only a consumer. It is a person who has vast knowledge about the products and services of their favourite brand, and they pass this knowledge to others. They want to actively participate in creating products and services of that brand, and they make conscious choices of what to buy. In other words, a prosumer is an active consumer who is not just a passive recipient of advertising [5].

This led to the situation when manipulation is present everywhere. Today, a word uttered in a communication space does not serve the truth but is a tool for the promotion of different interests. Some users, believing in their anonymity, publish content which they would never do in real life. The examples supporting this train of thought are trolling, stalking and hitching. Moreover, apparent anonymity of commentators gives the possibility to produce content which infringes the fundamental element of the journalist profession, i.e., the responsibility for what they said. Interestingly, despite the fact that the actors of a social space, both individual and collective, are aware of the need to verify information in the ecosystem of media, they adopt the logic of media and apparently anonymous commentators. Therefore, we deal with the reality which resembles a state of anarchy which, as we know, poses a lethal threat to freedom.

This is the huge paradox of our time: the fantastic development of technique opened a new unimaginable opportunity for communication among people, but simultaneously, the quality of communication dramatically comes down. To express this symbolically: “the top of technique” caused civilization regress again into the (internet) jungle.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Hence, we need to expect that also in this “wild” virtual world of communication, there will be a gradual consolidation of mechanisms and standards which will introduce a little bit of civilized order into this space. So, the question arises: To what extent can traditional values be transfer into the new “digital reality”? I believe this could be achieved only in the process: The organization of traditional space for free discourse took a few centuries; now, we live much faster, but this process must take time. I do not have answer to how such a “transition of traditional values” should be shaped, but I am sure that as conditions for responsible free communication we constantly need:

- Responsibility for the spoken word (sent message);
- Respect for the partners of dialogue;
- Ability to remain silent. We live in permanent chase, in a “crowd of information”, we suffer for lack of silence. And critical free thinking needs silence.

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