

BOOK REVIEW

The Power and the Story: The Global Battle for News and Information by John Lloyd, (2017) London: Atlantic Books

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Most journalists around the world will agree that a central element of their jobs is to be as truthful as possible to the events they are covering. However, as John Lloyd writes in *The Power and the Story*, staying loyal to the truth is not always an easy task. In authoritarian regimes, the State's shadow looms large over journalistic freedom, dissenting voices are suppressed and mainstream media are under the tight control of those who wield power. In democratic societies, journalism is often practised under the pressure of the market, frequently leading to partial accounts of events. Based on personal interviews with some of the defining figures in contemporary journalism, Lloyd's direct experience in Egypt, the UK, Italy, Russia and other countries, and a comprehensive review of secondary sources, *The Power and the Story* surveys the state of journalism across the globe, starting in China and concluding with the United States, highlighting the apparently shrinking appreciation for good journalism worldwide.

Keywords: Media power; Russia; China; journalism; authoritarianism; dissent

The year 2017, which began with the inauguration of Donald Trump, the most iconoclastic President in US history, served as confirmation that the news media are living through an era of eroding public trust and heightened scrutiny, particularly in respect to social media. This period could also be characterized by what appears to be an increasing number of rhetorical attacks against journalists, some of which come directly from the White House. Throughout the presidential campaign, and well into his first year as President, Trump's labelling of CNN and NBC as 'fake news' and his persistent attacks on the 'failing' *New York Times* were cheered by supporters at rally after rally (Shear, 2017). In other parts of the world, attacks against media professionals regularly went beyond rhetoric and turned into legal and, sometimes, physical attacks. Reporters Without Borders puts the number of journalists detained globally in 2017 at 326, and those killed at 65 (RSF, 2017). While both figures are slightly lower than in 2016, they remain alarmingly high. Amongst those silenced by force in 2017 were the Maltese investigative blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia, who had regularly denounced instances of government corruption (Garside, 2017), and Gauri Lankesh, an Indian journalist-activist,

whose work often decried Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascent to power (Mondal, 2017). Also in 2017, journalists at Al Jazeera saw their jobs on the line during a diplomatic spat between Qatar, where the station is based, and several of its neighbours. The list of demands by Saudi Arabia and its allies for the re-establishment of relations initially included the shutting down of the station, which often spoke unfavourably of them (Wintour, 2017). In Turkey, a failed military coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led to the detention of more than 150 journalists charged with plotting to overthrow the government (Weise, 2017).

Building on some of the cases presented above and dozens more, John Lloyd's *The Power and The Story: The Global Battle for News and Information* offers an exhaustive chronicle of the state of journalism today. In eleven fact-rich and geographically-diverse chapters, the book describes the multiple ways in which the news media intertwine with those who wield power, be it political power or power over capital (which frequently leads to political power) and how this often opens the door to professional constraints for journalists. Case after case and country after country, Lloyd, an accomplished journalist and founder of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, makes a compelling defence of fact-based journalism. The countries discussed in the book are divided into two parts, 'The Authority of the State' (Part I) and 'The Authority of the Market' (Part II), that are followed, in Part III, by a reflection on journalistic freedom. In Part I, Lloyd describes the ability of authoritarian regimes to curtail journalistic freedoms and shape 'alternative truths'. In Part II, the focus shifts to democracies where journalism is practised under 'market rules,' and the discussion turns to the 'pressures [the] market exerts on the creation of truthful accounts' (157). In Part III, the emphasis is on the notion of journalistic freedom. 'The more journalism is responsible to its core mission, the freer it will be' (365), writes Lloyd, to whom the 'core mission' would be that set forth by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001): 'journalism's first obligation is to the truth.'

The cases selected in the book as examples of authoritarian regimes, all of which are presented in Part I, include China (chapter 1), Egypt (chapter 2) and Russia (chapter 3). When comparing these three countries, in all of which journalistic freedom is curtailed by the State, Lloyd contends that there is a difference between China and Egypt, both of which he labels as 'ideologically guided societies', and Russia, defined as 'post-ideological-authoritarianism'. In the first two cases, 'truth' can only exist within the boundaries of State ideology, which is socialism in China and Islam in Egypt. This ideological 'truth' is routinely held in higher esteem than the 'truth' based on facts that would be expected of journalists. Because of this, journalism becomes subject to the hegemonic ideology, and dissenting voices are actively suppressed. In Russia, ideologically void since the fall of communism, the State is equally keen on controlling narratives, but it seems more comfortable with leaving a marginal space for criticism in the media (as in the case of the reform-minded radio station, Ekho Moskvy). Lloyd does not elaborate on whether this proposed typology of authoritarian regimes is fluid or not. In other words, it is unclear to what extent a 'post-ideological' state such as present-day Russia could become an 'ideologically guided society' in the short or long run. Taking the argument to an extreme, a good test of Lloyd's typology would be to ask: as the Orthodox Church gains political influence in Russia under Vladimir Putin, are we to expect a further tightening of restrictions on journalists in the country, and a veering towards environments as oppressive as in 'ideologically guided societies' such as China?

The focus of chapter 3 is not on religion, but on the intricacies of post-Soviet Russian domestic politics. Lloyd provides a detailed account of the progress, and then regression, that Russian media experienced between the years immediately after the fall of the USSR and the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. After a decade of moderate plurality in the early 2000s, the news media went through a process of de-pluralization. This coincided with Putin's aspiration to regain control of strategic sources of power that had been left to oligarchs, some of whom

opposed his ascent to power. The media were among such sources of power. In a short span of time, Putin took control of all media assets owned by men such as Vladimir Gusinsky, founder of the popular NTV, and Boris Berezosvky, who up to 2002 was the largest shareholder of Russia's public television station, known at the time as ORT. The present media environment in Russia is described in the book as a 'virtual space' (an idea that Lloyd borrows from the works of Victor Shenderovich), in which Russian television (and film), fully under the control of those loyal to Putin, creates 'alternative truths' that are often far from reality. This also includes content on RT (formerly known as Russia Today), Moscow's multilingual television channel aimed at foreign audiences, which is also briefly discussed by Lloyd. Outside the 'virtual space', there are only a small number of media outlets that are very critical of Putin's monopoly on power. While some of these are mentioned in passing (Meduza.io and Ekho Moskvyy, for example), one would expect a more thorough overall discussion to include other outlets, such as the highly acclaimed *Novaya Gazeta*, given their centrality in creating alternative discourses in contemporary Russia.

Descriptions of dissenting journalism abound in the chapters on China and Egypt. In China, we are introduced to veteran journalist Gao Yu, blogger and celebrity Han Han, former newspaper editor and writer Qian Gang, and others who have tried to push the limits of the permissible. Some of the work of dissenting journalists and intellectuals published under the meagre journalistic openness that was tolerated during the later years of Hu Jintao's presidency in China (2002 to 2012) would now be unlikely to see the light, given the restrictions imposed on freedom of expression since the ascent of Xi Jinping to power in 2012. The best example of Xi's success in turning the news media into servants of the ideological cause of the Communist Party – one of the arguments Lloyd puts forward in chapter 2 – is the case of the Nanfang (or Southern) Media Group. Based in the city of Guangzhou, the Nanfang Group was once a bastion of a relatively independent journalistic culture but has been muted since 2013, when journalists staged a rare public protest after a newspaper editorial was heavily censored. If the ideological driving force behind the control of journalism in China is Party orthodoxy, in Egypt (and more generally in the Middle East), Lloyd says there is a mix of 'state-party power and Islamic doctrine' (49). Enterprising and enquiring journalism is rare, because journalists know it is hard for them to practise it whenever it challenges the *status quo*. The consequence of this, Lloyd posits, is that journalism tends to play into the hands of those in power (political elites, the military and clerics). These groups have managed to instil a fear of revenge against journalists who may consider deviating from officialdom. In this environment, 'a culture of caution, indifference and self-censorship' (52) has come to characterize journalism in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Part I closes with three brief cases of efforts to suppress critical journalistic projects in two authoritarian regimes, Ethiopia and Turkey, and a parliamentary democracy, South Africa. Lloyd is quick to state that South Africa's case is different from the other countries, and that the example is being used in the book as a reminder of the potentially negative consequences for journalism of repressive media policies. However, the choice of South Africa, with its vibrant civil society, functioning judicial system and real electoral democracy, appears somewhat misplaced. The attempts by the governing African National Congress (ANC) to curtail freedom of the press have not only been unsuccessful, as Lloyd describes, but they emboldened many South African news outlets to pursue more incisive investigative reporting, and publish fierce attacks against the ANC's meddling with the press.

In Part II, all examples come from democratic countries with a relatively functioning market economy. Continuing with Lloyd's main argument in the book, the need for more fact-based journalism and the different restrictions on the production of quality journalism, Part II highlights how both inefficiencies in the market and externalities of the political system can

have an impact on journalists' ability (or willingness) to provide truthful accounts of events. While the eight countries discussed in this part, all of which witness limited government intervention in the news media, are presented to us as independent cases, it is possible to see common trends. Lloyd describes the creation of large private media conglomerates in India (chapter 5) and the Czech Republic (chapter 8), where businesspersons see entry into the news industry as a means of harnessing political power. These two countries share similarities with Italy (chapter 6) and the rise of Silvio Berlusconi, first as media mogul, and then to prime minister. Chapter 7 looks at the evolution of print journalism in the United Kingdom since the 1970s, particularly tabloids. This serves to illustrate another trend across countries: the increased competition for limited newspaper readership and decreasing advertising revenue has pushed part of the news industry to be more concerned with entertaining audiences than informing them, with truth not always seen as a necessary condition. A further common trend across most of the countries discussed in part II, including Israel (chapter 8), is that constraints on journalistic freedom linked to media ownership have been more common in media 'owned by politically engaged figures of the right' (47) such as Rupert Murdoch in the UK, Sheldon Adelson in Israel or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, than by the less dominant groups that lean politically to the left.

The last two chapters in part II discuss journalism in the US, where the competition created by online news outlets has rendered the traditional business model of the press almost obsolete. In chapter 9, Lloyd introduces the disruptive work of Ezra Klein (*The American Prospect*, *Vox*), Nate Silver (*FiveThirtyEight*), Shane Smith (*Vice*) and other young journalists, who 'face continuing hostility from the mainstream media, which see both their journalism and their business models as a lowering of standards' (324). In chapter 10, Lloyd addresses two other disruptive phenomena: the rise to power of Donald Trump and the ability of PR companies to bypass mainstream media to target users directly online. Although these two are, in principle, not connected, Lloyd tells us, 'both reflect the increased power given to already powerful players in business, politics and celebrity occupations by the Net, gained at the expense of the mainstream press' (360). He goes on to describe this as a 'war on observable, provable, checkable facts' which means 'it is not only an attack on pre-Net journalism, but also on one of the necessary elements for a democratic polity: the primacy of the fact' (362).

Given the constraints faced by journalists, both in democratic and authoritarian regimes, and the decreasing value of 'the primacy of the fact,' the closing section of the book is devoted to projects that have sought to achieve maximum journalistic freedom, which, again, Lloyd understands in terms of being truthful. This is a heterogeneous, but well-curated, set of cases, from public broadcasting—with the BBC, which, some would argue, is held in many parts of the world as the epitome of neutral public service radio and television, even if opinions in the UK are less enthusiastic—to the early days of the French newspaper *Libération*, when journalists influenced by Maoist thought would see their role as 'pure conduits of the words and views of those whom they wished to represent' (385). On the list, Lloyd also includes investigative journalists, whom he sees as 'ideally more free than others, because they are directed, or direct themselves, to find the truth, or the best version they can' (367). While the cases of investigative journalism presented in the book do fit the description, investigative journalism is not always as pure in its intentions as Lloyd seems to acknowledge. In authoritarian states such as China, investigative reporting in television programmes such as *Focus (Jiaodian Fangtan)* has often been used to feign openness and divert attention away from 'real' abuses of power (Chan, 2002; Li, 2002). In other words, investigative reporting in these programmes is limited to areas that are not overly sensitive, such as corruption at lower levels of the administration, and that the central government would like to see solved. However, any attempts to reveal wrongdoings at the highest levels are not going

to be well received, as both the *New York Times* and *Bloomberg* learnt to their cost after reporting on the personal wealth of top-ranking members of the Chinese Communist Party. Investigative journalism in liberal democracies is also, sometimes, politically motivated. In highly polarized media environments, such as Spain or the United States, government leaks aimed at damaging political rivals are often disguised as investigative journalistic pieces in newspapers, magazines or TV, and later found not to be true (Sampedro, López Ferrández & Carretero, 2018).

Based on personal interviews with some of the defining figures in contemporary journalism, Lloyd's direct experience in Egypt, Italy, Russia and other countries, and an extensive review of secondary sources, mostly media reports, *The Power and The Story* ticks all the boxes of long form journalistic reportage. It is fact-based, attentive to detail and engaging to read. Individual chapters would make excellent readings for introductory undergraduate journalism courses: they do not dwell on jargon and are filled with data, anecdotes, and useful professional advice. More broadly, the book will also be of interest to readers who want to understand a phenomenon that is affecting every corner of the world: the shrinking appreciation for good journalism.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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