Violence and the Media: Does a free press decrease violence in a country

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What causes the violence people see every day? Some would say, its video games, because they are so violent. Some say it is the movies, because they have violence too. Maybe it’s because parents do not teach their children well. Or maybe it is a lack of free press. When we look out the world, The Question should be asked what does freedom do to violence in a country well that is something that should be tested. Is a country with a Free Press less likely to have as much violence throughout the country compared to those countries that have a very restricted press.

The thought process here is that, if people have freedom of the press they will be less prone to violent out bursts. It would make sense that if people had to outlet of freedom through the press that they would be able to voice their opinions much more. Since they would then be able to say their opinions out loud, without fear that they would be punished. No punishment would mean that people, would truly say what they believe and think, instead of bottling it up, and waiting for it to just explode. This explosion leading to increases in violence, in the given country.

To determine this, the extremes of each side should be looked at To test whether the lack of a free press contributes to violence, I will look at countries with different levels of freedom.. I used the rankings compiled by World Audit, which is an organization that brings together many different sources of information from respected sources to rank the level of freedom each country gives to their press. According to World Audit, Finland and Sweden are two countries with the most free press. While Myanmar, and Belarus have the least free press.

. I will now examine these four countries to see if there is a correlation between having a free press and the level of violence in the country.

Finland is a country with an overwhelming freedom of the press because they have many different laws that protect the freedom of the press. Article 12 in their constitution guarantees freedom of expression and access to information. In 2004 their government passed a new press freedom act. This law was something that was brought to existence with the help of media outlets ("Finland," n.d.). Moreover, there are 200 different newspapers that are printed in the country and the government subsidizes the printing press ("Finland," n.d.). There are state run radio stations and state run televisions stations, but there are many that are run privately. Most of the newspapers ie country are completely unaffiliated with any political party. As far as cable television goes there is very little interference within Finland when it comes to broadcasting. Furthermore, their usage of the internet is complete unrestricted. As the data shows, Finland is a a country with a very free press.

Sweden is another country that has extreme freedom of the press, carrying the same ranking, as Finland. It is a country that has freedom of the press that goes back to even before the Constitution of the United States ("Sweden," n.d.). Sweden’s newspapers, much like Finland, are not connected to any specific political party, but the affiliation that they once had can be seen throughout their editorial pages ("Sweden," n.d.). Something that could be looked at as a downside in the country is that most of the television is dominated by state broadcasting, and much of the television systems they have are owned by the same people ("Sweden," n.d.). The newspapers again like Finland are subsidized by the government ("Sweden," n.d.). Again much like its Scandinavian partner Finland, Sweden has complete unrestricted internet use, and is one of the greatest users of the internet in the world ("Sweden," n.d.).

Belarus, unlike Sweden and Finland has a major problem when it comes to their freedom of the press, or lack thereof. The Constitution in Belarus calls for freedom of the press, but their government is still very restrictive. According to Freedom House, “authorities are extremely intolerant of criticism, often silencing opposition media with libel lawsuits, financial pressures, closures and suspensions, and intimidation of journalists” ("Belarus," n.d.). In fact, there has been laws that were passed that criminalizes the act of criticizing the government and the president, to the point where a prison sentence might occur ("Belarus," n.d.). In Belarus a person needs a license to print and broadcast media and the content of these are regularly monitored. In May of 2003, one of the few independent newspapers *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* stopped printing because they had been warned many different times before that they should not print anything that could be viewed as negative towards the president. In February of 2009, “A draconian new media law” forced all media to register with the Information Ministry ("Belarus," n.d.). According to Freedom House the goal was to make it easier to deny the required accreditation to allow for broadcasts and print (Freedom House. the government also will use intimidation to protect them from reporting they deem to be libel ("Belarus," n.d.). While Myanmar does have the internet it is highly censored and regulated and only about one percent of their population has access to it ("Belarus," n.d.).

Subsequently there is the situation that is occurring in Myanmar that very much mirrors the one that goes on in Belarus. In 2008 the country approved a new constitution that does provide for freedom of speech ("Burma (Myanmar)," n.d.). All content that is written in magazines, newspapers and any other type of periodical must first be approved by the government ("Burma (Myanmar)," n.d.). The newspapers are allowed to as freedom house puts it “constructively criticize” the government, but it only can be about items such as project or response to natural disaster ("Burma (Myanmar)," n.d.). People who do criticize the government are dealt with harshly. These include prison and they may be assaulted or intimidated ("Burma (Myanmar)," n.d.). There is no private daily media. Media sources that are privately owned normally only exist in monthly or weekly editions ("Burma (Myanmar)," n.d.).

 I will now look at the level of violence for each country. To do this, I used the Eighth United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems. This survey provides data on the total number of murders that occurred within a country during 2002. The reason for using this survey is that it provides the same data for all of the countries. Also it makes sure that all the data was collected in the same fashion so that; there really can be some excellent data that can be compared. There will be five separate categories that will be used to compare the violence that happens in a country. These rates are Murder, attempted murder, assaults, robberies, and rapes.

First one looks at the violence in Finland. Finland is a country with a relatively low frequency of violence. There are .0254 murders per 1000 people, .0716 attempted murders per 1000 people, 5.389 assaults per 1000 people, .1060 rapes per 1000 people, and.4078 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Sweden’s numbers are also much in line with Finland’s. Their numbers line up this way, .0245 murders per 1000 people, .0815 attempted murders per 1000 people, 6.906 assaults per 1000 people, .2447 rapes per 1000 people, and 1.005 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Then there is Myanmar which seems to have lower numbers than each of the other two countries. Their numbers look something like this .0019 murders per 1000 people, .0001 attempted murders per 1000 people .1652 assaults per 1000 people .0046 rapes per 1000 people and .0001 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Belarus again is similar in numbers to the numbers that we find in Myanmar. These are, .0996 murders per 1000 people, .0195 attempted murders per 1000 people, .2132 assaults per 1000 people, .0859 rapes per 1000 people and .2479 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005).

What does all this mean? well it is something that needs to be broken down group of information by group of information? First murders Finland had .0254 murders per 1000 people. For the entire year the country of Finland as a whole had 132 murders (United Nations, 2005). Sweden had .0245 murders per 1000 people in their population (United Nations, 2005). Overall Sweden had 219 murders throughout the country. Then there is Myanmar which had .0019 murders per 100 people, which was by far the lowest that was found during the research (United Nations, 2005). The country had 92 totally murders for the entire year. Lastly there is Belarus. Their murder rate was .0996 per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). For a total of 989 murders for the country (United Nations, 2005). So the country with the lowest murder rate per capita would be Myanmar, which like said was .0019 per 1000 people, this number is significant less than any of the other three countries. While the two countries that has the most free press, had fell in between the two countries with the least free press with .0254 for Finland and .0245 for Sweden. Belarus had .0996 murders per 1000. This was by far the highest number of murders per capita out of all the countries. Now this prompts the question what causes this great disparity? Also why does Myanmar have so many fewer murders than the other countries? Well for the disparity, the argument can be made that because there is so much more freedom in Sweden and Finland that there is less of a reason to resort to violence because of their abilities to vent frustrations in other ways. That still does not explain why Myanmar has such a lower murder rate than compared to the other countries. It is something that could be attributed to the fact that their government can be much more repressive. Or is it possibly misreporting. This is odd that it does support the hypothesis that was originally put fourth, but at the same time it does not.

There is also the attempted murder rate which is something that is a good indication about the rate of violence that can be found in these countries. Finland has an attempted murder rate of .0716 attempted murders per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). While Sweden has an attempted murder rate of .0815 attempted murders per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Then there is Myanmar which attempted murder rate is at .0001 attempted murders per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). And lastly there is Belarus .0195 attempted murders per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). This is again something that one might find to be odd, the countries that do not have freedom of the press, had a much lower attempted murder rate than that of the countries that are free. In fact the Myanmar, and Belarus’ attempted murder rate was more than half of what the murder rate than that of Sweden and Finland. This interesting development goes against what common thought is and against the idea that this paper set out to demonstrate.

Then there assaults which is another way to look at the violence that can be seen throughout the country. Finland has a rate of 5.389 assaults per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Which seems to be quiet high. Sweden has an assault rate of 6.906 assaults per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Again that is a very high number especially when it comes to being compared to the .1652 assaults per 1000 people in Myanmar, and the .2132 assaults per 1000 people in Belarus (United Nations, 2005). Again this runs against the common thought process of most countries. But again why is this? It is something that could be attributed to the authorization nature of the regimes, which are in power in Myanmar and Belarus, or is it something else.

Rape is possibly the most heinous crime that one can possibly commit, and it has been argued that is really is only a problem that is only seen in the developed world. That is also a trend that is sadly shown by the data. Finland for example has .1060 rapes per 1000 people, while Sweden is higher at .2447 rapes per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). For some reason that will be discussed later Myanmar has .0046 rapes per 1000 people, and Belarus has .0859 rapes per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). There is a continuing trend that is showing that the two countries with much less freedom seem to almost be the safe country that has far less violence.

 The last set of information that is going to be looked at is the total number of robberies that happens in each of these countries. Which normally, is a violent act of has the threat of violence that goes with. Finland has a fairly high rate of robberies with rate of .4078 robberies per 1000 people, while Sweden is even higher with 1.005 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Again for some reason the two countries that have a very low rating when it comes to freedom of the press have a much lower occurrence of robberies. Myanmar with .0001 robberies per 1000 people, and Belarus has .2479 robberies per 1000 people (United Nations, 2005). Again it has the same trend as shown before that the two countries Myanmar and Belarus appear to be so much safer.

 As stated earlier the theory behind this paper is that a free press helps to decrease violence by allowing people to express their voices and be heard in the media instead of resorting to violence. Now the question that now exists is does this theory hold any weight? The short answer is no, it does not. This is because as the data continually showed the countries that were more restrictive on their media, seemed to have substantially less violence than the extremely free countries. What explains this trend? Since logically one would think that if a country gives people the ability to air all their grievances, the thought would have to be there would so much less violence. Obviously this does not work.

Part of the reason could be that Myanmar and Belarus have such strong authoritarian governments that they just squash any sort of violence. It is something that has been seen throughout history. Both countries have a dictator and therefore people don’t rise up. It could because of the harshness of the laws that the countries have. Especially, in comparison to most of the developed world where the laws are much more reasonable in than the laws in the countries where a dictator has gained power. Still it is something that one might find odd. Especially if you use the American media, which tends to portray violence in the less developed countries as a regular occurrence, and something that is much worse than here in the United States and the rest of the developed world.

It is also possible that are inherently violent. And since Sweden and Finland have so much more freedom than Belarus, and Myanmar, it could be that people just act out more. This would be, because the punishments that go with each of the crimes are so much less. There are some issues with this data as well. It does not break down the murders in to subcategories, such as domestic violence, or random acts of violence. Which all have different motivations behind them and could speak more towards culture differences than anything. Since if there is an increase number of domestic violence murders, that is something that could be attributed, to the role of women with in a country, or how much rights they have, since there are men who struggle with the concept of women as equals, which could lead to violence.

It is clear from the use of this data, and freedom of the press most likely has no effect on violence that occurs in a country. Even though the information that was used in this research show that there is a difference between the countries when it comes to the amount of violence each one sees, that is more than like to be attributed to the regime that has control of the government. That is to say that the governments of Myanmar, and Belarus, are extremely harsh, as shown by their strict laws against journalists. And logic could be used to infer that all other laws in that country are equally as harsh, leading to the decrease in crime.

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