

The Relevance of People's Attitudes Towards Freedom of Expression in a Changing Media Environment

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Abstract: The article outlines arguments for the relevance of people's attitudes towards freedom of expression: It is a fundamental principle of democracy that if a virtue does not receive support from the population, it will not be anchored in law and its foundation is endangered in the medium term. People's support for free speech is becoming even more influential because authoritative control of internet communication is faced with difficulties. Furthermore, with the development of social media users gain new opportunities to publicly express their opinions attaching even more importance to normative self-regulation. As a matter of fact, these increased opportunities of self-regulation may either enhance or decrease the exercise of expression rights. Thus, citizen's endorsement of free expression is a valuable indicator of the status of freedom of expression in a country. To approach to the subject empirically, the paper systematizes findings on people's attitudes towards free speech: Most people believe in freedom of expression in the abstract. Willingness to apply the right to opposing groups, however, is lower. Perceived threats, confidence in democratic principles, mode of communication, and personality variables influence tolerance of expressions. Finally, a research agenda is put forward to examine appreciation of free expression, its antecedence, and implications.

Keywords: freedom of expression, civil liberties, Web 2.0, public opinion

La relevance des attitudes des gens par rapport à la liberté de l'expression dans un environnement media changeant

Résumé : L'article présente des arguments pour la pertinence de l'attitude des gens par rapport à la liberté d'expression. L'un des principes fondamentaux de la démocratie affirme que si une vertu ne reçoit pas le soutien de la population, elle ne sera pas ancrée dans la loi et son fondement risque de disparaître à moyen terme. Le soutien du peuple pour la liberté d'expression devient de plus en plus influent car le contrôle sur la communication sur Internet exercé par les autorités se heurte à des difficultés. En outre, face au développement des médias sociaux, les utilisateurs gagnent de nouvelles possibilités pour exprimer publiquement leurs opinions, accordant ainsi une importance encore plus grande à l'autorégulation normative. En effet, ces possibilités d'autorégulation peuvent soit augmenter soit diminuer l'exercice des droits d'expression. Ainsi, l'approbation de la libre expression par les citoyens est un indicateur précieux de l'état par rapport à la liberté d'expression dans un pays. Pour aborder le sujet de façon empirique, l'article systématise les données sur les attitudes des gens vis-à-vis de la liberté d'expression. La plupart des gens croient en la liberté d'expression d'une façon abstraite. La volonté d'appliquer le droit à des groupes d'opposition, cependant, est plus faible. Les menaces perçues, la confiance dans les principes démocratiques, le mode de communication et les variables individuelles de la personnalité influencent la tolérance vis-à-vis de la liberté d'expression. Enfin, un programme de recherche est mis en avant pour examiner l'appréciation de la liberté d'expression, de ses antécédents et de ses implications.

Mots-clés : liberté d'expression, libertés civiles, Web 2.0, opinion publique

1. Introduction

Freedom of expression is a core value in democratic societies. Its vitality is monitored by several organizations which provide data on the status of freedom of expression and the media in the world (e. g., Committee to Protect Journalists, 2012; Freedom House, 2011a; International Research and Exchanges Board, 2011; Reporters without Borders, 2011; cf. Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007). The organizations focus on the institutional support of free opinion and its unimpeded exercise. They mirror the legal, political, and economic conditions for the development of independent media, lively journalism, and unrestricted expression. Recently, also the level of internet freedom has started to be monitored as the

internet has emerged as a crucial medium to mobilize and advocate reforms. For example, Freedom House (2011b) launched its Freedom on the Net ranking of 37 countries. Such elite assessments give highly relevant insight into the quality of freedom of expression as institutional support or harassment directly restrict professionals' and individuals' exercise of the right. A focus on institutional coverage, however, lacks information on the importance of freedom of expression with those who are supposed to exercise the right. The present article therefore argues in favor of an additional indicator for the status of freedom of expression. It outlines two arguments for measuring the relevance that people attribute to freedom of expression: It presents a general argument based on democracy theory as well as an argument deduced from the new opportunities for communication in times of internet and user generated content in the Web 2.0. Taking into account the relevance of people's commitment to the value immediately draws interest to its empirical examination. The paper systematizes existing findings on people's attitudes towards freedom of expression and proposes a research agenda for future studies on the status of freedom of expression.

Before turning to the core arguments of the paper, some specifications appear necessary: Freedom of expression comprises the right to offer one's thoughts via any channel without constraints. Freedom of speech, of the press, of the media, etc. are subsets of freedom of expression that relate to specific ways of communication. Press and media freedom not only include the protection of the individual's expressions via the media, but also an institutional guarantee of a free media system (Breunig, 1994, pp. 50ff). As the core arguments of the article will apply to all means of expression no matter if they are mediated or direct or if they stem from institutions and professionals like media organizations and journalists or from laymen, the broad term 'freedom of expression' will be used.

The second specification concerns the balance of freedom and its limitations (Breunig, 1994, pp. 111ff): On the one hand, freedom of expression includes protection from censorship and support for communicators (e.g., the protection of journalists' sources or journalists' right to access information from public authorities). On the other hand, even in democratic states, free speech is not without limitations. These constraints do not necessarily reflect illiberal restrictions of civil rights, but are the result of weighing colliding fundamental rights (cf. Peffley, Knigge, & Hurwitz, 2001a). For example, in many constitutions discriminatory and racist speech is not protected by freedom of expression. The higher competing goods like equality are valued, the less protection is granted for free expression. Given these two sides of the coin, the appreciation of freedom of expression should not only be considered regarding the citizens' appreciation of free expression as a fundamental right in general. An estimation of the attitude towards the value is also derived from people's support for censorship when colliding values are concerned. This will provide a more substantive picture of the status of expression rights from

the people's point of view and allow for a more comprehensive cross-national comparison.

2. Relevance of people's attitude towards freedom of expression

Whereas institutional protection and harassment of free expression have caught some attention in the evaluation of the status of freedom of expression around the world, measuring appreciation of the value by laymen has received less interest. The following two sections will explain two arguments for its relevance.

2.1. Civic commitment and institutionalization of values

Inglehart (1997) concludes on democracy in general: "In the long run, democracy is not attained simply by making institutional changes or through clever elite-level maneuvering. Its survival also depends on what ordinary people think and feel" (p. 215; see also, e. g., Bollinger, 1986; Bahry, Boaz, & Gordon, 1997). His statement may hold true specifically for the democratic right of free expression: Free speech requires institutionalized endorsement and support by the government and state institutions. This, however, is not sufficient. The people's valuation is just as important. If a virtue does not receive support from the population, it will not be anchored in law, and its foundation is endangered in the medium term. This fundamental principle of democracy is most comprehensible in direct democracy where people vote on policy initiatives directly. In representative democracy, people voice their interests in elections of representatives, who are accountable to the people. The citizens' attitudes towards free speech will therefore have influence on political and legal support as well as on limitations of the value. The massive demonstrations against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) in Spring 2012 can serve as a recent example: Many European states that have signed the treaty have set aside the ratification in response to the public protests that criticize the secrecy of the negotiations and potential threats to freedom of expression and other civil liberties.

This leaves the question concerning the relevance of people's attitude towards expression rights in non-democratic countries. Expressing one's opposition to the status quo is particularly difficult when civil liberties are restricted. Especially limitations of free opinion, dependency of media, and limited access to information profoundly constrain people's influence on policy. However, civic will might dig its way to change by turmoil. The Arab Spring exemplifies institutional changes triggered and followed through by civil pressure. Among other objectives, the protesters successfully rallied for more freedom of expression. Therefore, one can agree to the careful conclusion by Becker, English, and Vlad (2010), who rank the relevance of citizens' attitudes alongside institutional guarantee of free media: "A country like Vietnam, for example, which gets low scores [in terms of freedom of

the media] from evaluators but not from the general public, might rightly be considered to have a more free media system than a country, such as Russia, that scores poorly on both” (p. 20).

Concluding from the first argument, the attitude of laymen towards the importance of free expression is relevant when these laymen are considered in their role as citizens. The citizens’ attitudes towards fundamental human rights may exert influence on institutional treatment of these issues and therefore is a factor not to be neglected when investigating the status of free expression. However, up to this point, empirical testing of the assumption that citizens’ attitudes towards democratic principles actually have an impact is limited. Elitist theory of democracy even argues that people involved in the political arena may counterweight the public values. In Western societies, political elites are assumed to be in stronger consent with democratic principles than the mass. This is supposed to work in favor of free expression when appreciation of laymen is low (Bahry et al., 1997; Gibson & Bingham, 1983; Sullivan, Walsh, Shamir, Barnum, & Gibson, 1993). Consequently, this also implies the suggestion that elites have the opportunities to hinder liberalization when authorities oppose expression rights as a means of preserving power. However, first results indicate the validity of the assumed relationship: Naab, Hefner, Scherer, Schmid, and Hansen (2010) conducted a cross-national secondary analysis on the institutionalization of free expression and its appreciation in the population. They uncover a positive and significant correlation between the Freedom House Index ‘Freedom of Expression and Belief’ and country-level data of the World Value Survey on the importance attributed to freedom of expression by laymen. It is important to be careful in asserting the direction of causality. The citizens’ attitude may influence institutional processes in free countries. At the same time, in the process of socialization, individuals may learn which behavior patterns and attitudes are acceptable and which are not. This process is also affected by the predominant culture of a society and its explicit and institutional protection of free speech.

2.2. Normative self-regulation of social media communication

Beyond the assumed interdependence of civic appreciation and institutionalization of a value, there is a second argument on the relevance of people’s attitudes which derives from the changing media environment and its limited legal control.

States provide legal rules for expressions, most of them impose legal restrictions of freedom of expression, and some also guarantee legal support for free expression by safeguarding an appropriate environment and support for communicators. The law is agreed as binding, its regulation is compulsory. Provided that a state follows

the principles of rule of law, violations are punished by state authority. In addition to the law, values and norms serve as an internal control of each individual. Although standards of ethics are not necessarily shared by everybody and a breach of ethics cannot be punished directly, ethics form the second important pillar of control besides law: Values and norms give prospective orientation. When norms are in accordance to law, normative orientations will help to prevent violations of rights a priori. They are means of regulating behavior in areas where it has not (yet) been possible to provide definite legal clarification. When norms oppose authoritative guidelines, normative self-regulation may lead to an evasion of law and to making use of legal vacuums (cf. Debatin, 1997; Horstler, 1997).

Norm guided use of the media is becoming even more important as legal coverage of basic human rights is facing severe difficulties in internet communication. Several aspects contribute to an enhanced influence of normative beliefs (cf. Funiok, 2000; Karmasin, 1999, p. 371; Tambini, Leonardi, & Marsden, 2008): There is a time-lag between new media development and jurisdiction concerning new technological, social, and economic aspects. Furthermore, media and especially online media have a transnational character. Although there are European and international approaches of approximation of legislation and law enforcement across international borders, comprehensive legal control of transnationally disseminated media is impossible. Communicative channels multiplied, structures decentralized, and authoritative influences to impose access restrictions against communicators decreased. Besides that, internet content is persistent, i. e., once published it cannot be deleted but may have spread, be linked to, and be saved in internet archives (e. g., Google Cache and archive.org). This limits chances of retrospective authoritative regulation.

Apart from the aforementioned difficulties concerning most internet content, further matters complicate legal regulation of social media and open up opportunities for normative self-regulation. In 2004, the term Web 2.0 was coined. It subsumes flexible and user-friendly technologies and applications that facilitate interoperability and participatory content production (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2008, pp. 15f). Recently, several authors refer to the term 'social media' instead of Web 2.0. It is difficult to differentiate categories of social media or Web 2.0 as there are many hybrid applications. However, Schmidt (2009, pp. 22ff; see also Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008) provides a helpful overview on relevant social media applications: multimedia platforms, weblogs, micro blogs, podcasts and video casts, wikis, instant messaging, feed readers and social news services, and social networks (the later integrating many of the aforementioned services). Most Web 2.0 platform operators do not produce content and do not provide editorial services, but they provide the users with means of production. Users need little technical skills and equipment to publish text and audio-visual material on these platforms, referred to as user generated content. With the rise of social media, laymen gained new opportunities to

communicate publicly. This rekindles hopes on democratizing effects of internet communication because of the decentralized structure and low access barriers to publish and to receive information free of state, hegemonic or editorial control. Some social media communication takes place in small groups, private chats, and on barely known platforms. Limited access to these small groups hampers control by law. Prosecution of infringements is complicated by the increased anonymity of many communicators. The actual producer of information or opinion is quite often only known by a nickname. The operators of Web 2.0 platforms are mostly host providers, i. e., they publish content produced by others on their web servers. Depending on the state legislation of a country, the host providers are only liable to a limited extent for the content published by their users.

Because of the increased potential for free expression, the question is raised how to use these opportunities responsibly. Normative orientations have an increasing impact on freedom of expression, its enforcement, and the compliance with its limitations. It is therefore necessary to regard not only institutional open spaces but also normative attitudes of those who will or will not make use of the freedom. As a matter of fact, the increased opportunities of normative self-regulation may either enhance or decrease the exercise of expression rights. When actors hold liberal attitudes and feel safe to apply them, they can make use of limited editorial and state control. The mentioned characteristics give way to suppressed opinions and enable opposition to authoritative standpoints with less fear of harassment. Additionally, less external control also facilitates extreme expressions beyond socially tolerable limits like cyber mobbing or hate speech. Thus, ethical limitations and the protection of colliding values are in the hands of the new communicators as well.

Yet, one should not resort to a technological deterministic perspective assuming per se that the new chances for deliberation are made use of (for a summary of the discussion of the democratizing effects and counter-arguments see, e.g., Calingaert, 2010; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2007, 2010; Groshek, 2009; Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2003). Furthermore, self-control beyond law may constrain freedom, when communicators practice self-censorship because they fear personal safety, experience economic pressure or lack knowledge on legal protection. Although legal control of online expressions is limited (not fully disabled), individuals still need to summon the courage to resist social mechanisms of control and even denunciation. It is confirmed that perceived threats, e. g. of authoritative retribution or social isolation, as well as personality differences influence the willingness to express one's opinion (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1996). Following the BBC World Service Poll of 2010, 52 % of the respondents of 26 countries do not feel safe to express their opinions on the internet. Yet, there is a hard core of people who bear the risk of rejection and still express their opinions (Glynn & McLeod, 1984; Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

3. Measuring public opinion on freedom of expression

The outlined arguments suggest to empirically examine people's attitudes towards free speech. Since Stouffer's work "Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties" (1955), researchers of political science have devoted considerable effort to examine political tolerance, its antecedence, and consequences for democracy building. One of the main indicators of political tolerance used in these studies is tolerance of free expression. The issue has, however, rarely been regarded as an indicator of the status of freedom of expression beyond institutionalized support. Only in some recent polls, respondents were asked to evaluate the degree of freedom of their country's media system. The validity of these assessments is examined in several secondary analyses and the authors find medium-size to high correlations between elite assessments and people's evaluation of media freedom (BBC World Service, 2007; Becker & Vlad, 2009, 2010; Becker, English, & Vlad, 2010; Becker, Vlad, & English, 2010; English, 2007; English & Becker, 2012; Kull et al., 2008). Yet, the measures do not focus on the citizens' attitude but on their evaluation of the institutional circumstances. The present article will directly address people's individual attitudes which are a prerequisite to use expression rights and to tolerate expressions of others even if they are prohibited by law. The article at hand does not provide new empirical results but integrates existing data. The next paragraph gives an overview of findings on the importance citizens attribute to freedom of expression. Afterwards, results are presented on the estimated importance of free expression on the internet and in social media.

3.1. *Laymen's commitment to freedom of expression*

It is a consistent finding of most studies on the commitment to freedom of expression that on the one hand most people favor freedom of expression in the abstract. On the other hand, however, their willingness to apply this right in specific situations and to opposing communicators is lower. Considering this striking inconsistency between support for abstract norms and less support for applying these norms to offensive groups Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz (2001a; cf. Miller, Wynn, Ullrich, & Marti, 2001; Peffley, Knigge, & Hurwitz, 2001b) emphasize that decisions to support restrictions of concrete expressions are made against the background of a competition of values. When people are (made) aware of the fact that the right to free expression could collide with other rights like social stability or privacy, support diminishes considerably. For example, a person favoring free speech but at the same time appreciating racial equality would be in conflict about either tolerating or restricting publications of members of the Ku Klux Klan. Consequently, Peffley and colleagues (2001a, 2001b) propose measuring perceived conflicts between free speech and other values to tap the importance of freedom of expression.

The World Value Survey 2008 used such forced-choice measurement (World Value Survey, 2012; see also Naab et al., 2010). Respondents in 56 countries were asked to choose the most important value out of a list of four statements. The list contains two materialistic values (“maintaining order in the nation”, “fighting rising prices”) and two non-materialistic values (“giving people more say in important government decisions”, “protecting freedom of speech”; Abramson & Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1977). South Koreans rate freedom of expression least valuable: 2 % of the respondents choose freedom of expression to be the most important value. The largest percentage is reached in the Netherlands (41 %). As a comparison: 18 % of the US-American participants and 21 % of the French participants choose free expression (for similar forced-choice measurement, see BBC World Service, 2007). The main body of research on laymen’s appreciation of free expressions implicitly refers to such value conflicts. The scholars specify a target group of communicators or some content of expressions. Study participants are then asked about their willingness to tolerate expressions of this target group. The measure indirectly forces them to choose between granting freedom of expression to the group and the value that the group opposes. The substantial question therefore is where laymen draw the line between tolerable and intolerable expressions. However, the answer is manifold. Davis (1990) summarizes the findings of his cross-national study, which may hold true for most comparative studies on the commitment to freedom of expression: A core group of citizens are generally supportive of free speech and another group of people generally favor censorship. The remaining citizens tend to disagree on the question which limitations of free speech are tolerable and which amount to inadequate censorship. “So far, what we have seen looks like an international unpopularity contest where judges disagree” (p. 8). Accordingly, empirical results on people’s tolerance of expressions and international rankings of more or less supportive countries strongly depend on the target dimension used in the studies.

However, some factors of influence on tolerance of expressions prove consistent in many studies. The more a group of communicators is perceived as threatening, the more strongly people demand limitations of the target group members’ opportunities to express themselves (Bahry et al., 1997; Gibson, 2006; Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002). People more strongly tend to support a restriction of expressions they perceive to be socially harmful and undesirable (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001; Paek, Lambe, & McLeod, 2008). This complicates cross-national comparisons of the status of expression freedom. “Aside from the obvious difficulties that arise when such group is non-existent in some nations, these measures inhibit comparison because the same group may not be equally threatening in two contexts” (Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002, p. 117). A solution to this vulnerability of target-specific measures is to apply a ‘least-liked’ approach. The respondent identifies her/his own target group by naming the most disliked group. Though this measure has become the dominant strategy in tolerance research, it is still necessary

to control the perceived threat of the group to draw conclusions on the liberality of the respondents, because "Quite simply, a 'least-liked' group is not necessarily equally disliked in all contexts" (Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002, p. 117).

Another factor that determines tolerant free speech judgments is commitment to democratic principles in general. Those who believe in democratic norms are more willing to apply freedom of expression even when faced with disliked and extremist groups (Davis, 1990; Lambe, 2004; Marcus et al., 1995; Paek et al., 2008; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). This may be interpreted as a default level of commitment to democratic principles which influences decision-making in concrete situations (Lambe, 2004, p. 291; Marcus et al., 1995, p. 59). However, the results of Bahry, Boaz, and Gordon (1997) suggest that though so-called demophiles, i.e., people with high commitment to democratic values, are more tolerant on average, demophiles in less established democracies are less tolerant towards extremes of the political spectrum because of fear of endangering democracy. The support of freedom of expression is decreased by low confidence in the efficiency of democratic institutions, of majority rules, and of institutionalized protection of minority rights (Gibson, 2006). In view of this result, it must be suggested that it will be an even bigger challenge to appreciate and exercise freedom of expression both for nations in democratic transition and non-democratic nations. From a normative point of view, limited implementation of democratic principles surely cannot justify constraints of freedom of expression. It can serve as an explanation, though. In this sense, Bahry and colleagues (1997) conclude: "At least for demophiles, denying rights to threatening groups is a realistic response to the fragility of democratic institutions. If so, their democratic intolerance may be less a reflection of an ingrained authoritarian culture than a rational answer to political chaos" (p. 505).

Several individual-level studies additionally examine sociodemographic and personality antecedents of willingness to censor expressions, among them age, gender, authoritarianism, conservatism, and religiosity (e. g., Bahry et al., 1997; Hurwitz & Mondak, 2002; Lambe, 2002, 2004; Marcus et al., 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; for country-level analysis see Naab et al., 2010). The studies tend to yield mixed results. Influences vary with regard to the considered content of expression, the communicating group, the form or medium of expression (see below), and to measurement. Analyses which include all factors are not known, therefore knowledge on interaction effects and mediated influences is pending. However, the influence of psychological security is well confirmed. Those who are more insecure are less likely to tolerate expressions. Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) even find proof that the effect of insecurity is direct and not mediated through threat perception. Furthermore, persons are more tolerant who have greater faith in others, who are less neurotic, and more open-minded (Bahry et al., 1997; Lambe, 2004; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995). Additionally, the

educational level contributes to political tolerance in general and to freedom of expression (for an overview see, e. g., Weil, 1985; Lambe, 2002). The common explanations for this influence refer to socialization with values of enlightenment and to highly educated people feeling more secure and hence being better able to tolerate diversity. However, Weil (1982, 1985) finds evidence that the relationship between education and free expression is not universal, but influenced by the dominant values of a regime or a society. Results confirming influences of education policy, classroom interventions, and participation in school media programs on attitudes towards free speech encourage the assumed socialization effect (Lopez, Levine, Dautrich, & Yalof, 2009). This means that a public and institutional pro-liberty atmosphere will enhance individual appreciation among the well-educated, whereas a climate against free expression will reduce support among the well-educated.

In sum, it can be stated that although there are varying results of studies investigating and comparing the citizens' attitudes towards boundaries of free expression rights, some significant factors have emerged. The status of freedom of expression is related to perceived threat, democratic commitment and trust as well as to some personal characteristics. When comparing the status of free expression, these factors should be considered to get a comprehensive picture and unbiased country-level comparison.

3.2. Laymen's attitudes towards free expressions on the internet and in social media

As explained in the preceding paragraph, people's attitudes towards free expressions vary considerably according to the perceived characteristics of the expression. It is now worth considering if the mode of expressing an opinion also influences tolerance of this opinion. If so, knowledge on the appreciation of free expression in classic media and non-mediated speech cannot simply be transferred to free internet communication. Hurwitz and Mondak (2002) present a valuable differentiation structuring this phenomenon. The authors find prove that intolerance of expressions stems from two different sources: (a) intolerance against expressions of a certain content, which the authors call discriminatory intolerance (see preceding paragraph), and (b) generic intolerance, caused by unwillingness to permit a certain expressive act regardless of the content. In this sense, Lambe (2002) develops a willingness to censor scale asking respondents to judge several expression speech situations. These situations vary regarding the expressed content (e. g., hate speech, political speech, defamatory speech) and regarding the medium ("pure" speech, demonstrations, newspaper, magazine, television, cable, internet) (see also Davis, 1990; Lawrence, 1976; Sullivan et al., 1982).

Only little data is available on tolerance of different modes of expression: Taking a closer look at generic intolerance, Davis (1990) shows that Australians, Austrians, Britons, Italians, Americans, and Germans differ in tolerance towards several forms

of non-mediated expressions like publishing books, holding meetings, and organizing demonstrations. The most comprehensive, cross-national data concerning certain expression situations is published by the International Social Survey Programme (2012). In 2006, respondents from 33 nations were asked if people should be allowed to organize public meetings, to organize protest marches and demonstrations, and to organize a nationwide strike to protest against the government. Thus, the poll focused on generic tolerance of diverse acts of expression while keeping the content nearly stable. On average, 46 % of the respondents would tolerate public meetings, whereas only 24 % would tolerate strikes.

The lack of research is even more obvious with regard to people's tolerance of free online expression. Some cross-national polls include questions on the support for internet censorship (without comparing it to other modes of expression). Following the BBC World Service (2010), for example, an average of 53 % of the respondents in 26 countries worldwide agrees that the internet should never be regulated by any level of government anywhere. The Portuguese agree the least (40 %), Nigerians the most (77 %). In the Worldpublicopinion.org Poll of 2008, participants of 23 nations were asked if the government should have the right to prevent people from having access to some things on the internet. On average, 62 % agree (Kull et al., 2008). Similarly, national studies add some empirical findings lacking, however, opportunities of cross-national comparison and comparison to other expressive acts. The attitudes towards internet freedom resemble those towards freedom of expression in general: People regard free online expression as important, but impose several restrictions. Tolerance is lowest for child pornography, political extremism, and violent content. Erotic content and content that infringes property rights and copyrights are considered to be less problematic. Kids and adolescents especially disapprove of websites featuring drug misuse, eating disorders, violence or suicide (Dehm & Storll, 2010; Infratest dimap, 2009; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Machill, Neuberger, Schweiger, & Wirth, 2003; Schwenk, 2002).

The study by Trepte, Reinecke, and Behr (2008) is the only one known to the author that explicitly focuses on social media, namely weblogs. The German participants attach specific importance to the standards that weblogs respect individual privacy rights and do not discriminate or insult on the grounds of gender, disability or minority background. However, they are more tolerant towards weblog content denigrating religious, ideological or moral convictions and weblogs presenting wrong information. From the opposite perspective, the data suggest that media users might be more willing to censor the former kind of content whereas

they might tend to demand the right of free expression for the latter.¹ Interestingly, the authors find prove, that protecting rights colliding with the right of free expression is regarded as less relevant in weblogs compared to daily newspapers. However, the absolute values still show high support for the restriction of free speech in weblogs on grounds of ethical standards (cf. Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, & Soon, 2009).

Determinants of willingness to censor online expressions have not been investigated yet. Hurwitz and Mondak (2002) come to the conclusion “that the antecedents of generic intolerance remain poorly understood” (p. 116). Nevertheless, there are suggestions on the influence of personal media use on willingness to censor. The results of Trepte and colleagues (2008) indicate a stronger wish for restrictions in weblogs among respondents who use Web 2.0 services like weblogs, chats, and internet forums and who generate content compared to respondents who rarely use Web 2.0 applications. In contrast, studies on classic media suggest more tolerant attitudes towards a given form of media content when it is used by the evaluating persons themselves (McLeod et al., 2001; Paek et al., 2008). On the one hand, this contradiction may reflect methodological differences between the studies. On the other hand, the Web 2.0 offers an almost endless variety of content and it is difficult to select high-quality content. This might encourage claims for stricter standards of expressions. This interpretation will only apply to Web 2.0 users in countries enjoying access to a great variety of information and opinions. Probably, inhabitants of less free countries might favor increased variety over protection of conflicting rights.

So far, the article has summarized the scarce findings on tolerance of online expressions by the readers of social media content. The willingness to censor and self-censor of those actively producing social media content as well as its determinants like perceived authoritative and social control have not received investigation yet. This is surprising as producers of media content have multiplied and come from various backgrounds. Many of the social media communicators are laymen with no journalistic training and they publish without direct editorial or authoritative support or control. Procedural and normative rules of Web 2.0 publication develop in cloudy connection to existing ethic and legal standards (Cenite et al., 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Neuberger, 2005; Viégas, 2005). This draws attention to the mindset of the new communicators on the Web 2.0. Of course, proposed codes of blogging ethics, netiquette manuals, and other ethical guidelines for user generated content on social media platforms give an indication of ethic attitudes of the new communicators (e. g., Blood, 2002; O'Reilly, 2007; cf. Schulz & Held, 2008; Tambini et al., 2008). Most lay content producers, however, are not

¹ Please note that Trepte and colleagues aimed at examining ethical standards imposed by their participants as a criterion of media quality. The items did not directly tap on willingness to censor content considered of low quality.

familiar with those codes which receive only limited acceptance in the community. Therefore, these codes rather show general statements of ethics and quality standards than public opinion on norms for online expressions.

In sum, the attitudes of laymen – and in times of the Web 2.0 of potential media content producers – towards freedom of expression and its limitations on the Web 2.0 have aroused little scientific interest. The overview indicated that a closer examination of attitudes towards various expression acts may be fruitful.

4. Conclusion

The article argued that laymen's endorsement of freedom of expression and their tolerance of opposing expressions indicate the status of freedom of expression. This suggestion is the foundation of democracy. Judge Learned Hand put it in his often quoted statement: "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women. When it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it" (Hand, 1944). It appears strikingly relevant to monitor the perceived importance of freedom of expression for the citizens. The present article summarized some methodological issues concerning such investigation. It was shown that appreciation of the expression rights in the abstract only gives an incomplete picture as people's endorsement diminishes when the value collides with competing values. Consequently, results are determined by the conflict of values included in the measurement. This problem becomes most significant considering cross-national comparisons of free expression attitudes. International studies on the sentiment towards expression rights need multilayered measures including diverse competing values and target groups equally portraying the situation of different cultural and national backgrounds. As providing fully unbiased measurement is rarely possible, studies need to control for the effects of perceived threat by a target group or an expression situation. Additionally, analyses on the appreciation of freedom of expression need to consider explanatory variables. Otherwise, the mere descriptive ranking of more or less tolerant countries (or individuals) leads to an incomprehensive picture that fosters polarizing interpretations. Important explanatory variables may include trust in democratic institutions able to absorb even extremist expressions and to secure colliding rights to an appropriate extent as well as the socio-economic and educational structure of the population.

The reason for insisting on endorsement of free expression to be a foundation of democracy is the implicit assumption that liberal minded people(s) will exercise freedom of communication and apply the right to others. This assumption of free attitudes actually having behavioral implications needs to be proven. Such prove is required especially under the conditions of a changing media environment. Authoritative control of internet and social media content is limited compared to classic media of less multifacetedness and centralized structure. This presents

laymen with new opportunities to access and express opinions hitherto suppressed. This in turn begs the question if laymen actually are aware of these opportunities and if they take advantage of them. Endorsement of the value is only one element in the complex picture of the exercise of civil liberties. It is reasonable to suggest that perceived social and authoritative control and fear of its consequences have an impact on the willingness to censor, to self-censor, and on the actual behavior.

Finally, the question arises if the citizens' appreciation of a value is connected to its institutional protection. Democracy theory assumes so and hopes about the democratizing effect of the internet and social media rest on this suggested connection. The article cited some cautious indication of such a relationship (Naab et al., 2010) but the fundamental implications of the assumed relation demand additional research efforts. If liberal attitudes are intertwined with legal and political support, modifying the mindset and maintaining endorsement of civil liberties becomes central to comprehensive democratization. Persuasive campaigns and educational programs become highly relevant to democratic transitions. Institutionalization and appreciation of freedom of expression will then back each other. In countries lacking institutional protection of freedom of expression, there is no such mutual support. Citizens' attitudes are essential for liberal reform and the Arab Spring suggests that, in the long run, they can have impact on the institutionalization of freedom of expression.

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