



Balancing Freedom Of Information And Social Responsibility In The Democratic Development Of Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT.

Background: In the era of rapid digital transformation, balancing the freedom of information with social and ethical responsibility stands as a critical challenge for emerging democracies. This study explores the evolutionary trajectory and structural elements of information freedom within the context of democratic reforms and civil society building in New Uzbekistan.

Methods: The research utilizes a comparative and historical-philosophical analysis, tracing the conceptual roots of liberty and free thought from ancient Eastern heritage (such as the *Avesta* and Islamic pluralism) to modern Western press theories (authoritarian, libertarian, and social responsibility models). It examines contemporary media landscapes, institutional shifts, and global indices to assess the transition from Soviet totalitarian press frameworks toward a socially responsible media model.

Results: The findings indicate that while elements of libertarian media theory—such as pluralism, reduced state censorship, and the unblocking of digital platforms—have successfully integrated into Uzbekistan's media space (evidenced by a notable rise in the World Press Freedom Index), institutionalizing these gains requires an economic self-sufficiency of mass media. Furthermore, statistics reveal a substantial improvement in governance accountability, with state responsiveness to media criticism increasing from 12% in 2018 to nearly 90% in recent years. However, the sustainable operation of these democratic mechanisms remains heavily contingent upon public legal culture and media literacy.

Conclusion: The study concludes that true information freedom cannot function effectively in isolation from social responsibility, journalistic ethics, and public oversight. Harmonizing legal guarantees with a high level of media literacy serves as the primary determinant for protecting human rights, mitigating the spread of manipulative misinformation, and ensuring the transparency of state authorities in an open civil society.

Keywords: Freedom of Information, Social Responsibility, New Uzbekistan, Democratic Reforms, Mass Media Independence, Media Literacy, Public Oversight, Press Freedom Index, Journalistic Ethics, Information Culture.



INTRODUCTION.

Extensive scientific research is being conducted across various countries (such as the USA, Germany, France, and Japan) on cultivating a culture of information acquisition and processing (filtering out fake news), ensuring the principles of objectivity and truthfulness in public dissemination, effectively utilizing digital technologies, and further enhancing citizens' media literacy. The "Charter for a Free Press," adopted by the World Press Freedom Committee in 1987, establishes key standards, including the prevention of government restrictions on mass media regarding information access and production, as well as the equal status and authority of independent and state-owned publications. This is because the mass media plays an incomparable role in establishing the rule of law and shaping a robust civil society.

"Today, we are transitioning to a path of innovative development aimed at radically renewing all spheres of state and societal life".¹ As President Sh. Mirziyoyev emphasized in his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly: "Today, Uzbekistan is developing rapidly. Adhering to and deeply realizing the traditions of wisdom of our ancestors, we are implementing resolute reforms and pursuing the path of shaping a new image of our country".²

On the basis of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated January 28, 2022, "On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026,"³ large-scale reforms are being implemented across all sectors. In this context, the relevance of the issue of freedom of information, which possesses universal human significance, continues to increase. When the international non-governmental organization "Reporters Without Borders" released its World Press Freedom Index for 2020, Uzbekistan was ranked 156th out of 180 countries. Analysts acknowledged that the press freedom situation in Uzbekistan had improved by 4 positions compared to 2019, and by 13 positions compared to 2017.

Naturally, achieving this result did not occur on its own. It can be attributed to the release of detained journalists, the lifting of bans on dozens of websites that had been blocked for decades, the simplification of the media registration process, the launch of live broadcasts containing political content, and the creation of conditions allowing certain journalists to raise sensitive topics such as corruption and forced labor⁴. In 2022, Uzbekistan rose by 24 positions in the World Press Freedom Index ranking, securing the 133rd place⁵.

In the universal concept of human rights, freedom of information is categorized as an essential and mandatory element for expressing human dignity, fairness, and the equal and inalienable rights of all individuals. Every citizen, possessing the innate and natural freedom of speech, has the right to put forward their own innovative ideas. Therefore, freedom of information is of paramount importance for human self-expression; it constitutes a natural and inalienable right that prohibits external interference into an individual's private life without their explicit consent.

¹ Mirziyoyev, Sh. M. (2018). Address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Oliy Majlis. Tashkent: Uzbekistan. – pp. 19–20.

² Mirziyoyev, Sh. M. (2018). The Approval of Our People is the Highest Evaluation Given to Our Activities. Tashkent: Uzbekistan. – p. 244.

³ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-60 "On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026." URL: <https://lex.uz/docs/5841063>

⁴ Press Freedom Index: Uzbekistan Ranks 156th. (2020). Accessed on: April 21, 2020. URL: <https://kun.uz/90781005>.

⁵ Uzbekistan Rises in the Press Freedom Index, but the Situation Remains "Difficult". (2022). Accessed on: May 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2022/05/03/rsf-index/>



Globally, several international instruments have been adopted regarding the free dissemination of information. In particular, the following were signed: the Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press (1991), the Almaty Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Asian Media (1992), the Santiago Declaration (1994), the Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Arab Media (1996), the Sofia Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media (1997, primarily for Central and Eastern European countries), and the Declaration of Principles adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva (2003)⁶. "The necessity of building a 'free and liberal' society requires not the rejection of the laws of nature or the disregard of responsibility, but rather our profound realization and acute awareness of our own accountability in leading this society toward progress"⁷. Understanding freedom of information in this manner serves as a reminder of the necessity of social control. In our view, only when the comprehension of freedom and the sense of responsibility operate in harmony will an individual's role, status, and prestige within society continuously elevate.

In this regard, we can observe that the ideas put forward in the *Avesta* resonate deeply with the contemporary tasks of constructing a humanitarian state. Through their philosophical and social essence, the concepts within the *Avesta* expanded the horizons of human thought and served as an essential instrument in forging a harmony between faith and virtue. It advanced the principle of a well-rounded, morally mature individual achieved through a society governed by justice and built upon the foundations of reason and intellect⁸. In general, analyzing the perspectives of our ancestors on liberty, free thought, and human freedom reveals that the concept of freedom was afforded distinct attention and practically integrated into social life. Issues concerning liberty and human freedom were prominently addressed in the scholarly and educational works of such figures as Al-Bukhari, At-Tirmidhi, Yusuf Hamadani, Ahmad Yasawi, Bahauddin Naqshband, Al-Khwarizmi, Burhanuddin Marghinani, Najmuddin Kubra, and Boborahim Mashrab. Specifically, their works manifest democratic principles that condemn social vices—such as the pursuit of excessive wealth, injustice, and oppression—while advocating for the equality of all individuals before God and the necessity of maintaining a humane disposition toward the poor, the impoverished, and the destitute.

Acknowledging the absolute oneness of Allah demonstrates that democracy is inherently valid within Islam; recognizing the uniqueness of the Creator shields humanity from earthly dictatorships, autocrats, and cults of personality. The exclusive recognition of Allah in Islam places all servants on equal footing before Him, and faith instills in the pious the fortitude not to tremble before those who proclaim themselves "the shadow of God" or His "representatives" on Earth. As the journalist K. Bahriev asserts: "*God alone is faultless; hence, human beings are not free from sin, which means worshipping them is impermissible, and consequently, these sins can be openly spoken about. This constitutes Islamic pluralism*"⁹.

"Mass communication in the Middle Ages was naturally carried out in a manner distinct from today. During that era, the direct or indirect dissemination of information to several hundred or several

⁶ Свобода печати и информации.

URL: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/decl_press.shtml

⁷ Parmonov, S. (2009). Philosophical Problems of the Culture of Freedom. Philosophy and Law, (1), p. 27.

⁸ Juraev, N. (2013). The Miracle of "Avesto". Tashkent: Gafur Gulom Publishing House. – p. 22.

⁹ Bakhriev, K. (1997). Democracy and Human Rights: Distinctive Features of the Uzbek Path of Legal Reforms. Tashkent: World of Economics and Law. – p. 46.



thousand people occurred primarily in mosques, madrasas, and marketplaces. It is well known that during those periods, firstly, the human population was not as vast as it is today, and secondly, their movement (migration) from one location to another did not transpire at such an intensive pace as observed in contemporary times"¹⁰. In those times, conveying a message to the king was no easy task; nevertheless, rulers endeavored to listen to the opinions of the people. In this regard, Nizam al-Mulk penned the following lines: *"Anushirvan issued a decree: let bells be suspended from a chain at such a low height that even a seven-year-old child can reach them. Should any seeker of justice arrive at the palace, let him not depend on the gatekeeper, but rather pull this chain so that Anushirvan may hear, listen to his grievance, and take appropriate action"*¹¹. A special official (messenger) was required to consistently deliver reports to the king, and if a report was not conveyed to the monarch in a timely manner, the official faced punishment.

Turning to Western countries, we observe that the socio-political views of the French philosopher J.J. Rousseau and his contemporary Enlightenment thinkers found expression in various legal-normative documents and declarations. For instance, the Bill of Rights, enacted in 1689, states: *"That the freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in Parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament."* Article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted in France in 1789, recognized that no one should be harassed for their opinions, even religious ones, provided that their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.

Today, ensuring the rights and freedoms of citizens within society is the defining characteristic of a democratic state. This is because *"democracy enables the government and the political system to organize their activities taking into account the objective needs of society."* It is only within a democratic state that the opportunity arises to protect and promote individual and collective perspectives within the framework of the law. This is reflected in the formation and activities of political parties and public associations, political pluralism, freedom of the press, and other aspects. In this sense, operating in harmony with democratic processes that ensure government accountability to voters, freedom of speech becomes one of the essential tools for protecting human rights. *"Under contemporary conditions, democratic progress is directly linked to the penetration of information and communication technologies into all spheres of human activity"*¹². In an information society, relationships in the information sector are viewed as social connections arising from: a) creation; b) collection; c) processing; d) storage; e) searching; f) dissemination; and g) utilization of information. In other words, information relations are social interactions that arise and manifest directly within information processes.

Today, a person's right to freedom of information consists of the following interrelated elements:

- Acting upon one's own thoughts and convictions without hindrance;
- Freely renouncing one's thoughts and convictions;
- Freely expressing one's thoughts and convictions;
- Communicating in oral or written form, including the right to refrain from communication;
- Freely choosing the language of communication (the specificity of the language);

¹⁰ Solieva, M. K. (2010). The Role of Social Communications in the Formation of Central Asian Nations' Culture (9th–16th Centuries). Tashkent: Fan va Texnologiya. – p. 36.

¹¹ Nizam al-Mulk, Abu Ali. (2015). *Siyasatnama (The Book of Government)*. Tashkent: Yangi Asr Avlodi. – p. 65.

¹² Karimov, F. (2010). An Important Factor of Democratic Development. *Democratization and Human Rights*, (3), p. 42.



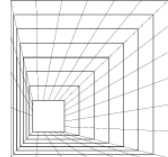
- Freely searching for, receiving, and disseminating information by any means, regardless of state borders;
- Exchanging ideas and knowledge as freely as possible and comparing them; participating in the collection of information (publicly disclosing an opinion);
- Refuting false or distorted reports and protecting oneself from damages caused by such reports;
- Appealing to self-governance bodies and state authorities, either individually or collectively;
- Engaging in free creative activity, etc.

Furthermore, freedom of information is recognized as an interdisciplinary complex of legal norms regulating social relations in the sphere of understanding, using, copying, and protecting information. Consequently, the universal rights to information are as follows:

1. The right to know about the creation and operation of all information systems that pertain, to a certain degree, to a citizen's private life or information about them, as well as information regarding other areas of the citizen's life and activities;
2. The right to consent to the collection of personal information for socio-economic, cultural, or other social purposes;
3. The right to verify the reliability of such information and to dispute its inaccuracy through administrative and judicial procedures;
4. The right to use such information for the purpose of verification or obtaining necessary data;
5. The right to be informed about the use of such information;
6. The right to a citizen's code (registration of the citizen in the respective information system);
7. The right to obtain reliable information regarding the state of the natural environment;
8. The right to obtain reliable financial information, and others.

Political conditions for freedom of information imply, first and foremost, the existence of a clearly defined state policy in the information sphere. From a legal perspective, it necessitates understanding the scope of information freedom through diversity of opinion, freedom of conscience, and ideological pluralism, approached with tolerance for one's own way of thinking. In this context, the social significance of information freedom is determined, on one hand, by the affirmation of an individual's uniqueness and, on the other hand, by the potential to find effective ways of mutual understanding, tolerance for others' opinions, and consensus to enhance human dignity and maintain peace and stability in society. In this regard, the role of the press and the journalists working within it is incomparable. Doctor of Philology Kh. Dustmuhammad has substantiated that "in modern press, professional journalistic ethics must be formed on the basis of national mentality, national morality, and norms of national values, as well as the principles of achieving a balance between press freedom and national values"¹³. Kh. Dustmuhammad writes that "information culture and ethics must be the logical continuation of the modern information civilization observed globally, and human progress can only move toward the future in this direction". Today, there is a necessity for individuals to learn the culture of freedom of information, both to respect the opinions of others and to avoid forcing one's own views or convictions through coercion or pressure. Furthermore, every person must learn to freely express personal opinions on various issues within the norms strictly established by law.

¹³ Dustmuhammad, Kh. (2007). *Problems of Journalistic Professional Ethics: Theoretical and Methodological Analysis*. Tashkent: Yangi Asr Avlodi. – p. 216.



In the book *Four Theories of the Press*¹⁴, the authors categorized press theory into authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet totalitarian theory. The **authoritarian theory** was widespread in England during the 16th-17th centuries. Its foundation is the absolute dominance of the King, his government, or both authorities. The main goal is to support the incumbent government, implement its policy, and serve the state. Its difference from other theories is that media does not necessarily have to be state property, but it must serve the implementation of state policy.

The **libertarian theory**, adopted in England and the USA after 1688, was developed based on the research of Milton, Locke, and Mill, as well as the general philosophy of rationalism and natural rights. Its main goal is to provide information, entertain, earn money, but primarily to assist in finding the truth and monitoring the government. It differs from other theories by being a tool to control the government and satisfy other needs of society.

In the 20th century, the **social responsibility theory** began to spread widely in the USA. Its basis consists of the works of Hocking, the Commission on Freedom of the Press, and media codes of ethics. The main goal is to inform, entertain, earn money, but primarily to bring problems to public discussion. Its significant difference from other theories is that the media must assume social responsibility; otherwise, someone must force them to do so.

The **Soviet totalitarian theory** was implemented in the former USSR, as well as in some forms by the Nazis and Italians. Its main goal was to support the socialist system, particularly the party dictatorship. It differs from other theories in that the media belongs to the state and is strictly controlled by the state.

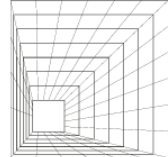
According to our analysis, in this work, the authors provide the theories traversed by Western countries sequentially ("authoritarian-libertarian-social responsibility") and highlight the Soviet totalitarian theory separately. It is evident that, in their opinion, the Western press moved from the authoritarian theory to the libertarian, and subsequently to the social responsibility theory.

In Uzbekistan, however, the press moved from the authoritarian theory of the Tsarist Russia era to the Soviet communist press theory in the 1920s. This theory prevailed for nearly a century, and the media based on it limited independent thinking in people.

Can one, therefore, leap from the Soviet totalitarian press theory, bypassing the libertarian theory, to the social responsibility theory? In other words, why is it so difficult for us to get used to criticism, to listen to new ideas, and to accept them if they are appropriate? In our view, the economic potential of society plays an important role here. First and foremost, a mass media outlet must be economically self-sufficient and not rely on someone else's aid. Necessary funds can primarily be found through advertising products of competitive enterprises. In this regard, it is necessary to study the path traversed by the developed West. From this point of view, it is evident that elements of the libertarian theory have entered our lives today. Today's Uzbekistan media provides information; there are separate cultural-musical entertainment TV and radio programs; many publications are even being printed; efforts are being made to find the truth and establish social oversight.

Without denying the importance of laws, it can be said that legislation alone is not enough. Establishing a life where freedom of information prevails primarily requires teaching responsible leaders in the state and society management system, as well as citizens, to be tolerant, and to teach them this step-by-step. Modern scientific views emphasize that correct decisions made with the active

¹⁴ Siebert, F. S., Schramm, W., & Peterson, T. (1988). *Four Theories of the Press*. Moscow: Vagrius. – p. 222. (In Russian).



participation of the general public serve the progress of society more effectively. "As citizens become more aware of information 'under the control' of state power and governance bodies, a sense of social responsibility is formed and nurtured in society"¹⁵. It is vital that the right of individuals to freely discuss their problems remains unrestricted. We believe that the state must recognize and protect these rights.

The preservation of the rule of law concerns every citizen. If we effectively organize the discussion and promotion of enacted laws, properly exercise our rights and freedoms in law-related fields, and instil a strong conviction in ourselves and those around us to seek judicial recourse whenever rights are violated, we will contribute substantially to ensuring the rule of law and defending the legal framework. Otherwise, obsolete and dysfunctional laws will continue to emerge. It is the fundamental duty of the mass media to establish public oversight and respond to violations of citizens' rights. Consequently, the mass media serves as the primary democratic institution for exercising public oversight. Regrettably, however, there remains a notable scarcity of critical articles and broadcasts across newspapers, television, and radio channels concerning the essence of reforms, challenges in implementing laws and decrees, or public appeals. *"Nonetheless, within the process of reforms, the mass media must transform into a genuine protector of the people's interests. This demands courage, professional excellence, objectivity, and a profound analytical capacity from them"*¹⁶. Regarding this issue, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, stated: *"The mass media must become an essential and influential instrument for conveying the demands and needs of the population to government authorities, the closest assistant and confidant of the people, and the mirror of democracy"*¹⁷.

Concurrently, a practice of swift response to critical media coverage by ministries, government agencies, and regional khokimyats (municipalities) through their public relations services is systematically taking shape. Evidencing this, the responsiveness index of state institutions to critical materials rose remarkably from 12% in 2018 to nearly 90% by the end of 2020¹⁸.

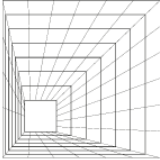
As the head of our state accurately pointed out, further liberalizing media activities, transforming them into a force that shapes public opinion within society, and positioning them as heralds of ongoing reforms must be viewed as a primary objective. In our perspective, conducting regular social surveys among community members and systematically monitoring the implementation of laws through the media will lead to a fundamental improvement in societal life. Recently, the National Media Association was established in Uzbekistan to ensure equitable conditions within the media market, foster further development, and support journalists and bloggers. Strengthening the material and technical foundation of mass media, supporting the endeavors of journalists and bloggers, and providing them with legal, organizational, and technical assistance fall within the mandates of the Public Fund. Concurrently, the Public Fund assists in developing self-regulation mechanisms within

¹⁵ Dustmuhammad, Kh. (2013). *Information: Miracle, Charm, Philosophy*. Tashkent: Yangi Asr Avlodi. – p. 12.

¹⁶ Mirziyoyev, Sh. M. (2018). *An Educated Generation is the Guarantee of a Great Future, an Entrepreneurial People – a Prosperous Life, and Friendly Cooperation – Progress*. Available at: <http://www.uza.uz/oz/politics/bilimli-avlod-buyuk-kelazhakning-tadbirkor-khal-farovon>. Accessed on: December 8, 2018.

¹⁷ Mirziyoyev, Sh. M. (2018). *The Constitution is the Solid Foundation of Our Free and Prosperous Life, and the Further Development of Our Country*. Tashkent: Uzbekistan. – p. 31.

¹⁸ Mirziyoyev, Sh. M. (2021). *Congratulatory Address to the Employees of the Press and Mass Media*. Available at: <https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/4454>. Accessed on: June 26, 2021.



the national mass media community. Furthermore, this Public Fund must extend its focus toward print media to aid in its vital revitalization and development.

The operation of institutions dedicated to safeguarding the freedom of information is a well-established global practice. Such regulatory bodies have been instituted and are actively functioning in several nations worldwide. For instance, France features the Higher Council for Audiovisual Communication (CSA), Great Britain maintains the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee, Germany utilizes the Commission on Mass Communications, and Russia has historically operated the Judicial Chamber for Information Disputes. These entities execute diverse mandates. For instance, the Higher Council in France outlines information policy, whereas the Commission on Mass Communications in Germany approves the registry of publications banned from dissemination, alongside resolving contentious disputes within the information domain.

Every citizen must deeply comprehend the profound role of information freedom. Simultaneously, in the free dissemination of information, citizens possess the opportunity to operate without external interference through independent thought, adhering to their own opinions and convictions protected by law—provided that the freedoms of others are not infringed upon and no threat is posed to the rights shielded by the interests and values of others. Inherently, this signifies the inviolability of an individual's spiritual and intellectual world. In this context, the state assumes the obligation not to impede the free exchange of thoughts and ideas that do not restrict the rights and freedoms of other entities and cause no detriment to legally protected interests.

There remains a distinct difference between raising a problem out of loyalty to one's people and illuminating their grievances, versus raising an issue with an attitude of animosity. Similarly, there is a vast disparity between disseminating information while respecting one's own values, versus abandoning the veil of morality to spread slander. Taking such dimensions into account, the progressive, albeit gradual, implementation of a culture of social responsibility will effectively serve the long-term advancement of a democratic society¹⁹.

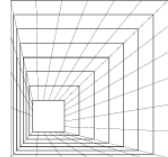
CONCLUSION.

The research results indicate that freedom of information constitutes one of the fundamental tenets of a democratic state and civil society. However, its effective operation is intrinsically linked to the responsible utilization of information, adherence to professional journalistic ethics, legal culture, and the level of media literacy. The harmonious integration of information freedom and social responsibility broadens citizen participation in public governance, strengthens public oversight, and guarantees the openness and transparency of state authorities' activities.

In recent years, the reforms implemented in Uzbekistan toward ensuring freedom of speech and information, supporting mass media activities, developing the digital information ecosystem, and establishing favorable legal conditions for journalists and bloggers have emerged as pivotal vectors of democratic progression. Concurrently, to mitigate the dissemination of fake news, manipulative information, and materials contrary to ethical norms within the information space, it is of paramount importance to elevate media literacy, cultivate an information culture, and consistently institute the principles of social responsibility into practice.

From this perspective, harmonizing freedom of information with legal guarantees, public oversight, media independence, and high professional responsibility serves as a critical determinant for the

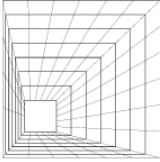
¹⁹ Sayid, H. (2016). *Letters to a Student-Journalist*. Tashkent: Sano-Standart. – p. 68.



sustainability of democratic reforms, the protection of human rights, and the advancement of an open civil society in New Uzbekistan.

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