

The Disputed Freedoms of a Disrupted Press

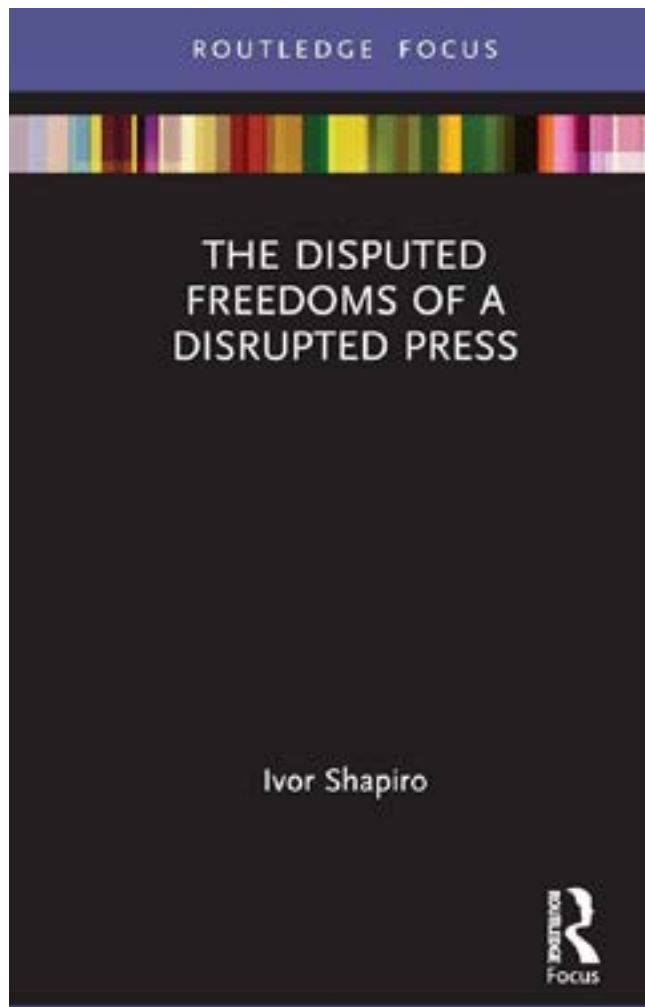
Ivor Shapiro
Routledge, 2023
Hardback (xv+146 pp.)



Shapiro shows us how defending journalism means defending press freedom—and how this is complex work.

Review by Shannon Dea

Ivor Shapiro's *The Disputed Freedoms of a Disrupted Press* (Routledge, 2023) is essential reading for anyone who cares (as we all should) about the future of journalism. As the title suggests, the book has two main focuses: freedom of the press, and the technological, political, and cultural disruptions media is today undergoing around the world. Thus, the book is at once theoretical and richly empirical. There could be no better author for such a volume than Shapiro, a long-time and award-winning journalist and editor turned professor and university administrator (now emeritus) who knows the world of reporting from the front-lines, as an industry leader, and as a scholar.¹ These combined perspectives result in a volume that is historically and philosophically rich, and deeply engaged with the real-world grit of global journalism. Shapiro's message throughout the book is that, now more than ever, we all—journalists and the public alike—need to steward



ARTICLE INFO

APA citation: Dea, S. (2024). [Review of the book *The disputed freedoms of a disrupted press*, by Ivor Shapiro]. *Facts & Frictions: Emerging Debates, Pedagogies, and Practices in Contemporary Journalism*, 4(1), 58-61. <http://doi.org/10.22215/ff/v4.i1.06>

Open Access / CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

¹Notably, between 2012 and 2016, Shapiro was one of the Canadian principal investigators of the [Worlds of Journalism Study](#).

freedom of the press so that a free press can continue to serve the public good.

In the first two chapters, Shapiro lays a sophisticated philosophical and historical foundation for the remainder of the book. He weaves together the history of journalism and the corresponding emergence of such core principles as freedom of the press to illustrate their historical contingency and interdependence. Amazingly, for a book as slender as this one, Shapiro manages to avoid tidy, monolithic origin myths: He traces the ancestry of news media to ancient antiquity and four continents, to 15th century disinformation and 17th century scandal sheets. Shapiro similarly resists simplistic understandings of the relevant philosophical principles. A teacher to the core, he is not content merely to explain philosophical views to his readers; through a series of prompts, puzzles, and cases, he encourages readers to work through them for themselves.

He starts the first chapter, “The Cost of Liberty,” with eleven provocative sentences and asks us to consider whether they are true, false, or a matter of opinion. Examples include:

Qualified and reputable researchers dispute the effectiveness of conventional responses to pandemics and climate change. . . .

.Governments’ financial aid for news organizations protects the free flow of knowledge about public affairs. . . .

Cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed are a type of hate speech. (p. 2)

These and eight other provocative sentences express a range of views on various expressive freedoms. Shapiro is quick to note that readers who work through the examples will have widely varying opinions on the answers. If he thinks that there are right answers to the questions, he doesn’t let on. This is an exercise that one expects to encounter in a university philosophy class, not a book on journalism. That Shapiro opens his book with the exercise is evidence of his deep conviction that to defend journalism, we need to defend press freedom, and that to defend press freedom, we need to understand it in all its complexity.

Shapiro develops, and throughout the book re-

turns to, the view that the freedom of the press is not an innate right but an instrumental or contingent right, constituted for the purpose of making newsgathering possible. The rights that come along with a press badge, he explains, “are not attached to the chronic condition of being human but reserved to the acute condition of being a journalist, and reserved rights usually come with conditions attached” (p. 37).

To map the purposes, rights and conditions of newsgathering, Shapiro takes readers on an erudite and engaging tour from the history of European liberalism, across various world belief systems, to ubuntu philosophy and the formation of the South African constitution. The primacy of the South African context in these important early chapters is a function of Shapiro’s early days growing up and working as a journalist in apartheid-era South Africa, but also of his insistence that human rights were not invented by—or at least not solely invented by—Europeans. He capably discusses such European and North American philosophers as John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, John Rawls, and Carol Gilligan. But he also discusses the origins of contemporary press freedoms in ancient and contemporary African and Asian thought, including in South Africa’s post-apartheid constitution, which includes strong protections of press freedom but excludes from those protections wartime propaganda and advocating for hatred. Although he emigrated from South Africa decades ago, Shapiro’s own approach to press freedom—freedom with conditions attached—remains recognizably South African.

Having laid the theoretical groundwork for the book in the first two chapters, Shapiro devotes the remaining four chapters to describing a range of disruptions threatening the free press, and the evolving shapes that journalism takes around the world in response to those disruptions. Each chapter focuses on a particular challenge and journalistic examples from a particular country.

Chapter 3 invites the reader to reflect on who counts as a journalist for the purposes of receiving access and constitutional (or similar) protections. To illustrate the complexity of the question, Shapiro delves into two Canadian cases of access denied: the arrest of journalist Amber Bracken and documentary producer Michael Toledano at the Wet’suwet’en pipeline blockade in 2021; and

the Federal Courts' overturning of decisions in two successive elections that denied Rebel News journalistic accreditation to attend federal leaders' debates. Both cases turned on the claim that the journalists in question were engaging in advocacy rather than journalism. It is a canny juxtaposition. I am likely not the only reader of this chapter who found myself rooting for the journalists covering the pipeline, and against Rebel News. Shapiro's analysis, though, makes it tough to have it both ways.

If Chapter 3 is concerned with journalism as an institution, the following chapter is centred on grassroots activism. Shapiro's focus in Chapter 4 is on various forms of misinformation. This time, the context is Argentina, where Chequeado, "one of the world's oldest and most innovative dedicated fact-checking organizations" (p. 55) uses an astonishing array of community-based tactics, from YouTube videos and Substacks to eye-catching flash mob-style public events to, in the words of Chequeado general director Laura Zommer, "reach people who don't follow the news . . . to increase the cost of lying" (p. 56).

Chapter 5's focus is the perhaps unsurprisingly excellent professional standards for Norwegian journalism. ("But, yes, that's Norway," Shapiro wryly observes [p. 92]).² Shapiro here makes the case that, especially with right-wing populism on the rise, it is urgent for journalists worldwide to regain the public's trust by developing and respecting clear professional standards.

Shapiro's final chapter takes us to Kashmir—where threats to journalism range from financial instability to government-imposed media blackouts—to show that a liberal constitution is not enough to protect press freedom. Globally, Shapiro reports, threats to the media vary widely. "This is not a news-business crisis; it's a freedom crisis," he warns, "and the biggest question becomes: how many people in any given place actually care enough about their diminishing freedom to do something about it?" (p. 106) What's needed, he tells us, is "unprecedented combinations of brave and focused action by publishers and journalists" (p. 106). He offers 15 ideas that he hopes will help. These include such suggestions as publicly guar-


anteeing editorial autonomy (p. 106), embracing professional standards (p. 107), and strengthening accountability (p. 108). Each idea is accompanied by examples. While the challenges are daunting, Shapiro finds cause for optimism. In the 48 hours prior to writing some of the final sentences of Chapter 6, he tells us, he learned 10 new things because journalists did their jobs.

This is a book designed to be useful to its readers. From the abstracts at the start of each chapter to the suggestions in the final chapter, this slender volume is a handy and indispensable user manual for both creators and consumers of journalism. It is also a terrific read—not only because of the varied and fascinating content, but because of Shapiro's incredibly snappy writing. While reading the book, I repeatedly laughed aloud at Shapiro's witty juxtapositions and cheeky turns-of-phrase. It is such a delight to read novel, thoughtful material by an expert steeped in the field who also happens to write lively, sizzling prose. This book might just be the most important book you could ever read for fun on a beach!

My only bone to pick with the book is with its characterization of standpoint epistemology—an approach to knowledge originated by feminist philosophers of science in the 1970s and 1980s. Roughly and readily, standpoint theory holds that marginalized "outsiders" have expertise because of the ways in which they are marginalized, and that this expertise can and should contribute to our understanding of the world. (It's more complicated than that, of course, but this is not a philosophy journal.) For a chunk of Chapter 4, and occasionally thereafter, Shapiro identifies standpoint epistemology with so-called "post-truth" approaches to news. Unfortunately, despite the care he takes in his other philosophical discussions in the book, he doesn't actually cite any standpoint theorists. The result is a reductionist and ultimately inaccurate characterization of standpoint theory, not unlike the popular (and populist!) misrepresentation of critical race theory that has become familiar. In reality, standpoint epistemology isn't a post-truth resistance to truth-seeking; rather, it is a careful and responsible method of truth-seeking, purpose-built for contexts in which injustice can

² Readers may wish to compare the Norwegian standards with the Canadian Association of Journalists' (2023) [Ethics Guidelines](#).

get in the way of the truth.³ This was the only sour note for me in what was otherwise an engaging, thought-provoking, and revelatory read.

The threats Shapiro describes are daunting, but he offers cause for hope. The history of the press has always been a history of disruption. As long as there has been a free press, journalists have responded to those disruptions, carving out enough freedom to do their jobs and get their stories out. They must continue to do the hard work of fighting for this freedom, as must the public that is affected by the stories journalists tell. *The Disputed Freedoms of a Disrupted Press* is a useful guide on how to do this hard work well. 

Shannon Dea (she/they) is a Professor of Philosophy and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina, on Treaty 4 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis/Michif Nation. Her recent work focuses on academic and expressive freedom. Before she was an academic, she was a community journalist. Email: shannon.dea@uregina.ca

REFERENCES

- Bowell, T. (n.d.). Feminist standpoint theory. Internet encyclopedia of philosophy. <https://iWep.utm.edu/fem-stan/>
- Canadian Association of Journalists (2023). *Ethics guidelines*. <https://caj.ca/wp-content/uploads/Ethics-Guidelines-v2023.pdf>
- Shapiro, I. (2023). *The disputed freedoms of a disrupted press*. Routledge.

Podcast version: https://factsandfrictions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Review_by_Shannon_Dea.mp3

³ T. Bowell (n.d.) is a good primer for readers wishing to learn more about standpoint theory.