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Transnational Corporation as a New Form of Power in the Contemporary Postmodern Society

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Abstract

The authors test the hypothesis of the eminent Czech social scientist Jan Keller (2002), who has presented an idea that we will witness reverse convergence theory. Keller has claimed that in the following development, not the most valuable and most perspective aspects of the former coexisting systems, i.e. socialism and capitalism, will interconnect, but rather the most problematic and least desired aspects of them. The authors tested the hypothesis on national corporations. The authors analyzed national corporations and drew attention to the accelerating concentration of the world wealth in the hands of a relatively small part of population. Financial capital is being more and more centralized, and there is disproportion between the high consumption on the one side and growing poverty of broader groups of society on the other. There are continuously emerging more and more sophisticated forms of surveillance and supervision.

Keywords: Globalization, transnational corporations, financial capital, poverty, capitalism, social control

1. Introduction

Globalization brings a significant change to the global order. It's a dynamic and continuing process whose advantages and disadvantages are highly discussed topics in today's world. Anthony Giddens (2003) described globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 2003: 62).

The so-called "universalists", e.g. Imanuel Wallerstein, represent the cultural convergence theory and explain globalization in the light of the development of economy. Economic activities help to bring nations closer together. Capitalism, especially due to its rational and technological aspects, is thought to be the engine of development. The so-called "culturalists" are more focused on the situational aspects of globalization, and they assume that cultural diversity will remain. Gerlinda Šmausová (2001) points out that there are being established new categories of nationalities and citizenship; there is no closed local space. Although the movers are mainly the media, money and power, the importance of cultures for creating identity cannot be overlooked; this applies to both group identity and the identity of individuals. Cultures vary in the chances to access the political system (see Šmausová, 2001: 155). According to Šmausová, globalization may be described as

mainly systematic process which is realized “behind the back of cultures” often radically changing their milieu (Šmausová, 2001: 156).

Ondřej Císař (2005) points out the three concepts of globalization. According to the first concept, i.e. the Marxist interpretation, all nations are inferior to transnational financial corporations and institutions which influence social relations while trying to achieve profit. On the contrary, the second approach, i.e. the opinions of so-called realists, says that military power is the decisive mover on the global level. The final approach takes into consideration the power of global public opinion which may influence the global development even without any political or economic tools, and it could even shape the global democratic community in the future (see Císař, 2005: 87 et seq.).

According to Císař, Jan Keller’s approach is similar to the first approach mentioned above. Jan Keller (2002) argues that there is a possibility to test the hypothesis that in the following development we will witness the convergence theory, i.e. the capitalist and socialistic system would be brought closer together. However not the most valuable and most perspective aspects of them would interconnect, but rather the most problematic and least desired ones (Keller, 2002: 30). Keller supports this view by describing situations in which the globalized system does not build any obstacles to the desire for maximizing profits, and on the other side, there has emerged police supervision and neocolonial military interventionism.

Below, we will focus on the transnational corporations which are typical for the era of globalization. It is also characteristic for such corporations that they strive to achieve the largest profits possible and to control people’s behavior and the way they think. Martin Khor (2005) argues that globalization is something which, in the Third world, was called colonization. Therefore, globalization may be looked on as an interruption of evolutionary lineage starting in the Middle Ages when Europe started to experience an unstoppable pressure of freedom and equality, supporting individualism, but also leading to certain balancing of opportunities (Furet, 1948).

In the following lines, we will return to the concept of globalization, which cleared the way for a development of transnational corporations.

2. Globalization

Globalization is not a new process. Blending of civilizations and mixing all kinds of living styles, values and ideas is something that had been taking place throughout the history, e.g. expansion of the ancient Rome. Today’s globalization is different, because it has gained qualitative aspects, i.e. it penetrates all areas of our daily life: culture, politics, economy, law, and the society itself (Večeřa and Machalová, 2010: 56).

Globalization is a process of integration of society on the global scale. It covers the today’s national, regional and local systems. It does not affect only the states, but also the individuals and their daily lives. The process of globalization is influenced by many factors, e.g. development of technologies, continuing trend of deregulation, privatization, growth policies based on export, and others. The main component of the contemporary integration is globalization of economic activities, which interconnects production and markets of different countries. This is happening by means of trade of goods and services, movement of capital and information and mutually intertwined nets of ownership and managing transnational corporations. One of the most crucial social consequences of globalization is intensification of the unequal social and economic development (Jeníček and Foltýn, 2010: 281-282).

3. Economic Globalization

Globalization is a significant factor and also a product of the modern economy which extends the economic competition and cooperation into a global level. We can find two main “accelerators” of social changes in the process of globalization.

First, it is the development of technologies which accelerate the development of new phones, computers, optical fibers, satellites, and other types of communication and connects them with global multimedia, electronic exchanges for trading stocks, bonds, currencies, raw materials, options and other financial instruments. Global electronic trading is no the rise.

Secondly, it is the wave of deregulation, privatization, liberalization of capital flows, opening of economy, extending global market and growth policies based on export.

Till the end of the World War II, most of production and services were inside the national states. The changes that took place after the war helped to establish the global financial and currency system, i.e. restoration of the post-war Europe by foreign firms, Bretton Woods Agreement and establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. After the period of golden age of economic growth between 1945 and 1965, the United States had to deal with increasing rates of inflation and a balance of payments deficit.

The economic recession of the 1970s and the destabilization of the Bretton Woods system caused an increase in economic interconnectedness, deregulation and liberalization. The companies that wanted to survive in the new, dynamic environment had to apply new development strategies which were characterized by international expansion. One of the new strategies was to relocate certain parts of production to areas with cheap and “disciplined” labor force in order to lower the production costs. This new strategy resulted in new international division of labor – NIDL.

Industrial production which had been concentrated in developed countries since the beginning of Industrial Revolution was more and more often shifted to the periphery countries, especially the newly industrialized countries of South America and Eastern and Southeastern Asia. Nevertheless the headquarters, research and development remained in the original core countries of the developed world. Therefore, a new type of international division of labor emerged; production capacities are spread all over the planet, but ownership and management is concentrated only in a couple of centers of the globalizing cities, which are typical for concentration of headquarters of transnational corporations, financial companies, market in technology and fashion news. This even emphasizes the social polarization between residential complexes and ghettos. By globalization of finance within cyberspace, such important cities as New York City, London, Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong or Frankfurt have become the centers of new, global, interconnected, information economy. The international financial transactions are not limited by regulations of particular countries, as they are concentrated in these cities and tax havens. To certain extent, this is in contradiction with the free market theory, under which investments should not be prevented from being directed to such places where they can be utilized in the best manner. The current situation however does not allow it and fast returns are becoming more preferred than long-term investments.

It used to be considered that a good name of a company and popularity among the public benefiting from the trade and industry was a long-term investment referred to by Henry Ford, who stated that an entrepreneur should follow only one central idea and execute it down to the

smallest detail. The leading ideas of his business should be rendering superior service to public. Service means to serve the customers, public and therefore the state and mankind (Hoch, 1928:18). This approach influenced also Tomáš Baťa, who, after returning from USA, promoted the principles of serving the public: “It is often said that it is the vital principle of industry, trade and any human activity. In nature, everything that serves life and supports it, grows, strengthens and breeds. The enterprises that serve human society the best are automatically supported by the public. People buy the products which are the best option with regard to price and quality. The most competent people usually look for a job at the companies that provide them with the best benefits, and in exchange, they do the best work and are loyal to the common idea of the enterprise. The principle of serving the public shall be the criterion of making the most important decisions for everybody.” (Baťa, 1932: 317)

As Jan Keller argues (2010) that in classical capitalism, as for legitimacy, an entrepreneur’s profit represents compensation for the risk. Therefore, the risk became legitimate and people like Ford, Rockefeller or Baťa served as examples for millions of people. World seemed to be open and everything depended just on people’s abilities and efforts. This situation is, however, changing rapidly in today’s society. Keller (2010) points out that the entrepreneurs today (he did not mean the small businessmen though) have large profits but only small risks which they even try to minimize by all kinds of contractual measures in order to avoid responsibility.

4. Transnational Corporations

The process of globalization of the late twentieth century is connected with massive development of large transnational corporations. A transnational corporation is considered to be an enterprise whose units are active in several different countries. Today, the transnational corporations produce more than a quarter of world production; trade between the internal units of these corporations amounts to ca third of the world trade. These entities have great economic potential. “The 100 world’s largest economies are not limited to only nations; half of them are transnational corporations. Sales of General Motors amount to the total sum of the gross domestic product of Tanzania, Ethiopia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Zaire, Uganda, Kenia and Pakistan combined. Market capitalization of such giants as Microsoft and many others amounts to tens of millions dollars.” (Handy, 1999: 87). Wal-Mart stores, British Petroleum, Toyota Motors, AXA, Citigroup, HSBC Holdings also belong between the largest transnational corporations.

Transnational corporations have such economic strength that they may influence the system in which we live. Not only have they decisive power in economic issues, especially in price policy, employment and quality of products, but they may also affect nation’s politics via nets of lobbyists on their payroll, and therefore influence laws to be passed to their advantage. Aside from that they may manipulate media via advertisement agencies. At the same time, management of corporations is being shifted to cyberspace.

The growth of transnational corporations was made possible by neoliberal economic policies based on the principle “what is private, is healthy with no exception”. Although neoliberal economic policies enhanced growth and helped to strengthen the middle class, it suppressed social solidarity by means of which it added to future inequality by incomparability, as Jan Keller put it (2010). Social inequality has grown in three areas. Firstly, it is Capital vs. Work where the spread between the profits of owners and stockholders on the one side, and salaries of employees and suppliers on the other. Secondly, it is the inequality between the employees and top managers. The wages of employees are stagnant, while the salaries of top managers are growing

rapidly. The third area of inequality is between those who are economically active and those who depend on welfare state for any reason.

One of the indicators of inequality is proven by the following fact: in 1970s and 1980s, the bosses of large American or Canadian companies earned a salary forth to six times higher than the average wages of employees; at the beginning of 1990s, the managers' salary was 40 higher than the average employees' wages, and according to the latest data, the managers' salary is now 500 times higher than average salary of employees. According to Keller, it is no longer inequality, but rather incomparability. Keller (2010) points out an example from France: a monthly salary of a manager equals to the salaries of ten people who have an average salary (SMIC – Salaire minimum interprofessionnel de croissance) over the period of 40 years. Liliane Bettencourt, who inherited the French cosmetics and beauty company L'Oreál, has an income that equals to a basic salary of 15700 Frenchmen. Another evidence of incomparability may be found in an increase of the so-called time of catching up, i.e. how many years it will take before we or our descendants have the salary of our boss. In the post-war years, the time-of-catching period was ca 20 years; today it is about 180-200 years. According to Keller (2002), dogmatism of neoliberal policy is not just a mere neutral economic doctrine, but it may be understood as a form of social engineering (Keller, 2002: 33). Social engineering may, in the broadest sense, be understood as every planned change that is to lead to certain expected consequences. Such changes may be certain measures in politics, legal or economic sphere, etc. Aside from that, social engineering is often looked on as a set of manipulative methods which may be misused by ideologies which really were misused, especially by totalitarian regimes. Such an ideology may be also found by those who often repeat the statement that invisible hand of market would solve any problems and who overlook the criticism of capitalist economy by asserting that there are problems which may be taken care of by applying certain appropriate measures and who avoid recognizing that capitalism may, as any other system, have its defects.

5. Several Selected Social Consequences of Economic Globalization

The emergence of transnational corporations is connected with unavoidable shifts of national economies towards global incorporation. Economic prosperity of particular states is more and more influenced by transfers made in financial markets and many external circumstances which are outside of control of national governments. Speculators on global markets affect lives of millions of people. Financial capital is superior to production capital, which is supported by global mobility of the former. Geographical flexibility allows corporations to transfer part of their production to a country, which offers better conditions; such a transfer may be carried out anytime. Therefore, the countries compete to attract large companies by offering the most advantageous investment and tax conditions. As Noreena Hertz argues that the efforts of governments of the Third World countries to attract direct or portfolio investments, which is necessary due to the limits of development aid, often accelerate their fall (Hertz, 2003: 55). Governments try to limit or completely repeal some laws, or they try to lower salaries or limit right to social benefits, lower the pensions and social insurance by the employers. The groups which could organize employees are silenced; there are even certain "paradises of pollution", which were caused by laws harming environment; human rights are abused, all that in order to attract foreign investors (Beck, 2006). Corporations are often charged of corruption, especially in the form of giving bribes in order to win public tenders, to be granted permissions or licenses. Sometimes they are charged of bribing state officials, being engaged in prohibited forms of lobbying or cooperating with undemocratic regimes.

Corporations are also criticized for not complying with labor laws or environmental standards. Cheap labor force is often connected with insufficient protection of the workers, child labor or slave labor. Such companies reduce their expenses by engaging in production processes which are not ecological although they may be cheaper. This applies especially when they expand to a country in which there is no or minimal legislation on protection of environment or consumers.

Another important result of the behavior of corporations, which was described above, concerns employment opportunities. Small and middle businesses become uncompetitive or have significant problems to survive on the market when a transnational corporation appears. Structural unemployment is a result of discrepancy between supply on the regional or local labor market and the worker's skills. Unemployed people may be disqualified due to their lack of expertise but also by the costs associated with commuting to work and moving to regions with appropriate employment opportunities.

Such companies often prefer contracts of employment for limited period and they hinder proper functioning of Unions and maintain excessively asymmetrical relationships with their employees. Such work placements cause insecurity of employees and strengthens the competition between individuals. Another factor that enhances unemployment is technological innovations. A long-term unemployment of an individual strongly endangers self-realization on the labor market and may even lead to ruining one's social status and an identity of man in society, outbursts of dissatisfaction, violence and pathological phenomena, extremism, street protests, etc. It creates a cycle of reproduction of social exclusion. If an individualized and isolated individual is excluded from the labor market, he or she is consequently excluded from the other social spheres and from the life of society; his or her political participation is disturbed (Suša, 2006). As a result of privatization of public services and limitation of social net, an individual is fully unprotected and exposed to market trends.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (1999), globalization helps to increase the potential of technical and economic options for only a minority of people, but it also creates negative consequences for majority. Exclusion affects social life as a whole; social belongingness is endangered and competition lowers social solidarity. Elkins (1992) refers to the so-called risk context which is more and more globalized. Global problems are caused mainly by the so-called industry-made risks, especially by increasing armament and excessive capacity of destruction. Aside from that, they are connected with global poverty, continuing ecological destruction, repression of human potential and limitation of human rights.

Both absolute and relative poverty cause not only hunger and diseases but also collapse of families, rise of crime and violence. Transformation of natural sources from means of survival into industrial goods breaks the traditions and community and it further causes forced migration, which leads to further social and ecological problems (Elkins, 1992). Social groups are marginalized, which applies mainly to original inhabitants but also to the entire nations, as it happened for example in Africa. The spread between rich and poor is getting larger, and a new type of division of people has emerged, i.e. those who have access to information and those who do not (Henderson, 2001: 9).

Another distinctive, negative phenomenon of economic globalization which has social consequences is the increasing spread between rich and poor within both the national states and the states itself. "For instance, the richest countries, such as USA, EU member states and Japan are one hundred times richer than the poorest countries, such as Ethiopia, Haiti and Nepal. This ratio

was hover only 9:1 one hundred years ago. There is a ratio 267:1 between GDP of Luxembourg, the nation with the highest per capita income, and GDP of Guinea-Bissau, which has the lowest GDP. However, 30 years ago, which was shortly after the process of globalization started, the ratio between the GDP of the richest country, which was USA, and the poorest country, i.e. Bangladesh was 88:1. The billionaires of this world, i.e. approximately one thousand people, own together more than the poorest 2.5 billion people. Almost half of the people living in Africa earn less than one dollar a day (Meziřícký, 2011).

6. Criticism of Transnational Corporations or Resignation?

As a reaction to the negative social consequences of economic globalization, global civil society is strengthening and new reliable market and educational ideologies, green and global education are on the rise. Some anti-globalization and alter-globalization movements are being formed; they protest against globalization which only strong economic entities may profit from and which is supported by capital to which no limits of social responsibility apply.

For instance, the movement Fair Trade promotes payment of “fair prices” for products and compliance with certain social and environmental standards during production of all kinds of commodities. The movement aims mainly at export from developing countries to developed countries of the world, and it is one of the opposites (and critics) of transnational corporations. The goal is to push through more just system of global trade.

Creation of more just system is also included in Corporate Social Responsibility, which covers the three most important spheres: economic sphere, social sphere and ecologic sphere. In the first sphere we can find, for instance, the requirements of transparency, rejection of corruption, protection of intellectual property, customer relations and ethical code. As for the social sphere, there are, for example, rejection of child labor, equal status of men and women in the workplace, corporate philanthropy and support of volunteering. We can also include employment of minorities in this sphere. The third sphere covers not only environmental friendly behavior, such as recycling and saving energy, but also ecological production in accordance with the valid standards and protection of natural resources. Therefore, social responsibility is supposed to be grounded on provision of support to development of community and employees, responsible behavior increasing productivity and loyalty of employees, reliability for environment. Companies are looking for solutions beneficial not only for business but also for society and even the planet. The topic of searching for global values and creation of civil society is getting ahead (Urbanová et al., 2013).

According to Ondřej Císař (2005), civil society overlaps its national influence and brings numerous democratic principles helping to restructure the contemporary globalized world, which is controlled by the “rich and powerful” by means of international organizations. Císař mentions three basic approaches: under liberal internationalism, the role of civil society is to ensure transparency and responsibility of international organizations. The radically democratic model requires enhanced participation of civil society in the international political structures. According to the deliberative ideas, the role of civil society is to help ensure communication between the political elites and the engaged parties. This function may be carried out, for instance, by non-governmental associations or it may be achieved by means of referendums (Císař, 2005: 90 ff.)

Civil society helps to individuals to self-express and to voluntarily associate in order to realize their particular interests. The citizens may participate in public affairs via civil society, which may also fill the space between private lives of individuals and the economic and political

macrostructures. Thus, civil society is an important social link that enables individuals to integrate into social life and social processes. It also helps to achieve the interests of individuals and to satisfy a number of their needs. Therefore, civil society may be understood as a protection against social anomy, and the importance of civil society in so-called global society will continue to grow.

On the other hand, there is also certain resignation, which is demonstrated by the fact that people do not go to vote. In his extensive study on social stratification of turnout of voters in the Czech Republic, Lukáš Linek (2013: 3-13) argues that people with higher sources and status usually go to vote. Turnout of voters is, thus, influenced by education, income and a belonging to a social class. Moreover, their influence grows over the time, and therefore there is inequality in participation of certain groups of voters. However, votes of all people should have the same value. As Linek explains, absence of the groups with lower status is caused by the fact that the members of these groups do not see anyone in the public life who could represent them and whom they could trust. The larger the inequality is, the lower the participation of low-status groups is. Therefore, the growing inequality in income has alarming consequences for the development of the Czech democratic political system (Linek, 2013: 11).

Individualism, which is connected with growth of insecurity of life position and life perspectives, is on the rise. It is individualism, which is connected with less concern about public affairs, less trust in government and less interest to be engaged in global issues.

7. Social Control in Globalized Society

The concept social control covers a collection of all means, social institutions and processes, which are in a social structure, by means of which a social unit ensures conformity with accepted values, goals, needs and norms.

Control is understood as controlling of behavior of others. It defines the degree in which a group regulates behavior of individuals who are members of such a group.

The approach to repressive institutions has changed over the years. People learned to live with them and, thus, their effectivity decreases. Norms of behavior have been relativized due to the irregularities in human action. The only way of the power institutions to control individuals is to interfere in individual's privacy. The external institutions are losing their significance, as opposed to conformity of lives of individuals which is gaining more importance, i.e. the conformity which is observed and followed by an individual. This conformity is often grounded on the individual's self-control and self-discipline.

As described by Malgorzata Jacyno (2012), intensive efforts to rationalize live behind the strategies chosen by individuals may be tracked down. The purpose of these efforts is to get as much health, happiness, youth, money and high self-confidence as possible in one's life. Crowded fitness centers, popularity of workshops on "training mind" and courses on "programming for a success", workaholics or the tendency to undergo drastic diets are just a few examples (Jacyno, 2012: 7).

In his volume *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1999), Neil Postman asked which vision of future of our society is more likely to happen; whether the vision introduced by Orwell or Huxley. At the end, he answers that it was Huxley who was correct.

Georg Orwell feared those who ban books. Aldous Huxley expressed his fear that it won't be necessary to ban books, as there will be no one who would like to read them. Orwell feared those

who will block our access to information. Huxley was afraid of those who will provide us with too many information that it will lead us to passivity and egoism. Orwell was afraid that truth will be hidden from us, whereas Huxley feared that truth will be drowned in the sea of insignificance. In the novel 1984 people are controlled by means of suffering. In Huxley's Brave New World, control is achieved by means of delight. Orwell was afraid that we will be destroyed by the object of our hatred, whereas Huxley feared that it is the object of our love that will destroy us.

Thanks to the growing social control, we may ponder over both of these visions, i.e. Orwell's and Huxley's. The former vision showed a world of loneliness, the latter the land of abundance and plenty. According to Orwell, people were stressed and depressed, whereas Huxley's characters were carefree and playful. However, they both had an identical presentiment of strong social control and highly controlled world; a vision that there will be less freedom and more control in the future.

After September 11, 2001, we are getting more and more under supervision. Using of cameras is so regular nowadays that we do not even register them. But it is not only about the cameras. Banks know everything about our credit cards; our mobile provider registers our calls and messages.

According to Benjamin Kuras, we are surrounded by so-called process of "creeping orwellization", whose goal is to deprive a citizen of his awareness of who he is, where he belongs, what is right and wrong, which ideas to follow and which to reject, which sources of knowledge to search, how to judge the deeds of himself and of others, what to be proud of and what to be ashamed of, what to strive for and how to recognize one's success. Kuras argues that this process is present in the entire Europe. The process is associated with attempts to lose national, ethnical or local sense of self-worth and confidence. Aside from that, there emerges so-called "social inspectorization", which is a control connected with chaotic issuing of plenty of laws, regulations, directives and initiatives. There is an army of controllers who make sure that all these regulations are complied with. Kuras also pays attention to economic globalization. He noticed that economic globalization is a process, by means of which more and more large megacorporations control bigger and bigger territories and dictate to the local economies and governments what they may or may not do. Kuras argues that everyone who watched the mergers and acquisitions that took place in Europe over the last five years cannot miss the fact that, in all sectors, one enterprise after another is getting under smaller number of extremely vast megacorporations. Thousands of small businessmen had to become employees or they are just unemployed. In globalized economy, such individuals may be threatened that if they are not obedient, the investments and production will be moved to a country with cheaper labor force and more obedient employees.

Kuras points out that globalization significantly adds to the totality anticipated by Orwell, because, as opposed to the former totalitarianism states, it won't be possible to escape due to its omnipresence.

And people fear: the presence of fear is almost tangible. Why? What leads them to it? One of workers stated for the server ParlamentníListy.cz: "I'm afraid I could tell you something that I would regret later. So don't take it wrong, but I prefer not to tell you anything about Mr. B (name anonymized by the authors)". The editors of ParlamentníListy.cz register several similar comments about Mr. B, which arouses many questions and covers this enterprise with a mysterious shadow.

There was one of the employees who said more: “I’m not happy here and I’m not the only one. Discrimination and protection is present here. We have more and more work, but the salaries remain same. I cannot tell you more. Don’t be surprised. Nowadays, people are afraid to say openly what they think so that they would not lose their job. Not too many job opportunities now.” (ParlamentníListy.cz, 2014).

8. Conclusion

Transnational corporations have a strong position in the globalized world. They have great power. There are many discussions about their influence on developing countries which often yield to the demands of large corporations in order to keep them in their country although it may affect the country’s development in a negative way. Due to the low legislative standards, breach of human rights or pollution of environment often occurs. However, it is very difficult to punish transnational corporations for their behavior. Using commercials, transnational corporations create a pressure on consumption and satisfaction of mainly material needs by means of which they create a form of control in which obedience is grounded on remuneration (possibility to buy something).

The example we used, i.e. transnational corporations, shows that in the globalized world the transnational corporations often take the most problematic and least desired aspects from capitalism. They often go back to its early, outdated phases, as the working conditions in some emerging countries correspond with those that were in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The socialistic system has lost its solidary and family bonds, but what remained is a fear to express oneself freely and in a responsible manner and to be engaged in public affairs.

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