

Forty years of fighting for freedom

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Reporting from London, the DCMF interviews Index on Censorship's founders forty years since the magazine launched.

By Giorgia Scaturro

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From left: Pavel Litvinov and Michael Scammell. DCMF photograph.

Forty years have passed since [Index on Censorship](#) was founded, a magazine which publishes suppressed stories from around world. It's a publication which defines and defends freedom of expression. Michael Scammell is founding editor, writer and Russia expert. Pavel Litvinov is a scientist and Russian dissident who worked on the magazine's original concept by challenging the restrictions of the Soviet regime.

In 1968 Litvinov wrote a letter to The Times explaining to the world the seriousness of a trial against some of Moscow's dissident writers. Poet Stephen Spender brought together the most notorious intellectuals of the time such as Igor Stravinsky, Bertrand Russel and Mary McCarthy who sent a telegraph offering Litvinov their support. Out of their commitments, the Index on Censorship was born.

The Doha Centre for Media Freedom interviewed Litvinov and Scammell on the sidelines of a forum in London, [The fight for free speech, 40 years on](#),

DCMF: What made you decide to defend free speech?

PL: My grandmother was a British writer and journalist who descended from Hungarian revolutionaries; her spirit was always in our family....My mother introduced me the poetry of Pushkin and taught me

sympathy and compassion for people who were oppressed.

MS: I had been working as a freelancer translating some of the dissidents' work into English then I answered an advertisement from Stephen Spender and got the job... We decided to start a magazine, which was much cheaper than a newspaper, with articles describing what was happening in the countries where dissidents lived. We published their original work in translation.

DCMF: What was the concept of this new organisation?

PL: It doesn't matter what ideas you are arrested, tortured or killed for, communist ideas, anticommunist ideas, liberal ideas ... you can say whatever you want without being put in prison, they cannot censor you, everything has to be published and discussed. It's become more complicated during these 40 years but the basic idea is still the same.

DCMF: Being an activist for free speech had a price. You were arrested. What did that mean to you?

PL: I was arrested for organising and participating in a demonstration on the [Red Square](#) against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I was prepared. I psychologically knew that this would happen. My question was 'how much can I do before they arrest me?'. I almost expected much worse. I spent four and half years in prison in Siberia. I almost died there because I had a bad case of pneumonia and even the KGB was scared because they did not want the scandal of my death. Several times, they came searching my house and stole things from me. I was arrested again after I went back to Moscow. They told me that they had enough material to send me to many years of labour camp. At the time, dissidents were either arrested or forced to leave the country. They thought they would stop us but the movement continued. I kept meeting my dissident friends giving advice on how to behave during the interrogations by KGB. I was kicked out of my country but when I immigrated to the US, I was able to help my friends to publish a magazine similar to Index.

DCMF: And did that experience and magazine you worked on lead to greater awareness of what was happening in the Soviet Union among the rest of the world?

MS: In the late sixties there was a zeitgeist, a spirit of the time that was very wide spread. If you think of 1968, you think of the anti-Vietnam demonstrations in USA but also the suppression of the [Prague Spring](#) in Czechoslovakia. The spirit of rebellion which the 1968 students movement fostered was turned on the western world too. We made a point publishing articles on media censorship in Britain, in America, in France, anywhere we felt there was repression of opinion. It was the beginning of a real understanding that one had a certain duty to monitor and to protest about what was going on in various parts of the world. If you have a feeling of disgust and hatred of oppression and censorship then it's not difficult wherever you find it to protest against it.

DCMF: How do you read the situation in Russia now, who are the enemies of free speech?

PL: There is plenty of propaganda, some people believe they are afraid of a democratic revolution. When we will have free elections things will change. Now, the internet, many local newspapers and good radio stations contribute to more freedom but ninety percent of the population is still brainwashed through television, which is controlled by the government. I don't think this will happen for too long. In our times, we had no hope. Today a new generation and bigger movements are growing among new Russia's middle class and they are much more practical, they can travel and study abroad, many work with computers. Russian democracy is young, 70 years of communism and the regimes of [Boris Yeltsin](#) and [Vladimir Putin](#) prevented people from developing a "democratic habit". It will take time but they will.

DCMF: Will things be better without Putin?

PL: Yes, but I can't prove it.

DCMF: What are your predictions for free speech in the next 40 years?

MS: There will continue to be censorship and oppression. The struggle will never end, it will just change its ground. It's a sort of protean struggle that takes different forms, the animal changes its shape but it's still an animal. The internet is a double edged sword - a wonderful instrument for freedom of expression but it also offers new opportunities for controlling that expression, think of Google but also China, Iran.

PL: There will still be problems with human rights but there have definitely been improvements and there is surely more awareness on the question of human rights. I am sort of an optimist although we have cases such as China for instance, North Korea and militant Islam, plenty of things that need to be moved in the direction of freedom of speech. But we are getting better.

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