

Introductory Words

Paul Sturges, Chair of the FAIFE Committee

I think that it would be hard to exaggerate the significance of the topics that we are here to discuss. Yet some people regard intellectual freedom (freedom of opinion, free expression and access to information) as some kind of luxury that is only relevant in comfortable, established economies. A recent assertion of mine that the intellectual freedoms represented fundamental human values was challenged by someone who called them a 'complete and utter irrelevance' asserting that there are more fundamental human rights: 'food, shelter, education and health'. Without being foolish enough to challenge the centrality to human life of nourishment and a warm and secure place to live, I would suggest this line of argument is inadequate. The role of intellectual freedom is much more important in the functioning of the individual and society than concentration on the more obviously basic rights recognises.

The argument for the universality of intellectual freedom as a set of values is rooted in the development and functioning of the human brain. The flow of sensations into the brain that range from tastes and smells through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, number and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, it develops and supports the ability to think. At the moment of birth a new human being is subjected to a range of stimuli more intense than anything experienced in the restful calm of the womb. An ability cope with new information and to make sense of it grows visibly and with great speed and it is clear that if a child is allowed full access to new sensations there is little limit to how much information it can process.

On the other hand, a child that is deprived of sensation visibly suffers for it. Occasional cases are discovered of children who have been shut up for years on end by their parents or carers in spaces that allow them hardly any access to external stimuli. These children's ability to learn has on each occasion been severely damaged and if the incarceration has continued too long they have proved incapable of progressing beyond very limited understanding and communication. Experiments in the early 13th century by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (*Stupor Mundi*) designed to show what language would be natural to children brought up without hearing any language at all were a disappointment. The children he caused to be brought up in isolation by deaf mute carers actually proved unable to learn much at all, let alone to reveal a natural proficiency in some ancient original language. The assumption that there was basic mental equipment, including language, which would be revealed in children kept in isolation, was simply wrong. The subjects of the Emperor's experiments had lacked the flow of stimuli that would develop their ability to learn, let alone develop a language capacity that could deal with what they learnt.

Modern research shows that certain areas of the brain perform certain functions: the frontal lobe area handling planning and decision-making for instance, or the brainstem dealing with involuntary functions such as breathing and heart rate. What is more, despite the popular notion that brain tissue is progressively lost over a lifetime, the brain is a 'plastic' organ that renews, changes and adapts to a remarkable extent according to need. Such change is apparent in people whose brains have suffered some damage that requires the reallocation of functions to areas originally serving