**Dissertation Defense**

**Neglecting the 'Right on Which All Other Rights Depend:' Press Freedom in the International Human Rights Discourse**

**Weibke Lamer**

*ABSTRACT*

Historically and philosophically, press freedom has closely been linked to the fight against tyranny and the advancement of human rights. But coverage of press freedom as a distinct human right is surprisingly absent from scholarship and the human rights agenda. This dissertation fills this gap in the academic literature by examining why press freedom has not become part of the established international human rights debate, despite its centrality to democratic theory.

It does so in three steps: First, it outlines the distinction between press freedom and other human rights to which it is usually subjugated, like free speech and freedom of information, thus highlighting the importance of press freedom as a distinct human right. Second, it examines in detail how press freedom is treated at the UN, and traces the historical path of the freedom of the press debate at the UN to determine how and why press freedom is neglected. Third, the dissertation examines the roles of transnational actors, the media and NGOs, in the context of the international promotion of press freedom.

The dissertation finds that, despite the popularity of ideational explanations in the field of human rights studies, in the case of promoting press freedom, considerations of power and strategic interests rather than ideas dominate state behavior. No state – not even Western liberal ones – goes out of its way to promote press freedom, because it undermines state power. The dissertation further finds that there is no domestic constituency for press freedom and that NGOs as well as the media themselves do very little to promote press freedom.

These findings imply that the current place of press freedom in the human rights discourse needs to be rethought. The findings also have implications for the idea of democracy and human rights and for their future not only in developing countries, but in liberal democracies as well. If the goal is to implement these ideas, the ‘right on which all other rights depend’ should be at the center of human rights advocacy at home and abroad.

**Dissertation Chair:**  Dr. Kurt Taylor Gaubatz

**Dissertation Committee:** Dr. Peter Schulman

Dr. Laura Roselle (Elon University)

***Batten Arts and Letters Building***

***Room 7009***

February 28, 2014

2:00 pm