

Foreseeable media inclination in making a single authoritarian nation:

Review study of press freedom in India & China

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Abstract

India and China are developing exciting changes in their media industries. Both countries are viewed as lucrative economies for digital content, and it is increasing in their billion-plus respective populations. However, the government's involvement and the business people's interference have questioned the news's authenticity. In the annual report compiled by Reporters without Borders, India is marked as 150th rank in the World Press Freedom Index, and China is reported as 179th out of 180 countries. The trend of propaganda news is disseminated at large, both within and between countries. Cult-like the presence of strong governments in both nations weakens the media and the voice of the people. In this conceptual article, I would like to use critical discourse analyses to critically analyze and address how media is going towards a darker side where only one voice is valued. Keeping the point of convergence as the past and future of media, this chapter will detail key industrial developments and see how this violent pattern will hurt humankind. Looking from the lens of media governance in secondary available literature like the government's official press releases, announcements, newspaper coverage, and e-news on the websites, this chapter will draw the similarities and differences in approach that both countries take to control and navigate their media. Censorship will be the focal point in understanding the salient reasons why those restrictions are applied and how they whitewash the narrative and identity of our society.

Keywords: Press freedom, India, China, Censorship, Authoritarianism, State control

Introduction

A densely populated media landscape is coupled with complexity, and with each layer, the freedom of speech is reduced. The sharp decline in press freedom globally is alarming and disturbs the social and economic order. As noted by a report by UNESCO in 2022, multiple laws have been adopted since 2016 that use vague or overly generalized language for punishments threatening online freedom of expression. Unsurprisingly, the Constitution is adopting these laws and pushing internet platforms like YouTube, Twitter, etc., to remove content that does not support the nation's ideology. It is also worth noting that the number of social media users surged from 2.3 billion in 2016 to 4.2 billion in 2021. Google and Meta receive more than half of all global advertising revenue, whereas the revenue for newspapers dropped by half in the last five years. Another troubling factor for the decline in press freedom is the growing threat against journalists. The rise in killings of journalists all over the world has created a chilling effect on the profession. Violence comes in all forms to media professionals: harassment, stalking, death threats, attacks, and defamation make their lives critical. Most of the time, political groups, government authorities, or criminals are involved in these attacks (Bhat & Chadha, 2020). Because of their dangerous connections, people self-censor or are reluctant to report on sensitive issues. A survey conducted by UNESCO says that 73 percent of women journalists experienced online violence and threats of physical harm during their course of work. Understanding the sharp decline in press freedom globally, this conceptual article will study press freedom in India and China and critically analyze and address how media is going towards a darker side where only one voice is valued. Keeping the point of convergence as the past and future of media, this chapter will see how this violent pattern will hurt humankind.

Looking from the lens of media governance in secondary available literature like the government's official press releases, announcements, newspaper coverage, and e-news on the websites, this chapter will draw the similarities and differences in approach that both countries take to control and navigate their media. Censorship will be the focal point in understanding the salient reasons why those restrictions are applied and how they whitewash

the narrative and identity of our society. The roadmap for directives for the future calls for urgent attention to protect democracy, enforce pluralistic and independent media, and ensure the safety of journalists. Support for public service media and philanthropic investments in news productions will be an added value for healthy journalism. Political scientist Steven Levitsky also mentioned a threat to American democracy in the shift towards majoritarianism. Indicating chronic challenges to democracy are long-developing forces and pose an immediate threat to the Americans. From West to East, the wave of authoritarian government, propagandist media, and extremist groups is extending (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2015).

It becomes a real problem when the countries with the highest populations are ranked at the bottom of the global press freedom index and endanger the lives of millions of people. Per Reporters Without Borders, India is ranked 151, and China is 179 out of 180 surveyed countries. The political, social, economic, legal, and security-related factors are used to rank the countries. The report also indicates that the concentration of partisan media and media ownership are crucial factors in the press freedom crisis. India is also seen as a jailer of journalists and repression of press freedom advocates. Similarly, China is known for its stringent censorship laws and excessive government control. However, the government and its supporters dismiss the poor ranking as politically motivated, conspiracy, and biased.

The worrying decline of press freedom in India

Think tanks, research scholars, and media advocates study the causes of why press freedom in India is declining and hurting people's trust in media. The state-funded media has shifted the Overton window of the media landscape in the country, and now censorship is getting normalized. India has reported a maximum number of Internet shutdowns than any other country in the past ten years. This grave concern is one of the reasons that ruptures free speech. German theorist Beate Muller explains that censorship is a "process of actions and reactions in the struggle for power, publicity, and the privilege to speak out, rather than merely as a repressive tool with predictable results." These ideologies are challenged as media has changed from policy-based news to propagandist style and employing aggression-based journalism to gain solidarity, promote nationalism, and unite the Hindus (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019). In this light, it is surprising to see the supporters of government and media organizations defend their actions and the abuse of human rights. What will be the future of national media in India as it persists in changing its narrative with the political interest and imposing censorship citing unclear reasons? Media conglomerate Reliance Industries owner Mukesh Ambani owns more than 70 media houses that have reached 800 million households in India.

Similarly, the 40-year-old national news channel NDTV was acquired by industrialist Gautam Adani, which led to further encroachment of media freedom. The billionaires are known to have political links with the current government party. Adani group has several business verticals, including infrastructure, banks, housing, and construction, and people are noticing how the construction of mega projects is begged by Adani groups only. Shrinking media freedom and their rights are questioned and analyzed by the journalists, at times at the cost of their own lives. Deccan Herald newspaper, published on May 9, 2023, states that, on average, four journalists are killed every year, and hundreds are arrested and kept in jail. Those critical of the government are branded anti-national and threatened with defamation charges. The lack of diversity and under-representation of reporters in the newsroom also limits the environment for healthy discussion and viewpoints. Situated within the broader media context, propagandist news content has been circulating since Narendra Modi from Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) became Prime Minister of India in 2014. It was when media reports portrayed India as a modern and progressive nation, far away from the shackles of cultural imperialism, dependency, and resistance. Transforming societies and creating cosmopolitan masses was a significant, bold move. The media landscape also underwent a revolutionary change and engineered its image as individualistic, manipulative, and

aggressive news curators (Imran & Javed, 2023). This led to inculcating hate, fear, and resistance in people towards other communities. Looking at the current political scenario, mainstream media organizations obey the diktats issued by those in power. Echoing the same sentiment, they give limited information and choice to their readers. One understandable reason is that they get advertisements from the government, but what about the ethics and responsibility of a journalist towards their profession? This pliant nature of media is, of course, advantageous to the ruling party. It helps their propaganda to distract the public's attention from any government failures and bring it to the issue they want to highlight.

Events that made India a Hindu dominating Nation

In 2024, these conscious decisions made by the editors take India centuries back to the colonial era, just this time, instead of Britishers, Hindu nationalists are ruling the secular nation. The focus on ethnic cleansing under the Modi government can be seen through speeches and the government officials' association with Hindu ideology. India represents one of the most successful examples of maintaining unity in diversity through power sharing and accommodation. This success is based on three core features of the Constitution: (1) democracy, (2) federalism, and (3) secularism. Since the time Modi was elected as Prime Minister, a series of acts have been passed that make Muslims and other communities feel like a minority in their own homes. Deliberate efforts have been made to establish India with a Hindutva agenda and transform it into a Hindu Rashtra – as far as changing the name of the country to *Bharat*. Lately, it can be seen in banning the documentary produced by BBC, *The Modi Question*. The series of documentaries questions the steps Prime Minister Modi took to enter politics and his response to the riot of 2002 in Gujarat when he was the state's chief minister. Alongside the documentary looks at the relationship between the Modi government and Muslims after the 2019 elections, as his policies reflect prejudice towards Muslims (Sinha, 2017). Amnesty International repeatedly criticized these policies as they violate human rights and fracture the fabric of democracy. Let us look at some prominent cases where the media orchestrated the narrative and supported the right-wing government by being their mouthpiece.

For instance, farmers' agitation in India was spurred by Parliament issuing three farm acts. The protest spanned between August 2020 and December 2021, when thousands of farmers from Punjab and Haryana marched to Delhi and sat on a hunger strike. Farmers were mainly concerned by the passed law, which would lead farmers to sell their produce directly to corporate buyers. In opposition to it, farmers demanded a Minimum Support Price bill, which ensures that corporations cannot control the prices. After meetings and a police force, the protestors were forced to clear the road blockade. However, the government states this to be a foreign conspiracy and a movement infiltrated by Khalistanis. Farmers Union was represented by media as violent, crashing Republic Day celebration at Red Fort but listening to their actual plea. Labeling them as anti-national or supporters of Khalistan. Not showing the ground reality is one of the missions of pliant media. Similarly, during the wrestlers' protest over the sexual conduct of a BJP member of parliament in May 2023, the press supported the political agenda and underplayed the rally. Instead, they played stories that their sports medals were the government's recognition and not their right to come out of poor conditions.

In August 2023, during a Parliament speech by Narendra Modi, people from the opposition party were shouting 'Manipur,' hoping he would address the grave situation there. More than 180 were reported dead, and hundreds were wounded and left homeless as ethnic violence erupted in the state between two tribal communities. The opposition even passed a no-confidence motion against the BJP. Still, Modi, once again, dusted it off by re-quoting progress made in the last nine years under his governance and evoking the feeling of Hindu nationalism. While Manipur still waits for a solution and shelter, the center in Delhi uses the conflict for its political gain. (Based on a report by NBC News, published on August 11, 2023).

Acts passed under the Modi government strengthening Hinduism

More than ever, Muslim men were blamed for trapping young Hindu women in love and getting their religion converted to Islam; this was known as Love Jihad. Mainstream media supported their arguments so much that this issue became a household concern pan-India. At the same time, in 2019, Muslim majority state Jammu & Kashmir was ripped off its unique status and emergency powers and was engineered to make a demographic shift. Resulting in violent attacks and stereotyping of Muslims.

1. National Register of Citizens (NRC): Under this act, all citizens must produce evidence of their Indian citizenship or risk deportation. To send illegal Muslim migrants to Bangladesh, in 2020, it was announced. Protests and collapse began in Assam and UP, and over time, violence grew all over the country, resulting in 23 deaths.
2. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): Under this act, permission to stay in India is given to migrants staying before 2014 from the neighboring countries who are Hindu, Christian, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh but not Muslim to become Indian citizens. When the act was passed in 2019, students, activists, and fundamentalists protested in public places, reminding the ministers that the founding idea of India was based on pluralism, secularism, and an all-inclusive republic. Police detained students, leaders, and scholars who were protesting, including noted historian Ramchandra Guha. (Based on a Reuters report published on December 19, 2019)
3. Uniform Civil Code: Erasing the differences from other religious minorities like Muslims and Christians, the Indian law is talking about implementing a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) before the 2024 elections, under which all people will have to follow similar marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance laws. So far, based on their religious scriptures, the community follows their practices. However, with the passing of UCC, rules central to their identity will be erased, and only one system will be followed. It has happened earlier in countries like France, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Egypt, and Turkey. India's long history of debated laws will further polarize the nation. Former director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and political scientist Rajeev Bhargava believes there is a legitimate case for the state to seek to change personal laws to foster equality, fairness, and freedom for all; however, he believes these changes are justifiable only on the grounds of 'gender justice.' (Based on Aljazeera News, published on November 17, 2023)

By declaring triple talaq unconstitutional, the Modi government made its case positive in showing its concern for Muslim women. Still, Muslims say that even in their own Sharia law, there are ways that protect women and give them inheritance rights, and the Modi government does not need to be their *Messiah*. Many social scientists believe it is not done to protect women's rights but to undermine Muslims in India and establish that they need an external savior. Critics label this as a 'fake concern' since, in 2022, 11 men were released early who were put in jail for gang-raping a Muslim woman during riots of 2002 in Gujarat. This situation is particularly problematic as a disturbing pattern can be made that not only endangers the Muslim community but everyone that the Modi government is trying to target and weaken identities, much like the behavior of a dictator.

Interference by religious extremists

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), established in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar as a volunteer organization, has, over the years, become a right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization. The connection between RSS and the BJP party stands stronger than before, and the mutual 'brotherhood' in its volunteers shares political influence on the media as they mobilize the masses. Researcher (Jha, 2021) studies the growing political involvement of RSS with the BJP to maximize the vote gain and establish its base in other

constituencies of Uttar Pradesh. His research states that Sangh works like a corporation to engage in electoral dominance and has an unprecedented influence on Indians. Social engineering and politicization of diverse identities are the two strategies that led them to establish control in Rampur, which is a Muslim-majority city in Uttar Pradesh. In a survey by Pew Research Centre, researchers found that 64% of Indians say being Hindu is essential to truly being an Indian. Tying close relations between national identity and religious observance, researchers note that about half of Hindus voted for the BJP in 2019. Among the Muslim population, 30% of voters voted for Congress, and 19% voted for BJP, whereas among Hindus, 49% voted for BJP, and 13% stamped their vote for the Congress party. Making a clear case that religion-based politics in democratic India is critically deep-rooted (Evans & Sahgal, 2021).

Using the internet and social media as a political tool for control

Other than mainstream media, social media platforms have become a breeding ground to manipulate narratives and build public opinions (Govil & Baishya, 2018). Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are the key platforms that nationalists are using to influence the youth and capture their attention. 65 percent of Indians are under the age of 35 years, and this set of population actively uses social media. The current government tapped this resource efficiently and engaged youth in making political decisions, giving them the feel of making decisions yet telling them what to think. This mental capture is even dangerous as it directly attacks their cognitive ability. In the above-stated study, researchers argue about the powerful link between digital social media and right-wing populism. This impact is not only contextual but also constitutive. In changing the ideologies of youth, the government hires a third party that, on their behalf, comments, posts, or starts the discussion on a given topic. Furthermore, when people dissent from their views in digital space, accounts are blocked, comments are deleted, and access is banned. Shockingly, India has become the world leader in internet blackouts, but sadly, this is the reality.

Jammu Kashmir, Rajasthan, and West Bengal faced the highest internet blackouts. Leaving no voice for the alternative opinion, 84 times in 2022, the internet was shut down, affecting 120 million people, and numbers are rising every day. In 2023, ethnic violence broke out between two tribal groups, Meiteis and Kukis, 175 people were reported dead, and with no sign of abating, the government chose to shut down the internet. In the troubled region of Kashmir, the government imposed 18 months of shutdown from August 2019 until February 2021 after stripping the independent rights and special status from the state. Before that, in June 2018, residents of Darjeeling experienced an internet blackout for over a hundred days. In February 2024, the Haldwani district of Uttarakhand experienced an internet blackout for three days over religious riots. Hindu officials demolished the education center for Muslims, *Madrassa*, by justifying it as a place for illegal activities. The statewide shutdown was imposed in Punjab in 2023 when a separatist leader ran away from police custody, in Haryana when riots broke out during the rally by Hindu nationalists, and during exam time to prevent cheating. It seems more like the country is at the mercy of the government only. Russia, Sudan, Myanmar, Iran, and Ethiopia are a few other countries using the same tactic to suppress the voices of the opposition. Internet Freedom Foundation clearly states that with each internet shutdown, accountability and transparency in the government are becoming dubious and critical (Karppinen, 2013). Media channels mostly portray this as an inconvenience, ignoring the fact that it is an abuse of human rights.

It is ironic how India depicts itself as a budding, tech-friendly country and home for entrepreneurs. With its growing e-commerce market, digital payment gateways, and streaming platforms, internet blackouts are frequently observed. It is high time to re-think whether people have any power or space to express their views or whether Indian media is just another tool for pressuring people and making them like robots. The online ecosystem is failing, making censorship a norm of society, and the online concentration of narrative moves from ideological control to cultural chaos.

Media freedom in China

China's authoritarian influence on free expression around the globe is disturbing. The socio-cultural contemporary media has limited the marketplace for the exchange of ideas. Mainly censoring the content for political dominance, China is near to North Korea in granting selective press freedom. All these years, they have successfully kept foreign multinationals out of the country and made people see them as the enemy of the state. Journalism in China does not exist in its true nature. Incidents of intimidation and jailing have been getting more frequent. The risk landscape is changing unfamiliarly and exposing small independent media outlets to civil lawsuits and national security investigations. Earlier, Hong Kong used to be a bastion of media freedom; however, after the national security law was passed in 2020, journalists have been pressured to avoid analyzing political movements. The law can be used to shut down or prosecute any staff. An article published by Aljazeera on Jan 31, 2022, indicates that local media professionals have left the country after being threatened and followed by security personnel. Foreign journalists have been detained from the country after imposing residential surveillance at their homes. The Chinese regime uses surveillance, coercion, intimidation, and harassment to keep independent journalists from reporting on issues it deems "sensitive." China is the world's largest jailer of journalists, with more than 100 currently detained. Freedom of the press has been central to Hong Kong's success for many years. Curtailing the space for free expression of alternative views weakens vital checks and balances on executive power. The free flow and exchange of opinions and information is vital to Hong Kong's people, businesses, and international reputation. The media environment is mainly market-oriented, unlike Chinese media, which the state controls. Besides, there is no Press Law in China so far, and the media finds it difficult to get protection from the state; from a legal perspective, the most challenging point is to determine the border between privacy, libels, and press freedom.

Here, we will be looking at censorship as a state apparatus tool. The exceptional nature of this propaganda machinery lies in its capacity to shift the focus from local to national issues seamlessly. Right-wing propaganda machinery employs various methods to disseminate content, targeting local groups to shape narratives from the grassroots level. This strategic dissemination of narratives aims to influence public opinion.

Conclusion

The media plays symbolic role in promoting human rights, diversity, and pluralism. With the current trend and shift in media channels, gender discrimination, racism, ethnic exclusion, minority stereotyping, discrimination against marginalized groups, prejudices, and hate speech have become more prevalent. For issues like these, historic leaders fought, and thousands of people lost their lives, but now they are being accepted. This is the darkest era we are living in. Free and independent media is the need of the hour; having trustworthy sources and unbiased opinions can save the political situation in India. Listening to alternative media instead of silencing them can present a strong case for including all voices. To maintain legitimacy and revive public trust in media, it should work as an instrument of democracy, not the government's mouthpiece. Media proprietors, editors, and journalists should promulgate and implement codes of conduct and enforce professional and ethical regulatory mechanisms. Independent ownership of media organizations will minimize disinformation, discrimination, hate speech, and propaganda. Additionally, data protection laws should be designed and applied in ways that do not limit media freedom and comply with international human rights law.

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