

Abstract

Media has been at the vanguard of augmenting public opinions around democracies. In contrast, it has induced well in hobbling the fundamentals of the existing democracies. It has immortalised the long-term goals of dictatorships *cherished* today. The media has instigated violence, wars and farther genocides in different parts of the world. Media, principally, owns how the countries would run at the hands of those who rule it. It becomes rather critical to examine how the failure of media and public opinions would shape the future of freedom and liberty in our world.

I wish to present this paper from a journalistic standpoint, as the acute description of media broadly covers so much as to write in one go. It will be an effort to subtly bring forward social media and the other sectors such as theatre and art. For the sake of facility, I am taking the deprivations of social media for-granted, meaning they require unquestionable monitoring.

In this paper, I will refer to the historical context of the media owned by the state danced to the tune of rulers. Whereas how media denounced the most powerful and has emerged as an essential pillar of democracies. The focus will remain on the ethical justifiability of media taking a stand. This paper would also incorporate how legacy media is subjugated by an uprising of digital, independent media - operating on its consumer base. Along that, it will also brief comparative statistics between Press Freedom and the pertaining level of democratic rights of the masses.

This paper will conclude with how the author takes a stand on an optimistic view if the media fails in playing its fundamental duties of making the governments accountable.

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Media and Democracy: A Romance Unraveled

The 21st century has seen tremendous expansion in how the news and information are transpiring and communicated through various mediums. As paradoxical as it may seem, with the rise in the sources of information about the government policy failures, we have seen falling levels of democracy around the world. The media bears an incredible moral responsibility during democratic elections, but we have seen the incidents of an explicit bias towards how the Left is denigrated and conferred irrelevant.

What is media exactly expected to do? Where does the media stand on morality? As First Amendment scholars and other prominent Americans see it, the press should do four things:

- (a) Provide a forum for discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas;
- (b) Give voice to public opinion;
- (c) Serve as citizens' eyes and ears to survey the political scene and the performance of politicians; and
- (d) Act as a public watchdog that loudly barks when it encounters misbehaviour, corruption, and abuses of power in the halls of government. A wide array of other requirements have also been mentioned occasionally but are subsumed in the four basic categories. (Gurevitch and Blumler)

In the capitalistic world we live in, the morals of how media should perform are deeply compromised. With the sole aim of the pursuit of power, governments have often tried to suppress the autonomy of independent media in exchange for government *affiliation and*

fame (to the media houses themselves). An appropriation of what should the voters see has evermore been what suits government agendas. Whether it is the United States of America or India, both have borne a rise in extreme hatred towards minorities with the help of *disinformation*.

Governments and media run hand-in-hand

“The general population doesn't know what's happening and it doesn't even know that it doesn't know.”

Noam Chomsky

Across the Asia-Pacific, we are seeing in real time the tactics being adopted by populist authoritarian governments to control a news media that they can no longer command. The new strategy: a bullying domination through heavy-handed harassment, raids on pretexts of financial irregularity, attacks on news media credibility, culture war outrage and disinformation to distract and discredit. (Park)

Before the advent of the Internet, the media might be restricted by striking production and distribution costs. It is relatively easy to shut down printing presses, stop delivery trucks, or stop ground transmissions. The border may be closed. The size of the media means that it is feasible to censor or arrest journalists before publishing. The government's toolbox retains the old tactics (as we see in Myanmar now, especially in the case of journalists being arrested), but the globalization of human rights means that the government that resorts to these tools pays in international condemnation.

Mastering digital news requires new methods is a long-term pioneer of the Modi government here in India. Under the political pressure from the farmers' protests, it is stepping up its efforts to control local digital media and restrict India's global media

coverage. The Indian government's new "[Code of Ethics Guide for Intermediaries and Digital Media](#)" requires a three-step control structure to replace traditional industry internal review and self-regulation steps (e.g. through press committees) with more dangerous intergovernmental committees. These regulations also gave the government greater power that forced social media platforms to remove the information after Twitter (after initial mistakes) refused to block journalists and activists.

The rich (corporations) power the colossal media houses; they are fed millions to divert the masses from the real issues. These corporations are in charge of controlling media in the best manner they see fit - the way that will result in the ranking in the enormous sums of money. How that information is obtained by us and how we perceive it - is influenced by their abundance. These corporations need to lobby with the governments to have a more secure business environment. *Au contraire*, Governments need these business houses to fund the election campaigns. To achieve this win-win situation, both of these parties serve each other's interests.

Historical and modern contexts of the role of the media

We as a human civilization have hardly learnt anything from our past. The second genocide did unbridle, resorting to the fact that we acquired nothing from the first. Unfortunately, things did not stop there either.

I want to bring two compelling historical episodes out of many, where the media's role did a lot in interpreting the violence and the *ipso facto*, the genocides. One of the incidents is based on a history, as we know it, while the other is as latest as the beginning of this year (2021). How democracies are imperilled and endangered through media; why the media need to take a moral stand. It carries no capacity to either halt or stop indefinitely the incidents that governments want to or have unleashed on their populations. But media, rightly dubbed as

the fourth estate of any democracy absolutely has an inevitable responsibility to speak for the masses and not governments.

Through those historical settings – the use of media by Hitler for propaganda and Capitol Hill insurrection media coverage, I want to bring up the differences in the application of media - in the concurrent past and the modern era of information. I want to shed light on how media has had and will react whenever democracies are compromised.

While Hitler used media to propagate his genocidal agenda, media radically facilitated his plan. However, in the US's Capitol Hill riots, the social media that ignited hatred in the first place, the media responded and hence understood how its freedom is chained, they understood the threshold of shouldering the demagogues; they understood what is crucial for democracy to stay alive.

Media in Hitler's Germany

“Newspapers which oppose public welfare are to be forbidden. We demand a legislative fight against such trends in art and literature that have a corrosive effect on our national life and the closing down of institutions that run counter to the above-mentioned demands.”

Adolph Hitler, Munich Germany, February 24, 1920

The mild, fatherly talk, came against the backdrop of press gag laws with edges the Nazi's felt were too rough for national and global public opinion. However, these laws, like the enactment for the "Protection of the People and the State," following the arson caused fire that destroyed the Reichstag building on February 5, 1933, had already secured gains for the Nazi party during the March 5 general election. With the help of Nationalist party allies, Hitler had a majority coalition. As a result, of those victories and with some cajolement, Reich Chancellor Adolph Hitler was able to get the German parliamentary body to pass the

so-called Enabling Law (Law for Removing Distress of People and Reich) on March 23, 1933. With this, he was able to rule by decree, having freed himself from the constraints of the Weimar Constitution. Thus, the Nazi party could use the legitimacy of the state for any whim. (Bruhn)

Hitler understood the power of the media very well and used new technologies considerably. Special attention was paid to the fact that only the Nazi ideology was reflected in the newspapers and radios. The raw wisdom of Hitler, the tales of his bravery, the only thing highlighted in the media was how Hitler was working day and night to take Germany forward. However, before the defeat of Hitler, an entire generation was wiped out. The books with only the Nazi ideology were taught in schools. All books with anti-Nazi ideas were burned. That is, history was changed in the schoolbooks. All the schoolbooks taught that the Aryan race is the supreme race.

Did media morally stand against the thriving Nazism?

The media centrally failed in speaking against the power of the Nazi Government. It is indisputable that people took to the streets to protest against what was going on. Nevertheless, the essential context is how the media was controlled without any innate objection, to propagate the agenda of Hitler. Much to our understanding, with sheer tyranny, people read and heard what was essentially controlled by the Nazis. How should the media have responded to this crisis? More so, the media did not stand its moral ground and continuously propagated the agenda of Hitler. As a consequence, Nazis were able to wipe out most of the Jewish population.

It cannot be determined that had Media performed its fundamental duties, it could have been able to eschew the Holocaust. However, the point is that media played a primary role in facilitating, if not arresting. Both of them are equally worse.

Governments around the world have been able to seize the rights of their people despite media performing its foundational duties. However, media has successfully been able to aggravate the consequences as and when it has facilitated the governments.

Media and the Capitol Hill insurrection of 2021

Former US President Donald Trump's relentless efforts to reverse the results of the 2020 election took a dangerous turn Wednesday when an armed and angry mob of his supporters stormed Capitol Hill and clashed with police just as Congress convened to validate Joe Biden's presidential win.

A woman was fatally shot in the violence that ensued as pro-Trump protestors breached barricades and advanced into the halls of the Capitol building, smashing windows and brawled with police officers in what is widely being considered one of the worst security breaches in US history.

The pandemonium appears to have deepened the divide within the Republican Party, with several leaders pointing a finger at Trump for inciting violence by urging his supporters to reject the results of the presidential election.

The chaos at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday was not typical. Nor was the coverage. Footage carried live by cable news and clips and photos shared across social media were jolting.

“As a researcher of media and social movements, I was absorbed by the violent events that unfolded. My research on protests shows that how the media portrays unrest – as riot or resistance, for example – helps shape the public's view of the protest's aims. Typically news coverage pays more attention to disruptive tactics than to the aims of protesters, especially when it comes to anti-Black racism protests or action that radically challenges the status quo.” (Brown)

However, this was different. News audiences are not necessarily used to seeing violence and disruption at citizen demonstrations in support of a president – and certainly not on the scale we witnessed on Wednesday at the Capitol. It proved a novel test of how the news media would frame the unrest and the aims of those involved.

A study of demonstrations between 1967 and 2007 concluded that protests were often framed as public nuisances, especially when those doing the protesting were ideologically liberal. Conservative protests were less likely to be seen as nuisances.

Despite the escalation of events from protest to insurrection, the initial coverage Wednesday seemed to include the grievances of those taking part. Some news media outlets, such as USA Today, made this comparative difference clear in their reporting. This is not a typical narrative in mainstream protest news coverage.

Republican Party's so-called 'unofficial spokesperson' Fox News who has been able to perpetuate the propaganda of the Republican Party seemed largely in line with the framing of other news channels, until the evening when commentary from the "Tucker Carlson Tonight" show shifted the network's narrative.

Some may dismiss Carlson's comments as irrelevant and radical. However, his framing provides insight into how the right-wing media has sought to portray certain protests in recent years, and the consequences of that action. More evidence lies in other popular right-wing media. Their framing doesn't accentuate the unrest's violent actions carried out by an angry mob at all. Meanwhile, Breitbart had a Mark Zuckerberg image front and center. That article described how Facebook had "blacklisted" Trump after the "events" on Capitol Hill.

Right-wing media not only distort the realities of the insurrection, they undermine and erase the impact of such undemocratic actions. Out of sight, out of mind. Most importantly, these are starkly different realities from the websites of news outlets such as ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN, as well as newspaper front pages – both online and in print – from around the country.

In recent months, some news organizations have vowed to address shortcomings in their coverage, including how reporters cover protests. If the unrest that followed the police killing of George Floyd was the event that triggered a welcomed media reckoning, then the insurrection at the Capitol could be the event that helps outlets better understand why framing is important.

[Did media morally stand against the Capitol insurrection?](#)

The USA, the world's oldest democracy, faced denigration of its 'dream'. How the media reacted to the Capitol insurrection is quintessential to analyze because anything that happens in the US sets an example for other functioning democracies globally. The moral responsibility of media in the US should have meant an investigation into the matter and not justifying the right-wing jingoism. Is it right to conclude that American media, in the 21st century, was able to bring this matter up in the way it should have? In any case, underreporting by the legacy media in the US clearly depicts their priorities. However, rather *non-defensive* press in the US vividly and subtly reported about what went wrong in the Capitol. The problem essentially lies with propagating the agendas set by extreme right-wing parties whose consequences are then borne by civilians.

Reporting on Capitol Hill (the one done by the independent media) sets another example of how responsible media goes on with reporting the intricacies of the country.

Point of reference: The media in any case could not halt the riots, but it inevitably changed the perspective of Donald Trump as a 'beloved' leader. Right reporting led to the impeachment of the former US President. However, it is also undeniable that the impact of Trump's admiration in forever Republicans has not fallen substantively (a report by Pew Research), all thanks to the years of media plaudits.

How is independent media in India transforming the news?

“It is not that good journalism is dying, not at all, it is getting better and it is getting bigger. It is that bad journalism makes a lot more noise than it used to do five years [2014] ago.”

RajKamal Jha, Editor – The Indian Express at Ramnath Goenka Awards, 2019

Media in India has seen plummeting form of independence in what it shows. Independent journalists are being sacked by the government of the day. Many journalists are facing criminal charges against them for voicing against the governments. Legacy media, as said before, is being funded by those very close and dear to the governments. It is rather conspicuous that the legacy media or otherwise known as *lapdog media*, has stooped to a level where there is no news on the TV screens anymore.

However, on an optimistic note, the youth has grown and spoke truth to power. India has seen a dramatic rise in the number of Independent News Channels that are utterly detached from government sponsorships and run on the finances raised by the readers' subscriptions directly. It has come as an alternative source to 'actual' news.

Historically, legacy media has been rolling for many years now to defend those in power. There is only so much that can be seen on policy failures of the government, which actually, are true.

Independent news channels on the internet have come together to create an alternative space that is safer and bears an acute moral responsibility of what journalism is. Nevertheless, the government is constantly trying to restrain those speaking against it through various legislations that are relinquished in a haste in the Parliament of India.

That requirement of making an alternative space for news that speaks against oppressions, that speaks truth to power and speaks for the people instead of governments, reflects what morality needs to be in the times we live in. Interestingly, Over the Top (OTTs) in India have seen incredible resistance from extreme right-wingers for showing anything that deems culturally and politically controversial. Nevertheless, OTT in India has flourished in the powering of content that is uncensored, unharmed by the government. However, India's new IT rules are an effort to curtail that freedom. *Anything that shall cometh in the way of rulers shall be deterred.*

Direct proportionality between press freedom and democracy

It can be classified that media flourishes in absolute democracy. However, how struggling press and media indicates a shift from democracy to authoritarianism. A research by The Economist suggests the world's oldest and the world's largest democracy have now become 'flawed'. That does not necessarily imply, these countries will never be able to retain their freedom back but it suggests that a rise of authoritarianism starts with a declining press freedom.

Here is a comparative note to the statistics from the study. However, here is a comparative table for the Global Democracy Index and the Press Freedom Index. Any country performing poor on either indexes will perform poor on the other one as well.

(The Economist)

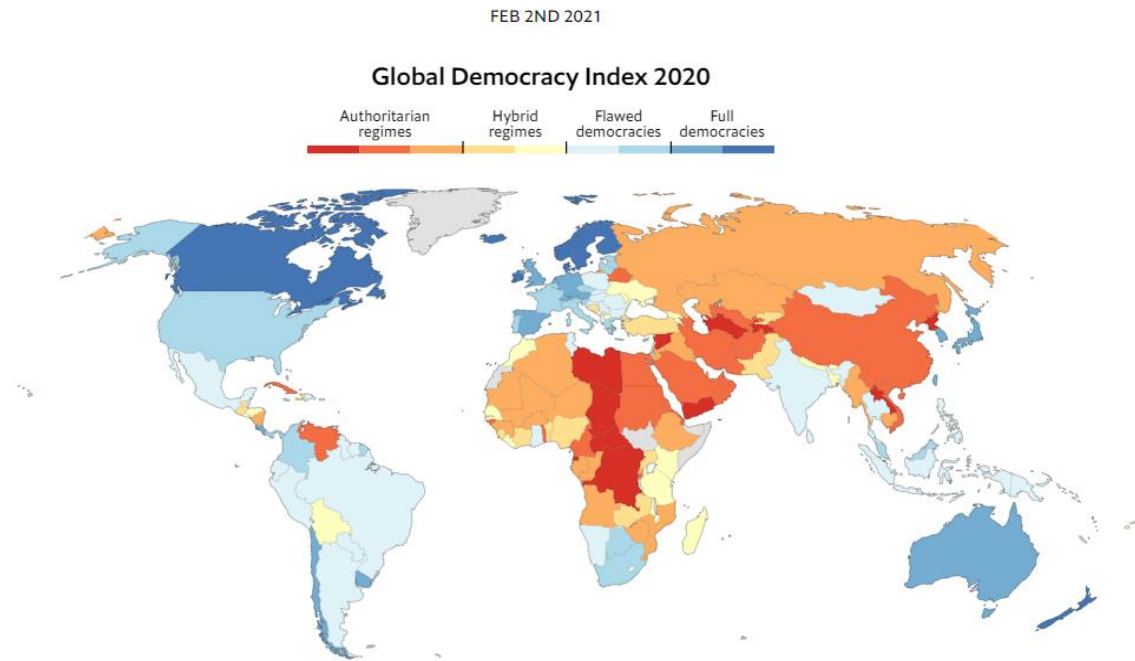


Figure 1 Global Democracy Index 2020

(Reporters Without Borders)

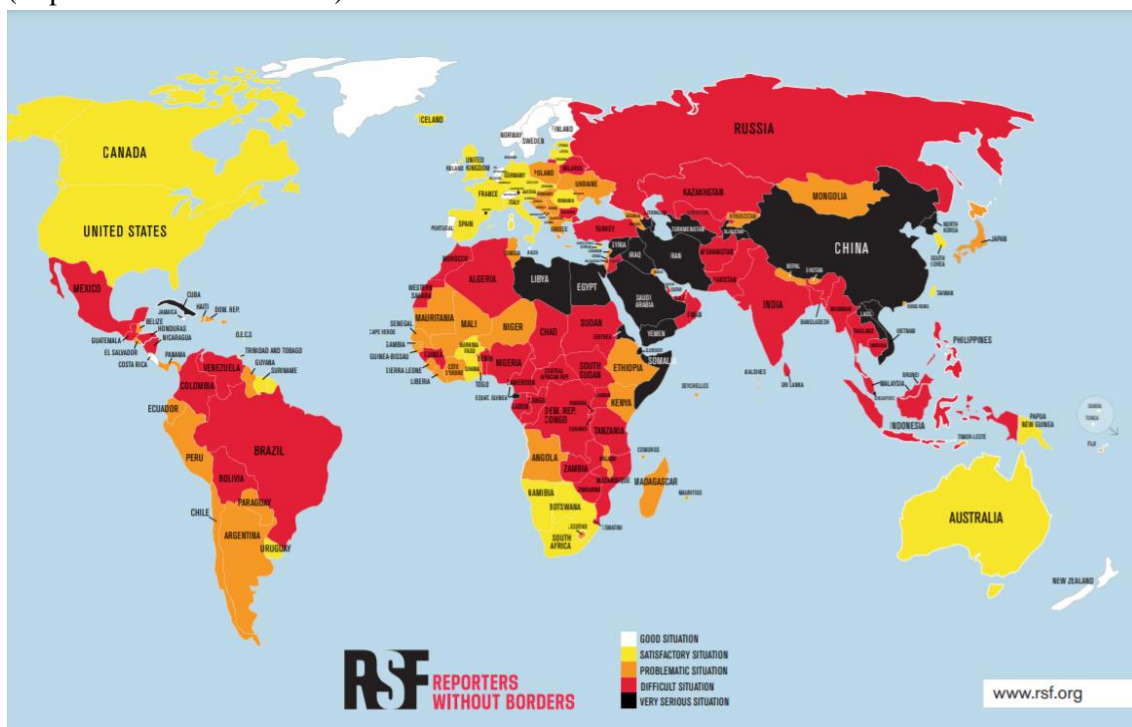


Figure 2 Press Freedom Index 2021

Why Media not taking a stand is immoral and unjustified? – The author's take

Many references throughout the paper suggest that the role of media is similar to that of a magician. Media has the power to keep its audience in an illusion – good or bad. However, it inevitably bears the responsibility of holding democracies alive. The inspiration for this paper comes from the poor state of affairs of the TV News industry in India.

Ever since the inception of media, it has essentially recorded our history. Therefore, it is essential to learn that our history shall be accurate. It is essential to learn that our future generations must understand and contextualize our past exactly. We do not expect a media which shapes it, sharpens, sensationalize the history that leads to genocides. Socrates never liked the centric idea of democracy. He believed that we should not let anyone out anywhere to cast their vote and select who will represent us, just like we cannot let a voyage happen with those who know nothing about handling a ship. Nevertheless, I as a youth completely believe that democracy is vital and media is supposed to safeguard it. I consider that at any cost, we shall protect democracy.

In the age of information, where we expected a correct band of information for anything and everything, we are actually facing a stout fall in the levels of democracy and liberty. To agree to some extent with the idea of Socrates, I think we need a fundamental transformation in controlling those in power. And again, media comes to mind.

Conclusively, history has not been any kinder to us. The way we are moving forward, it hardly looks that our future will be any better. Governments will do their best to retain power. The media has to come forward in protecting ordinary civilians and talk about what's of their interest. Media has to raise the flame until we can challenge the fundamentals of the systems that govern us.

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