



# ARTIFICIAL INDEPENDENCE

THE FIGHT TO SAVE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY





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The full IFJ South Asia Press Freedom Report 2023-24 is available at:  
<https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR23-24>

PDFs of country chapters are also available from each country page.

The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2023 to April 2024.

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**Editor:** Laxmi Murthy

**Executive Editor:** Jane Worthington

**Special thanks to:**

Rajneesh Bhandari  
 Shakila Esaqzai  
 Pulack Ghatak  
 Dilrukshi Handunnetti  
 Sabina Inderjit  
 Khairuzzaman Kamal  
 Raksha Kumar  
 Hujatullah Mujadidi  
 Ghulam Mustafa  
 Ahmed Naish  
 Lubna Naqvi  
 Indira Nawagamuwa  
 Hana Ibrahim  
 Alexander Oluk  
 Geetarth Pathak

Khagendra Phuyal  
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 Shreya Raman  
 Adnan Rehmat  
 Indrani Sarkar  
 Duminda Sampath  
 Beena Sarwar  
 John Troughton  
 Ihtsham-ul-Haq  
 Rinzin Wangchuk

**SAPFR Editorial Review Panel 2024:**

Guna Raj Luitel  
 Anuhita Mojumdar  
 Kamal Siddiqi

**Designed by:** LX9 Design

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Cover Photo: Members of the Maldives Journalists' Association (MJA) demonstrate on Malé's Artificial Beach on World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2023, raising concerns over amendments to the country's new evidence act and the ongoing obstruction of journalists. The MJA has been a critical voice in the fight for press freedom across the archipelago. Credit: MJA

Contents Photo: An Afghan man feeds pigeons near Kandahar on March 4, 2024. Since the Taliban's ascension to power in August 2021, press freedom, gender equality, and human rights have been systematically dismantled, with many struggling to afford basic necessities. CREDIT: SANAULLAH SEIAM / AFP

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# FOREWORD

Democracy may have been the most successful political idea of the 20th century, but across South Asia as multiple countries headed to the polls, it became increasingly apparent that its progress in this part of the world has at the very least, stalled.

The region's outward appearance of democracy faded under autocratic regimes and political polarisation, that pushed power and corruption ahead of civil liberties and fundamental freedoms again and again. Widespread economic crises deepened the fallout and the fissures.

Heaving under the weight of digital disruption in recent years and the vast erosion of stable financial revenue streams, South Asia's media is still struggling to evolve and shore up its future footing. Combined with shrinking wages and industry rationalisation, scores more journalists left the industry for good, opting for safer work and better livelihoods.

The cracks in the democratic house are clear in almost every space – and perhaps more so in the fourth pillar of the free press. But never has the case for truth been more necessary. Never has it been more important for collective solutions at all levels of society to create safeguards for media.

For democracies to fulfil their promise, they must be nourished with solid, fact-based, independent journalism at a broad scale. In this, professional journalists have a clear duty to inform a diverse range of people, to hold the powerful to account, and to provide comprehensive coverage to empower people with the knowledge they need at critical junctures such as elections.

But this can't be done by partisan media and political interference. It can't be achieved by wage starved journalists, 'clickbait' journalism and aggressive overregulation. It can't be delivered without real investment.

After years of misinformation, disinformation and social media manipulation and controls, it is clear that trust in media has been critically weakened – and with it, democracy itself.

Now, as the era of artificial intelligence sets forth a new wave of potential and uncertainty not only in the media but across all facets of life, there is a growing fear that it might also automate democracy and further sideline society.

In this report, *Artificial Independence: The Fight To Save Media And Democracy*, we explore the complex democratic challenges confronting South Asia. While decolonisation in the last century

opened up the possibility of democracy and growth of media, the reality on the ground is still far from achieved in the 21st century. We document the challenges for media and attacks on journalists in this time, including at least 232 violations, including killings, jailings, legal harassment and assaults. In the period, the IFJ and its affiliates recorded eight targeted killings of media workers and 87 cases of jailing, detention or torture. At the time of publication, at least 15 journalists, remain behind bars.

While the picture is bleak in many quarters, innovation and pushback is happening in each country of the region in different ways. Some countries are faring better than others. Importantly, in pockets, thankfully, change is happening. And there is hope – as this year's report shows.

The overall picture of health remains worrying in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, while Maldives and Bhutan had some measures of democratic progress, yet access to information remained embedded only in law rather than in action. In Nepal, a united front of media workers continued to fight the endemic industry challenge of irresponsible media enterprises emerging and collapsing. But in every country, a determined network of media workers continues to push back. The will is strong.

Across the region, digital media is also growing stronger and is finding critical influence in new arenas like TikTok and YouTube. Unions and civil society are working together and using technology and other means of collectively reinforcing the key tenets of a healthy democracy.

Thankfully media viability as a critical priority is now being more widely discussed. And as journalists are taking seats at the table with governments and global bodies to find solutions and drive agendas, there is an increased acceptance that media as crucial democratic infrastructure must be a priority in future strategies.

In the stories of challenge, defiance and triumph, we document the path of South Asia's determined media as they work to find ways to power professional journalism. Because without them, there is no story and there certainly is no democracy. This is their journey.

**Jane Worthington**

Director

IFJ Asia-Pacific



**Read the full report *Artificial Independence: The Fight To Save Media and Democracy* including country chapters and interactive violation listings online**  
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Hujatullah Mujadidi, the President of the Afghanistan Independent Journalists' Union (AIJU) speaks to the media at the union's offices, at a press conference marking World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2023. Since the Taliban's ascension to power, a collapse in the media sector has severely impacted journalists' wages and conditions, with over 60 per cent of media workers forced out of the profession. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP



## OVERVIEW

# IMPERILLED DEMOCRACY

A voter shows an ink mark on their finger after casting a ballot during general elections in Thimphu on January 9, 2024. Despite only adopting a democratic constitution in 2008, Bhutan's National Assembly elections saw a peaceful transfer of power, with the media serving as an important watchdog through the process. CREDIT: MONEY SHARMA / AFP

**T**he world over, the year 2023-2024 witnessed democracy in action, with the ballot of more than two billion people in about 50 countries making momentous choices. The world's most populous region – South Asia – saw citizens in Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka either vote, or gear up to elect governments.

Bhutan, though a newcomer to democracy, nevertheless had a peaceful transfer of power, with Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay highlighting the watchdog role of the media in pressing for accountability and adherence to democratic principles.

In the rest of the South Asian neighbourhood, however, democracy seemed precarious, with physical violence and bomb blasts marking polling in both Bangladesh and Pakistan and misinformation, deep political, religious and ethnic divides accompanied by sharply polarised media coverage of the election campaigns in India and Sri Lanka. In the Maldives, though the closely contested presidential elections in 2023 saw both the government-owned and private media being partisan and favouring the government, the defeat of the incumbent President Solih showed that the polling process was relatively fair.

With elected autocracies gaining ground globally, the synergy between freedom of expression and robust democracy was never more apparent in the year in review. Controlling the airwaves, curbing access to information, taming and pressurising the media

and crushing dissent was the modus operandi of the autocrats and their corporate cronies.

In South Asia, home to one in five of the world's people and with common histories of colonialism, heterogeneous communities and deep inequalities, the media endeavoured to speak truth to power, particularly at critical election junctures. Yet, the year under review saw the erosion of the expected institutional safeguards for an independent media, due to which the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms remained disappointingly unfulfilled in the region.

The future of media in this context remains more critical than ever. With legacy media across the region still alarmingly over-dependent on government or corporate revenue, independent voices continue to move over to digital platforms to challenge the establishment through professional journalism. In a digital ecosystem bursting with YouTubers and content producers on Tik Tok, carving out a space amidst paid influencers and channels that fall as rapidly as they rise, has not been easy. Despite financial difficulties, stringent government surveillance and harassment, some tenacious journalists strive to keep professionalism alive, either solo or in small media ventures. The courage of these small organisations has attracted the wrath of the government, leading to renewed attempts to strengthen regulation and control over the media.



## Inexorable slide

Ongoing crises in the region – both economic and political – continued to have a devastating impact on the media's influence and sustainability in the past year.

In **Sri Lanka**, the impact of the 'Aragalaya' or grassroots movement was still causing waves. The ongoing financial crisis continued and inflation was at an all-time high, forefronting the nation's struggle to survive. This pressure vacuum pushed concerns of civil liberties and press freedom off the radar even as journalists and activists associated with the Aragalaya continued to be harassed.

The backslide that began in **Afghanistan** after the Taliban's takeover in 2021 continued to drive the country's stability downward. Most of the hard-won freedoms for the media, for women, and human rights have been relegated to history, stalled or slid perilously behind amid a crisis of survival for what remains of the country's media following a mass exodus of media workers from the country in recent years.

When the first elected government in **Bhutan** came to power in 2008, it inherited a severe economic crisis which was reflected in the state of the media, with newspapers closing and journalists quitting the profession in droves. The latest data from the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) in 2023 showed continuing falling newspaper circulation over the decade, even though newspapers continue to employ the highest number of journalists (41 per cent). Meanwhile, hundreds of journalists left the profession and the country out of frustration at low wages and poor working conditions.

**This pressure vacuum pushed concerns of civil liberties and press freedom off the radar even as journalists and activists associated with the Aragalaya continued to be harassed.**

In **Nepal**, the country's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal formed his third coalition government in a year in March 2024, after months of confabulations. Media workers already reeling under a spate of dismissals and wage struggles, were also subjected to attacks, both on and offline. Press freedom remains severely challenged.

The fourth presidential multi-party election in **Maldives** in 2023, witnessed a peaceful handover of power, after a hotly-contested run-off that was viewed as a test of the Indian Ocean archipelago's nascent democracy, as well as its ties with China and traditional benefactor India. The country's young media industry continued to evolve and push back on key industry counterpoints, giving testament to the right to freedom of expression enshrined in the constitution just a decade and a half ago. However, trust in the media was low, with the public holding the media responsible for fuelling political divides and dissensions.

**Pakistan** went through a chaotic year. The period saw a turnstile of three governments, including a six-month long constitutional limbo between an outgoing parliament and an incoming one, and an election marred by violence. Amid the volatility of the political mire, media freedoms continued to be tested on numerous fronts. Unrest continued to simmer in the tribal districts which remained marginalised and under the influence of tribal jirgas, or traditional 'courts'. Likewise, civil unrest in Southern Balochistan amidst precarious digital connectivity added to the feeling of alienation from the country's mainstream.

In **India**, a deeply polarised legacy media pushed the discourse onto digital media and social media, with YouTube becoming a major source of news. Independent journalism suffered in the mix of the online mire. Unfiltered, with no editorial oversight, social media has emerged as a contentious, often toxic space that mirrors and exacerbates

existing social cleavages of gender, religion, caste and ethnicity. The government of Narendra Modi continued to issue thinly veiled threats, in the guise of "advisories" warning the media from publishing or telecasting false content that could potentially disturb communal harmony or public order.

In **Bangladesh**, Sheikh Hasina tightened her grip on the reins of power for a fifth term, in a sham election boycotted by the opposition. She seems comfortably positioned to consolidate her power unchallenged, without any checks and balances. Democratic rights, civil liberties and press freedom now look poised to slide further down the scale.

## Curbing dissent, through law

The government in India, in its attempts to control the rambunctious digital media space, drafted the Broadcasting (Services) Regulation Bill, 2023 that is seeking to replace the 30-year-old Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, to regulate all broadcasting content, from television to streaming platforms. The vaguely worded draft with overbroad definitions came under sharp criticism from journalists and media rights bodies. The power to deem content as "objectionable" or inflammatory when arrogated to the state has been clearly documented to effectively criminalise unbiased reporting.

The attempt to set up a government Fact Checking Unit (FCU) to monitor online content and recommend taking down content deemed problematic was thwarted by the highest court in India, which stayed the setting up of the FCU in a significant judgement on March 21, 2024, calling it "undue" control of the internet by the executive arm of the government.

In Sri Lanka, the Online Safety Law which criminalises freedom of expression online, was enacted in February 2024, despite vigorous opposition from local journalists as well as international human rights organisations and several petitions challenging its validity. A new commission with powers to define, regulate and prosecute the production of 'fake statements' is now written into the law.

Faith leaders, artists, protestors and even writers were penalised for allegedly injuring religious sentiments of the majority Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. While there are no specific blasphemy laws, penal sanctions and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act have been used to detain persons for insulting religion, together with the liberal use of the archaic prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) which was often abusively used during the violent ethnic conflict.

In Pakistan, in July 2023, the Federal Investigation Agency admitted to surveillance of as many as 400,000 social media accounts accused of allegedly uploading blasphemous content. Blasphemy, which carries the death penalty, continues to be on the statute books and was used as recently as March 2024, when a student was sentenced to death for allegedly sending blasphemous pictures and videos through WhatsApp.

## Attacking the messenger

Journalists across the region were subjected to physical assaults, abduction, arbitrary detentions, and some even paid the ultimate price for their work with eight journalists killed.

In Bangladesh, ten journalists died an "unnatural death", with two being registered as murders, with three suspected murders being listed as road accidents.

Pakistan witnessed the killing of four journalists – two in Punjab and two in Sindh, which was dubbed one of the most dangerous places to practice journalism in the country.

In India, journalists came under attack from police, vigilantes and armed gangs who objected to their stories. One journalist was killed while on duty. Journalists attempting to report on the violent ethnic



**The fourth presidential multi-party election in the Maldives in 2023, witnessed a peaceful hand over of power, after a hotly-contested run-off that was viewed as a test of the Indian Ocean archipelago's nascent democracy**

A blindfolded activist with rope around his wrists and covered with the logos of different social media platforms is dragged by a separate activist wearing a mask of President Ranil Wickremesinghe while protesting the Online Safety Act in Colombo on January 24, 2024. The law has been criticised for its potential to restrict expression online, with some identifying its targeting of protests in the vein of the 2022 Aragalaya. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

conflict that broke out in May 2023 in the northeastern state of Manipur found themselves under attack – from security forces as well as armed groups from both sides.

In Nepal, the Federation of Nepali Journalists and Nepal Press Union recorded 45 violations of press freedom from May 1, 2023 to April 30, 2024. Besides physical attacks, discrediting the media and journalists critical of politicians was also rife. Journalists investigating corruption, financial irregularities and administrative malfeasance were targeted, as in the past.

In the Maldives, the trend of impunity continued, with justice not being served for crimes against journalists. On November 22, 2023, the criminal court dropped terrorism charges against three suspects accused of plotting the murders of journalist Ahmed Rilwan and blogger Yameen Rasheed. The three men had been arrested in June 2022 after a breakthrough by the presidential commission on deaths and disappearances. The abrupt dismissal of charges over an alleged lack of evidence raised serious questions about the work of investigating authorities over the preceding years.

Slandorous attacks on journalists, which often lends impunity to physical attacks, were a feature in press conferences in the Maldives. The Maldives Journalists' Association condemned "attempts to discredit journalists with unfounded and false allegations."

## Information blockade

Following the backslide in hard won rights in Afghanistan, the country's Access to Information Law in 2014 (amended in 2018) has become all but defunct. Access has been curbed, with the government

censoring the flow of information. Inevitably, it has led to a lack of transparency and accountability, as well as impeded the public's right to information. Reporting on sensitive issues in the absence of authentic official data has lacked credibility, and women journalists face greater barriers in accessing information, since they are not granted interviews by authorities, nor are they usually invited to press conferences and other media events.

In Bhutan, which lacks a law to guarantee access to information, the appointment of government-affiliated officials to regulatory bodies like the Bhutan Infocomm and Media Authority (BICMA) is a matter of concern. Bureaucratic stonewalling and lack of transparency adversely impact the public's right to vital information, according to journalists in Bhutan.

Access to information was marred by erasure of newspaper archives in Jammu and Kashmir and the Maldives. Since 2021, journalists in Kashmir began to notice that articles critical of the government at the centre had vanished from the online archives of prominent publications. The digital archives prior to 2019, the year in which the centre revoked Article 370 which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir, have been partially or completely deleted in what has been described as the "enforced disappearance" of the media archive on the region. While "technical glitches" are the official explanation, the attempt to erase the history of dissent is apparent, and the loss of access to this historical record is immeasurable.

Over in the Maldives, a similar process unfolded with Haveeru, the country's oldest newspaper, which was forced to shut down in 2016. On March 3, 2024, while an ownership battle was settled by the





Indian National Congress party president Mallikarjun Kharge (C), along with other members of parliament, addresses the media after taking part in a protest against the suspension of 141 opposition MPs across 26 parties in New Delhi on December 21, 2023. Attacks, harassment, and insecurity have degraded the Indian media's capacity to challenge threats to democracy. CREDIT: SAJJAD HUSSAIN / AFP

Supreme Court, the Maldives Journalists' Association (MJA) noted the loss of the newspaper's archive that represented "a record of many decades of Maldives' history" as a major blow for the industry and the public's right to know.

Recent developments in Maldives show that good laws alone are not sufficient. The Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2014 was ranked the 22nd strongest RTI law in the world out of 138 countries. But, as per a study by Transparency Maldives and the Information Commissioner's Office of Maldives (ICOM) in 2023, though the media and members of the public were using the law, not a single state institution was fully compliant in following the law's dictate and nearly half of state institutions covered by the law did not have a functional website; less than 20 per cent of required information was easily accessible.

Internet shutdowns continued to be used as a strategy to curb access to information and the right freedom of expression. In Manipur in northeast India, which was reeling under a violent ethnic conflict from May 2023, the internet was shut down for seven months and continues to be patchy in designated areas. Purportedly a measure to curb disinformation and the circulation of inflammatory videos and messages on social media, particularly WhatsApp, it has also effectively prevented journalists from verifying information and publishing credible news.

In Pakistan too, widespread internet shutdowns and curbs on social media access impacted freedom of expression and access to information during crucial events. On February 8, 2024, a nationwide suspension of mobile internet services on election day impeded the right to free speech. In May 2023, a four-day internet blackout was imposed during violent protests following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

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### Dire financial straits

Climbing out of the economic pits following the Covid-19 pandemic, the media industry across the region is facing immense challenges.

In Afghanistan, media organisations are unable to hire new staff or pay decent wages to existing staff. The Taliban's control over the media and the accompanying prohibitions on various forms of entertainment has devastated advertising revenue. Unable to produce programs that resonate with their audience and attract commercial partnerships, most media organisations remain cash-strapped. According to the Afghan Independent Journalists' Union (AIJU), prior to 2021, there were 11,900 active media workers in the country, 2,833 of whom were women. However, after the Taliban takeover, only just over 4,700 journalists and media staff are currently active, just 700 of them women.

The media in Bhutan has survived on the back of government subsidies to newspapers houses. The subsidy being equally divided among all the private media houses regardless of their market share has prevented commensurate gains for the more efficient ones. The attrition rate among professional journalists continues to be high.

The decrease in the real GDP growth in Nepal, the lowest since 2020 literally drove Nepalis away from the country in search of better





Afghan journalists attend a Taliban Ministry of Higher Education press conference in Kabul on August 21, 2023. Since August 2021, the Taliban has established strict barriers for journalists and media workers, with information funnelled through official channels, news restricted to official announcements, women barred from most press conferences and media events. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

prospects. Nearly a million Nepalis, including students, left the country in the past year. For those that remain, the going is tough. Lack of payment and underpayment has plagued journalists from even prominent media houses. More than a hundred media outlets across the seven provinces of Nepal downed their shutters in 2023, and approximately 243 media personnel quit their jobs, as per data from the Freedom Forum. However, the estimate numbers might be higher, in view of a lack of centralised database on job losses.

In India, many of the media staff who were laid off during and after the Covid-19 pandemic were forced to freelance or take up lesser paying and non-journalistic work. A critical issue is the lack of accurate data on the extent of the crisis, even as media houses continued to retrench their staff. In December 2023, a major media house with cross media ownership laid off 120 employees from its digital division. It was only through word of mouth that staff learned that their name was on 'the list'. Not surprisingly, a survey by Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies found that two third of the journalists survey were affected by the lack of security in their job. Toxic newsrooms and lack of job security came into focus with the sudden death of well-known journalists while on the job.

In the Maldives, the media's dependence on state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for advertising revenue, self-censorship and undue influence is a key concern. Lack of regulation, transparency in allocation of advertising revenue has hampered accountability and continues to encourage political influence. Viability of the media independent of advertisement revenue has yet to be established.

In Pakistan, journalists laboured under a cloud of uncertainty and unpredictable layoffs. An IFJ survey led by the Pakistan Federal Union

of Journalists (PFUJ) in 2023 in Sindh, found that only 39 per cent media staff were permanently employed and just 28 per cent had fixed term contracts. Lack of career opportunities, secure employment, uncertain and low wages and lack of benefits was the norm. This situation is common across the country.

Still steeped in a financial crisis, journalists in Sri Lanka faced further precarity. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) shut down its regional services and introduced a voluntary retirement scheme for the employees. Meanwhile, 149 journalists and media workers were laid off by the Associated Newspapers Ceylon Limited (ANCL). Many private media houses were barely able to pay wages, and introduced austerity measures, even cutting off legitimate allowances.

## Long road to gender equity

Across the region, women journalists were worse off, whether due to conflict, or economic crisis. Hard won rights, whether to pursue a profession, move freely and be treated on par with their male colleagues remain a seemingly unattainable pipe dream for many.

Women journalists in Afghanistan under the Taliban continue to face restrictions including the requirement to cover their faces when appearing on television, the denial of participation in many press conferences and programs, and the ban on broadcasting women's voices on radios in several southern provinces. Their freedom is curbed by the requirement to have a male guardian.

In fact, women journalists have all but disappeared from the south and southeast of Afghanistan, in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan, Paktia, Paktika, Khost and Logar.

Women in newsrooms in Nepal too continued to face challenges.





Police officers stand guard in front of news vans parked outside a special court hearing of jailed former Pakistani Foreign Minister and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi in Islamabad on August 21, 2023. Government instability and restrictions on PTI were a leading cause of unrest across Pakistan, with nation-wide, violent protests seen in the wake of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's arrest in May. CREDIT: FAROOQ NAEEM / AFP

A conference on embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) organised by Nepal Investigative Multimedia Journalism Network (NIMJN) in November 2023, highlighted the lack of interest in DEI among senior level media decision-makers. From a lack of basic facilities like washrooms and arrangements for sanitary hygiene, women journalists still face discrimination in assigning beats based on gender, caste and ethnicity. The gender pay gap is still an unfortunate reality.

Gender-based layoffs were seen in Sri Lanka, where the pandemic and the financial crisis severely impacted women's employment in the media sector. Media organisations tended to lay off women while retaining men, thus further skewing the balance of female employment in the media.

The prevailing culture of impunity in the Maldives is also reflected in abuse faced by women journalists. Perpetrators in two prominent cases of sexual harassment in 2020, have not faced any charges. More than a quarter of women journalists, a third of the staff in mainstream media outlets have experienced sexual harassment, according to a report on gender equality in the media published by the MJA. Online abuse is rampant, with prominent women journalists being threatened with sexual assault and murder by anonymous social media users. Others have been intimidated by trolls demanding they censor their views online.

Pakistan's women journalists faced similar harassment both online and offline. They are in a minority, and their voices unheard. A mapping published in December 2023 by the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WFMP), supported by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the National Press Club (NPC) found that despite women comprising around 5-30 per cent of media workforces in mapped areas, their representation in decision-making roles is less

than 10 per cent or none at all. They are also grossly under-represented in unions and press clubs, the mapping found.

## Controlling the digital space

The landscape of online media in Afghanistan is complex and fraught with challenges. While some digital platforms continued to function with the support of the Taliban, those critical of the regime faced censorship and license revocation. Prominent online news websites like Roznama-e-Hasht Sobh and Ettela'at-e-Rooz had their licenses revoked. On the other hand, several YouTube channels which operate within the framework of the Islamic government, enjoy relatively more freedom.

In Nepal, Section 47 of the Electronic Transactions Act, 2008 is now a tool to arrest and threaten digital journalists. Even social media platforms operating in Nepal are under the scanner and were required to set up their offices in the country, for greater government oversight. The government released a 15-point social media directive on the Operation of Social Networking 2023 in November 2023, based on the Electronics Transaction Act (ETA). This directive has been viewed as problematic because of its potential for misuse against journalists.

Towards the end of 2023, during protests led by businessman Durga Parsai demanding the restoration of monarchy, the Nepali government banned TikTok, on grounds of it affecting social harmony. Other legislative measures such as the Media Council Bill, National Mass Communications Bill, Information Technology Bill, and Social Media Regulation and Management Bill and the Public Service Broadcasting Bill brought to unify state-owned media Radio Nepal and Nepal Television and transform into a public service broadcaster all continue to be under discussion.

Digital news media in India faced immense challenges even as they





**In 2023, soon after the new government in Maldives was sworn in, three anti-government websites with allegedly incendiary content were blocked, amidst loud opposition.**

Newly elected Maldivian president Mohamed Muizzu speaks during his inauguration ceremony in Malé on November 17, 2023. Muizzu gained power following a hotly contested election between himself and his predecessor, Mohammed Solih, with the extent of his perceived pro-China stance to be seen through his coming term. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

remained the few critical voices. Besides control through criminalising online content, raids and arrests were the modus operandi. In October 2023, the Delhi police raided the office and home of the founder of web news portal NewsClick and arrested the founder editor Prabir Purkayastha and his physically challenged administrative officer under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, a draconian anti-terror law under which it is extremely difficult to get bail.

In addition to raids and ‘searches’, some journalists in India found that their devices were illegally installed with spyware. In June 2023, a new investigation by Amnesty International and the Washington Post found that the Indian government had used the invasive Pegasus spyware to target the i-phones of high-profile journalists. Among them were founder editor of the Wire, Siddharth Varadarajan and Anand Mangnale, South Asia editor of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

Digital platforms, increasingly emerging as important players in the news eco system in the Maldives are predominantly based in the capital Malé, home to 40 per cent of the population. Some news websites operate out of a few of the more populous islands in the north and south, often the main source of news, aside from a few television stations. Only one newspaper, Mihaaru, releases a daily print edition.

Over in Pakistan too, dynamic digital news media start-ups have made their mark. Focused on public interest and community reporting, the connect with audiences is high. The coming together of these outlets in the 26-member Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP), represents a consolidation of the digital news media business and a healthy challenge for Pakistan’s legacy media. The emergence of digital platforms has been accompanied by an increased attempt at control. In July 2023, the federal cabinet approved two problematic pieces of legislation – the E-Safety Bill and the Personal Data Protection Bill which promise to heighten surveillance.

## Silencing and self-censorship

Besides external control and intimidation, self-censorship was practiced across the region. In Bhutan, a survey by the Bhutan Media Foundation found that an astounding 84 per cent of journalists practice self-censorship. Interestingly, male journalists are one and a half times more likely to practice self-censorship compared to their female counterparts. A “small society syndrome,” – a well-knit society

where everybody knows everyone else – and the fear of backlash are the two major reasons behind the practice.

In India, fear of reprisal has prompted many media houses to carefully skirt news that is likely to annoy the government and corporate media owners. This has resulted in a dumbing down of critique and avoidance of stories that could rock the boat. Mainstream media in India is rarely carrying out investigative journalism or reporting stories that hold the government to account. Instead, it is the independent digital portals that dare to do journalism in the public interest.

Censorship has always been a convenient tool in the hands of governments. In 2023, soon after the new government in Maldives was sworn in, three anti-government websites with allegedly incendiary content were blocked, amidst loud opposition. The MJA and the Editor Guild’s stressed that the existing legal framework does not allow unilateral action by the government, which was advised to seek remedies through the self-regulatory mechanism of the Maldives Media Council (MMC).

In Pakistan, unsubstantiated complaints of alleged blasphemy online, often puts citizens and sometimes journalists in serious trouble. Journalists practice a significant degree of self-censorship on topics concerning law and religion, to avoid attracting blasphemy allegations. This atmosphere of intimidation has eroded the quality and quantity of independent reporting on sensitive issues.

## Credibility and trust in media

“Disinformation that has been ‘scaled up and weaponised’ on social networking platforms presents a major challenge and threat to democracy and media credibility,” said N. Ram, director of *The Hindu*, one of India’s leading dailies. Speaking at fifth World Media Summit held in Guangzhou, China, in December 2023, he said Artificial Intelligence (AI) and disinformation were “two key areas in which major and potentially disruptive challenges could become opportunities for the media to do well, empower themselves in new ways, and pursue a path of sustained development.” Misinformation, inaccurate information, disinformation, or deliberately misleading and biased information or ‘fake news’ and the entry of AI in newsrooms and on social media, have made the credibility question more complex.





**The vigorous protests against the unjust dismissal of 82 media workers in Nepal by the Kantipur Media Group, the country's leading private media company, showed that union power can be a strong unifying force.**

Illegally terminated workers, supporters, and members of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) demonstrate outside the offices of the Kantipur Media Group in Kathmandu in October, 2023. After months of protests, the FNJ secured voluntary retirement packages for affected members, with some journalists continuing protest action, in a demonstration of union power amid Nepali media's economic woes. CREDIT: FNJ

Trust in media was a concern across the region. IFJ and MJA's 'Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media' report, 2023, found that 87 per cent of respondents held the media accountable for political divisions in the Maldives with television and internet news websites perceived to have the highest levels of sensational or biased coverage, depending on their ownership. Given the lack of fact-checking mechanisms, the high degree of misinformation and disinformation on social media in the run up to the presidential elections in September 2023 went virtually unchecked.

Surprisingly, despite the highly polarised mainstream media in India, trust in the media is high, as per data released by the Reuters Institute's Trust in News Project (2023). Of the four countries surveyed (the US, UK and Brazil were the others), the Indian public at 65.6 per cent had the highest trust in the media. Significantly, a caste element surfaced, with marginalised 'Other Backward Classes' three percentage points lower and the former untouchables the 'Scheduled Castes' and indigenous Scheduled Tribes each "more than ten percentage points less trusting", pointing to the upper-caste and class bias in mainstream media.

In Pakistan, social media was believed to be most responsible for spreading fake news, as per a study by Freedom Network and the Coalition Against Disinformation released in early 2024. Exposure to increased online disinformation poses a threat to Pakistan's democratic structure and processes, felt the respondents.

In Bangladesh, too, the proliferation of disinformation and false propaganda both for and against the government have been fuelled with and by AI technology. Myths and propaganda about religion or ethnic minorities, incendiary videos and memes built up a climate of impunity that normalised discrimination and violence.

Misinformation and disinformation trends in Sri Lanka were strongly linked to the island's political economy, along with myths related to ethnic identity and religion – the staples of disinformation campaigns. In the ongoing financial crisis, much of the misinformation was targeted at economic policies including tax controversies such as misrepresentation of common levies drew panic responses. Hoaxes about the economic collapse drove companies to pull out of the island and distorted statistics on food security proliferated.

## Positive steps

Yet, all was not bleak in the year under review, as journalists, their unions and media support organisations collaborated to improve media rights in extremely challenging circumstances.

In Afghanistan, strengthening the Media Ethics Commission under the Ministry of Information and Culture and establishing coordination committees between journalists and local officials in the provinces was a step towards professionalism. Support from UNESCO's office in Afghanistan enabled upskilling and training, empowering Afghan journalists and media outlets to produce quality content. Even as the situation in Afghanistan no longer occupies centre stage in world affairs, the challenges faced by the media industry in Afghanistan call for attention from the international community and support to uphold press freedom and independent journalism in the country. The situation of Afghan journalists in exile continues to be of concern, with many of them hanging in a no-visa limbo, with no jobs, while others have been forced to return home.

The vigorous protests against the unjust dismissal of 82 media workers in Nepal by the Kantipur Media Group, the country's leading private media company, showed that union power can be a strong unifying force. The agreement between the Kantipur Media Group and the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) in December 2023 led to some relief for the striking workers. However, protest actions continue to ensure implementation of the agreement.

Towards the end of 2023, Maldivian journalists and workers welcomed the enactment of a much-awaited industrial relations bill drafted with technical assistance from the International Labour Organization. Ratified in January 2024, the new law guarantees the right of workers in the Maldives to take industrial action and form trade unions and introduced mechanisms for collective bargaining and dispute resolutions between workers and employers. An accompanying occupational safety and health law seeks to reduce workplace hazards and redress complaints and provide compensation for workplace injury. The MJA called it a "momentous union win" achieved after "a very long-standing strategic execution of plans led by workers and unions".

In Pakistan, the landmark Sindh Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act 2021, an outcome of a collaborative campaign and advocacy, inched toward its practical implementation. The Pakistan



In Bangladesh, too, the proliferation of disinformation and false propaganda both for and against the government have been fuelled with and by AI technology.



A man reads a newspaper highlighting the election of incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League party following Bangladesh's parliamentary elections in Dhaka on January 7, 2024. Hasina's consolidation of power has seen challenges to democratic rights, civil liberties, and press freedom. CREDIT: INDRANIL MUKHERJEE / AFP

Journalists Safety Coalition worked to mobilise the Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners (CJMP) notified under the new Act. Further steps were taken in June 2023, when the federal government allocated PKR 1 billion (about USD 5.5 million) to insure journalists against health emergencies. In October 2023, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government promised to amend endowment rules and increase financial assistance for the province's media workers facing financial emergencies or those rendered jobless.

The Pakistani government's demand in October 2023 that Afghan refugees – including 200 journalists – return to Afghanistan, giving a one-month deadline before forced deportations, saw several solidarity actions. In June 2023, IFJ urged state-sponsored humanitarian assistance for Afghan journalists in Pakistan, while Freedom Network launched the 'Advocacy Hub for Afghan Journalists' project in December 2023 to provide financial and legal assistance to over 100 exiled Afghan journalists to help them survive and also continue to report. This is a welcome move particularly for Afghan women journalists in exile in Pakistan, struggling with unemployment, visa issues, out-of-school children, and the threat of imminent deportation.

In December 2023, the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) launched a campaign titled 'Pakistan's Media Needs Women' to advocate gender inclusivity in the media industry and in press clubs. In January 2024, key media stakeholders reiterated their support to WMFP's campaign, pledging to proactively tackle underlying issues such as inclusivity, equal representation, and fair wages. Alongside, the National Press Club announced a 'Women Journalists' Caucus' and set up a working committee to strategise the initiative aimed at improving competence of women journalists.

A pushback from various stakeholders in Pakistan saw the passing

of the Official Secrets (Amendment) Act, 2023, after an uproar in parliament forced the government to withdraw a controversial clause, which would have allowed intelligence agencies to conduct search and seizures – including of journalists – without warrant.

The period in review also saw initiatives to unionise digital journalists with the support of the IFJ. A strategy paper for the establishment of a labour union for digital journalists was used to conduct a series of consultations in Pakistan, awareness campaigns, networking, online engagement, and advocacy with over 50 digital journalists based in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Quetta. The campaign culminated in an application for registration of a trade union for digital journalists with the National Industrial Relations Commission (NIRC).

Journalism at its finest was on display in India, amidst the heat of a landmark general election in April-May 2024, where incumbent Prime Minister Modi bids for his third term. In a significant judgement on February 15, 2024, the Supreme Court of India struck down the validity of electoral bonds, a mode of funding political parties introduced in 2017 by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. While the mainstream media lagged, it was feisty independent digital media that sifted through huge amounts of data to make connections between who had donated, how much and to which party. Independent news media websites - Newslaundry, The News Minute and Scroll – with several independent reporters, collaborated to investigate and break stories that revealed a sordid corporate-political combination of patronage and plain extortion. "Project Electoral Bond" as this collaborative exercise was termed, demonstrates that public interest investigative journalism is thriving, despite an atmosphere hostile to independent media. •



## SPECIAL REPORT

## PRECARIOUS DEMOCRACIES

In 2024, over two billion people have either voted or will vote in over 50 countries including all the major countries in South Asia, the world's most populous region. While Bhutan, Bangladesh and Pakistan voted in the first two months of 2024, India's general elections are set to run from April through to June 2024 and Sri Lanka's presidential election is set for September.

The overall health of the democracies in the region does not paint an optimistic picture judging from the election experience of the period in review. In Bangladesh, the country's main opposition party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the elections. In Pakistan, although candidates affiliated to former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf won the most number of seats at the national level, coalition strategies and army interference ensured that Shahbaz Sharif, of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, became the country's next prime minister.

In India, systematic erosion of watchdog and regulatory bodies such as the country's Election Commission, has made the opposition parties, civil society and independent observers sceptical about the fairness of the electoral process. In January, mayoral elections were conducted in the northern city of Chandigarh. The presiding officer named the candidate of the ruling party at the centre the winner, despite the fact that his opponent had garnered more votes. Remarkably, the presiding officer was caught on camera tampering with the votes. Four months before the general elections, such an act should have raised a ruckus. But, even as the lower courts declined to intervene, the mainstream media remained cowed down. The Supreme Court only intervened after significant social media pressure.

**Maldives** held a hotly contested presidential election in September-October 2023 that saw one poll followed by a run-off. Dr Mohammed Muizzu, seen to be pro-China, defeated incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, perceived to be pro-India. Besides contending with domestic concerns like high levels of debt, over-crowded cities and housing shortages, the presidential election was almost a referendum on whether China or India would gain more footing in the Indian Ocean archipelago nation, considered of strategic importance in the region. The report of the EU Election Observation Mission, Maldives noted that while media freedoms were generally respected during elections, "Political partisanship of media was prevalent, including in public service media, while there were some indications of information manipulation in social media." For example, the Public Service Media (PSM) "blurred the line between the incumbent's campaign and presidential responsibilities and emphasised government accomplishments during the entire campaign period".

In the backdrop of such democratic backsliding across South Asia, the media is left vulnerable and compromised. It is hard to assess which country has it worst this election season. India has long been considered the most robust democracy in the region, a country where curbs on the media existed but were relatively less extreme. Over the past few years that trend has shifted. But, according to many analysts, Bangladeshi democracy might be moving towards a total collapse with the opposition political parties and media being functionally choked.

## Eliminating Opposition

**Bangladesh** went to the polls on January 7, 2024, but violence had already taken hold of the country a few months prior. Almost 10,000 opposition leaders were arrested after a rally on October 28, 2023, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. At least 16 people were killed – including two police officers – and over 5,500

were injured. At least 30 journalists were also attacked and their equipment damaged by both political party activists and the police while covering the rally, which was organised by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), seeking an independent caretaker government to conduct elections.

During the rally, protestors ambushed Mohammad Ali Mazed, a video journalist with Agence France-Presse, hit him on the head and stole his equipment. Rafsan Jani, a reporter for the *Dainik Kalbela* newspaper was hospitalised after being brutally beaten.

Several other journalists were injured including *New Age* journalist Ahamed Fayeze; *Bangla Tribune's* Salman Tarek Shakil, Jobaer Ahmed, Abu Saleh Musa, Rabiul Islam Rubel and Touhidul Islam Tarek; *Dhaka Times's* Salekin Tarin, and Kazi Ihsan Didar; *Daily Inqilab's* F A Masum; *The Daily Ittefaq's* Tanvir Ahammed and Sheikh Naser; Ekushey TV's Touhidur Rahman and Arifur Rahman; *Desh Rupantor's* Arifur Rahman Rabbi; Share Biz's Hamidur Rahman; and freelance journalist Maruf.

The ruling Awami League blamed the BNP for the violence, while the BNP accused the government of infiltrating the gathering to initiate violence and discredit what they said was a peaceful movement. Regardless of who initiated the violence, journalists' security was severely compromised. A report by the US-based National Democratic

According to many analysts, Bangladeshi democracy might be moving towards a total collapse with the opposition political parties and media being functionally choked.

Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) said, "the quality of the January 7 election in Bangladesh was undermined by incidents of state, ruling party and opposition violence." The report said that the pre-election environment, characterised by "zero-sum politics, violence among political actors, contracting civic space and worsening freedoms of expression and association" also weakened the quality of elections.

On polling day, many journalists were intimidated and denied entry to the polling stations. Most of the harassment and violence in Bangladesh was prompted by supporters of the ruling Awami League targeting reporters who were trying to cover electoral malpractice including booth capturing and vote rigging.

On election day, around 15 to 20 men wearing Awami League badges attacked seven journalists. These included MA Rahim, a correspondent for broadcaster Ananda TV; Rimon Hossain, a camera operator with Ananda TV; Masud Rana, a correspondent with online news portal enews71; Sumon Khan, a correspondent with broadcaster Mohona TV; Elias Bosunia, a correspondent with broadcaster Bangla TV; Minaj Islam, a correspondent with the *Daily Vorer Chetona*; and Hazrat Ali, a correspondent with the *Dainik Dabanol*. The reporters were covering an assault on independent candidate Ataur Rahman outside a polling station in northern Lalmonirhat district.

The hostility to media persons was widespread. Mohiuddin Modhu, a news presenter and correspondent for Jamuna Television, said that some men threw bricks at him when he tried to speak to a teenager who attempted to cast a ballot in Nawabganj.

Saif Bin Ayub, a sub-editor for the *Daily Kalbela*, was assaulted by about 30 men, when he was photographing alleged "ballot stuffing"





College students in face paint spread awareness during an election campaign ahead of national elections in Chennai on March 19. In India, the weakening of regulatory bodies, including the Election Commission, has coincided with increasing attacks on journalists, human rights defenders, and political opposition. CREDIT: SATISH BABU / AFP

by members of the ruling Awami League. The men pushed Bin Ayub against a wall, punched and kicked him in the abdomen and scratched him while forcibly removing his press identification card from around his neck. Ayub said that the police did not intervene while the men beat him for 15 minutes.

Sirajul Islam Rubel, a correspondent and Arafat Rahaman, a reporter for *The Daily Star* were ambushed by around two dozen men, when they tried to leave a Dhaka polling station after covering an alleged ballot stuffing attempt by Awami League supporters. The men grabbed their phones and deleted videos of the alleged incident and did not let them out until the police arrived.

In **Pakistan**, in December 2023, weeks before the elections, media in Baluchistan, the western region of Pakistan which has seen separatist movements for decades, witnessed multiple curbs. Notably, half a dozen men raided the residence of Tahira Baloch, a renowned TV anchor and social media activist, in Quetta in the middle of the night.

Violence was a feature both before and during Pakistani elections too. Just a day before Pakistan was to go to the polls on February 8, 2024, two bombs went off in the electoral offices of independent candidates in Baluchistan. This effect was chilling on the eve of the election.

There were instances of physical attacks in **India** as well.

Data from the last five years from the Armed Conflict & Location Event Data Project reveals that there is an increasing threat to journalists from physical attacks, mob violence, and violent demonstrations in India. In order to ensure journalists are prepared for both online and offline threats, CPJ's Emergencies Response Team compiled a safety guide for journalists covering India's election.

## Weaponising the law

Over the past decade, Indian media has been subjected to a swathe of curbs of various kinds. Analysts highlight the process of delegitimisation and co-option of the mainstream media that has escalated since 2014. Sevanti Ninan, a media analyst and journalist, writes that the media was “denied access to government sources for primary news gathering, while the prime minister and his ministers used the state-owned media and social media to communicate with the citizenry.”

This atmosphere has led to independent and critical voices mostly shifting to digital-only publications. Thus, many observers believe that the government wants more power to control online media. Over the last few years, the government has passed laws and rules that would help it regulate the digital news portals. However, most of these laws are being challenged in courts.

The digital-only independent media is finding ways to collaborate and stand tall. In 2017, the Narendra Modi government introduced a funding system for political parties called ‘electoral bonds’, a system that critics called opaque and lacking accountability. These were promissory notes that businesses could purchase from the State Bank of India – a nationalised bank – and donate to a political party. In effect, this kept the identities of both buyer and receiver anonymous to the public.

On February 15, 2024, in a landmark judgement, the Supreme Court deemed the electoral bonds illegal and ordered that transaction details be made public. Data was released by the State Bank of India in spurts, which meant journalists had to sift through mountains of data and





Commuters in the Maldives drive past a billboard displaying a political advertisement for the then-opposition People's National Congress on September 6, 2023. Through the Presidential Election, politically partisan media was documented by international observers, with some evidence of information manipulation in social media, and pro-government messages shared via public broadcasters. CREDIT: MOHAMED AFRAH / AFP

join the dots to figure out which companies had donated what and how much money to the various parties. Three independent news media websites - Newslandry, The News Minute and Scroll - along with several independent reporters, joined hands to work on dozens of stories to expose the payback that political parties were getting from businesses in return for favours in an investigation they called "Project Electoral Bond".

It is not the first time that such a collaboration came into being. In 2023, when major states in India went to the polls, Newslandry, The News Minute, The Wire, Scroll and *The Caravan* came together to cover and analyse the election results. Not only have these newsrooms found it beneficial to collaborate, but it is also safer to stick together while working in this particularly unfriendly media environment.

On February 9, 2024, authorities used Section 69A of the Information Technology Act (amended in 2023), which allows it to block online access to reporting that poses a threat to the "security and integrity of India" to order *The Caravan* to take down a story about cases of murder and torture by the Indian army in the militarised northern territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It gave the independent narrative magazine 24 hours to remove the story. *The Caravan* has approached the court over the matter.

Authorities used law to target news organisations on several occasions. Eighteen media associations and organisations of journalists wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice of India, after the Delhi Police, which is overseen by the central government, raided and/or questioned 46 journalists, editors, writers, and professionals connected to the online news portal, NewsClick. Perhaps the outcry did not get the expected results. The founder and editor of NewsClick along with another staff member were subsequently arrested and charged under

the oppressive anti-terror law, Unlawful Activities (prevention) Act, under allegations that the news portal was given money to spread pro-China propaganda.

Around the same time as the NewsClick saga was underway, about 35 per cent of Indians voted in November 2023 during the state elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Telangana. A report by the Free Speech Collective on the state of freedom of expression in the five states revealed several instances of harassment, arrest, and even killing of journalists who reported on corruption or questioned authorities.

In January 2024, **Sri Lanka** passed the Online Safety Bill allowing the government to set up a commission that can order people and internet service providers to remove online posts deemed "prohibited statements," without a clear definition of what that means. Sri Lanka is facing its worst economic crisis. The country declared bankruptcy in 2022 with more than USD 83 billion in debt and a significant chunk of it to foreign creditors such as China. Analysts say that the government would want a strong hold on the press to control the narrative while it attempts to overcome its dire economic state.

In September 2023, the country revised the Anti-Terrorism Bill after much public pressure. That bill is set to replace and repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which has been repeatedly used to jail and harass journalists for their work. But since the law doesn't define "terrorism", some analysts feel the law might be used to target journalists who ask uncomfortable questions to the authorities. With the upcoming presidential elections, the first since the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, a free press is crucial for the conduct of a free and fair election.





Supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party brandishing a photo of former Prime Minister and PTI Founder Imran Khan blocks the Islamabad-Peshawar highway while protesting alleged election tampering in Peshawar on February 11, 2024. In the lead-up to Pakistan's elections, news outlets were restricted from covering Khan's speeches, PTI activities, or even identifying electoral candidates as running with PTI. CREDIT: ABDUL MAJEED / AFP

**On the day of Pakistan's elections, not only were mobile internet services shut down 'temporarily', but the Ministry of Interior also deftly stated that the shutdown was "inevitable".**

## Controlling the Internet

Internet shutdowns, website blocking and tampering with internet speeds have become more commonplace in the last few years. Elections periods were no exception.

Just a day before the Bangladeshi election, Tarique Choyon, a contributor to *Daily Manab Zamin* and one of the government's leading media critics, said the newspaper's website had become inaccessible in many places in **Bangladesh**. "We have no technical flaws at all," he tweeted. The website was reportedly back online the next day.

Since these were the first elections in Bangladesh since the 2018 polls, many media houses were fearful that the curbs on internet speeds would repeat, as they had in 2018. Thankfully, that was not the case.

**Pakistan** got what opposition parties in Bangladesh were seeking. After the country faced a democratic crisis last year, a caretaker government was appointed responsibility for the smooth conduct of the country's elections. But that did not necessarily ensure that the elections went off uneventfully.

On the day of Pakistan's elections, not only were mobile internet services shut down 'temporarily', but the Ministry of Interior also deftly stated that the shutdown was "inevitable". Journalists reportedly faced difficulty in collecting and disseminating information during and after the ballots were cast.

Waqas Angaria, Karachi-based reporter with Geo News, told *The News*

*International* that his plans of dissemination of results and providing real-time updates to the channel were disrupted. Internet monitor Netblocks also said real-time data showed internet blackouts were in effect in "multiple regions of Pakistan in addition to mobile network disruptions," as reported by *Dawn*.

Such disruptions cut off crucial communication lines especially on a rather violent election day. That day, 51 documented attacks resulted in the killing of about 15 people in the country on that single day.

For elections to be fair, the media should be able to inform the public of different policies, candidates, manifestos and agendas. This forms the foundation of media's responsibility towards its audiences. However, after Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan lost a confidence vote in parliament in April 2022, Pakistani media was subsequently banned from reporting his speeches and rallies. Later, in August 2023, Khan was imprisoned. As elections drew closer, restrictions on coverage of Khan's party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) became even more sweeping. News media heads of mainstream channels reportedly received calls from the army asking them to not identify candidates endorsed by the PTI or display the party flag while referring to such candidates.

Despite the ban on coverage of the PTI, violence on the national election day, and the various internet shutdowns, Imran Khan's party won the plurality of seats, but not a majority – taking 93 of the 266





Activists with the People's Revolution Party of Sri Lanka hold placards advocating for human rights and democratic freedoms at a Colombo demonstration on August 11, 2023, in the wake of the Island's worst economic crisis. The government's crackdown against the grass roots movement, or Aragalaya, has seen press freedom restricted and journalists harassed. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP

**in a deliberate attempt to limit international oversight, Bangladeshi authorities refused to issue visas to journalists from many leading international media outlets, including BBC News, *The New York Times*, Bloomberg, Agence France-Presse, Reuters and Al Jazeera ahead of the polls.**

seats. This has been largely credited to the country's robust social media. A young population took to the largely unregulated social media in Pakistan to express their support to Khan's party, which used TikTok and YouTube to reach the 60 per cent of voters between the ages of 18 and 45.

On December 17, PTI reached over five million people in what they called a "virtual rally". With their leader in jail, PTI members had to innovate ways for him to reach out to the larger public. In what might be considered controversial they used debatable artificial intelligence (AI) to generate his audio clip, interspersed with his older clips and played it in the virtual rally.

A clamp-down on mainstream media has given rise to digital-native platforms, such as RaftarTV, NayaPakistan, and Siasat.pk, which have millions of subscribers on YouTube. "While a political outcome still remains in flux, it is clear that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's success can be attributed to its recognition of and connection with this tech-savvy demographic that may have felt overlooked and disenfranchised by political opponents and the mainstream media," write Waqas Ejaz and Mitali Mukherjee.

Pakistan's two dynastic parties, Sharif's PML-N and the Bhutto family's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), came in second and third place, with 75 and 54 legislative seats respectively.

PML-N and PPP joined together to form a coalition government and, surprisingly, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was pushed aside for his brother Shehbaz to become the country's new prime minister – reported to be a more palatable options for Pakistan's military because of his consistent pro-establishment stance.

In **India**, social media has been a double-edged sword. While women politicians, especially from opposition parties have been trolled, it has also served to uncover stories that mainstream media would otherwise not pay heed to. For instance, a political leader was found sleeping on a bed of currency notes. The picture went viral and mainstream publications were forced to take note.

### Restricting international oversight

Given that India has been courting western democracies, image building is crucial. In a move to caution international media, a notice was served to French journalist Vanessa Dougnac withdrawing her Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) status because of allegedly "malicious and critical" articles. Dougnac, who has been based in India since 2001 and is married to an Indian citizen, wrote regularly in the newsweekly *Le Point* and the newspapers *Le Soir* and *La Croix*. This was clearly a case of intolerance towards dissenting views. The Ministry of Home Affairs issued a





Voters queue up to cast their ballot outside a polling station in Thimphu on January 9, 2024. While Bhutan's elections were celebrated due to a peaceful transition of power, lingering barriers to official sources of information have raised questions over press freedom in the Himalayan kingdom. CREDIT: MONEY SHARMA / AFP.

notification in March 2021, requiring OCI cardholders to obtain special permission for journalistic activities.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's South Asia bureau chief Avani Dias left India on April 19, 2024, after being told her visa would not be extended because her reporting "crossed a line". She was also told that her election accreditation would not be approved because of a government directive.

Similarly, in a deliberate attempt to limit international oversight, Bangladeshi authorities refused to issue visas to journalists from many leading international media outlets, including BBC News, *The New York Times*, Bloomberg, Agence France-Presse, Reuters and Al Jazeera ahead of the polls. Some were asked to sign a statement that Bangladeshi authorities had the right to approve their text and images and ensure that their work did not harm the "national image" in exchange for a visa.

In **Maldives**, the amendment proposed by the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) in March 2023, to Sections 41(a) and 41(b) of the General Elections Act to require any reporter covering the elections to work for a media outlet or broadcasting service registered with the government and approved by the Election Commission, was met with expressions of concern. The amendment was criticised by the International Federation of Journalists, the Maldives Journalists' Association (MJA) and Transparency Maldives, who said the proposed amendment would "exclude freelance journalists and foreign correspondents from election monitoring practices". With deteriorating press freedom, this was interpreted as a move to unduly control press coverage of the elections.

## The "bright spot"

Bhutan went to polls on January 9, 2024, to elect members to its lower house, called the National Assembly. Analysts saw the elections as a "bright spot" thanks to a smooth transfer of power. But there are questions about how informed the public was about who they were voting for because in 2023, Bhutan's Press Freedom Index dropped by a whopping 57 places in one year.

Despite some promising democratic trends since 2008 when the country transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a democracy, the media has continued to complain about barriers to its functioning such as access to official sources of information. As a result, the lack of transparent governance and a secretive bureaucracy continues to perpetuate a culture of secrecy and distrust of the press in the South Asian kingdom.

The world over, a rise in authoritarian governments such as in Turkey, Russia and Argentina has put the question of free flow of information and the right to know to the front and centre. The media is contending with strong controls over information flows, despite the relative freedom afforded by social media.

Especially in South Asia, which houses one in five people of the global population, with diverse societies and complex histories, it is imperative that media and media workers are able to hold power to account. Without effective institutional safeguards, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms will remain a pipe dream. Election time, when democracy is in action, is a litmus test for a free and independent press, and the experiences in South Asia in the past year show exactly how it is facing immense challenges on this front. •



## SPECIAL REPORT

## SOUTH ASIA'S MEDIA VIABILITY AND TRUST ISSUE

**W**hat does the media in South Asia comprise of today? Paid content masquerading as reportage. Social media posts masquerading as 'real news'. Journalism decried as 'fake news'. Press freedom as a window dressing, with media blackouts on issues like enforced disappearances and struggles for self-determination. Social media blockades; laws weaponised against journalists. Troll armies attacking journalists on social media, with women particularly targeted. Journalists self-censoring or leaving the profession. Media outlets facing financial crises. Corporations buying up media houses. Journalists sent out to report with little or no training or editorial oversight. 'Citizen journalists' bearing witness without context or verification. Partisan journalists and social media users at loggerheads. Amidst this chaos, journalistic values, ethics and responsibility have never been as critically needed as they are today – globally and specifically in South Asia.

Viability and sustainability of the media are closely linked to the public's trust and credibility of news. A prerequisite of viability is an economic and political environment that enables independent media to function. Such conditions are lacking in most parts of South Asia.

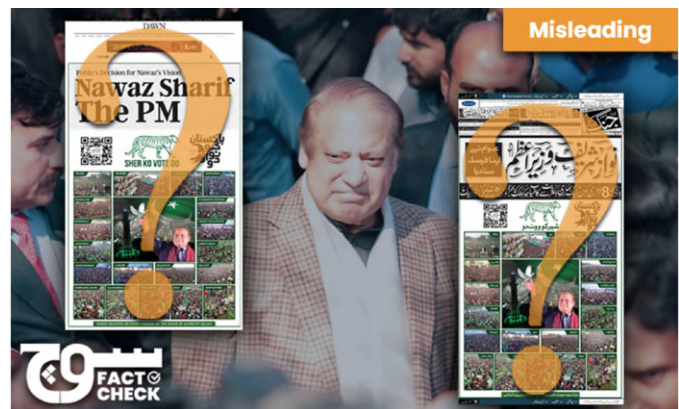
"Nawaz Sharif the PM" declared a front-page banner headline in both Urdu and English, of a major legacy newspaper in Pakistan, a couple of days before the country's general elections on February 8, 2024. Above the declaration of victory was the proclamation: "Public's decision for Nawaz's vision". In the centre of the page, is a line drawing of a tiger with the following words below: 'Sher ko vote do' (Vote for the lion). The 'sher', an Urdu word used interchangeably for lion and tiger, is the electoral symbol of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz political party led by former twice-elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif. He was last ousted in a military coup of 1999 that gave Pakistan its third, over decade-long military dictatorship. To the left of the tiger is a QR code and to the right, another slogan: 'Pakistan ko Nawaz do' (Give Pakistan Nawaz). Sharif recently returned to a politically fraught Pakistan after four years in exile.

These headlines and more text with photos of political party leaders took up the entire front page of not one, but most of Pakistan's leading legacy newspapers. These were advertisements, paid for by a political party. Resource-strapped newspapers, desperate for revenue, accepted the advertisement which landed with the marketing departments late at night.

English language newspapers tend to change the font of text-heavy ads to differentiate them from the paper's own reporting. The only paper to carry the ad on its back page was the English-language daily *Dawn*, which has a policy barring front page advertisements larger than a quarter-page. But the paper violated other policies, like letting the advertisement go without an editorial overview. The political party had sent it late at night, and the marketing department pleaded not to hold it back since it adhered to *Dawn's* policy of allowing political parties to praise themselves and their own performance, without attacking rivals.

Irate Pakistanis in the country and diaspora took to social media against the 'fake news' of Nawaz Sharif being declared prime minister even before the polls. Posts with photos and videos of the newspapers went viral, the outrage multiplying with each forward and re-share.

Few saw the distinction between a paid advertisement and genuinely reported news content. The legacy media in Pakistan,



A graphic displays former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif interlaid with full, front-page advertisements for the Pakistan Muslim National League-Nawaz in leading domestic newspapers, with text claiming that the public had chosen Nawaz's 'vision'. The layouts were criticised for failing to distinguish between paid and regular content, demonstrating struggles in Pakistan's media balancing sustainability and ethical concerns. CREDIT: SOCH FACT CHECK

**A pre-requisite of viability is an economic and political environment that enables independent media to function. Such conditions are lacking in most parts of South Asia.**

like media elsewhere which is already facing a credibility crisis, took another major hit.

The outrage, however, proves that Pakistan's "newspapers are alive and kicking, and still have an impact," said Sarmad Ali, managing director of the Jang, News and Geo Group in Pakistan, and also secretary general of the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS).

Such full-page ads are not unique to Pakistan, according to Ali. *The New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune* have carried full front-page ads, as have papers in the Gulf states, United Kingdom, Malaysia and Bangladesh. It is particularly common in India, he added. Ali agrees that full disclosure would increase journalistic credibility "but why would an advertiser or political party pay for such content then?" he asks.

In Pakistan, online news traffic is increasingly taking the Facebook route, but local media are unable to tap the traffic for revenue generation. Various studies have found that social media algorithms disadvantage local channels or platforms, and Meta and Google algorithms prioritise international media. Thus the presence of "big tech" in the digital sphere tends to encroach on both audiences and ad revenue from local news organisations.

With the over-dependence on government advertising, it is apparent that it is a challenge to uphold one of the first conditions for a viable media eco-system. What UNESCO terms a "political and social environment that enables journalism to perform its role as a public good" under its "media viability indicators" does not exist in Pakistan and most of its neighbours. Indeed, the indicators of viability are precarious at best and non-existent at worst across South Asia.





Journalists, media workers, and supporters hold placards during a candlelight vigil outside the Mumbai Press Club in Mumbai on October 5, 2023, condemning the arrests of NewsClick founder Prabir Purkayastha and HR head Amit Chakraborty on October 3, raids on the outlet's offices, and the questioning of a further 46 journalists. Their arrests under the notorious Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act represent one of the latest punitive crackdowns on free expression and critical voices online. CREDIT: INDRANIL MUKHERJEE / AFP

Various factors that indicate healthy media-economy-politics relations are largely absent in most parts of the region. According to UNESCO, these include a supportive economic and business environment; the structure and scope of the media economy; the media labour market; the financial health of media operations including advertising revenue; the capital environment for media operations; organisational structures and resources supporting financial and market sustainability and the media's contribution to the national economy. The Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) media viability survey put success along six key strategies: putting the business of media as high as editorial; a lean or flat organisational structure ie no waste; a clearly defined brand and audience; diversified revenue; finding new and creative ways to connect; and being open to change.

The crisis of viability and sustainability in legacy media across South Asia has seen many media houses pivot to digital-only publications, and even print publications move towards 'digital-first' editions – an acknowledgement of the sea change brought about by the rise in online platforms and digital media.

## Going digital

Digital media has changed the media landscape across the world with bewildering speed. There has been a largescale move away from print publications, broadcast and radio to the online space. This digital disruption has majorly changed the production of news, its filters and editorial oversight, as well as how audiences access content and how revenue is generated.

While digitisation has "democratised" the media, says senior Indian journalist Tarun Basu in New Delhi, it has also "killed the old model -

everyone has access to the news at the same time".

This is far from the years when legacy media outlets and terrestrial television channels were the only game in town for news consumers.

Today there are even fake pages impersonating legacy media outlets. And they have thousands of followers. For instance, a Facebook page calling itself Dawndigital.tv uses the same font as the Dawn media group, one of Pakistan's most credible media outlets. The fake page has 15,000 followers and promotes a particular political party.

In India, legacy publications have also gone digital, entering the arena of several digital-only publications. In Jammu and Kashmir, which has witnessed a decades' long separatist movement, "journalism is all but dead", says Anuradha Bhasin, managing editor of the *Kashmir Times*, Jammu and Kashmir's oldest newspaper. In November 2023, the editor shut down its print edition and the paper is now only available online.

Journalism has long been difficult in Jammu and Kashmir, and the situation continued after August 2019, when the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, stripping the state of its special status.

A BBC report in August 2023 analysed how dozens of papers in Kashmir published a daily government press release. "Nearly all had the release on their front pages, some had edited it, others carried it verbatim. The rest of the front pages were covered with statements from the government or security forces. There were many feature stories but barely any journalism holding the government to account."

Currently on a journalism fellowship in the US, Anuradha Bhasin has been experimenting with different formats for the *Kashmir Times*, finding "new ways of storytelling" and no longer focusing on the 24/7 breaking news model.

Dynamic independent media start-ups in India launched in the past





**LEFT:** Indian paramilitary troopers patrol past a cut-out of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Srinagar on December 11, 2023, after India's Supreme Court upheld an order abolishing Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) special status within the Union's constitution. Since the revocation of J&K's special status in 2019, independent journalism has been made near-impossible, with several legacy and emerging news outlets shuttering or rolling back operations. CREDIT: SAJJAM QAYYUM / AFP

**RIGHT:** Hindi-language journalist Ravish Kumar, shown in documentary *While We Watched*, resigned as an anchor from NDTV to start a successful YouTube channel, following the station's 'hostile' takeover. PHOTOGRAPH: BRITDOC FILMS

decade or so are small ships with professional crews, bravely navigating repressive governments, precarious economies and challenging markets. In India, NewsLaundry, The Wire, Scroll, The News Minute and subject-specific portals such as Live Law, fact-checking portals such as Boom Live and Alt News are doing cutting-edge journalism on shoe-string budgets, depending on small grants, subscriptions, donations and brand management.

More encouraging are the YouTube channels in India run by respected journalists from broadcast media. Prominent broadcast journalists like Ravish Kumar and Barkha Dutt formerly with NDTV, Abhisar Sharma and Bhasha Singh have a faithful following that also allows some degree of monetisation. In Pakistan, Naya Daur TV launched by senior journalist Raza Rumi, and in Nepal, Setopati launched by Ameet Dhakal and Barakhari by Prateek Pradhan – both former newspaper editors – with dedicated audiences are emerging as credible sources for news as well as long form, investigative stories.

Social media has become a major channel to receive news, with 'WhatsApp University' as Ravish Kumar pejoratively terms it, becoming a significant player in public discourse in South Asia, home to a quarter of the world's population.

Yet, regulation of social media is a double-edged sword in the hands of authoritarian governments and "big tech" platforms.

## New media under fire

But being digital is no safeguard, even in mainland India, where digital portals face take-down notices and others forms of censorship. Most recently, the independent news portal NewsClick, which has stood tall in covering issues ignored by the mainstream media, such as protests by farmers, Dalits or indigenous people, has been the target of raids, by the Enforcement Directorate for alleged economic offences, and its editor and another staff member detained under the draconian anti-terror law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. NewsClick and its funders have refuted the allegation of accepting funding for pro-China coverage, charges based on a thinly-researched article in *The New York Times*.

Journalists and editors from The Wire, Scroll and Alt News have been subjected to raids by various government agencies, criminal charges, defamation cases, and surveillance. In April 2023, the Government of India notified amendments to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 meant to tackle 'fake news' is being seen as a form of censorship, with the government abrogating to itself the power to decide what is 'fake'. Social media companies are obliged to take down content thus identified or risk losing their "safe harbour" protections in Section 79 of the IT Act, which permits intermediaries to avoid liabilities

for what third parties post on their websites. Evidently, the account blocking and take down requests have been numerous enough for the social platform X (formerly Twitter) to publicly differ with the Indian Government. The accounts and posts were withheld as ordered, but the platform said, "we disagree with these actions and maintain that freedom of expression should extend to these posts".

Similar patterns are evident in Bangladesh, where the Digital Security Act of 2018, later replaced by the Cyber Security Act, is being weaponised against journalists. In Sri Lanka, a similarly 'draconian' Online Safety Act was enacted in January 2024. Analysts believe it is aimed at ensuring that the kind of protest movement that toppled the government in 2022 does not arise again.

Crackdowns also affect non-journalistic users in the digital sphere, who often share material without filters or verification as governments across the region also register cases against Facebook or Twitter (now X) posts that allegedly go against the 'national interest' or a religious ideology.

## Fragile freedom

At present, Nepal is "a beacon of hope in the region" in terms of press freedom, said Kunda Dixit, publisher of weekly English language *Nepali Times* that he launched in 2000. He was among those who had to flee the country to avoid arrest in 2016-18 during politically motivated attacks. "It's a fragile freedom... there's always a danger that the dark times could return."

Currently the press in Nepal is relatively free. There are investigative stories in the mainstream media in Nepal exposing major scandals, but "the politicians know that the mainstream media don't matter so much. The real worry is social media. The danger, as elsewhere, is the dire financial crisis, publishers not paying salaries, and media being vulnerable to corporate control."

Now used to an independent media, "the Nepali people will push back" against any crackdown, Dixit predicted. "We have to remain vigilant. Press freedom is like a rubber band. You have to use it and stretch it to make it work."

The country has seen a rapid rise and an equally rapid fall in digital start-ups, with sustainability being a major factor. In October 2023, a dozen digital media portal publishers came together to form a Digital Media Society to work towards more professionalism and sustainability of online media in Nepal.

The influx of technology and the scramble to convert media into paying enterprises are global phenomena that also impact the media in South Asia.

Many newspaper owners in India have other business interests, and



## The real worry is social media. The danger, as elsewhere, is the dire financial crisis, publishers not paying salaries, and media being vulnerable to corporate control.”

editorial independence is fragile, factors that influence press freedom. There is also the sociological bias of those in leadership positions in media houses, says Sushant Singh, currently a consulting editor with *The Caravan* and a teaching fellow at Yale University. Most are male, belong to the upper castes, and buy into the idea of a ‘strong Indian state’ which leads to an “unnatural support for ideology”.

Journalists, particularly those working with smaller local language media houses in small towns, are also vulnerable to intimidation by draconian laws for national security. The resulting self-censorship is another factor that contributes to distrust in the media.

“Everyone speaking out in India knows the consequences. They are aware of risks to their safety and security that their journalism can attract. At one level, it is madness to speak out in this situation, but many do,” says Singh.

Another threat to media credibility is that business enterprises in India are buying up media outlets. And when those enterprises are close to the government, it leads to even more mistrust.

In January this year, Adani Enterprises, owned by Gautam Adani, raised its stake in the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) to 76 per cent (INR 50 million) having acquired it in December 2023. In December 2022, the group had taken over the pioneering news broadcaster NDTV, and before that, Quintillion Business Media.

The ‘hostile takeover’ of NDTV prompted one of station’s star anchors, the widely watched Hindi-language journalist Ravish Kumar, to resign and start his own YouTube channel, which now has over nine million subscribers. His story is now the subject of a documentary, *While We Watched*, which backdrops on the “existential crisis in truth-telling worldwide”, according to *The Guardian*. Kumar is just one of the many broadcast journalists around South Asia who were pushed out of television channels and launched their own YouTube channels. With proper ‘monetisation’ this is emerging as an alternate way of earning a livelihood and also reaching audiences. But it is “precarious” as Kumar pointed out during his speaking tour at American universities last year. Governments can shut down YouTube or block Internet sites at will.

Television may be dying, but there’s a surge in digital media. In India, the world’s biggest media market, digital is set to overtake TV in revenues by the end of 2024, according to FICCI report. India’s media and entertainment sector grew by 8 per cent in 2023, reaching INR 2.3 trillion (USD 27.9 billion), 21 per cent above its pre-pandemic levels in 2019, says the report: “70 per cent of this growth stemmed from new media, which now constitutes 38 per cent of the sector”.

In order to buck the trend of digital start-ups riding the wave but fast vanishing, digital news media portals that are here to stay have realised that collaboration is the key to sustainability. The DIGIPUB in India and DigiMAP in Pakistan have merged out of a felt need for joint action against government high-handedness and over-regulation.

### Declining trust

The media face a “trust issue” because they’ve been weakened economically by “the theft of advertising” by Google and other platforms, said Kanak Mani Dixit, founder of Himal Southasian magazine. He outlines how “advertising is down to a pittance, hence power brokers who have the money call the shots.”

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened an already dire situation for many media outlets as cash-strapped companies cancelled advertisements and readers no longer wanted physical copies of printed publications. The biggest challenge is survival. In post pandemic Pakistan, with two-fifths of media jobs lost, unemployment, under-employment and non-payment of wages stalk the media industry which continues to face dire straits. Meanwhile, attacks from all sides of the political spectrum are

another challenge that legacy media outlets and journalists face in this age of ‘outrage culture’.

In this situation, there is an even greater need to contextualise the impact of increasing sensationalist news, images and videos being spread on social media and through WhatsApp. Many of these are doctored clips or propaganda from one side or another. As for the ‘trust deficit’, legacy media are perhaps no longer as “independent” as readers would like them to be, says Zaffar Abbas, editor of the Pakistan daily *Dawn*. People get a lot of instant news from social media posts and WhatsApp forwards, but there is hardly any cross-checking of the veracity of such posts, shares and forwards.

A 2019 study by global market research company IPSOS found that trust in traditional media declined over the previous five years. Two factors were found important: rampant fake news and doubts about media sources’ good intentions. India was found to have a high degree of trust in newspaper sources.

Other studies, such as by the Reuters Institute’s Trust in News Project (2023) also found that of the four countries surveyed for the report, the Indian public has the highest trust in the media: 65.6 per cent of Indians said they trust news ‘somewhat’ or ‘completely’, followed by USA (47.1 per cent), then Brazil (39.8 per cent) and UK (38.3 per cent). Interestingly, the level of trust decreases further down the social hierarchy with the “upper castes being the most trusting of information from the news media”. Socially marginalised ‘Other Backward Classes’ are three percentage points lower and the former untouchables the ‘Scheduled Castes’ and Indigenous Scheduled Tribes are each “more than ten percentage points less trusting”.

Data from Statista in 2023 found that the share of adults who trust news media most was 38 per cent in India, as compared to 69 per cent in Finland and 63 per cent in Kenya. Globally, social media was seen as a less reliable source of news. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 found that young people show a “weaker connection with news brands’ websites and apps – instead coming to news via search, social media or aggregators.”

Ideally, media everywhere should have editorial processes, even if rudimentary, for verification and accountability. The reality is that this in effect can delay publication of news, by which time fake news and information without context has already made the rounds on social media, without filters. Those sharing misinformation have no obligation to self-correct or issue a correction. In comparison, newspapers are duty-bound to do this if there are errors in the information they put out.

So it is the professional journalists, with editorial oversight, who can provide the context that is crucially required. Ironically, those who most need this context often no longer read the newspapers and rely instead on those social media posts and WhatsApp forwards.

But trained journalists - and their editors - are also susceptible to pressure from the noise on social media and digital platforms. And even major legacy media outlets pander to ‘clickbait’ pressure, with headlines that often don’t reflect the nuance and context that an otherwise reasonable story may contain.

An interesting correlation emerges between the Reuters report on trust in the media and the recent report, compiled by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), India’s largest and oldest non-governmental trade association and advocacy group, and Ernst and Young, India. The FICCI report finds that contrary to the global trend, the print media are still thriving in India. Advertising revenues in India grew by 4 per cent in 2023 with a significant growth in premium ad formats, “as print remained a preferred medium for affluent metro and non-metro audiences. Subscription





Incoming Maldivian president Mohammed Muizzu speaks during an interview with AFP in Male on November 13, 2023. IFJ research revealed that a majority of survey respondents found that the media had contributed to political polarisation. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA

**Several recommendations are put forward including the suggestion that “newsrooms, press freedom bodies and civil society organizations develop monitoring systems to identify reputational attacks and harassment targeting journalists.”**

revenues also grew by 3 per cent due to rising cover prices,” according to the FICCI press report.

Newspapers in India remain heavily subsidised by government and private advertising, with consumers paying only 20 per cent of the cost of production, according to estimates. Award-winning reporter Sushant Singh, notes that this makes the papers heavily dependent on government advertisements and vulnerable to political and other pressures.

In the Maldives, the 2023 IFJ report, “Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media” found that digital media or online news portals were the leading source of “daily” news for 67 per cent of respondents, followed by television with 53 per cent. The study, which was jointly launched by IFJ and its Maldivian affiliate the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) found Facebook was the dominant choice of social media platforms, publishing what Maldivian people understood as “news content”. As many as 64 per cent use the platform as their primary medium to access news online.

Significantly, a key finding was related to political divisions, with the majority of respondents (87 per cent) agreeing that the media should be held accountable for political divisions in the country. According to the MJA, “Editorial independence and transparency is the biggest challenge journalists and the media face - the key to solving this is directly tied to strengthening journalists and helping organize media workers unions in the country.”

The recommendations to increase trust in media included: Increased support to ensure stronger, more sustainable media in the Maldives; efforts to strengthen editorial independence in media outlets, particularly relating to media ownership and establishing a mechanism to ensure transparency in funding for media outlets.

## Attacking credibility

Assaults on journalists, including reputational harm, have seriously impacted how journalists work, and in turn journalistic credibility, finds a study conducted by the University of British Columbia's School of Writing, Journalism, and Media in collaboration with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The findings of the 2023 study,

based on the testimonies of 645 journalists in 87 countries, found that attacks included “public messages intended to discredit, delegitimize, or dehumanize journalists.” Such attacks are also launched in politicians’ speeches (reported by 72 per cent of respondents), news broadcasts, and courtrooms, the study found.

The report notes that globally, press freedom and trust in journalism appear to be on the decline, while threats to journalists’ safety – particularly women and those belonging to marginalised ethnic, racial or religious groups – are on the rise. “Journalists who faced frequent reputational attacks were more likely to have experienced harm to their mental and physical health, to have seriously considered quitting journalism, and to have relocated from their city or country to avoid or mitigate threats” found the study. Self-censorship was one of the fallouts of the attacks.

Manimugdha Sharma, one of the researchers and a former journalist with the *Times of India*, notes that India has the worst showing on all the parameters, and some of the respondents from India exhibited unprecedented levels of fear.

Several recommendations are put forward including the suggestion that “newsrooms, press freedom bodies and civil society organizations develop monitoring systems to identify reputational attacks and harassment targeting journalists.”

Expressions of public support and legal action against those who defame or threaten journalists are also essential. Preventive measures like cyber-security training, as well as legal and psychological assistance for journalists would also be useful. Another recommendation was for social media companies to improve their anti-abuse tools, content moderation, and capacity to assist targeted journalists.

Overall, concluded the Report, the systemic and ongoing damage to journalism and public discourse needed to be addressed in the interests of journalists’ safety and ability to promote accountability, truth-telling, and most importantly, democracy.

“However, even in these difficult times, there are few media – they tend to be online, but exceptionally some print – that have not succumbed,” says Kanak Mani Dixit in Kathmandu.

Many citizen journalists and social media users have played



important roles in bringing critical issues to the attention of the legacy media. Few have the training or ability to provide the required context and nuance.

If there is an agreement that journalism is about bearing witness, providing news and information in context, being fair, and giving voice to underprivileged communities, this is a task that even non-professional or citizen journalists can participate in. Many are doing this, but often without intentionally adhering to these basic principles which professional journalists also need to keep in sight.

## Towards viability

Given the struggle to survive in a harsh economic and political environment, the independent digital portals are pushing the envelope and redefining viability itself. Collaboration over competition seems more workable than competing for scarce resources. In India, digital portals pooled resources to offer election coverage in May 2023, during the crucial hotly contested state elections in Karnataka. Pooling in financial resources as well as reportage, the audiences were offered real-time updates as well as informed commentary, unlike the rabble rousing that passes for 'journalism' in news shows on mainstream television. A similar collaboration by The NewsMinute, Scroll, Newsland and

several independent journalists, broke some of the most significant stories in recent times, as part of 'Project Electoral Bond' in March 2024 – an expose on the funding of political parties deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. Collaboration also offers some protection from the risk of being slapped with cases and hauled to court.

Globally too there has been new thinking around viability. Internews, Microsoft and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have launched a new public-private partnership to develop a Media Viability Accelerator to help independent news outlets become more financially sustainable. The announcement, made ahead of the 2023 Summit for Democracy, demonstrates a cross-stakeholder commitment among government, business and civil society to support media viability.

Additionally, what if concerned institutions and individuals come together to formulate and agree on a global minimal code of ethics around basic journalistic principles like ensuring two-source verification from diverse sources, context, fairness, and non-partisanship? If this is something that professional journalists as well as social media users voluntarily endorse in large numbers, it would also help educate news consumers - many of whom are also news producers - and perhaps help correct the course of journalism today. •

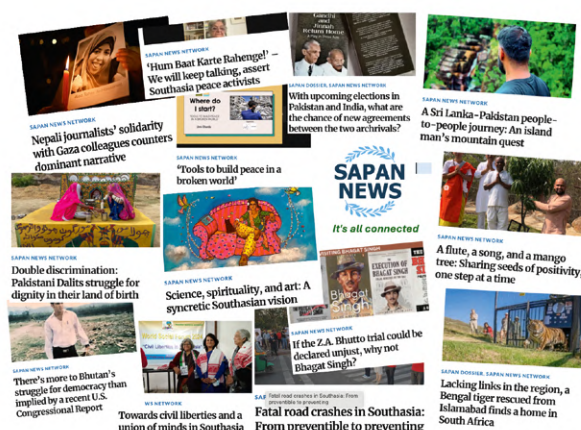
## The Thought Behind the Dream

In August 2021, Pakistani journalist Beena Sarwar sent out a feature she had written to several editors she personally knew around South Asia and called it a syndicated feature from a media outlet she invented at that moment - Sapan News. Sapan was originally the acronym for a peace movement she had been involved in since March 2021 – the Southasia Peace Action Network. This in turn was built upon decades of work around human rights, dignity, and peace issues with a focus on Pakistan, India and South Asia. (Southasia as a single word is borrowed from the style book of Himal Southasian magazine, to emphasise regional togetherness).

Originally shortened as SAPAN, it began to be written as Sapan, which means dream in many South Asian languages. The dream is one of peace, cooperation, collaboration, and dialogue across regional and other divides. The Southasia Peace Network holds regular monthly online public discussions furthering this cause with area experts from around the region and the diaspora and expatriate communities.

Working with a small team of volunteers, Sarwar would send out press releases about these events that media outlets across the region regularly published. She then began sending out stories aimed at amplifying the ideas shared during these discussions. It soon became apparent that Sapan News was providing features on issues that the mainstream media tend to sideline, due to lack of human and financial resources. Sapan News has developed into an independent, syndicated media service that covers and connects Southasia, the Indian Ocean and diaspora. Its slogan: 'It's all connected'.

Sapan News as a small, digital, volunteer-run, non-profit newsroom that is local, regional and global, is driven by a spirit of fairness, upholding democratic values and human dignity. Given the polarisation in societies everywhere, Sapan News tries to present different perspectives, across binaries, with well-researched, contextualised information, explainers and backgrounders and voices from the community and on the ground. An intergenerational, international and local pool of writers including industry leaders, experts, analysts, academics, activists, editors,



reporters, students and multimedia journalists make up the team.

Sapan News stories connect the dots and go into the why and how of issues that tend to be overshadowed by the rush of daily news stories and mainstream narrative. They highlight the peripheries, art, culture and sports in the context of politics and produce stories that go behind the headlines with deep dives and the kind of nuance that media outlets often don't have the time, capacity or resources to work on. Sapan News focuses on the process and context behind the news and takes the long view. Sapan News features are currently published by over 30 media outlets, including some leading digital publications around South Asia as well as in Australia and North America.

The viability of this tiny enterprise as well as its future impact is yet unknown. The crowd-funded volunteer-powered work got a boost in December 2023, after successful fundraising through NewsMatch, a philanthropic fund administered by the Institute for Nonprofit News, INN, a professional body of which Sapan News is a member. On the cards now is hiring part-time editors, paying the chief editor, covering some expenses, paying modest honoraria to some freelance contributors and training interns along the way. The journey to making a positive contribution to the media landscape has gone into second gear. •



Supporters of India's Congress party hold signs and symbols during a roadshow for Mansoor Ali Khan, an election candidate for Bengaluru central on April 3, 2024. Increasing threats to the world's largest democracy by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party have made opposition parties, civil society and independent observers sceptical of the process' impartiality. CREDIT: IDREES MOHAMMED / AFP











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