

GLOBAL
CONFERENCE
FOR

MEDIA
FREEDOM

NOVEMBER 16, 2020

**NEW CHALLENGES FOR
MEDIA FREEDOM AND
DEMOCRACY**

Shanthi Kalathil, National Endowment
for Democracy

20
20



NEW CHALLENGES FOR MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

Acknowledgment and disclaimer: The views and positions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development or the Government of Canada. The report is in its original language.



Executive summary

Media freedom and the health of democracy are intrinsically entwined. However, changes wrought by globalization, new technology and rising authoritarianism have had significant impacts on both. The information revolution has both benefited and weakened media systems. While media outlets can now reach billions of new information consumers, the same technological transformation has cratered old business models and left fewer channels for accurate information. Amidst these changes, anti-democratic and other malign actors have been quick to perceive opportunities presented by these broad alterations in the information ecosystem. Illiberal regimes and others have actively seized upon the new media environment to spread disinformation, fuel polarization and exploit democratic vulnerabilities. Authoritarian states have deployed considerable resources to manipulate, censor and shape the information space. Disinformation campaigns that crowd out credible information, alongside other manipulation techniques, have thus emerged as a significant threat to media freedom.

Partly based on the same data collection practices that power the information economy, mass surveillance has also become affordable and easily deployable. Even the perceived possibility of surveillance may have a chilling effect on freedom of expression in democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. In light of new challenges including empowered authoritarians and a constantly evolving technological environment, effective solutions are likely to require an overlapping combination of efforts from government, private sector, media and civil society entities. Moreover, given the relevance of all of these stakeholders to both media freedom and democracy, it is important that decisions that shape the information space be as inclusive as possible.

Background

For years, the nature of the self-sustaining and positive relationship between media freedom and democracy appeared self-evident. Democracy fundamentally rests on a well-informed electorate, which sources information from robust and independent media institutions. These, in turn, are sustained via public or private funding by that electorate.

Moreover, an independent media sector should ideally perform a number of roles that support accountability, transparency, participation and inclusion in democratic processes. The media provides accurate and credible news, facilitates informed public debate and discussion, holds the powerful to account and serves as a watchdog for the public interest. The open and accountable democratic environment fostered by these vital media functions also nurtures the long-term health and freedom of the media sector—which in turn acts as a fundamental building block of equitable development.¹

Idealized as this virtuous circle may have been, even the basic assumptions behind the democratic environment—media sector relationship are now being questioned. Changes wrought by globalization, new technology and rising authoritarianism have significantly weakened independent media. Studies have shown a steady decline in the freedom, capacity and influence of independent media over the past decade.² The challenges for the health and vibrancy of democratic systems around the world are profound, and not easily met.

Systemic changes

A number of interrelated systemic changes in the international environment—social, economic, political, technological—have had significant impacts on independent media around the world, and freedom of expression more generally. Most fundamental of these has been the information revolution, which has both benefited and weakened media systems. Emerging technology platforms have enabled media outlets to reach billions of new information consumers. But the same technological transformation has radically

altered old advertising models, and with them the financial foundation that sustained many forms of independent media in the past. As a result, national and local news outlets around the world have been shuttered in large numbers—a situation exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.³ This has left far fewer channels for accurate information.

Simultaneously, through these new technological platforms, media systems themselves have been democratized, enabling broad public participation in the creation and sharing of news and information. This rapid shift, enabling many-to-many communication models and upending the role of traditional media, was initially heralded as ushering in a new era of public participation and discussion that would deepen democracy. Indeed, the rapid growth of many-to-many platforms for communication did expand the space for debate on important policy questions, while including many previously left out of such discussions.

But with this came a sharp change in the “mediating” function of media—and the outsourcing of this component to non-transparent, privately owned algorithms. These algorithms govern not just what information is available to different populations, but also to whom, and how many, and with what frequency. This fundamental shift, implicating not just the content but the reach of speech, has consequences for both the public’s right to impart information as well as its right to receive information. The complex policy questions engendered are among the most hotly debated in democratic contexts around the world.

Foreign interference and disinformation campaigns

Even as these questions have arisen with urgency in democracies, anti-democratic and other malign actors have been quick to perceive opportunities presented by these broad changes in the information ecosystem. Illiberal regimes and others have actively seized upon the new media environment to spread disinformation, fuel polarization and exploit democratic vulnerabilities. Major authoritarian states have

¹ World Bank, “The Right to Tell: The Role of Mass Media in Economic Development,” WBI Development Studies, 2002. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/15212>

² Nicholas Benequista, “Confronting the Crisis in Independent Media: A Role for International Assistance,” Center for International Media Assistance, March 28, 2019.

<https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/confronting-the-crisis-in-independent-media/>

³ Marc Tracy, “News Media Outlets Have Been Ravaged by the Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/business/media/news-media-coronavirus-jobs.html>

deployed considerable resources to manipulate, censor and shape the information space. This has resulted in a confusing and polluted global information space in which the room for freedom of expression has constricted even as the numbers participating in that space have increased.

Disinformation campaigns that crowd out credible information have thus emerged as a significant threat to media freedom. Whether conducted by a country's domestic actors or foreign individuals or entities, these campaigns have now become a consistent feature of the media landscape. While their content is what has dominated the attention of policymakers, it is their data-collection ecosystem that is a new wrinkle of the information age. The collection and usage of personal data has fuelled ever more precise ways of finding and targeting audiences, to whom not only products but entire political belief systems can be sold. As Philip N. Howard, Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, has noted, the global economy of disinformation rests on the complex interaction between data sets, algorithms and information infrastructure—and determines its ultimate impact.⁴

All of these changes have significantly impacted media systems in long-established, well-consolidated democracies. Younger democracies and other vulnerable states face an even steeper challenge, given the more inhospitable political environment and relatively unguarded channels for foreign political interference. The convergence of these factors paints a bleak picture for media freedom in these environments, particularly when financial sustainability forces a race to the bottom on norms and standards. These vulnerabilities are particularly exacerbated in smaller, poorer countries where authoritarian and other antidemocratic actors find fertile ground to till: for instance, three European countries that have faced significant Russian information operations

are North Macedonia, Montenegro and Moldova.⁵

The global rise of authoritarianism and manipulation tactics

While disinformation is on the rise, it is not the only way in which antidemocratic and other malign actors can censor and manipulate the information space. As the democratic recession continues apace, authoritarian regimes have grown savvier in harnessing both new and old tools to threaten free expression. Beijing, for instance, has been studying and testing Kremlin disinformation tactics. But it has also trained consistent attention and resources on proactively censoring the global information space to suppress information it considers politically sensitive—whether mass internment in Xinjiang or democracy protests in Hong Kong.⁶ In their approach, the Chinese authorities have sought to directly manipulate elements of the information ecosystem at the source, whether through shaping and censoring their own emerging platforms or curbing accurate international news reporting through harassment of foreign journalists and visa revocation. These multiple methods—including, in particular, leveraging of the private sector—have long been used by the government to harness information within China's borders but are now being commonly used beyond them.

China and Russia are not the only states to perceive new opportunities for curtailing dissent and expression in the new information environment. As Freedom House has noted, mass surveillance, based on some of the same social media listening tools marketed commercially, has become affordable and easily deployable.⁷ Even the perceived possibility of surveillance may have a chilling effect on speech in democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. The full combination of these troubling trends has led to a decline in global

⁴ Philip N. Howard, "Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives," Yale University Press, 2020.

⁵ Edward Lucas, "Firming Up Democracy's Soft Underbelly: Authoritarian Influence and Media Vulnerability," National Endowment for Democracy/International Forum for Democratic Studies, February 2020. https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Firming-Up-Democracys-Soft-Underbelly-Authoritarian-Influence-and-Media-Vulnerability-Lucas.pdf?utm_source=forum-landing-page&utm_medium=site&utm_campaign=authoritarian-influence

⁶ Sarah Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence Since 2017," Freedom House, January 2020.

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/01152020_SR_China_Global_Megaphone_with_Recommendations_PDF.pdf

⁷ Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, "Freedom on the Net 2019: The Crisis of Social Media," Freedom House, 2020.

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf

Internet freedom for the 9th consecutive year in 2019, according to Freedom House.

Not all manipulation tactics are sophisticated or multifaceted. There has also been a connected rise in the bluntest of censorship techniques, Internet shutdowns and/or throttling, often used within backsliding or illiberal democracies to silence government critics or contain protests. The digital rights group Access Now documented at least 213 incidents of Internet shutdowns around the world in 2019, noting that the most commonly used justification for these actions has been a stated government desire to combat “fake news, hate speech or content promoting violence.”⁸ Internet throttling, a related technique in which governments force Internet service providers to slow service during sensitive political moments or crises, is also on the rise. Like shutdowns, internet throttling stifles access to information and threatens media freedom, the right to information and freedom of assembly.⁹

Considerations for stakeholders

To some extent, media freedom is tied to how well media organizations and journalists can keep pace with the complexities of the new information landscape. Shibboleths of broadsheet journalism no longer seem fit for the times. Advancing the best practices of independent journalism and preserving media freedom amidst the noise of disinformation campaigns has proven difficult for even the most well-resourced of organizations, of which there are only a handful around the world.

Newer media outlets, native to the online space, have experimented with different ways of responding to and at times covering these challenges. Some have focused on fact-checking and debunking, while others have chosen to cover the phenomenon of disinformation itself rather than simply navigate

around it in reporting.¹⁰ Such solutions are not straightforward, as disinformation spreaders may consider amplification of a manufactured rumor by an influential news organization a win, even if the amplification is in the form of debunking.¹¹ Specific techniques aside, some analysts maintain that applying political or technical fixes will be less fruitful unless the data collection practices underlying the business models of new information platforms are addressed.¹²

Calls for greater regulation of the information space now abound. Because government regulation of content is a difficult issue in many democracies and can lead to unanticipated consequences, it is useful to also consider a range of measures, including updating offline protections, fostering user choice, and amplifying credible, independent news.¹³ Moreover, some of the most encouraging initiatives are emerging from within civil society itself. Some observers argue that stakeholders should start by agreeing on a blueprint for action on norm building, applicable to both consumers and producers in the information space, and drawing on practices of responsible behaviour from professional associations, journalism schools, industry bodies and others.¹⁴

Finally, development of digital literacy programs is an area in which finding consensus on the need is easy, but understanding what types of efforts are most successful, under what circumstances, and at what scale is more difficult. Not even the most well-resourced digital literacy program, however, can address the underlying complexities that lie at the heart of the information ecosystem. In light of new challenges, including empowered authoritarians and a constantly evolving technological environment, effective solutions are likely to require an overlapping combination of government, private sector, media institution and

⁸ Access Now, “Targeted, Cut Off, and Left in the Dark,” undated.

<https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/02/KeplitOn-2019-report-1.pdf>

⁹ Samuel Woodhams, “The Rise of Internet Throttling: A Hidden Threat to Media Development,” Center for International Media Assistance, May 20, 2020.

<https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/the-rise-of-bandwidth-throttling-a-hidden-threat-to-media-development/>

¹⁰ Dean Jackson, “The Lie is Not the Story: Practicing Journalism in the Disinformation Age,” Power 3.0, April 5, 2018. <https://www.power3point0.org/2018/04/05/the-lie-is-not-the-story-practicing-journalism-in-the-disinformation-age/>

¹¹ Claire Wardle, “5 Lessons for Reporting in an Age of Disinformation,” First Draft, Dec. 27, 2018.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/5-lessons-for-reporting-in-an-age-of-disinformation/>

¹² Nathalie Maréchal, Rebecca MacKinnon, and Jessica Dheere, “Getting to the Source of Infodemics: It’s the Business Model,” Ranking Digital Rights, May 2020. https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Getting_to_the_Source_of_Infodemics_Its_the_Business_Model_2020-05.pdf

¹³ Karen Kornbluh, Ellen P. Goodman and Eli Weiner, “Safeguarding Digital Democracy: Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative Roadmap,” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 2020, No. 4. https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Safeguarding%20Democracy%20against%20Disinformation_v7.pdf

¹⁴ Edward Lucas, *ibid.*

civil society efforts. Moreover, given the relevance of all of these stakeholders to both media freedom and democracy, it is important that decisions that shape the information space be as inclusive as possible.