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Freedom House

FREEDOM AND THE MEDIA 2019:
A Downward Spiral

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ON THE COVER

A journalist covers the scene as several hundred people rally against television propaganda in front of state outlet TVP's headquarters in Warsaw, Poland. Photo Credit: Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

I. *Freedom and the Media: A Downward Spiral*

by Sarah Repucci, *Senior Director for Research and Analysis*

Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) cheer as they wait for a speech by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi during a campaign rally. Photo Credit: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP/Getty Images.

Key Findings

- *Freedom of the media has been deteriorating around the world over the past decade.*

- *In some of the most influential democracies in the world, populist leaders have overseen concerted attempts to throttle the independence of the media sector.*

- *While the threats to global media freedom are real and concerning in their own right, their impact on the state of democracy is what makes them truly dangerous.*

- *Experience has shown, however, that press freedom can rebound from even lengthy stints of repression when given the opportunity. The basic desire for democratic liberties, including access to honest and fact-based journalism, can never be extinguished.*

The fundamental right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press is under attack, and part of the assault has come from an unexpected source. Elected leaders in many democracies, who should be press

freedom's staunchest defenders, have made explicit attempts to silence critical media voices and strengthen outlets that serve up favorable coverage. The trend is linked to a global decline in democracy itself: The erosion of press freedom is both a symptom of and a contributor to the breakdown of other democratic institutions and principles, a fact that makes it especially alarming.

According to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* data, media freedom has been deteriorating around the world over the past decade, with new forms of repression taking hold in open societies and authoritarian states alike. The trend is most acute in Europe, previously a bastion of well-established freedoms, and in Eurasia and the Middle East, where many of the world's worst dictatorships are concentrated. If democratic powers cease to support media independence at home and impose no consequences for its restriction abroad, the free press corps could be in danger of virtual extinction.

Experience has shown, however, that press freedom can rebound from even lengthy stints of repression when given the opportunity. The basic desire for democratic liberties, including access to honest and fact-based journalism, can never be extinguished, and it is never too late to renew the demand that these rights be granted in full.

Attacks on press freedom in democracies

In some of the most influential democracies in the world, large segments of the population are no longer receiving unbiased news and information. This is not because journalists are being thrown in jail, as might occur in authoritarian settings. Instead, the media have fallen prey to more nuanced efforts to throttle their independence. Common methods include government-backed ownership changes, regulatory and financial pressure, and public denunciations of honest journalists. Governments have also offered proactive support to friendly outlets through measures such as lucrative state contracts, favorable regulatory decisions, and preferential access to state information. The goal is to make the press serve those in power rather than the public.

The problem has arisen in tandem with right-wing populism, which has undermined basic freedoms in many democratic countries. Populist leaders present themselves as the defenders of an aggrieved majority against liberal elites and ethnic minorities whose loyalties they question, and argue that the interests of the nation—as they define it—should override democratic principles like press freedom, transparency, and open debate.

Among Free countries in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report, 19 percent (16 countries) have endured a reduction in their press freedom scores over the past five years. This is consistent with a key finding of *Freedom in the World*—that democracies in general are undergoing a decline in political rights and civil liberties. It has become painfully apparent that a free press can never be taken for granted, even when democratic rule has been in place for decades.

Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić's administration in Serbia have had great success in snuffing out critical journalism, blazing a trail for populist forces elsewhere. Both leaders have consolidated media ownership in the hands of their cronies, ensuring that the outlets with the widest reach support the government and smear its perceived opponents. In Hungary, where the process has advanced much further, nearly 80 percent of the media are owned by government allies. *

Cultivation of progovernment media is spreading to neighboring states. The leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria, until recently part of that country's ruling coalition, was caught on video attempting to collude with Russians to purchase the largest national newspaper and infuse its coverage with partisan bias. Score declines linked to economic manipulation of media—including cases in which the government directs advertising to friendly outlets or encourages business allies to buy those that are critical—were more common across Europe over the past five years than in other parts of the world.

> *"The erosion of press freedom is both a symptom of and a contributor to the breakdown of other democratic institutions and principles…"*
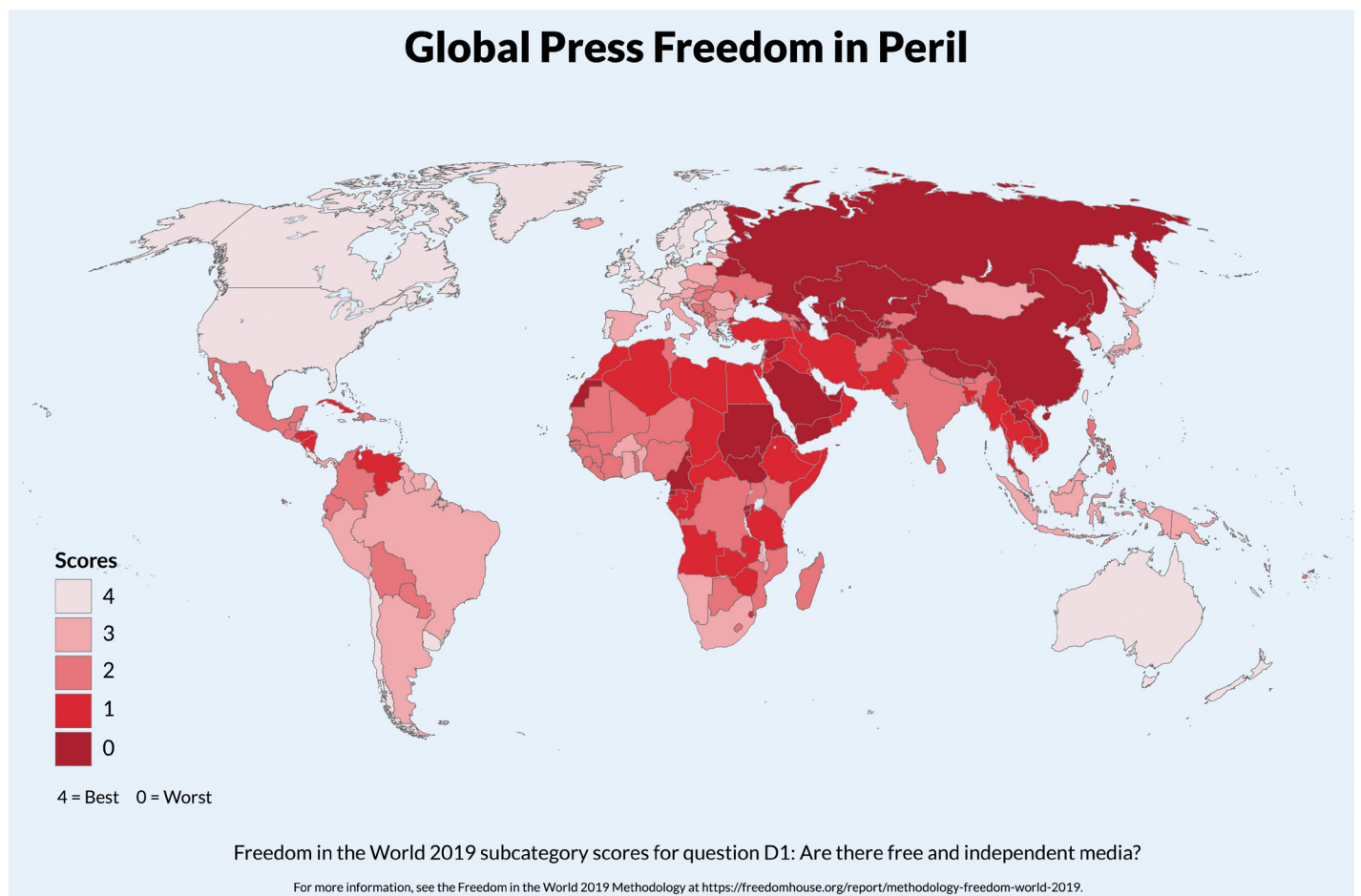
Such tactics of influence and interference are a relatively recent phenomenon on the continent, which has generally displayed strong support for press freedom since the fall of the Berlin Wall 30 years ago.

In Israel, one of the few democracies in the Middle East, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly excoriated investigative reporters and now faces corruption charges for allegedly offering regulatory favors to two major media firms in exchange for positive coverage. Although Netanyahu has resisted efforts to formally indict and try him on these charges, the evidence suggests that the prime minister was willing to sacrifice press freedom in order to maintain political power. Many voters apparently accepted this tradeoff in the April 2019 elections, putting Netanyahu's party and its allies in a position to form a new ruling coalition.

India, the world's most populous democracy, is also sending signals that holding the government accountable is not part of the press's responsibility. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has supported campaigns to discourage speech that is "antinational," and government-aligned thugs have raided critical journalists' homes and offices. The media have become widely flattering of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who won reelection last month, amid allegations that the government issues directives on how the press should cover his activities and intimidates journalists who push back. The government has also been selective in the allocation of television licenses, effectively excluding unfriendly outlets from the airwaves.

In perhaps the most concerning development of recent years, press freedom has come under unusual pressure in the United States, the world's leading democratic power. Although key news organizations remain strong and continue to produce vigorous reporting on those in office, President Donald Trump's continual vilification of the press has seriously exacerbated an ongoing erosion of public confidence in the mainstream media. Among other steps, the president has repeatedly threatened to strengthen libel laws, revoke the licenses of certain broadcasters, and damage media owners'

Global Press Freedom in Peril

Scores

4
3
2
1
0

4 = Best   0 = Worst

Freedom in the World 2019 subcategory scores for question D1: Are there free and independent media?

For more information, see the Freedom in the World 2019 Methodology at https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2019.

other business interests. The US constitution provides robust protections against such actions, but President Trump's public stance on press freedom has had a tangible impact on the global landscape. Journalists around the world now have less reason to believe that Washington will come to their aid if their basic rights are violated.

Fueling a global decline

The breakdown of global press freedom is closely related to the broader decline of democracy that Freedom House has tracked for the past 13 years. Although the press is not always the first institution to be attacked when a country's leadership takes an antidemocratic turn, repression of free media is a strong indication that other political rights and civil liberties are in danger. Assaults on media independence are frequently associated with power grabs by new or incumbent leaders, or with entrenched regimes' attempts to crush perceived threats to their control.

Over the past five years, countries that were already designated as Not Free in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report were also those most likely to suffer a decline in their press freedom scores, with 28 percent of Not Free countries experiencing such a drop. Partly Free countries were almost equally likely to experience a gain as a decline in press freedom, reflecting the volatility of these middle performers and the complex forces influencing their trajectory. The worsening records of Not Free states, combined with the negative trend among Free countries, have driven the overall decline in global press freedom.

While populist leaders in democracies seek to secure and build on their gains by taming the press, established autocratic governments continue to tighten the screws on dissenting voices, as any breach in their media dominance threatens to expose official wrongdoing or debunk official narratives. In Russia in 2018, authorities moved to block the popular messaging application Telegram after the company refused to hand over its encryption keys to security officials. The government in Cameroon shut down internet service in the restive Anglophone region for most of last year, a heavy-handed reaction to protests and a nascent insurgency stemming from long-standing discrimination against the large Anglophone minority. In Myanmar, two Reuters journalists were sentenced to seven years in prison after a flawed trial in which the court ignored plain evidence that they had been entrapped to halt their investigation of military atrocities against the Rohingya minority; although they were recently pardoned, they were not exonerated.

The downgrades in various countries can be attributed to a range of legal, political, and economic factors, but some stand out as more concerning and pervasive. Violence and harassment aimed at particular journalists and media outlets have played some role in 63 percent of the countries with a press freedom score reduction over the past five years. The 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi was the most infamous recent case, but it was hardly unique. Journalists in El Salvador received death threats in 2015 after they uncovered stories of police abuse and extrajudicial killings. A Malian journalist who was outspoken about rampant political corruption was shot in the chest in 2017. Also that year, a Tanzanian journalist investigating the murders of local officials disappeared, and his fate remains a mystery.

Trends in press freedom differ by region. Since 2014, there has been no net change in the average press freedom score for the Americas or Asia-Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa has seen a slight increase of 3 percent. But the average scores in the two least free regions of the world, Eurasia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), declined by 9 percent and 11 percent, respectively, while press freedom in Europe—where four out of every five countries are Free—dropped by 8 percent.

In Eurasia and MENA, the media in the past year have faced an intensification of traditional challenges. Examples include new legislative restrictions in Belarus, further arrests and convictions in Lebanon, and heightened insecurity and fatalities in war-torn Yemen. These developments illustrate the ways in which already difficult environments can grow steadily worse in the absence of meaningful international support for media independence and other fundamental rights.

Even in the regions where average scores were more stable, press freedom has come

"In perhaps the most concerning development of recent years, press freedom has come under unusual pressure in the United States, the world's leading democratic power."

under threat in individual countries. A new privacy law in Nepal restricts collection of the personal information of any individual, including public officials, exploiting legitimate concerns about privacy to suppress media scrutiny of political leaders' conflicts of interest or corruption. In Pakistan, security agents have allegedly warned journalists against coverage of taboo subjects, such as abuses by the military, or given reporters instructions on how to cover specific political issues. The regime in China has worked to close off the last remaining avenues for accessing uncensored information by increasing pressure on private technology companies to police the content on their platforms more assiduously.

Guiding lights in the darkness

The picture of global press freedom is not entirely bleak. The most encouraging examples of democratic progress over the past two years—Ethiopia, Malaysia, Armenia, Ecuador, and The Gambia—have nearly all featured parallel gains in their media environments. Among these five countries, only Armenia failed to register an improvement in its press freedom score in the same year as its initial political opening in *Freedom in the World*. This correlation underscores once again the close relationship between media freedom and political change: Just as antidemocratic power grabs often involve attacks on independent media, a reformist leadership is defined in part by its willingness to accept criticism from a free press. And just as restrictions on media freedom frequently precede the erosion of other rights, the removal of such restrictions facilitates and catalyzes further democratic advancements.

The improvements in these countries also point to the resilience of independent journalism, even after years of repression. In Malaysia and Ecuador, the lifting of political pressure on the media allowed independent outlets to rebound from censorship and previously progovernment outlets to produce less obsequious coverage. In Ethiopia, outlets that had been operating from abroad were able to return to the country. In The Gambia, persecuted journalists returned from exile, and more locals have decided to enter the profession.

Media freedom can recover much more quickly after a period of authoritarian governance than some other elements of democracy, such as the rule of law. But it is also subject to rapid reversals. The Arab Spring provides a cautionary tale. Soon after the 2011 uprisings, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya all recorded improvements in press freedom in *Freedom in the World*. All have since faced setbacks. Like democracy itself, press freedom is not an end state that remains secure once it is achieved—it must be nurtured and defended against the forces that oppose it.

The media and democracy

While the threats to global media freedom are real and concerning in their own right, their impact on the state of democracy is what makes them truly dangerous. A free and independent media sector that can keep the population informed and hold leaders to account is as crucial for a strong and sustainable democracy as free and fair elections. Without it, citizens cannot make informed decisions about how they are ruled, and abuse of power, which is all but inevitable in any society, cannot be exposed and corrected.

A review of some of the countries that have faced potential turning points in the last year illustrates how the media's ability to support democracy depends on their freedom to operate independently.

Journalists played a key role in the April 2019 ouster of authoritarian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, not only by reporting on antigovernment protests but also by staging their own demonstrations when major news outlets failed to give due attention to the popular movement. However, the frequent arrests of critical journalists that took place under Bouteflika have continued since his resignation, an indication that the unfolding leadership transition may be less revolutionary than many have hoped.

Before Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir was removed from office, also in April, the population was accustomed to domestic news outlets that failed to provide unbiased and substantive information. Citizen journalists and

exile-based outlets filled the gap, disseminating news and images largely via the internet. As frustration with al-Bashir's misrule grew throughout the winter and he perceived the extent of the threat to his power, his regime cracked down, arresting journalists who covered mass protests and revoking the credentials of some foreign reporters. As in Algeria, journalists staged their own protests. Military commanders attempted to placate the public after al-Bashir's arrest, announcing the end of media censorship and tacitly acknowledging that a perception of increased press freedom would help consolidate their control. But journalists are skeptical of such declarations by the junta, and they have joined other protesters in pressing for a transfer of power to civilian leaders who can oversee a genuine democratic opening.

In Venezuela, media repression has increased since the opposition-controlled National Assembly designated Juan Guaidó as acting president in January. Combined with repeated electricity blackouts, this pressure from the authoritarian regime of Nicolás Maduro has severely hampered efforts by media outlets in the country to inform the public about political events and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. But a handful of resilient journalists have continued to disseminate news through social media, the internet, and international partners. One reporting group has developed technology to record video with low bandwidth on mobile devices and then automatically delete it after transfer to a secure server, reducing the risk of reprisals against journalists who are detained and searched. Journalists' ability to document opposition activities as well as the brutality of the regime response has helped to galvanize international support for the democracy movement.

In order to address the information gap on the ground in Venezuela, some media outlets have also forged direct relationships with subsets of the population. Journalists enter communities that have had limited access to objective news under Maduro and report on local stories. This fosters public trust and makes residents more receptive to other impartial news. Despite these valiant efforts, however, the production of reliable, objective news that is accessible to Venezuelans remains a daunting challenge.

Armenia has made far more progress in its democratic transition in the past year, with protests leading to fresh elections and a new, reformist government. As in Sudan, most television channels initially avoided covering the mass demonstrations. But a small contingent of independent outlets, including Civilnet and Azatutyun, was able to provide steady in-depth reporting, including live streams and skillful use of social media. The information flow helped the popular movement to gain momentum, increasing pressure on establishment forces and legitimizing the rising new leadership. These outlets also helped stem disinformation spread by the former regime.

There is an obvious tension between journalists who are attempting to perform their proper democratic function and antidemocratic regimes that are determined to retain power. The innovative and courageous work of independent reporters offers hope that even in the most desperate circumstances, those who are committed to distributing information in the public interest can find a way. But these journalists alone cannot address the needs of billions of people who still have access to little more than their government's narrative and must rely on their own instincts and observations to assess the claims of corrupt and abusive leaders.

> *"There is an obvious tension between journalists who are attempting to perform their proper democratic function and antidemocratic regimes that are determined to retain power."*

Further analysis

This essay is the first in a series of four on the links between media freedom and democracy.

In "The Implications for Democracy of China's Globalizing Media Influence," Sarah Cook looks at the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party is expanding its overseas influence operations through involvement in news reporting, content dissemination, public debate, and in some cases electoral politics outside China. Even in settings where Beijing has not yet attempted to undermine free expression and access to information, the groundwork is being laid for future interference, with insidious implications for democracy.

In "The Illiberal Toolbox for Co-opting the Media," Zselyke Csaky analyzes the toolbox that democratically elected but illiberal leaders use to co-opt the media. She examines the legal, extralegal, and economic tactics deployed in Serbia and Hungary, both of which declined to Partly Free in *Freedom in the World* this year. The essay also describes the conditions that make media environments vulnerable to illiberal co-optation.

In "Why Social Media Are Still Worth Saving," Adrian Shahbaz writes about the extent to which major technology platforms such as Google and Facebook have disrupted the online media ecosystem, for better and worse, around the globe. The essay analyzes how authoritarians and propagandists manipulate digital media to undermine democracy, and proposes a new partnership between tech companies and news media to support high-quality journalism.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for policymakers in democratic nations will help ensure the sustainability of independent media worldwide:

- **Ensure that their actions do not excuse or inspire violations of press freedom.** Democratic nations have a particularly important role to play in maintaining media freedom. Words matter, and when US officials verbally attack the press or fail to swiftly and vigorously condemn acts of repression such as Khashoggi's murder, it sends a signal to undemocratic leaders around the world that assaults on the press and crimes against journalists are permissible.

- **Take strong and immediate action against any violations of media freedom globally through press statements, phone calls, meetings, letters, and the imposition of targeted sanctions on perpetrators.** This includes speaking out against violence against journalists and authorities' failure to identify and prosecute attackers, restrictions on media access, blocking of websites, and censorship on particular topics.

- **Stand up publicly for the value of a free press, and support civic education that will inform the next generation.** Press freedom is one of the most fundamental pillars of American democracy, and constitutional protections in the United States are stronger than in any other country in the world. Citizens could easily forget this amid media mudslinging and incendiary commentary. Political leaders and teachers should reiterate the extent to which we all benefit from professional journalists who hold those in power to account.

- **Ensure that foreign policy and assistance prioritizes support for democratic principles, including media freedom, as the foundation of national security and economic prosperity.** The goal of foreign assistance is to bring recipient countries to the point that they no longer need it. In that sense, it is shortsighted for donor governments to invest funding overseas without shoring up press freedom. National security and economic prosperity are strongest in nations where democratic rights are protected, and a free press is a key watchdog of democracy. Foreign aid specifically focused on bolstering independent media by providing technical training and emergency assistance is especially needed given the threats journalists currently face. Countries that have experienced recent expansions in press freedom, such as Angola, Ethiopia, Malaysia, and Ecuador, are particularly vulnerable to backsliding and require special focus.

- **Support social media as an alternative outlet for free expression in repressive environments.** Innovative alternatives to state-controlled media regularly spring up on social media, including recently in Venezuela, Armenia, and Sudan. Related technology can be used to circumvent censorship and keep reporters anonymous where needed. Donor agencies should provide funding for technology that increases journalistic freedom.

II. *The Implications for Democracy of China's Globalizing Media Influence*

by Sarah Cook, *Senior Research Analyst for East Asia*

A newspaper consumer reads a copy of the Africa edition of Beijing's state-run China Daily newspaper in front of a newsstand in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo Credit: TONY KARUMBA/AFP/Getty Images.

Key Findings

- *The Chinese government, Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and various proxies have rapidly expanded their influence over media production and dissemination channels abroad. As a result, the CCP has enhanced its ability to interfere aggressively in other countries, should it choose to do so.*

- *Chinese authorities influence news media content around the world through three primary strategies: promoting the CCP's narratives, suppressing critical viewpoints, and managing content delivery systems.*

- *These efforts have already undercut key features of democratic governance and best practices for media freedom by undermining fair competition, interfering with Chinese diaspora communities, weakening the rule of law, and establishing channels for political meddling.*

- *Actions by policymakers and media development donors in democracies will play a critical role in coming years in countering the potential negative impact of Beijing's foreign media influence campaigns.*

Media coverage of China's increasing global presence has often focused on the country's rapidly growing economic impact, and potentially negative implications for foreign countries. These anxieties, while deserving of sober consideration and policy responses, threaten to overshadow the risks to democracy posed by the expanding global influence of the authoritarian CCP—including through its efforts to harness media outside China to advance the party's agenda. The CCP has developed the world's most multilayered, dynamic, and sophisticated apparatus of media control at home, while vastly expanding its ability to influence media reporting, content dissemination, public debate, and in some cases, electoral politics, outside China. And where the potential for undermining press freedom has not been activated yet, the groundwork is being laid for future influence, if—or more likely when—Beijing decides to deploy it.

The expansion of the CCP's foreign media influence is a global campaign, and the United States is among its targets. The results have already affected the news consumption of millions of Americans. Moreover, the varied and aggressive ways in which the CCP seeks to influence media narratives abroad undermine democratic governance and electoral competition in other countries, including US allies like Taiwan. The cumulative effects of these efforts, if unchecked, could have far-reaching implications for democratic governance, press freedom, and US influence worldwide.

The many facets of Communist Party overseas media influence

The CCP's global media influence campaigns are multifaceted. Traditionally, they have sought to promote positive views of China and a benign perspective of the CCP's authoritarian regime; encourage investment in China and openness to Chinese investment and strategic engagement abroad; and suppress or curtail negative coverage of China's political system. In recent years, a new narrative has presented China's authoritarian governance style as a model for developing countries, and in some cases simultaneously challenged the attractiveness of both democracy and US international leadership.

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Promoting CCP narratives

In a 2016 speech, CCP leader Xi Jinping told state media, "Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles."[1] Even prior to Xi's ascension to the top of the Communist Party, the Chinese government had begun investing billions of dollars to expand the global reach of state media outlets. Through a variety of news distribution partnerships and through social media, Chinese state media content now reaches hundreds of millions of people in numerous countries and languages. Efforts to more deeply penetrate foreign media markets and spread preferred CCP narratives show no sign of ebbing. A November 2018 *Financial Times* investigation found that the Chinese state-run television broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) provides free content to 1,700 foreign news organizations.[2] Between September and November 2018 alone, China's official Xinhua News Agency signed news exchange agreements with wire services in Australia, Belarus, Laos, India, and Bangladesh.

The CCP also embeds its narratives in foreign media through proxies and allied figures, including Chinese diplomats, friendly media owners and journalists, and foreign politicians with business interests in China. For example, New Zealand member of Parliament Todd McClay, who attended a CCP-organized dialogue in 2017, recently referred to reeducation camps in Xinjiang as "vocational training centers," echoing the terminology used by the Chinese government to justify the detention and political indoctrination of over one million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities. Similarly, former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder—who has profited after leaving office by aiding German companies in their contacts with Chinese officials—dismissed the mass detentions as "gossip" in a 2018 interview with Reuters. In the developing world in particular, the CCP's foreign propaganda efforts appear to have had some effect in boosting or retaining a positive image of China, and Xi Jinping personally.[3]

Suppressing critical viewpoints

The CCP and its agents, allies, and proxies also work to suppress critical coverage of China abroad. Chinese diplomats downplay negative coverage of China in op-eds and media appearances, particularly on topics like mass detentions in Xinjiang or the troubles facing China's economy. Diplomats have repeatedly engaged in outright harassment of journalists in order to curb criticism, as in early 2019, when Chinese diplomats in Sweden and Russia intimidated reporters who had written critically about the country's economy, or in support of democracy in Taiwan.[4] The Chinese government and its proxies also discourage investigative journalism into the dark underbelly of modern China or the CCP's overseas political influence efforts by obstructing the work of foreign correspondents in China, and threatening foreign journalists with costly defamation suits in courts based in their home countries.

The CCP has also successfully co-opted media owners, who then marginalize critical reporting in their own outlets, notably in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and outlets serving the Chinese diaspora. Occasionally, this extends to English-language media,[5] as occurred in September 2018 when a partially Chinese-owned newspaper in South Africa discontinued a weekly column after its author wrote about abuses in Xinjiang.[6] Indirect pressure is also applied via proxies—including advertisers, satellite firms, technology companies, and foreign governments—which take action to prevent or punish the publication of content critical of Beijing, while undermining the financial viability of news outlets critical of the CCP.[7] Separately, cyberattacks and physical assaults that are not conclusively traceable to central Chinese authorities but serve the party's aims have taken place.

Managing content delivery systems

Finally, over the past five years, technologies that deliver content to news consumers have opened new avenues for Chinese government influence abroad. In Africa, the Chinese television distribution firm StarTimes—which has become a key player in the transition from analog to digital television in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and elsewhere—holds the power to determine which stations its viewers can access. Although privately owned, StarTimes has benefited from a close relationship with the Chinese government and occasional subsidies. Meanwhile, Chinese tech giant Tencent's WeChat instant messaging service, which is ubiquitous in China, now reaches an estimated 100 to 200 million people outside the country. Recent evidence suggests these communications are increasingly monitored and censored according to Chinese government standards.

Chinese state media's increasing number of news distribution deals, Chinese diplomats' aggressive acts of media suppression, and the institutionalization of Chinese content delivery systems abroad point to escalations in the ability—and willingness—of Chinese officials to undermine independent news coverage abroad, and ultimately weaken the watchdog role played by media in democratic settings.

Implications for democratic governance and media freedom globally

The strategies Chinese officials, state media, and other actors employ to exercise influence over media around the world have the potential to undermine key features of democratic governance and best practices for media freedom. In some cases, this potential is already being realized.

Flouting transparency

Chinese state media publications distributed in other countries routinely omit any mention of government links that would signal their origin to uninitiated news consumers. Indeed, it is precisely because news consumers in many countries are typically not attracted to or convinced by Chinese government propaganda that layers of obfuscation are employed to distance content from its authoritarian origins.

Chinese state media thus employ deceptive taglines in their advertising. The *People's Daily*, for example, touts itself to potential foreign followers of its Facebook page as "the biggest newspaper in China," making no mention of the fact that it is the CCP's official mouthpiece. Such disingenuous self-identification extends to paid print advertorials. The state-run *China Daily*'s "China Watch" supplement, which has been published in mainstream media outlets across 30 countries[8] —including in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*—rarely includes explicit mention of the Chinese outlet's official ties.

In many cases, this lack of transparency extends to the economic arrangements surrounding various activities, be it how much *China Daily* is paying for each advertorial, how many and which journalists travel to China on government-paid trips, or what financial benefits news exchanges provide to each party.

These CCP efforts to conceal the origin, scale, and nature of Chinese state media involvement abroad compromise the integrity of resulting public debate, and erode cultures of transparency at outside media operations.

"Chinese investments in foreign communication sectors have raised concerns about conflicts of interest, corruption, and questionable bidding practices."

Undermining competition

The CCP executes a variety of strategies that undermine fair competition between state-owned or friendly news outlets and critical ones, often reducing the latter's financial viability.

Chinese government obstruction or imposition of penalties on outlets viewed as critical, in addition to limiting their audience, can prompt stock losses and dent income from advertising. The 2012 blocking of the Chinese-language web edition of the *New York Times*, for example, resulted in lost advertising revenue and a 20 percent overnight drop in the paper's stock value. Chinese government representatives also pressure businesses not to place advertisements in critical outlets. As a result of such efforts, Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* lost advertising contracts from players in the lucrative real estate industry and two London-based investment banks. In 2019, the paper's remaining advertisers have faced strident public denunciations from former Hong Kong chief executive CY Leung, currently the vice chairman of a mainland government advisory body.[9] Damaging cyberattacks by China-based actors against overseas Chinese or international media—a regular occurrence for some key targets—also impose financial costs on cash-strapped outlets, which must pay for clean-up and prevention efforts.

The Chinese government and its partners have also found ways to provide other advantages to Chinese state media abroad relative to competitors. For example, after overseeing the transition from analog to digital television in a number of countries in Africa, StarTimes has prioritized Chinese state media channels in its package offerings at the expense of independent international news stations. In Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, television packages that include channels like BBC World Service cost more than basic versions with local channels and Chinese state media. More generally, as Beijing has expanded its aid and investment in foreign media sectors, it has tended to favor state-owned outlets over independent, private competitors, mirroring the media landscape in China.[10] In other instances, apparent behind-the-scenes pressure by Chinese officials has resulted in critical media outlets like the US-based New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV) being deprived of press credentials to newsworthy venues—like the UN General Assembly[11] —while Chinese state-media have retained reporting access.

Interfering with diaspora communities

Twenty years ago, many Chinese in the diaspora got their news from relatively independent papers or broadcasting operations based out of Hong Kong or Taiwan. Today, Chinese state media or pro-Beijing private outlets are more influential, and thus more able to encourage diaspora voters to hold perspectives similar to Beijing's and to back policies in their home countries that are advantageous to the CCP.

In the United States, the CCP's ability to influence media consumed by Chinese Americans is particularly evident in the cable television market, which CCTV dominates relative to the Taiwanese station ETTV and the US-based NTDTV.

[12] Reports of behind-the-scenes Chinese pressure on US cable companies and the online popularity of stations like NTDTV relative to CCTV indicate that something other than market forces are at play in shaping this hierarchy.[13] Chinese officials also cultivate partnerships with stakeholders in privately owned, US-based Chinese-language media outfits.[14]

CCP authorities exert enormous influence over the Chinese-language Australian media, where most such publications, with notable exceptions run by dissident communities, are pro-Beijing.[15] The few independent diaspora publications face direct obstructions to their operations by Chinese officials, as occurred last year, when diplomats from the Chinese consulate in Sydney bullied a local council into banning the *Vision China Times* from sponsoring a Chinese New Year event and convinced at least ten businesses to pull their advertisements.[16] CCP interference in Canada's media market was exposed by the separate firings of two journalists at the *Global Chinese Press* after they published content deemed by executives to be displeasing to Beijing. In New Zealand, the CCP's long-term efforts to co-opt diaspora outlets—and with them coverage of local politics—has left the diaspora in a state, according to one Chinese scholar, where "the Chinese community can only realistically aspire to political representation by its own members through individuals approved by Beijing."[17]

CCP control of news distribution outside China is further increasing as WeChat's popularity expands in the diaspora, and as politicians correspondingly use the service to communicate with Chinese diaspora constituents. In Canada, WeChat censors deleted a member of Parliament's message to constituents praising Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protesters, manipulated dissemination of news reports related to Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou's arrest, and blocked broader media coverage of Chinese government corruption and leading officials. In the United States, Chinese Americans have seen WeChat posts silenced in group conversations about local Asian American political issues. In Australia, a recent study of news sources available to the Chinese diaspora found negligible political coverage of China on the WeChat channels of Chinese-language news providers. Incredibly, between March and August 2017, none of the WeChat channels published a single article on Chinese politics, despite the run-up to the important 19th Party Congress that fall.
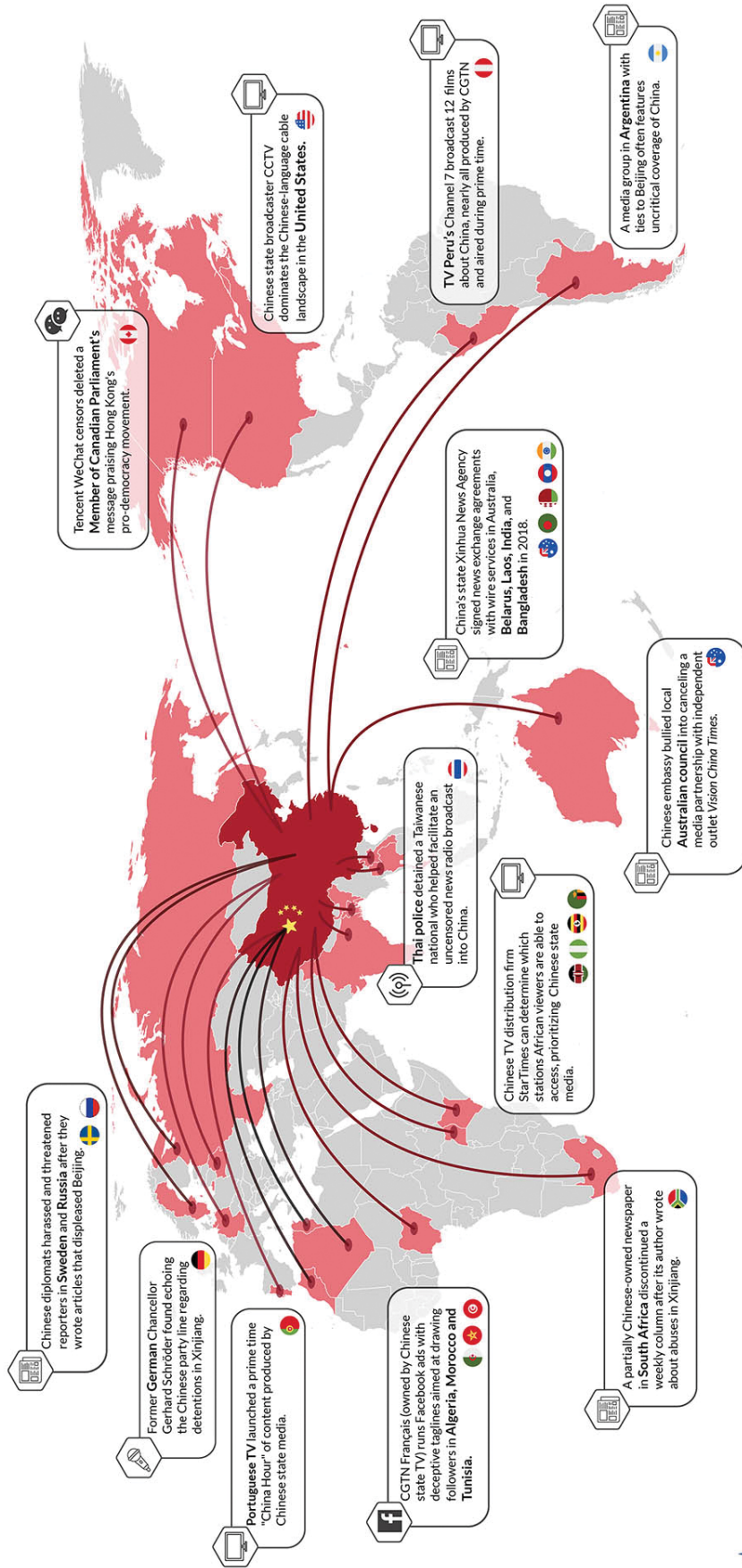
Establishing channels for political meddling

Although Chinese government efforts to use media influence for electoral meddling have been limited, important incidents have recently emerged. In Taiwan, several examples of "fake news" stories and doctored images originating in China tainting the reputation of the Taiwanese government have spread widely on social media, with some picked up and reported as fact by Taiwanese news stations.[18] Some observers believe such activities—alongside other factors— had an impact on local elections in November 2018 when the ruling party, which is disfavored by Beijing, suffered a number of surprising losses.[19] In April 2019, Taiwanese media reported that suspected Chinese government agents had made quiet offers to buy popular pro-Taiwan Facebook pages ahead of next year's general elections.[20] Recruitment advertisements for live streamers with pro-unification views have also emerged online.

The run-up to the 2018 midterm elections in the United States also saw CCP-backed efforts to reach American voters— in particular, soybean farmers. In July, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), the foreign-facing arm of China's state-owned broadcaster, released a two-minute animated video about the impact of bilateral trade tensions on the US soybean industry, concluding with the question, "Will voters there turn out to support Trump and the Republicans once they get hit in the pocketbooks?" In September, the print edition of the *Des Moines Register* included a *China Watch* supplement with articles describing how a trade war would harm American soybean farmers—content far more targeted and politicized than is typical for the China Watch insert. While the impact of these efforts was limited, they reflect willingness by Chinese state media to use established avenues of content dissemination in an effort to influence American voters.

These examples primarily involved propaganda and disinformation spreading on non-Chinese owned social media platforms like Facebook, LINE, and YouTube. But the growing use of the China-based WeChat application by both diaspora communities and non-Chinese speakers in countries like Malaysia, Mongolia, and Australia, creates a fertile foundation for future CCP electoral meddling. As Australian professor John Fitzgerald recently noted, "We are entering uncharted territory. WeChat was not designed to work in a democracy."

Beijing's Global Reach: Selected Cases of Chinese Media Influence Abroad

Tencent WeChat censors deleted a **Member of Canadian Parliament's** message praising Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV dominates the Chinese-language cable landscape in the **United States.**

TV Peru's Channel 7 broadcast 12 films about China, nearly all produced by CGTN and aired during prime time.

A media group in **Argentina** with ties to Beijing often features uncritical coverage of China.

China's state Xinhua News Agency signed news exchange agreements with wire services in Australia, **Belarus, Laos, India,** and **Bangladesh** in 2018.

Chinese embassy bullied local **Australian council** into canceling a media partnership with independent outlet *Vision China Times.*

Thai police detained a Taiwanese national who helped facilitate an uncensored news radio broadcast into China.

Chinese TV distribution firm StarTimes can determine which stations African viewers are able to access, prioritizing Chinese state media.

Chinese diplomats harassed and threatened reporters in **Sweden and Russia** after they wrote articles that displeased Beijing.

Former **German** Chancellor Gerhard Schröder found echoing the Chinese party line regarding detentions in Xinjiang.

Portuguese TV launched a prime time "China Hour" of content produced by Chinese state media.

CGTN Français (owned by Chinese state TV) runs Facebook ads with deceptive taglines aimed at drawing followers in **Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.**

A partially Chinese-owned newspaper in **South Africa** discontinued a weekly column after its author wrote about abuses in Xinjiang.

Freedom House

Undermining the rule of law

When attempting to restrict the operating space for independent diaspora or offshore Chinese media, Chinese officials have undermined the rule of law in other countries by maliciously harnessing court systems and flouting conflict-of-interest and other standards meant to ensure honest business practices.

Chinese officials have applied pressure on critics in foreign media through those countries' own court systems, and at times have pressured local officials to aid them. In Southeast Asia, several cases have emerged involving the Sound of Hope radio network. Based in the United States and founded by practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual group, which is banned in China, the station broadcasts uncensored news about rights abuses and corruption in China, among other debate-based and cultural programming. In Thailand, police, reportedly at the urging of the Chinese government, recently detained a Taiwanese national who had helped facilitate the station's broadcasts into China. The case was ongoing as of May 2019 and marked the third of its kind in the region; two similar cases have taken place in Indonesia and Vietnam—the latter resulting in two men being imprisoned.

Journalists and news outlets reporting critically about Chinese government actions or pro-Beijing officials outside mainland China also face threats of or actual defamation lawsuits. Leung, the former Hong Kong executive who has been denouncing *Apple Daily* advertisers, has brought a defamation suit in Hong Kong against a journalist with a separate outlet who wrote about his possible links to organized crime. In the Czech Republic, lawyers representing the powerful Chinese energy and financial conglomerate CEFC sent letters threatening lawsuits over articles linking the firm's owner to Chinese military intelligence.[21] In 2018, Chinese Australians with ties to the Chinese government filed defamation suits against two media companies over a high-profile investigative documentary examining the CCP's political influence in Australia.

In other instances, Chinese investments in foreign communications sectors have raised concerns about conflicts of interest, corruption, and questionable bidding practices. In Taiwan, attempts by a company owned by a China-friendly media tycoon to purchase stakes in a major cable company sparked fears that such cross-ownership would cause cable providers to advantage pro-Beijing stations at the expense of independent or pro-independence ones. (Following vigorous public debate, the deal was rejected by regulators.[22]) In Zambia, a partnership between the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and Chinese service provider StarTimes to create a joint venture—TopStar—reportedly violated domestic laws against any single media entity having licenses for both content transmission and content creation. The deal was also made without approval from either ZNBC's board or Zambia's parliament, leading to suspicions of corruption.

Future trajectory

Having an economically powerful authoritarian-led state rapidly expand its influence over media production and dissemination channels in other countries is a relatively new phenomenon. The current impact of Chinese media influence operations on democratic institutions and practice remains relatively limited, although it disproportionately affects diaspora communities. Nevertheless, the sheer scale, economic clout, and expanding network of relationships involved highlights the CCP's enhanced ability to interfere aggressively abroad, should it choose to do so. In addition, Beijing has demonstrated a willingness to ignore or violate outright diplomatic norms, human rights protections, and laws of foreign countries to achieve its ends.

However, the ability of the CCP to achieve its desired goals through its foreign media influence campaigns is still contested. Critical reporting about Chinese government actions within and outside of China appears with regularity, reaching large audiences. A number of independent Chinese-language media in Hong Kong, the United States, and elsewhere have become more professionalized and influential over the past several years. Civil society groups, media owners, and former officials in countries where Chinese influence is expanding have begun to speak out and urge their governments to uphold good governance standards when considering Chinese investment in communications infrastructure.

Looking ahead, individuals and organizations wishing to explore principled responses to the threat to global freedom and democracy posed by China's globalizing media influence should focus on investigating and exposing stealthy and deceptive activities, increasing the sophistication and scale of policy debates, and upholding local legal standards.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for policymakers in democratic nations will help counter the potential negative impact of Beijing's foreign media influence campaigns:

- **Increase transparency.** Foreign governments should adopt or enforce policies that enhance publicly available information about Chinese media influence activities in their countries. This could include reporting requirements for spending on paid advertorials, ownership structures, and other economic ties to Chinese government actors. In the United States, the Department of Justice should expand recent such requests to CGTN and Xinhua to other state-media or linked outlets, especially the Chinese-language CCTV.

- **Sanction diplomats.** When Chinese diplomats and security agents overstep their bounds and attempt to interfere with media reporting in other countries, the host government should vigorously protest, conveying that such behavior may violate diplomatic protocols. If the act in question repeats or is particularly egregious, the host government should consider declaring offenders persona non grata.

- **Scrutinize international WeChat censorship and surveillance.** Foreign parliaments should hold hearings to better understand the scope, nature, and impact of politicized censorship and surveillance on Tencent's WeChat platform, then explore avenues for pressuring the company to uphold the rights to free expression and privacy of users living in democratic countries. Politicians who choose to use WeChat to communicate with constituents should monitor messaging closely to detect any manipulations, register accounts with international phone numbers when possible, and republish messages on parallel international social media platforms.

- **Support independent overseas Chinese media.** Media development funders should make sure to include exile and diaspora media in funding, training, and other assistance opportunities for Chinese-language media. Foreign governments should proactively engage with such media, providing interviews and exploring other potential partnerships, while resisting pressure from Chinese diplomats to marginalize them. Funders should provide technical and financial support for responding to cyberattacks.

III. *A New Toolbox for Co-opting the Media*

by Zselyke Csaky, *Research Director, Europe & Eurasia*

Journalists of Hungary's biggest opposition newspaper Nepszabadsag and their supporters protest in Budapest. Photo Credit: ATTILA KISBENEDEK/AFP/Getty Images.

Key Findings

- *In their recent attempts to control the media, antidemocratic leaders in fragile democracies have deployed a new toolbox that includes economic, legal, and extralegal means to silence critical journalists and bolster friendly news outlets.*

- *In Hungary, the governing Fidesz party has all but consolidated its control over the media, and has built a parallel reality where government messages and disinformation reinforce each other.*

- *In Serbia, the process of co-optation has not yet been fully successful, but an environment of intimidation and harassment inhibits journalists' day-to-day work.*

- *Beyond these two countries, a lack of trust in the media, the onslaught of fake news, increasing political polarization, and the lack of a profitable business model all grind down press freedom, laying the groundwork for co-optation by ill-intentioned political actors.*

In April 2018, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party won their third parliamentary supermajority, securing 49 percent of the vote and trouncing the fragmented opposition. A year earlier, Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vučić won an outright victory in his bid for that country's presidency, taking 55 percent of the vote in the first round and preempting the need for a presidential runoff for the first time in Serbia's history.

Orbán and Vučić have both moved to dismantle institutional checks and balances and centralize power in their own hands; they have also benefited from European support and ineffectual domestic opposition. But it is their domination of the media that has underwritten their success.

Over the past few years, a new toolbox has emerged that illiberal leaders in fragile democracies deploy to control and co-opt the press, with the aim of ensuring their stay in power. This toolbox leaves out tactics like censorship, force, or outright intimidation of journalists. Instead, it contains a collection of methods used to harness structural conditions. Once successful co-optation has taken place, media are incorporated into the system as building blocks that prop up those in power.

The illiberal toolbox for co-opting the media contains a variety of legal, extralegal, and economic strategies for applying pressure to critical outlets, and supporting friendly ones.

Hungary serves as the primary example where this co-optation has been successful. And while Vučić and his allies have yet to consolidate control over Serbia's media, they are following in Orbán's footsteps. Both countries declined from Free to Partly Free in Freedom House's most recent *Freedom in the World* report.[1]

But it is not just Hungary and Serbia where media co-optation by ill-intentioned political leaders can threaten democracy. Globally, independent media foster public discussion and political participation that is grounded in well-informed opinions. These practices are essential to democracy, and today they are under strain. While the public sphere has expanded exponentially in the new millennium, this expansion has brought with it confusion, economic disruption, polarization, and an increasing level of distrust toward the institutions that underpin democracy. Of these institutions, the media are under particular duress.

The illiberal toolbox is particularly effective because it exploits the weaknesses of today's media environment, including the decline of trust in the press, and the crisis of the old business model. It takes place gradually and stealthily, and after a point it is difficult to reverse. This makes the media in many countries vulnerable—and by extension, threatens the very basis of democracy by undermining an essential check on unbridled government power.

The toolbox

Tilting the market

The application of financial and economic pressure is an effective means for co-opting outlets. This technique takes advantage of the changing media business model, which has left many outlets cash-strapped. Governments can also plausibly deny responsibility for this strategy's effects, as it relies on players on the market and in institutions supposedly outside the government's control.
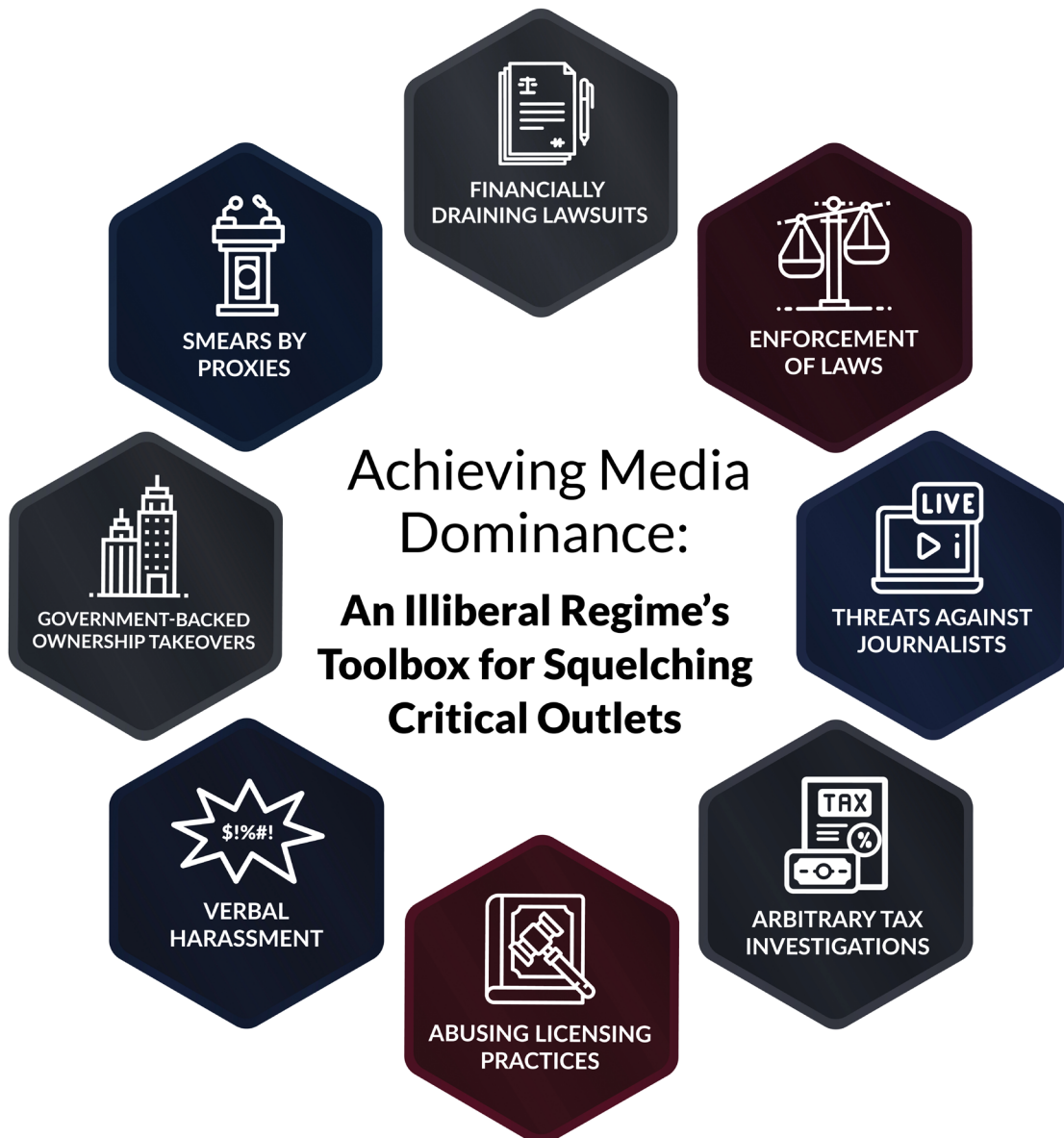
Hungary's Fidesz has perfected the use and abuse of market forces to take over media, and has extended its political power as a consequence. The near total consolidation of the media in progovernment hands accelerated starting in 2016. That year, the leading daily *Népszabadság* was shut down overnight in a hostile maneuver, and its publisher sold to Lőrinc Mészáros, a gasfitter-turned-oligarch and childhood friend of Orbán.[2] *Népszabadság*, like most other outlets in Hungary, had been struggling financially, but as the country's most-read daily it was among the few publications that had a realistic chance of turning its fortunes around.

Mészáros later built a media empire through the direct or indirect acquisition of television channels, dailies, weeklies, online media, and all of Hungary's regional newspapers.[3] He has since become Hungary's second-richest man,

increasing his wealth 300 times in the span of three years thanks to his political connections.[4] At the end of 2018, however, Mészáros and other government-friendly businessmen suddenly decided it was time to give up their holdings, offering all outlets for free to KESMA, a progovernment media conglomerate. KESMA unifies more than 400 media products, and exhibits in plain sight the astonishing domination of government-friendly media in Hungary.[5]

The degree of ownership consolidation seen in Hungary has yet to take hold in Serbia. However, a recent privatization drive handed several outlets to owners friendly with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).[6] Individual acquisitions by people close to the government occur as well. In late 2018, the brother of a top SNS official purchased two national television channels; he also owns three online portals, a radio station, and nine cable channels.[7]

An even more worrying form of financial pressure in Serbia is the harassment of media by the tax authorities. In 2017, the weekly *Vrjanske novine* received daily visits, which coincided with its publication of an interview with a former head of the tax authority; its owner ultimately announced that the paper could no longer withstand the pressure, and it ceased operations. In 2018, the news site Juzne Vesti, known for its critical reporting in the south of Serbia, was subjected to its fifth months-long tax investigation in five years.[8]

FINANCIALLY DRAINING LAWSUITS

ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS

SMEARS BY PROXIES

THREATS AGAINST JOURNALISTS

GOVERNMENT-BACKED OWNERSHIP TAKEOVERS

Achieving Media Dominance:

An Illiberal Regime's Toolbox for Squelching Critical Outlets

VERBAL HARASSMENT

ARBITRARY TAX INVESTIGATIONS

ABUSING LICENSING PRACTICES

Wielding the law

Governments occasionally deploy laws and regulations to intimidate or interfere with journalists, or to drain them of their resources. But the illiberal toolbox rarely contains instruments for the sort of blunt-force legal repression, such as censorship, that would prompt immediate condemnation by neighboring democracies and media monitors. Instead, it is the politicized implementation of technical laws that puts pressure on independent outlets.

For example, Hungary's media authority, set up by the government in 2011 and stacked with Fidesz loyalists, has used its powers to selectively refuse licenses to independent or opposition-leaning outlets. In 2012, the authority initiated what became a lengthy legal battle with the left-wing Klubradio channel, denying it a license and refusing to implement court decisions in the station's favor over a period of more than two years.[9] Regulators struck again in 2016, when the authority refused to renew the broadcasting license of the country's most popular radio station, Class FM. After a protracted court case, Class FM's frequency was awarded to a progovernment outlet in 2018.[10] The decision was a significant blow to Hungary's radio market, leaving the country with only government-affiliated national stations.

Similarly, Serbia has also undermined press freedom through politicized manipulation of the law. Defamation has been decriminalized, and the country's media laws are otherwise in line with international obligations. But politicians have continued to file costly defamation suits seeking exorbitant civil damages. In early 2018, for example, minister without portfolio Nenad Popović sued the investigative portal KRIK in four separate lawsuits in the space of one month, for 1 million dinars ($9,500) each.[11]

And while Serbia's media regulators do not display overt hostility to independent media as in Hungary, they lack the capacity to implement Serbia's otherwise well-formulated media laws. The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media is only partially staffed and is operationally dysfunctional, having notably failed to call out governing party dominance of the media landscape during election campaigns. In February 2019, it failed to act when two television stations aired a slick video that mocked opposition leaders, and that had first appeared on the governing SNS's YouTube channel, even though Serbia's laws prohibit political advertising outside elections.[12]

Keeping them in line and on their toes

Harassment can also take more direct forms, such as physical attacks and threats. But thuggish attacks are generally absent from the illiberal toolbox. Instead, political leaders signal that hostility toward journalists is permissible, including by standing down in the wake of aggression against them rather than insisting on a timely and effective follow-up, or by deploying proxies to delegitimize their work. In this way, they cultivate an atmosphere of fear and impunity in which journalists know that scrutiny of power is fraught with risk.

Serbia's media environment is much tougher on journalists doing their day-to-day work than is Hungary's. Smears and verbal harassment from politicians and online accounts are omnipresent, and attacks by government-friendly tabloids are a regular occurrence. Media workers are frequently called "traitors" and "foreign mercenaries." In early 2018, a journalist association's front door was plastered with flyers that read, "Miserable Association of Enemies of Serbia;" meanwhile, some journalists claim they are under surveillance by state security.[13] In late 2018, the home of a 70-year-old investigative journalist was torched. That attack was egregious enough to prompt a response—a ruling party official was detained and stripped of his position for allegedly ordering it. However, that such a severe, apparently premeditated attack took place at all underscored the widespread perception in Serbia that independent journalists operate at their own risk.

"This toolbox leaves out tactics like censorship, force, or outright intimidation of journalists. Instead, it contains a collection of methods used to harness structural conditions."

Though outright harassment is rare in Hungary, the government makes sure journalists know their place. A 2019 press conference by Orbán was notable for its inclusion of critical journalists for the first time in years. In addition, Orbán has not given an interview to Hungary's most-read online news site, Index.hu, since 2007, and has referred to it as "fake news." The government spokesperson also regularly engages in attacks meant to damage journalists' credibility; in 2018, he called a journalist working for a foreign outlet a "despicable SJW [social justice warrior]" on Twitter.

Cutting checks

Establishing and supporting a progovernment media empire is as important a tactic in the illiberal toolbox as pressuring critical media. Such support can take many forms, including the preferential awarding of state advertising contracts, special financing schemes, and privileged treatment by tax authorities.

In Hungary, the use and abuse of state advertising has reshaped the media market. While state advertising takes up only about one-sixth of all advertising, it has grown exponentially in the past few years.[14] In 2018, state ad spending was five times more than under previous governments a decade earlier, with a whopping 85 percent of contracts awarded to government-friendly companies. Since 2014, several new progovernment outlets have been set up, with some tripling or quadrupling their profits in the span of a few years without any indication of an increased audience. The progovernment weekly *Figyelő*, which published a list of government critics in 2018 deemed "Soros mercenaries" (referring to the billionaire and philanthropist George Soros), has increased its income from government advertising tenfold since its takeover by a government ally in 2016; by 2018, three-fourths of its ad money came from state contracts.[15]

State advertising plays an important role in supporting progovernment media in Serbia as well, and there are additional innovative methods available for the government to channel money to friendly media. Project co-financing, through which the state chips in to help media projects that serve the public interest, has been used to allocate money to progovernment outlets. This abuse was highlighted by the European Commission in its 2018 report on Serbia, which also criticized the nontransparent nature of the co-financing processes.[16] Friendly outlets have also benefitted from selective tax enforcement, while smaller, critical outlets have suffered harsh penalties.[17]

Building a parallel reality

Finally, creating a loyal media empire is not enough—the outlets have to be put to use in a strategic way, and the illiberal leaders of Hungary and Serbia are masters of constructing a grand narrative and crafting a new reality. Flooding the media landscape with their own political messages allows those in power to dominate the political agenda, divert public discussion away from sensitive issues, and ultimately control and manipulate the public sphere.

The public media are an important part of this narrative building. State-owned or state-controlled news agencies dwarf their private competitors in both Serbia and Hungary. Serbia's Tanjug news agency was formally closed as part of a privatization drive, yet it continues to operate through support from public coffers.[18] The market domination of Hungary's state newswire, MTI, is guaranteed through its subsidized low price.[19] And while public broadcasters in Serbia and Hungary have always been supportive of governments in power, the tone and nature of that support has dramatically shifted in recent years. Whereas previously they were more or less professional outlets with a slight bias, now they are government mouthpieces.

In Hungary, the government and progovernment media have turned into a major source of parallel reality narratives. In early 2018, the progovernment daily *Magyar Idők* claimed that 2,000 "mercenaries" were working for Soros in Hungary; the number—which appeared to originate with a malicious sting operation conducted by a shadowy group and aimed at discrediting Soros-affiliated NGOs—was later repeated by Orbán himself.[20] Soros has featured in numerous other false news items, including a headline the government-friendly TV2 ran in 2017 that read, "Soros would have killed his own mother." Moreover, employees of the public broadcaster have admitted to receiving instructions from the prime minister's offices on how to cover sensitive issues, such as migration.[21] In 2019, a leaked video recording showed a reporter from the state broadcaster instructing a progovernment expert on what to say.[22]

Besides identifying the "enemy" through issue framing and agenda setting, the illiberal toolbox also contains elements of positive narrative building. Serbia's President Vučić is indefatigable when it comes to talking to friendly media. Ahead of the 2018 local elections, reporting on the president, the SNS, and the government received four times more airtime than did the remaining 23 electoral lists combined.[23]

> *"While illiberal co-optation does not eradicate independent journalism, it harnesses institutional weakness and market conditions to severely limit its reach and impact."*

Achieving Media Dominance:
An Illiberal Regime's Toolbox

Squelching Critical Outlets

Economic tools

- ◆ Government-backed ownership takeovers
- ◆ Arbitrary tax investigations
- ◆ Financially draining lawsuits

Legal tools

- ◆ Selective enforcement of laws
- ◆ Abuse of regulatory and licensing practices

Extralegal tools

- ◆ Verbal harassment
- ◆ Smears by proxies
- ◆ Permitting impunity for threats against journalists

Bolstering Loyal Outlets

Economic tools

- ◆ Biased allocation of state advertising
- ◆ Subsidies through lucrative public contracts
- ◆ Financing of new outlets

Legal tools

- ◆ Selective enforcement of laws
- ◆ Favorable regulatory and licensing decisions

Extralegal tools

- ◆ Politicized leadership changes at public media
- ◆ Generous access to state leaders and information

A model ready for export

In Serbia, the prospect of EU membership, which brings with it increasingly stringent rule-of-law monitoring, can still provide an incentive for change. But once successful co-optation has taken place, as in Hungary, it is very difficult to reverse. And after consolidating media in Hungary, Fidesz is now taking steps to expand its influence transnationally: party allies acquired media in Macedonia and Slovenia in 2018,[24] and early 2019 saw the creation of an English-language newswire based in London apparently established to spread Orbán's illiberal agenda.[25] Perhaps not surprisingly, the first non-Hungarian news agency to quote the new wire was Serbia's Tanjug.

While illiberal co-optation does not eradicate independent journalism, it harnesses institutional weaknesses and market conditions to severely limit its reach and impact. Media consumers can still access quality journalism produced by small, public-minded teams of reporters, but in light of increasing government control of the media landscape, these outlets are fighting an uphill battle. The illiberal toolbox works because it discourages and obscures independent reporting, funnels limitless resources into the creation and maintenance of a loyal media juggernaut, and makes sure journalists know their place in the new system.

Both in Central Europe and outside it, the press is suffering from a crisis of trust and a crisis of the old business model. In the United States and in Europe, the profound change that came with the spread of online news and the collapse of the traditional advertising market has sent outlets and owners scrambling for profits by prioritizing content that spurs outrage. The growing prominence of fake news and disinformation has further fed into political polarization,

contributing to a cycle of decreasing trust. In the United States, fewer than half the population say they trust the media; the figure is around one-third in Italy and the United Kingdom, and only one-fourth in Turkey or Russia.[26] Rates of trust in the media seem to move together with those of trust in government—explaining part of the current crisis.[27]

The lack of trust, the onslaught of disinformation and tabloidized half-truths, and the elusiveness of a profitable business model all grind down media freedom and prepare the ground for potential illiberal takeover. When crafty and talented political leaders emerge with an appropriate agenda, it could be simply a matter of time before democracies buckle under the pressure.

Rays of hope

But not all is bleak. Positive examples already suggest that a change has started on the demand side, as more people are willing to pay for news that they find valuable, as well as on the supply side, with journalists launching innovative models that concentrate on quality news analysis. Democratic governments are also catching up and have moved into the debate—though sometimes somewhat awkwardly—proposing regulatory involvement to tackle thorny issues around fake news and disinformation.

Citizens and lawmakers are protesting media abuses, particularly those by public broadcasters. In Serbia, protesters in March 2019 stormed the headquarters of the public broadcaster RTS after it failed to report on earlier protests and denied airtime to opposition leaders. In Hungary, opposition lawmakers in December 2018 occupied the headquarters of the state broadcaster, with the support of demonstrators outside.

Democratic countries must work to build a media environment that prioritizes independent and accurate reporting and guarantees access to quality information for all segments of the population. This will not only prevent illiberal co-optation, but will also shore up institutions and strengthen and support democracy at home.

> *"Democratic countries must work to build a media environment that prioritizes independent and accurate reporting and guarantees access to quality information for all segments of the country."*

Recommendations

The following recommendations for policymakers in democratic nations will help counter efforts by ill-intentioned political actors to co-opt media:

- **Recognize and speak out against illiberal tactics.** False assertions aimed at damaging legitimate journalism— including claims that the media are biased or part of the opposition, or that independent journalism and articles uncovering wrongdoing present a security threat—are often accepted at face value. Officials from democratic countries should stay on alert for such illiberal tactics, carefully research false claims, and use their findings to refute them. Policymakers and high-level officials in democratic countries should continue to speak out against laws, practices, and rhetoric that negatively impact media freedom.

- **Closely watch vulnerable media markets to prevent illiberal co-optation.** The crisis facing the traditional business model has affected practically all media markets globally, but the impact has not been uniform. Countries where the recent populist upsurge is coupled with a media market that suffers from systemic problems—such as the deep intertwining of political and economic interests as seen in Romania or Italy—are particularly vulnerable to illiberal co-optation. Policymakers should identify and expose the methods taken from the illiberal toolbox and urge democratic governments to combat their use in vulnerable markets. Foreign assistance, where applicable, should include efforts to shore up press freedom.

- **Provide tailored assistance to journalists in countries where the political leadership has co-opted the media.** As

co-optation progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for local journalists to counter government domination. Democratic governments and media funders need to actively reengage to halt this deterioration and preserve local incubators of good journalism. Both in Hungary and Serbia, the reengagement needs to be strategic: financial support and grant programs should prioritize long-term resilience, rather than solely rewarding the leanest and most creative solutions. Private foundations deciding to support media in these countries should consult local sources to keep their money from ending up with state-controlled outfits.

- **Counter the strategic use of lawsuits and regulatory action against media.** Political leaders are increasingly abusing laws and relying on hostile decisions by regulatory authorities to silence and intimidate investigative journalists and other critics. But it is not just an illiberal tactic—Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are becoming a widespread tool to silence critical voices globally. While anti-SLAPP laws exist in several countries, judges are often unfamiliar with the practice and its increasing use against journalists. Policymakers should further the adoption of local anti-SLAPP laws and, with the help of press freedom organizations, educate both the judiciary and local journalists about them. Policymakers should also monitor decisions implemented by media regulators to ensure that media freedoms are not being squelched through hostile technical means.

IV. *Why Social Media Are Still Worth Saving*

by Adrian Shahbaz, *Research Director, Technology and Democracy*

A man holds a mobile phone displaying a fake message shared on WhatsApp while attending an event to raise awareness of fake news in Gadwal, Telangana, India. Photo Credit: Dhiraj Singh/ Bloomberg via Getty Images.

Key Findings

- *Social media dramatically expand access to information and freedom of expression, and in repressive and troubled countries they remain a lifeline to journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens attempting to exercise their democratic rights.*

- *Dismissing social media as a cesspool of lies and vitriol plays directly into the hands of authoritarians looking to increase state hegemony over the information landscape.*

- *The governments most guilty of pumping out misleading propaganda and surreptitiously manipulating social media through paid trolls and automated accounts are often the same ones that propose to solve the problem by restricting civil liberties.*

- *In order to tackle disinformation without curbing freedom of expression, government regulation should concentrate on certain aspects of companies' conduct, not the speech of their users.*

For years before the recent uprising against authoritarian ruler Omar al-Bashir, Sudanese girls had shared pictures of their romantic crushes in a Facebook group dedicated to digging up dirt on local boys—a sort of crowdsourced background check. But as security agents escalated their crackdown on the nascent antigovernment protest movement in September 2018, the network mobilized to identify and deter abuses by state security personnel. "You can post any photo for any person of the National Intelligence and Security Service," said Azaz Elshami, an activist in the Sudanese diaspora, "and they will give you who he is, where he lives, his mobile number, family, all that." The process was so effective that agents of the much-feared NISS had to wear masks in public to avoid identification.

However, it became clear during the protests that the same digital tools could be manipulated by the government to spread disinformation. In January, when Sudanese police used live ammunition against the demonstrators, a news site maintained by the Sudanese diaspora reported the death of three individuals, including 16-year-old Mohamed al-Obeid. Local journalists rapidly shared his image on social media, and it soon spread to international media outlets. As activists attempted to ascertain more details about the boy's identity, suspicion grew, until ultimately it became clear that the image depicted the aftermath of police violence in far-off Brazil. Sudanese activists concluded that the fraudulent image was the work of a team of NISS internet trolls known for disseminating smears and falsehoods.

"It was a trap," one citizen journalist tweeted, "orchestrated to discredit us all."

Sudan's revolution, like the Arab Spring before it, has showcased both the positive and the negative potential of social media. At a time when the harmful aspects of these platforms are being exposed and debated around the world, the fact that they have also delivered vital benefits should not be forgotten. They have fostered a rise in citizen journalism and activism and allowed independent reporters to continue reaching news consumers in environments where traditional outlets have fallen under government control, and their transnational nature has provided a measure of protection against state censorship. The challenge for policymakers, technology companies, and civil society today is to prevent malicious state and nonstate actors from poisoning the digital sphere while protecting and enhancing the conditions and qualities that allow the internet to bolster media freedom and advance democracy.

The internet as a refuge for media diversity

Almost from its inception, the internet offered new media spaces unspoiled by government intrusion. Blogs, online news outlets, and social media platforms provided alternatives to progovernment television, radio, and print outlets. Even in a place as repressive as Saudi Arabia, liberal poets challenged religious dogma, and young bloggers chronicled the mental gymnastics of embracing foreign pop culture while upholding Saudi customs. This ballooning of freedom was eventually deflated by state authorities who cracked down on critical thinking and "un-Islamic" ideas. While individuals in many countries remain uninhibited in their ability to publish facts and opinions, they may face punishment for what they publish—freedom of speech does not always extend to freedom after speech.

Nonetheless, in countries facing drastic and sudden declines in press freedom, the internet can be an important redoubt. Almost 150 news outlets have been closed in Turkey since the 2016 coup attempt, with hundreds of journalists facing spurious charges of supporting terrorism. As a result, many media professionals have moved online. Prominent journalist Ünsal Ünlü runs a podcast from his home office, while start-ups like Dokuz8 are testing new models of digital-first reporting. Those who have been forced to leave Turkey altogether, such as Yavuz Baydar and Can Dündar, have broadcast independent news from overseas on new platforms like Ahval and Özgürüz. Though officially blocked, their coverage remains accessible on most social media services and via virtual private networks (VPNs) that enable users to skirt government censorship.

Meanwhile, governments around the world have continued to extend strict press laws and audiovisual codes to the online realm in an attempt to bring online media to heel. A bill now under consideration in Pakistan, whose press freedom environment is highly restricted, would impose a licensing regime on online journalists and news outlets. Authorities in Uganda in March 2018 issued new requirements obliging online publishers, news platforms, and radio operators to obtain authorization from the country's Communications Commission. Amendments to Belarus's Media Law in December 2018 expanded the definition of traditional media to include online outlets and related websites,

resulting in the blocking of several independent news sites that had enjoyed relative editorial freedom. In Egypt, similar legislation adopted in August 2018 has provided a legal basis for blocking dozens of websites belonging to human rights organizations and news outlets. The upstart *Mada Masr*, a progressive news site created by young journalists who were pushed out of *Egypt Independent* in 2013, was among the targets.

International platforms as a buffer against censorship

While many local governments are clearly intolerant of an unfettered online news sector, major international technology platforms serve as an important buffer against such censorial tendencies. *Mada Masr*, for example, continues to post content directly to its Facebook page, while Turkey's Medyascope runs a YouTube channel.

Due the rollout of strong encryption technology by most companies, governments can no longer order internet service providers to bar access to specific content *within* a tech platform, such as an individual account or group page. This has resulted in a growing imbalance between large tech companies and many governments, which must persuade executives or administrators based overseas to remove a given post. Many US-based companies deliberately refrain from setting up operations in more repressive countries where their employees could face punishment for failing to adhere to a government request that would violate the human rights of their local users.

Perhaps the most powerful media tool provided by such international platforms is live streaming. The feature is now built into many mobile applications and social media services, allowing anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection to double as an amateur television crew with global reach. Particularly in countries where leaders or political factions dispute facts on the ground, live streaming provides a higher degree of credibility than any other media form. Unlike with a news article or photograph, it is difficult to dispute the timing, location, and creator of a live stream. The format is also highly transparent and interactive. Anyone watching a live stream can type questions or comments that are automatically superimposed within the video for all to see, including the streamers themselves, who often respond to comments in real time.

Bloggers and journalists in Belarus and Armenia have used Facebook Live and other live-streaming services to challenge the government's claims on the size or goal of antigovernment protests, and to document security forces' often heavy-handed response. In Venezuela, activist media start-ups like Efecto Cocuyo ("Firefly Effect") use the live-streaming platform Periscope to provide an alternative to the dominant progovernment news outlets. Their journalists cover press conferences by opposition figures, the proceedings of local legislatures, and large protests that state media equate with armed riots or refuse to acknowledge.

More traditional media players in democracies have engaged in their own experiments along these lines. Public broadcasters from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States teamed up to develop a Turkish-language news channel that will air exclusively on YouTube. The stated goal of the channel, +90, is to "provide independent and accurate information that promotes free speech and a multitude of perspectives on current affairs." Since it is based overseas, Turkish authorities upset over its coverage would need to convince the Silicon Valley–based hosting company to censor a US government–funded news service.

But international social media platforms are not exactly immune from government pressure. In Vietnam, a one-party state where the authorities maintain a tight grip on information flows, a network of democratic activists based inside and outside the country run a Facebook page that provides an independent take on the repressive regime to some 1.3 million followers. While Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg mentioned in congressional testimony that the company refrains from establishing a physical presence in repressive countries in order avoid complying with political censorship, the platform did remove at least seven stories from the activist group in question, Việt Tân, in early May, citing "local legal restrictions." The posts covered the health condition of Vietnam's president at a time when the authorities had issued a strict media blackout on the subject. Reuters "broke" a story on the president's illness over 10 days after Việt Tân had initially covered it.

"Nonetheless, in countries facing drastic and sudden declines in press freedom, the internet can be an important redoubt."

In Sudan, the democracy movement and press freedom will rise or fall together

Featured Profile: Reem Abbas

Journalist, writer, and award-winning blogger Reem Abbas is covering human rights and politics in Sudan at a critical juncture in its history. In April, after four months of massive protests, Sudan's authoritarian president Omar al-Bashir was removed from power in a palace coup. The events brought about the end of a 30-year reign marred by the violent repression of dissidents, including journalists. While Sudan's political fate remains uncertain, al-Bashir's removal has granted journalists like Abbas a reprieve from the repressive environment he cultivated.

While the proliferation of social media allowed Abbas some freedom to disseminate independent reporting on her blog and among her 34,000 Twitter followers, she was never free from the threat of reprisals while al-Bashir was in power. "I was always fearful because of the stories I'd written," Abbas says. Social media blocks during the protests, though routinely circumvented, served as another reminder that critical voices were not welcome in Sudan.

Now, Abbas feels far safer, and is more able to work without facing practical impediments. She can write freely and confidently. Perhaps most valuably in her eyes, she can name her sources without fear that they will face retaliation.

Yet Sudan's newly liberalized media environment brings with it significant responsibilities. "We need a lot of capacity building for us to actually be able to deliver and do justice to this uprising, and to the people who fought for this country," Abbas says. Furthermore, the media market was stunted under al-Bashir, and is not designed to support independent journalism. Outlets are under resourced, and like many of her peers, Abbas must support herself through consulting positions while still making time to write. She worries that the polarization of news outlets poses an obstacle to the development of sustainable independent journalism.

Nevertheless, Sudan's opening environment offers Abbas and her colleagues the promise of pursuing their passion with fewer constraints. "When I'm writing about a topic," she says, "I'm living it, and I'm breathing it; I really want to give voice to the people I'm interviewing."

Activists in autocratic countries are concerned that companies like Facebook could move toward complying more consistently with government orders for financial or legal reasons. Vietnam recently passed a cybersecurity law, closely modeled on China's, that requires companies to store data about Vietnamese users on servers located within the country. If major international platforms were to obey, the private communications of local users would be within the reach of Vietnamese security agencies, who consider nonviolent political activism to be a threat to national security. Already, Việt Tân has been branded a terrorist organization for its insistence on peaceful democratic reform away from one-party rule.

> *"These qualities—increased trust and decreased transparency—have been used by malevolent actors to deepen social divisions and even illegally interfere with elections."*

If you can't censor them, exploit them

There is a dark side to the freedom that digital media offer. To the extent that various online platforms and applications have created an information space beyond anyone's authoritative control, malicious state and nonstate actors are exploiting it to advance their respective agendas.

The messaging service WhatsApp, owned by Facebook, is a case in point. Unlike Facebook proper and Twitter, where the default privacy setting for users is "public," WhatsApp messages are designed for more private communications. They are end-to-end encrypted, meaning not even the company itself has access to them, only the intended recipients. Administrators of group chats must "invite" new participants, ensuring a degree of vetting. Thus in the dozens of countries where WhatsApp usage is high, large swathes of the online media landscape have become, effectively, hidden from view.

These qualities—increased trust and decreased transparency—have been used by malevolent actors to deepen social divisions and even illegally influence elections. In the 65 countries covered by Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* 2018 report, 32 had instances in which paid progovernment commentators intervened on social media, including WhatsApp, usually to smear the political opposition or critical journalists.

In Brazil, an investigation by the newspaper *Folha* revealed that business groups had illegally contributed to the successful 2018 campaign of far-right presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro by funding some $3 million in mass messages on WhatsApp. The groups also collected phone numbers through a third-party service, which is prohibited under Brazilian electoral laws.

In India, where doctored images and fake news abounded on various platforms during the April–May general elections, Facebook announced that it had removed over 1,000 pages for violating policies on spam and "coordinated inauthentic behavior." Political parties circulate propaganda and misleading claims about one another, religious minorities, and critical journalists. Hindu nationalists in particular have grown adept at spreading false rumors that characterize opposition parties as favoring Muslims over the general population. The so-called cyber army of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party claims to have 1.2 million volunteers.

Tech platforms may also be weaponized by religious and ethnic extremists to incite violence against minorities. In the aftermath of the Easter terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka this year, the country's authorities blocked Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Viber as a precaution against further violence. False information about the attackers' identities and potential additional attacks had already begun to spread on social media.

But blocking access to communication tools is a blunt and ultimately ineffective instrument for stemming disinformation and other false news, which can continue to spread via word of mouth and even mainstream media; social media, meanwhile, can be useful in debunking erroneous reports. For example, in Sri Lanka the authorities disseminated a photo of a woman on national television, alleging that she was involved in the Easter attacks. They realized only later, after internet users traced the photo to a US-based student, that it was a case of mistaken identity.

How and how not to regulate

Despite their great utility and positive potential in repressive environments, online media and major technology companies in particular have come under harsh criticism for their management—or failure to manage—problems like disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence, all of which threaten the fabric of democratic societies. Facebook, Google, and Twitter have been accused in the United States of colluding to censor conservatives, while European policymakers and the public at large are pushing back against the perceived ways in which tech platforms have disrupted the media ecosystem. A survey of 27 countries around the globe found that trust in social media was lowest in North America and Europe, where distorted online content has been credited with aiding the rise of right-wing populist demagogues.

The best remedy for bad or erroneous speech remains more and better speech, not enforced silence. Yet on today's online platforms, undemocratic and illiberal actors seem to have a louder megaphone. Studies have shown that dubious information intended to spark outrage gains greater visibility on social media than more sober, truthful content. The platforms' own algorithms appear designed to amplify content that generates high levels of engagement, even if the result is a rush to ever greater extremes. These dynamics mean that content disseminated by a very small but coordinated and radical network of individuals or accounts—including those orchestrated by undemocratic parties or regimes—can easily overshadow the views of the more moderate majority.

In light of these and other problems, the technology sector does need greater regulation. But defenders of democracy should be wary of any push for state regulation that aims to define acceptable and unacceptable speech and entails a reduction in freedom of expression. It is instructive that the very governments most guilty of pumping out misleading propaganda and surreptitiously manipulating social media through paid trolls and automated "bot" accounts are often the ones that propose to solve the problem by restricting civil liberties.

Instead, governments should find other ways to improve companies' performance. Policymakers could establish independent multistakeholder bodies to evaluate companies' content moderation practices for transparency, proportionality, and the effectiveness of appeal processes. Such bodies can also set minimum standards for the detection and elimination of coordinated inauthentic activity, such as paid trolls and bot accounts, as well as guidelines for political advertising during election campaigns. In addition, public officials should regulate other aspects of the sector through the lens of antitrust laws and privacy protections, since they have important consequences for freedom of expression in a democracy. The overarching goal of such regulation should be to protect and augment the constructive role that online communication platforms can play in all societies.

Social media are a crucial part of the modern media ecosystem. They dramatically expand access to information and freedom of expression, and in repressive and troubled countries they remain a lifeline to journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens attempting to exercise their democratic rights. Rather than surrendering these services to the malevolent forces that have exploited their weaknesses, democracies must fight back in a way that is consistent with their own long-standing values.

Recommendations

For governments:

- **Concentrate on conduct, not content.** Antitrust actions can help stimulate competition, making platforms more likely to improve their services in response to public pressure. Regulatory interventions can also be used to strengthen users' privacy and control over their own data, and to bolster safeguards against hacking and other cybersecurity threats. Election laws should be amended where necessary and vigorously enforced to ensure transparency in online campaign activities and prevent covert foreign interference. When it comes to speech,

policymakers should establish independent multistakeholder bodies to evaluate companies' content moderation practices for transparency, proportionality, and the effectiveness of appeal processes. These bodies could also set minimum standards for the detection and elimination of coordinated inauthentic activity, such as paid trolls and bot accounts.

- **Ensure that all internet-related laws and practices adhere to international human rights law and standards.** National governments should establish periodic reviews to assess whether their laws and practices regarding online speech conform to the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Any proposals to regulate social media should be examined in light of their likely impact on freedom of expression, particularly as it relates to women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and other vulnerable groups.

- **Support research and information sharing.** Public officials should provide resources to universities, nongovernmental organizations, and investigative journalists working to understand, detect, and share instances of coordinated inauthentic activity, particularly by state and quasi-state actors. Specific grants can be designed to strengthen civil society's outreach to tech platforms, especially in countries of the global south.

For companies:

- **Ensure fair and transparent content moderation practices.** In order to fairly and transparently moderate public posts within their platforms and services, private companies should do the following: (1) Clearly and concretely define what speech is not permissible in their guidelines and terms of service. (2) If certain speech needs to be curbed, when appropriate, consider less invasive actions before restricting it outright, for example warning users that they are violating terms of service and adjusting algorithms that might unintentionally promote disinformation or incitement to violence. (3) Ensure that content removal requests by governments are in compliance with international human rights standards. (4) Publish detailed transparency reports on content takedowns—both for those initiated by governments and for those undertaken by the companies themselves. (5) Provide an efficient avenue for appeal for users who believe that their speech was unduly restricted.

- **Engage in continuous dialogue with local civil society organizations.** Companies should seek out local expertise on the political and cultural context in markets where they have a presence or where their products are widely used. These consultations with civil society groups should inform the companies' approach to content moderation, government requests, and countering disinformation, among other things.

- **Label or eliminate automated "bot" accounts.** Recognizing that bots can be used for both helpful and harmful purposes, and acknowledging their role in spreading disinformation, companies should strive to provide clear labeling for suspected bot accounts. Those that remain harmful even if labeled should be eliminated from the platform. Although today's technology allows reasonably high accuracy in bot recognition, companies should also establish transparent remedial mechanisms to remove the bot designation from any account that may have been mislabeled.

Footnotes

Sources for *Freedom and the Media* 2019 essays can be found at the end of each essay online at:
https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-media/freedom-media-2019