

Free Media and Democracy in the Age of Elected Demagogues

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A lot of us are worried today about the challenges media and democracy face in South Asia and around the world.

Truths that we thought were self-evident are being challenged. New technologies are making the press irrelevant. The media business model has collapsed. The erosion of press freedom is eroding democracy.

In South Asia in the last five years, we have seen the rise of the [alt-right](#). In the world's largest democracy with its long tradition of freedom of expression, trolls and vigilantes are on the loose – silencing journalists with threats and even death.

The Philippines elevated a [self-confessed death squad gang leader](#) to the office of president. Turkey's elected president has unleashed a [draconian crackdown](#) on dissidents. After Brexit there has been a rise of [the wrong right across Europe](#). Just when we thought America's president couldn't tweet anything more shocking anymore, he surprises us every morning.

Western democracies come with a design defect: they permit the unrestricted freedom to express the most extreme and despicable views. Populist politicians use this to stoke xenophobic fears about migration, crime, and terrorism. The mass media can be manipulated to whip up voters at election time.

Democracy has been used to elect demagogues. Despots have learnt to exploit the disarray within the traditional democratic political establishment, and their lack of accountability and chronic failure to deliver development and services. And once they are elected to power, they proceed to dismantle the very institutions of democracy that got them there.

Germany saw all this happen in the 1930s. In a recent op-ed [Jochen Bittner](#) of the German newspaper *Die Zeit* called the present worldwide anti-democratic wave “Orderism”—it is based on fear of disorder and chaos. It offers stability over freedom. He compared Orderism to the promises of utopia under Communism, and said “it is merely a fig leaf for tyranny.” The enemy of Orderism is liberal democracy, and in this Putin, Trump, Duterte, Erdogan and others have a mutual admiration society.

In South Asia, there has been a yearning for strongman rule that stems from an unaccountable elite that has rigged the system to get elected over and over again. Dynastic politicians and reckless rulers have contributed to political instability and democratic decay, and South Asians envy the order they see in East Asia.

Many in South Asia are fed up with the squalor of our cities, crumbling infrastructure and endemic corruption. Yet, even though surveys have shown that we still strongly believe in democracy, we look longingly at Malaysia, Singapore or China as role models. There is a belief that East Asia's limited democracy is a better formula for economic growth.

But we have all tried strongman rule before in South Asia, and our experience has not been very encouraging. In fact, our strong men (and women) have tended to be as corrupt and despotic as our elected leaders.

The only time South Asian countries have had the least corrupt and most accountable leadership is when we've had interim electoral governments made up of unelected technocrats. You have to be really, really lucky to have a Lee Kwan Yew—who showed that a visionary leader could be accountable even with limited democracy.

Every day there is growing evidence that the election upsets in the US and other countries were due to manipulation of media, especially the social media. Post-truth journalism was out of sync with the masses, and the social web was hijacked by bots and fake news sites.

Facebook in particular has come under intense scrutiny for doing nothing about its toxic ecosystem of falsification, even before the recent revelations about how Cambridge Analytica stole and sold personal data for targeted messaging at election time.

This has led some to question the media's adherence to the doctrine of false equivalence—the journalism rule under which reporters are required to give equal weight to both sides in an argument even when one side is deliberately lying, or saying something incendiary. The mantra of objectivity is now being challenged with the argument that it is more important to be truthful than neutral.

This bit of soul-searching comes at a time when media everywhere is under siege. It has either been forced by commercialisation to abandon its public service remit, or it is being seriously challenged by hate content on the social web.

The word “demagogue” comes from the perfectly wholesome Greek word for “a leader of the people.” It took on a derogatory connotation only because the Athenian upper class despised the proletariat. Demagogues today are able to manipulate the media at election time to whip up chauvinism and intolerance. Journalists who adhere to rules of objectivity lose their relevance in this frightening Orwellian combination of *1984* and *Animal Farm* that we see unfolding around us.

The emperor doesn't like it when we point out that he is naked. Power doesn't like it when you speak truth to it, and power tries to intimidate and harm the messenger. Government agencies controlled by elected autocrats have also become smarter. They have learned that jailing journalists attracts needless international attention. So they have refined their methods—

censorship today is achieved by behind-the-scenes threats which can be even more insidious and sinister.

It was easier to deal with old-fashioned censorship. At least you knew who the enemy was, and we took it as our noble duty to defend democracy and the free press. But what do you do when the threats to press freedom do not happen in a totalitarian state, but in elected democracies where the legislature and judiciary have been compromised and co-opted?

When the central values of democracy and press freedom are threatened, journalists have to take on an activist role—because they are not just defending their own freedom, but the citizens' right to know. We in the media are just the custodians of press freedom.

In my own country, Nepal, we have seen absolute monarchy, military coups, parliamentary democracy, a war and a shaky post-conflict transition.



Pro-democracy protests in Kathmandu in April 2006

Throughout it all, we have experienced first-hand that the threat to democracy and press freedom come from both the extreme left and extreme right. We have seen that development is directly related to democracy: it is when villages, municipalities and the national Parliament have elected leaders that the chances of accountability are highest.

The answer to the current crisis of democracy lies in strengthening its four pillars, fortifying the judiciary, legislature, executive and the media to be more accountable so they can serve as checks and balances. And one of the critical institutions for that has to be an independent and investigative public service media. As someone famous said: the only way to fix the problems with democracy is by making it more democratic.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.