

From Watchdog to Mouthpiece:
How Populism, Platforms, and Ownership Reshape the Media in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the erosion of press freedom in India and its implications on the media's democratic role. While the press is expected to function as a watchdog by holding the government accountable, informing citizens, and facilitating public debate, this role is increasingly constrained. This paper argues that right-wing populism, the expanding influence of social media platforms, and the growing concentration of media ownership have significantly limited the independence of Indian journalism. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, populist strategies aim to delegitimize journalists and suppress dissent through harassment, legal measures, and creating conditions that compel self-censorship. At the same time, social media has amplified misinformation and polarization, challenging the authority of traditional media outlets. These pressures are compounded by concentrated media ownership, which prioritizes political and economic interests over independent reporting. Together, these developments limit the media's capacity to act as an effective watchdog for democracy. India's case reflects broader global pressures on media institutions, raising concerns about the future of democratic accountability.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Michelle Bonner for teaching the course *Comparing Politics Around the World*, which inspired my interest in the

relationship between democracy and media institutions. I am grateful for her encouragement, which motivated me to engage deeply in research and reflect on contemporary political realities. I am also thankful for the team at On Politics for their guidance, editorial support, and the opportunity to contribute to this publication. I would like to thank my mother and boyfriend for their encouragement and acting as sounding boards throughout the writing process. Finally, I am deeply thankful to God for his guidance, blessings, and presence in my life.

Introduction

India is currently experiencing constraints on press freedom that limit the media's ability to fulfil its ideal democratic role. In a democracy, the media is expected to act as a watchdog by holding the government accountable, informing citizens, and providing a platform for debate through the expression of diverse perspectives.¹ While scholars argue that “dissent and democracy ideally go hand in hand,” this relationship is increasingly not a reality in India, undermining the effectiveness of the media in the world's largest democracy.² This paper argues that the most significant challenges to the Indian media's democratic responsibility are the rise of right-wing populism, the expanding influence of social media platforms, and the growing concentration of media ownership. Although this analysis is specific to India, these challenges reflect broader pressures experienced by media institutions globally.

Recently, India's media landscape has undergone significant structural and ideological shifts in the production, distribution, and consumption of news content. These transformations include changes in political ideologies, technological advancements, and the liberalization of the media industry.³ At the same time, Hindu nationalist discourses dominate media outlets, promoting narratives that India is strengthened through one land, religion, and language.⁴ As certain

¹ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

² Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. “The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech.” *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1737. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

³ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. “Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape.” *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

⁴ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

narratives become privileged, the space for acceptable dissent and debate in the Indian media has narrowed. Additionally, the expansion of social media across India has intensified the spread of misinformation, undermining the media's ability to provide accurate information. Alongside this, media independence is further undermined in India by political and corporate elites who incentivize content that aligns with their interests. Together, these developments significantly constrain the Indian media's ability to fulfil its democratic role.

The Rise of Right-Wing Populism

Right-wing populism in India challenges the media's ideal democratic role by reinforcing the dominance of Hindu nationalist ideologies. This dynamic is further shaped by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intolerance of dissent towards the government, which narrows the space for critical journalism. Populism is a political strategy in which elites seek power by catering to majoritarian concerns while creating division within the nation.⁵ Bhat further identifies relevant strains of populism in India, including right-wing populism, which seeks to deepen the national divide between "the people" and non-Hindus, as well as anti-media populism spread by Hindu nationalists, which relies on claims of corruption to foster distrust of the media.⁶ As these strains of populism are intertwined throughout India, the media struggles to find spaces where a free and pluralist press can thrive. When the ability to express dissent and a diversity of opinions without repercussions is limited, a threat to India's democratic media is presented.⁷ The

⁵ Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

⁶ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

⁷ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

main ways in which the Indian government utilizes right-wing populist strategies to regulate the media for its advantage are by delegitimizing journalists, punishing dissenters, and promoting self-censorship.

Right-wing actors and supporters actively attempt to delegitimize journalists to maintain control over the Indian press. By scrutinizing the mainstream news for any error in reporting, Modi and his supporters are able to justify their assertions that journalists are unreliable and unprofessional sources.⁸ Right-wing actors position themselves in opposition to India's mainstream media outlets, or what they allege to be the dominant, elite, corrupt, and left-wing media.⁹ As distrust in the mainstream media furthers, right-wing actors have encouraged both their supporters and the public towards platforms where Hindu-nationalist discourses are dominant.¹⁰ This shows that the erosion of trust in mainstream Indian media challenges journalists' ability to realize their democratic role of educating the public on relevant issues through presenting a diversity of perspectives.¹¹ Controlling narratives by suppressing journalistic dissent is central to Modi's populist strategy, allowing himself and his party to remain shielded from any legitimate criticism.¹²

⁸ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

⁹ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

¹⁰ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

¹¹ Basu, Subhjit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

¹² Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

Modi's government engages in punishing dissenters that are perceived to criticize him or any Hindu nationalist ideologies. Journalists frequently face harassment and occasionally violence as the police, legal regulations, and the judiciary are utilized by the Indian government with the intention of suppressing dissenting views.¹³ Ultimately, these measures create the deception that a tightening control on the press is necessary for national laws and security to be maintained.¹⁴ Furthermore, Modi and his government reward right-wing supporters who engage in violence against journalists by allowing them to avoid consequences as well as offering them what Bhat calls, "a seat at the table," or influential positions in government decision making.^{15, 16} Without dissent, the Indian government is able to eliminate the media's mechanisms of answerability and transparency that function to ensure accountability.¹⁷ Consequently, the media's democratic role in providing citizens with comprehensive content is undermined by the suppression of dissent.¹⁸

As a result of Modi's attempts to discredit and punish dissenters, many media sources and journalists have responded with self-censorship. Prabhu explains that mainstream media journalists are likely to experience intimidation and harassment from publishing critical views of Modi's government or

¹³ Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

¹⁴ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

¹⁵ Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

¹⁶ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

¹⁷ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

¹⁸ Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. "The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech." *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1737–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

Hindu-nationalist ideals.¹⁹ As journalists are becoming increasingly concerned about their personal safety due to fear of both governmental consequences and “mob persecution,” many resort to self-censorship.^{20, 21} Consequently, mainstream news sources across India have not only refrained from critiquing Modi’s government, but also shifted towards advocacy for Hindu-nationalist ideologies.²² This growing trend of self-censorship in India, enabled by a declining presence of dissent, encourages a further polarization of perspectives towards the media’s pertinence. Without protections surrounding criticism, self-censorship challenges the media’s role of ensuring rigorous journalism across India’s democracy.²³

Modi’s right-wing populist strategy aims to not only garner support but create loyal devotion to the Hindu nationalist cause. To ensure this, the media is expected to conform with Modi’s right-wing government.²⁴ Without debate present in mainstream outlets, the media becomes absorbed into Modi’s populist plans.²⁵ Ultimately, the suppression of free press provides Modi with outlets used for

¹⁹ Prabhu, Nagesh. 2020. “Managing the Unmanageable: Media and Modi.” In *Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Politics*, 249–93. Mathura Road, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885847.n7>.

²⁰ Basu, Subhajt, and Shameek Sen. 2024. “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India’s Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

²¹ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

²² Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

²³ Basu, Subhajt, and Shameek Sen. 2024. “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India’s Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

²⁴ Basu, Subhajt, and Shameek Sen. 2024. “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India’s Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

²⁵ Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. “Populism, Religion, and the Media in India.” *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

“delivering selective propaganda.”²⁶ This propaganda is designed to perpetuate the division between Modi’s supporters and anyone else, by portraying dissenting voices as a threat to national unity. Without a free press, the media loses the capacity to keep the government accountable, fundamentally challenging democracy in India.²⁷

Expanding Influence of Social Media Platforms

Increasing social media usage in India challenges the media’s ideal role in democracy as the spread and increasing influence of misinformation undermines possibilities for truthful journalism. Nation-wide, much of India’s public uses social media to engage with politics and learn about election campaigns, party policies, and governmental actions.²⁸ In turn, many prominent political leaders leverage social media to engage with citizens, and specifically voters, to share their ideologies and shape public perceptions.²⁹ As India ranks the second largest country in terms of global internet users, social media has become an increasingly influential instrument of mass communication.³⁰ Ultimately, social media’s broad reach provides an accessible space for citizens to demonstrate political

²⁶ Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. “The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech.” *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1745. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

²⁷ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India’s Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

²⁸ Raj, Shipra. 2023. “Digital Media and Women’s Political Participation in India.” *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 366–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

²⁹ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. “Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists’ Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda.” *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

³⁰ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. “Coping with Change in India’s Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape.” *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

participation.³¹ Despite this democratic benefit, many social media platforms have enabled hate speech and misinformation that weakens the Indian media's ability to reliably inform citizens.³²

The rising use of social media platforms in India has amplified the spread of misinformation and propaganda, ultimately heightening polarization across political discourses. Obijiofor and Singh explain that this expansive use encourages competition for audience attention, resulting in “more quantity and less quality,” which intensifies the dispersion of misinformation.³³ In order to attract viewers, social media content frequently adopts emotional language that focuses on political personalities instead of informative policy analyses.³⁴ Additionally, political actors exploit digital platforms with the intent of influencing audiences in favour of their agendas by circulating misinformation and propaganda.³⁵ The spread of “fake news” influences the masses, especially illiterate populations and politically neutral individuals who are more susceptible to emotional, fear based, and polarized narratives.³⁶ Polarized content is reinforced on social media as individuals are likely exposed to content they already align with, further perpetuating pre-existing

³¹ Raj, Shipra. 2023. “Digital Media and Women’s Political Participation in India.” *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 366–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

³² Basu, Subhajt, and Shameek Sen. 2024. “Silenced Voices: Unravelling India’s Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression.” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

³³ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. “Coping with Change in India’s Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape.” *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 271. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

³⁴ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

³⁵ Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. “The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech.” *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1737–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

³⁶ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. “Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists’ Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda.” *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

divisions.³⁷ Without the dominance of truthful and diverse information in online spaces, the mainstream media's inability to set agendas and narrative hinders their democratic role.³⁸

The influence of digital platforms has enabled anyone to create a narrative, undermining the role of mainstream journalists. Additionally, politicians such as Modi, neglect to interact with mainstream media sources by instead communicating directly with the nation's voters through social media outlets.³⁹ This allows political actors to reach supporters while avoiding the scrutiny of the press.⁴⁰ As a result, the role of mainstream media has shifted as journalists balance the need for impactful stories that captivate audiences against the time-consuming challenge of verifying the information spread on social media platforms.⁴¹ Furthermore, journalists often experience hate speech on digital spaces when challenging dominant narratives. What Obijiofor and Singh define as "trolling" in the context of the Indian media is an "ideological attack on those who question Modi's Hindu nationalist vision."⁴² As this harassment collides with the accessibility of social media, space for

³⁷ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

³⁸ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

³⁹ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

⁴⁰ Prabhu, Nagesh. 2020. "Managing the Unmanageable: Media and Modi." In *Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Politics*, 249–93. Mathura Road, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885847.n7>.

⁴¹ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

⁴² Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 273. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

accurate and exhaustive journalism diminishes, fundamentally challenging the media's democratic role.

Despite the challenges that social media presents to the mainstream media's democratic role in India, impactful democratic benefits have also emerged. This includes providing citizens, especially marginalized communities, with greater access to political participation. The increasing use of digital platforms in India has resulted in accessibility for engagement in ongoing issues, allowing political actors to instantly share their platforms nationwide.^{43, 44} In addition to staying connected, social media outlets have created spaces in which the public can collectively mobilize and speak out about issues that matter to them and their community.⁴⁵ This ability to participate in politics upholds the media's democratic role as citizens are able to stay informed, voice concerns, and prioritize issues. However, individuals that speak out are not exempt from online trolling and hate-speech, proving caution should be given towards romanticizing social media's capabilities of free-speech. Additionally, the presence of a "digital divide" means that many communities in India continue to have inadequate access to the internet or digital spaces, reinforcing pre-existing socio-economic inequalities in media representation.⁴⁶

⁴³ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

⁴⁴ Basu, Subhajt, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

⁴⁵ Raj, Shipra. 2023. "Digital Media and Women's Political Participation in India." *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 366–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

⁴⁶ Raj, Shipra. 2023. "Digital Media and Women's Political Participation in India." *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

The rise of social media in India has dramatically shifted the ways in which citizens participate in politics, requiring the mainstream media's democratic role to adapt. As people increasingly depend on digital platforms to access political content, the ways in which politicians connect with the public has been fundamentally restructured.⁴⁷ Traditional mainstream media in India has largely been replaced, prompting many journalists to amend their reporting strategies.⁴⁸ While social media has created avenues for political participation, the spread of misinformation and propaganda threatens the media's ability to defend their democratic duties.⁴⁹

Growing Concentration of Media Ownership

The increasing concentration of media ownership in India challenges the media's democratic role in providing independent journalism and holding the government to account. The economic liberalization of the media industry in the 1990s resulted in a transition from family-owned outlets to a corporate-controlled press across India.⁵⁰ Although the Indian media has become financially successful since privatization, the proceeding quality of journalism is in question.⁵¹ Corporate prioritization of profit over unbiased and analytical reporting has resulted in the

⁴⁷ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

⁴⁸ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

⁴⁹ Raj, Shipra. 2023. "Digital Media and Women's Political Participation in India." *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 366–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

⁵⁰ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

⁵¹ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

rise of commercialization and consequently, infotainment. Captivating content is utilized by the Indian media to retain consumer's attention, hindering the media's democratic role of prioritizing educational reporting.⁵² Additionally, India's public interests are frequently disregarded because of what Saeed describes as, "phantom journalism," which occurs when hidden corporate and political concerns influence the production of media content.⁵³ Without the Indian media's ability to independently and critically scrutinize government actions and policies, their democratic responsibility to act as a watchdog through measures of transparency are hindered due to external pressures.

The intensifying concentration of media ownership in India has shifted priorities, as goals of generating profit now challenge the press' democratic responsibility to provide independent journalism. The motivation to maximize profit encourages the publication of content on polarizing topics, as controversy effectively captures viewers' attention.⁵⁴ With a decline in investigative journalism in India combined with crime and entertainment dominating media landscapes, underrepresentation of issues that impact marginalized groups has become a reality.^{55, 56} Ultimately, journalists face corporate pressures to produce content that

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⁵³ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

⁵⁴ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

⁵⁵ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

⁵⁶ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

is tailored to attract mass audiences, and therefore profit.⁵⁷ As long as profit continues to control and shape journalism in India, the media will struggle to uphold their democratic role of reporting on issues that authentically impact the public.⁵⁸

As media ownership becomes more concentrated in India, corporate and governmental control over narratives threatens transparency, and therefore the press's democratic duties. Due to financial dependency, Indian media outlets experience pressure to produce content that fits with the interests of their sponsors.⁵⁹ Through strategically investing in the media, the government, businesses, and advertisers are able to gain political power, suppress negative publicity, and manipulate public perception by threatening to withhold funding.⁶⁰ Utilizing this, Modi and his party have secured ownership ties with media outlets, further constraining the media's democratic responsibility in upholding transparency out of public interest.⁶¹ For example, Modi's close affiliations with corporations that own media outlets allowed for dramatic influence over the media's election coverage to be swayed in his favour.⁶² As the concentration of media ownership has been shielded from public awareness, deceiving audiences

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⁵⁸ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

⁵⁹ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

⁶⁰ Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

⁶¹ Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. "The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech." *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1737–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

⁶² Prabhu, Nagesh. 2020. "Managing the Unmanageable: Media and Modi." In *Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Politics*, 249–93. Mathura Road, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885847.n7>.

into believing that curated content is fair and accurate has been normalized in India.⁶³

Overall, Indian media outlets have been discouraged from reporting on issues that conflict with the interests of powerful corporate and political actors. This hinders the press's ability to fulfil their democratic role of independently scrutinizing the pursuits of dominant actors in India.⁶⁴ When elite ambitions are prioritized over fostering a media environment that functions to maintain democracy, quality and critical journalism are sacrificed. Furthermore, corporate influence in India has conditioned media outlets to treat audiences as consumers instead of citizens.⁶⁵ Ultimately, commercialization throughout India's media environment undermines the quality of journalism, and therefore public trust.⁶⁶ Without public trust, the press lacks the capacity to effectively keep prominent political actors accountable. Ultimately, the Indian media's ability to uphold their role as democracy's watchdog has experienced deterioration amid a corporately dominated environment.⁶⁷

Conclusion

⁶³ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

⁶⁴ Prabhu, Nagesh. 2020. "Managing the Unmanageable: Media and Modi." In *Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Politics*, 249-93. Mathura Road, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885847.n7>.

⁶⁵ Sharma, Neelam, and Gayathri Sivakumar. 2023. "Social Media, Political Discourse, and the 2019 Elections in India: Journalists' Perspectives on the Changing Role of the 11 Mainstream Media in Setting the Political Agenda." *Global Media and Communication* 19 (2): 185-205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186252>.

⁶⁶ Joseph, Anjali Merin. 2024. "The Times of Jeopardising Free Speech." *Media, Culture & Society* 46 (8): 1737-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437241282179>.

⁶⁷ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

The most significant challenges that the media in India encounter while attempting to fulfil their democratic role under Modi's government are the rise of right-wing populism, the increasing influence of social media platforms, and the growing concentration of media ownership. The issue of press freedom in India demands attention, as this case represents a broader, global trend in which media institutions are tolerated only when journalists' activity overlaps with elite interests.⁶⁸ Basu and Sen highlight that healthy democracies not only require discourse from a variety of views, but also the ability to effectively respond to criticism.⁶⁹ The rise of right-wing populism and Hindu nationalist discourses in India has demonstrated that for this ideal to be reached, the media must continually keep the government to account, despite repercussions.⁷⁰ Although social media has allowed for an expansion of political participation, the protection of independent journalism is needed alongside, ensuring that the media remains committed to holding the government accountable.^{71, 72} Ownership concentration of the media suggests that there is a greater need for a regulatory distance to be present between corporations, the government, and the media.⁷³ Awareness of the most significant challenges that the media in India currently face is crucial to ensuring that media

⁶⁸ Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. "Hindu-Nationalism and Media: Anti-Press Sentiments by Right-Wing Media in India." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25 (4): 296–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15226379231201455>.

⁶⁹ Basu, Subhajit, and Shameek Sen. 2024. "Silenced Voices: Unravelling India's Dissent Crisis through Historical and Contemporary Analysis of Free Speech and Suppression." *Information & Communications Technology Law* 33 (1): 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2249780>.

⁷⁰ Thomas, Pradip Ninan. 2023. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication* 17: 2925–38.

⁷¹ Raj, Shipra. 2023. "Digital Media and Women's Political Participation in India." *Media Watch*, New Delhi, 14 (3): 366–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>.

⁷² Obijiofor, Levi, and Shailendra B. Singh. 2020. "Coping with Change in India's Media: Struggles of English-Language Journalists in an Evolving Mediascape." *Pacific Journalism Review* 26 (2): 261–78. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1076>.

⁷³ Saeed, Saima. 2015. "Phantom Journalism: Governing India's Proxy Media Owners." *Journalism Studies* 16 (5): 663–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1054174>.

institutions globally can continue to fulfil their ideal democratic role of providing news that is transparent, educational, and diverse.

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