



Journalists hold banners and placards protesting against the Digital Security Act in front of the Press Club in Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 11, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

# How is shrinking media space affecting our democracy?



Meer Ahsan Habib is a communication for development professional. His Twitter handle is @meeriyadh

MEER AHSAN HABIB

The media is often considered to be the fourth pillar of a democracy—while the other three pillars are the legislature, executive and judiciary. The media counterbalances these three pillars by playing a role in maintaining check and balance and thus contribute to ensuring their transparency and accountability. Now, how can we make sure that these three pillars are functional and effective? It is the citizens who will judge and without an informed citizenry, these pillars will be fragile and remain dysfunctional.

The media plays a vital role in creating an informed citizenry through ensuring the free flow of information. This can only happen if the other three pillars complement the fourth pillar. Sadly, the issue of “shrinking media space” is very relevant for Bangladesh these days, when we have impressed the world with a notable track record of growth and poverty reduction.

#### Media vs other pillars of democracy

Perhaps more so now than ever, the legislature and the executive are applying different formal and informal tactics to restrict the media and freedom of expression for journalists. The judiciary on the other hand has impacted the media both positively and negatively. For instance, it has been a bulwark against efforts to undermine the free media in Bangladesh, but did not strike down the restrictive laws and actions of the government which limits the freedom of the press.

The concept of “closing or shrinking space” for the media is not an old one, rather it is something that journalists and media practitioners have been facing for a very long time. The Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation even worse—not only in authoritarian countries, but dozens of democracies around the world have also been imposing different formal and informal



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controls over the media. And, it has happened sometimes in the name of safeguarding the public interest.

Governments in both authoritarian and in a good number of democratic countries are pushing back against democratic progress and limiting press freedom. Almost in all cases where media freedom has been curtailed, the other three pillars have failed to serve their mandate. Governments are legitimising their actions by creating legal and logistical barricades to democratic institutions, including the media. As a result, the manoeuvring space for the media has been reduced to a worrying level.

#### The ‘new normal’ is a global trend

We have seen this “new normal” in the US during the Trump era. It is now frequent in several South Asian democracies

including the biggest democracy in the world, as well as in some EU member states. A good number of countries have witnessed significant progress related to the economy, health and education. Governments, their development partners and the international community have celebrated these successes with a great deal of optimism. The world’s transition toward the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 is a reflection of this optimism and it has received unconditional support from the people, institutions, civil society and last but not least, from the media.

Sadly, the governments in question have failed miserably in safeguarding and protecting the freedom of the press and media. Freedom of the press and the media, according to various global rankings, was at its lowest in 2021. And

this happened at a time when all pillars of democracy, the government, media and the democratic institutions had a wonderful opportunity to fight the Covid-19 pandemic together. Nothing can better explain the paradox than a 2021 analysis by the Reporters Without Borders (RSF). According to RSF, free flow of information which is the vaccine against disinformation, was blocked in more than 130 countries in 2021.

#### Fighting disinformation

Technology and its easy access have empowered the people by making information easily available. Netizens can now publish anything they wish every single minute. This is indeed somewhat of a revolution. But this revolution has its very own and unique flaw—the spread of disinformation. From manipulating national elections to combatting the pandemic, over the past few years, the spreading of disinformation has influenced our lives and mindset.

Had the media been allowed to fight disinformation, the world could be a better place and we would not be talking about the shrinking media space that is ultimately affecting the democracies around the world. In the early stage of the pandemic, we saw how media censorship in China prevented the people and the world from getting real information about the outbreak. The world is now paying the price—fighting the pandemic and the spread of disinformation. We also saw how disinformation influenced the US election in 2016 and its subsequent impact all over the world in the following years.

#### The world is a dangerous place for journalists

The media’s overarching role to search beneath the surface and find the truth and disseminate it among the people is under threat. Traditionally, such threats were common in authoritarian and dictatorial countries.

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