

How is shrinking media space affecting our democracy?



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But the threat is now also emanating from unanticipated sources—elected governments in several democracies now consider media as an opponent. There is ample evidence to suggest that instead of being a supporter of press freedom, governments in democracies have adopted direct and indirect controlling measures forcing the media to give them favourable treatment. While Freedomhouse has attributed this to the global decline of democracy, it is also contributing to the declining trust in

democratic institutions leading to their decline. The Covid-19 pandemic could be a golden opportunity for governments around the world to ensure easy and uninterrupted access to information. But the opposite is happening. Exposing vaccine injustice and corruption by the media have not always been welcomed by the government and in many cases, journalists became victims of state-sponsored repressions. Not only that, governments' control over the media and censorship have made the world a

▲ **Instead of ensuring public security to express their opinions, the Digital Security Act 2018 acts as a threat to people's rights.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

more dangerous place for journalists. Journalists paid a very high price in bringing out the truth in 2021 when, according to UNESCO, 55 journalists were killed. Two-thirds of the victims had died in countries where there were no armed conflicts.

Legal barriers, state patronage and corporate control
Adoption of draconian laws and internet shutdowns by governments have become more frequent than in the past. Criticism of the media by political figures and powerful quarters and growing threats

to digital safety have led to journalists self-censoring. Two more contributing factors to the shrinking of media freedom are government patronage of preferred media establishments and corporate control over the media.

This has led to a division among journalists, with some favouring the government, while very few practice impartial and unbiased journalism. In many cases, the trend of favouritism becomes the mainstream and the latter struggles to survive in the face of state-engineered formal and informal oppression.

While the role of the news media varies from one democracy to another, a free press contributes to maintaining the balance of power and ensuring good governance. Democracies around the world have constitutionally guaranteed the freedom of the press. For instance, in the US, freedom of the press is protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. In Sweden, the Freedom of the Press Act of 1766 forms a part of the Swedish Constitution.

Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees freedom of the press. The law can impose any reasonable restrictions in the interest of the State's security, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence. Sadly, the government is only interested in restricting freedom of press by misinterpreting the constitutional provisions and by adopting draconian laws and policies.

In Bangladesh, such laws and policies include the Censorship of Films Act-1963, Printing Presses and Publication (Registration and Declaration) Act-1973, Community Radio Installation, Transmission and Operation Guideline-2008, Bangladesh Information Security Policy Guideline-2013,

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