



PRESSURE & POLARISATION

POWERING MEDIA RESISTANCE IN SOUTH ASIA



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page

The online report also includes country
reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh,
Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan
and Sri Lanka, as well as a full list of jailed
and detained journalists in South Asia and
the IFJ list of media rights violations by
Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May
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Cover Photo: Caricatures of former Sri Lankan prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa are displayed at the Galle Face protest area near the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo on July 17, 2022. The country's economic and social turmoil brought significant challenges to human rights, freedom of expression and the media industry across the island. CREDIT: ARUN SANKAR / AFP

Contents Photo: Indian soldiers stand guard at the site of an encounter with suspected militants on the Jammu-Srinagar national highway at Sidhra on the outskirts of Jammu on December 28, 2022. Journalists and media workers in Jammu and Kashmir continue to face obstructions, harassment and detention by law enforcement and state authorities. CREDIT: RAKESH BAKSHI / AFP

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FOREWORD

South Asia's emergence from the pandemic shroud of the past few years, has revealed a dramatically changed environment not only for media, but for democracy itself. And with it, citizens in this complex space are confronting a spectrum of new challenges to freedom of expression and their rights.

Political leaders emboldened by powers usurped during the time of crisis seem to have developed a habit for overreach, controls and clampdown. Too many have forgotten that democracy is not the will of one, but of the people.

Laws made in the name of national security and emergency in recent times have sadly taken up a more permanent place to restrict fundamental freedoms and limit vital spaces of discourse. And institutions that underpin democracy are too frequently being threatened or destabilised.

All this exists on a backdrop of persistent socio-economic inequalities, deep financial crises, conflicts and violence, environmental carnage, health and well-being challenges for vast populations, challenges to the rule of law, the rise of misinformation and a broad erosion of trust.

For media, the story is equally challenging and complex.

With the ongoing impacts of digital disruption and pandemic fallout, the structural economies of some legacy media remain fragile. Vast news deserts are emerging due to traditional media collapses and mass journalist layoffs. But so too, new and evolving media organisations and platforms are testing and exploring an array of funding models in an effort to build sustainability. And journalism as a profession is changing in how it delivers stories to a multi-faceted, diverse and increasingly young digital audience.

While diminished in numbers, South Asia's journalists and media workers are evolving, innovating and coordinating their efforts to strengthen media and industry resilience.

And the organisations that represent them are building alliances and organising on the issues that matter – regular wages, safety, digital rights, industry sustainability and autonomy, as well as investment and a legal framework that respects and supports press freedom.

In this report, ***Pressure and Polarisation: Powering Media Resistance in South Asia***, we explore the complex interface between power and the fundamental human rights of press freedom and freedom of expression. We also document the challenges for media and attacks to journalists in this time, including at least 140 violations, including killings, jailings, legal harassment and assaults. In the period, the IFJ and its affiliates recorded 13 targeted killings of media workers and 74 cases of jailing, detention or torture. At the time of publication, at least 10 journalists, five in India alone, remain behind bars.

In 2023, as we mark the 30th anniversary of the proclamation of World Press Freedom Day by the 48th UN General Assembly, we as media workers must take stock of the challenges for media freedom and the safety of journalists; raise awareness and foster partnerships to defend media from attacks; and pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their work.

Just like political leaders, journalists too hold considerable might – to influence, educate, challenge, inform and hold the powerful to account and they play an essential role to help verify and disseminate facts and to make complex matters intelligible for broader society.

While the term “messy democracies” may have attained a whole new resonance for South Asia in the period in review, this report shows how South Asia's media is working hard to strengthen public trust and reaffirm the vital role it plays as a pillar of those democracies despite the challenges. Here we document how brave journalists are continuing to push back and speak out against polarisation, to tell the truth, shine a light and defend hard-fought fundamental freedoms – not just for the media, but for all. Here is their story.

Jane Worthington

Director
IFJ Asia-Pacific



Read the full report ***Pressure and Polarisation: Powering Media Resistance in South Asia*** including country chapters and interactive violation listings online samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR22-23

The Taliban has placed increasing restrictions on women journalists, including prohibiting women journalists from appearing in front of the camera without long garments, hijabs, and face coverings in May, 2022. An Afghan female presenter with news network 1TV, Lima Spesaly with her face covered by a veil, takes a break during a live broadcast at the 1TV channel station in Kabul on May 28. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHASAR / AFP



OVERVIEW

OUT OF THE ABYSS

The region began a slow recuperation from an eventful post-Covid year – with the media in Afghanistan grappling with the new normal post-Taliban takeover and the Sri Lankan media adjusting to severe cuts following the economic crisis that crippled the country in 2022. Press freedom continued to be a major concern in Pakistan despite the ouster of an authoritarian regime and the installation of a prime minister who promised more independence to the media.

The electoral process in messy democracies in the region saw restrictions on the media in Nepal and parts of India, while the Bhutanese media was confronted by barriers to access information. Religious extremism and polarisation dogged the media in Bangladesh and Maldives. The erosion of autonomy due to corporate take-overs of independent media was the most visible in India, which also topped the global list for the highest number of internet shutdowns for the fifth consecutive year.

Even as the media was forced to confront the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the digital media space in particular and create robust editorial filters to tackle the challenge posed by tools like ChatGPT, the time-tested methods of controlling independent media remained a concern.

Thirteen journalists lost their lives in the line of duty, while journalists were subjected to 140 targeted attacks from various quarters:

Security personnel detain supporters of the Indian National Congress at a demonstration protesting the disqualification of opposition leader Rahul Gandhi from India's parliament in New Delhi on March 28, 2023. The Bhartiya Janata Party's action against opposition voices has extended to the media, with new legislation and other obstructions limiting freedom of expression. CREDIT: KABIR JHANGIANI / NURPHOTO VIA AFP

governments, politicians, mobs, militants and vested business interests.

The parcel bomb attack by the Islamic State at an event on March 11, 2023, celebrating Afghanistan's National Journalist's Day at the Tabian Cultural Centre in Mazar-e-Sharif killing two journalists and injuring 30 more, brought to the fore the extreme risks that Afghan journalists continue to face.

The mysterious and brutal murder of senior Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif in October 2022 in Kenya and the lack of transparent investigation into his murder underlined the impunity with which perpetrators escape the wheels of justice.

And yet, Pakistan missed an opportunity to operationalise the landmark Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act (2021), the first ever country in Asia to legally guarantee the safety of journalists, as Prime Minister Sharif failed to notify the safety commission under the law to start delivering safety and justice to journalists.

A report measuring Pakistan's progress in implementing the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and Issues of Impunity in December 2022 showed that Pakistan had only partly delivered on promises to protect its journalist community, mostly through efforts by civil society, media and the UN since 2012, but emphasised the need to effectively implement new laws to ensure perpetrators of attacks on journalists were held to account.

Survival mode

In **Afghanistan**, the media, and particularly those operating in the provinces, learned to avoid reporting directly on sensitive issues, whether women's rights or the anti-Taliban insurgency in Panjshir. Nevertheless, journalists are valiantly doing their jobs, reporting about health, agriculture, and the economy, educational programs, innovatively framing arguments in Islamic terms, or citing UN reports, and offering critiques undermining Taliban narratives. In an emerging "hybrid local-international" model, anonymous in-country contributors are continuing to feed information to journalists abroad who author important stories for the country.

Scores of Afghan media outlets became dysfunctional as they lost donor support and advertisement revenue and struggled to survive amid a shattered local economy. Estimates put the figures of functioning media in Afghanistan at only 192, out of 579 previously operating media houses in the country. Less than half of the 476 radio networks are still functioning. Media houses are unable to pay salaries, and Taliban strictures against women working saw about 80 per cent of women journalists lose their jobs in the radio sector alone.

Advertising by state-owned enterprises in the **Maldives** was used as leverage, begging questions about fair allocation and consequently, the independence of the media. In early 2022, the president's office was revealed to have distributed more than MVR 1 million (USD 64,000) for positive coverage of government projects.

Amid an economic crisis, the number of journalists leaving **Bhutan** for better opportunities is higher than ever before. Consequently, newsrooms in the tiny kingdom are stretched to their limits, impacting both the quality of journalism and work-life balance.

In **India**, the pandemic years saw massive retrenchments, but mostly under the radar. The magnitude of the layoffs was revealed only when journalists began to share termination letters on social media. Most of those who lost their jobs were not reinstated even after advertisement revenues stabilised in the post-pandemic period. Court battles too seemed hopeless, given the dilution of the Working Journalists Act, which offered a modicum of legal protection against such arbitrary dismissals.

In **Nepal**, the Federation of Nepali Journalists received more than 64 employment-related complaints in the last year and a half from journalists working in the mainstream media. A major complaint was non-payment of pending wages. In early 2023, a significant breakthrough came when the Labour Court froze accounts of Kantipur Media Group, the biggest publication house, while deciding on a case filed by a staffer.

The health of the media industry in **Pakistan** continued to decline as audiences from broadcast media – television and radio – switched to digital media. The number of journalists shrank by about 45 per cent amid ongoing widespread job uncertainty. A case filed by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) to review laws regarding job security, irregular wages, personal security, illegal terminations etc continues to be heard in the Islamabad High Court. Meanwhile, many prominent Pakistani journalists shifted to social media sites like YouTube to carry on their journalism.

The economic and political crisis in **Sri Lanka** caused shortages of fuel, printing materials, and the suspension of imports of printing machines and spare parts, which severely impacted the media. Newspapers reduced the number of pages, hiked prices, and suspended certain editions due to paper shortage.

According to the World Food Program (WFP), 33 per cent of households in **Sri Lanka** in were facing acute food insecurity in December 2022, with 68 per cent limiting portions and reducing the number of meals eaten per day. Media workers were not immune to the economic crisis. Low pay and job insecurity have

In June 2022, three suspects were arrested in connection with the abduction of Maldivian journalist Ahmed Rilwan after a breakthrough by the presidential commission on deaths and disappearances.

long dogged journalists in Sri Lanka, but there has undoubtedly been a further downslide amid the economic chaos. A survey conducted in 2022 by Free Media Movement (FMM) found that 50 per cent of the respondents earned less than LKR 15,000 (USD 41) per month.

Violence and impunity

The impunity for crimes against media practitioners continued, taking newer twists.

The UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists flagged 11 unresolved cases of murdered journalists in Bangladesh alone. The list has a total of 26 journalists, including some bloggers, killed between 2004 and July 2022.

The Freedom Network's Annual Impunity 2022 report released in November revealed that 53 Pakistani journalists were killed between 2012 and 2022 but the perpetrators were convicted in only two of these cases. One in every five murdered journalists in Pakistan reportedly failed to get justice because of shoddy police investigations, which prevented the cases from going to trial.

The mysterious murder of senior Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif seized the parliament, the judiciary and the military, but the perpetrators have yet to be identified. Shot dead on October 23, 2022, while driving to Nairobi in Kenya, Sharif had fled the country following various threats. To date, there has been no clarity on what really happened, who was to blame, and how his family can get justice.

Journalists in Afghanistan faced continued threats, arrests and violent treatment, mostly carried out by the Taliban, especially the security forces and employees of the Intelligence Department. Studies showed that the level of violence against the media and journalists increased by 138 per cent in 2022.

Meanwhile, the attack on March 11, 2023, in Balkh in the north of Afghanistan, showed the insecurity with which journalists in the country operate. The explosion in Tabian Cultural Center, in a gathering of journalists where many were supposed to be honoured for their work, killed two journalists and injured 30 others. Hossein Naderi, a reporter, and Akmal, a journalist student, lost their lives in this attack for which ISIS claimed responsibility.

In June 2022, three suspects were arrested in connection with the abduction of Maldivian journalist Ahmed Rilwan after a breakthrough by the presidential commission on deaths and disappearances. After a four-year investigation, the commission presented its final report to President Solih in December 2022. The commission concluded that Rilwan was taken out to sea, beheaded and his body sunk, and accused the previous government of allowing six suspects to flee to Syria.

Journalists who covered anti-government protests in Sri Lanka faced attacks and assault.

More than half of the respondents in a survey conducted by



Members of the Shiite Uleme Council light candles in a memorial for slain journalist Arshad Sharif on October 29, 2022. Discourse and investigations into Arshad Sharif's October killing have been marred by misinformation, diplomatic failings, and impunity. CREDIT: RIZWAN TABASSUM / AFP

FMM said they faced safety and security issues during their work. Significantly, 71 per cent of them said that they were not satisfied with the way their media institution had intervened in such issues.

The murder of Lasantha Wickrematunge and the enforced disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda are two prominent cases that remain judicially unresolved despite strong evidence to suggest the involvement of the Sri Lankan military and political leaders at the time. Both cases are pending in the courts for more than a decade, underlying the impunity for perpetrators of crimes against journalists.

Combating misinformation

The increasing role of technology – mediated through big tech companies – in shaping news, and propagating ‘fake’ news, is a concern that has yet to be prioritised. Control and manipulation by big tech, with little accountability to users, seem to be in synergy with authoritarian regimes in South Asia that restrict freedom of expression online.

In India, the concentration of legacy media houses in the hands of a few corporate houses saw the simultaneous boom in social media propagation of ‘news’. This unregulated and free-for-all space was systematically planted with propaganda. The weaponsisation of social media, particularly WhatsApp, by political parties was rife.

Sophisticated production of misinformation to mimic news reports surfaced around election time in Nepal. While some YouTube channels in Nepal formed an association and committed themselves to follow self-imposed ethical guidelines, others continued to produce content lacking in credibility, prompting the Press Council of Nepal to recommend action against 34 YouTube channels in July

2022 for violating the code of conduct.

Research by Freedom Network in 2023 revealed how Pakistani journalists are negatively affected by online disinformation. Around 60 per cent of the journalists surveyed said disinformation had increased their risk of getting deceived by fake social media posts during online newsgathering. In addition, most women journalists (56 per cent) surveyed said they were targeted with gendered disinformation campaigns, which caused them physical, psychological or reputational harm.

Sharp cleavages

The region saw growing schisms between communities and along religious lines. Hard-line positions got more entrenched, endorsed by those in power. This polarisation was inevitably reflected in the media, and in some cases, the media also fuelled these differences.

In India, a section of the media was identified as being pro-government while others were labelled hostile or “anti-national” and subjected to harassment in various forms, including being foisted with criminal cases.

Religion continues to be a sensitive topic in the Maldives, where the Communications Authority of the atoll nation regularly blocked websites with content deemed to be anti-Islamic. The fear of being labelled “secularist” or “anti-Islamic” prompts journalists and editors to practice self-censorship. Even though memories of the gruesome murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed in 2017 are still fresh, a further reminder of the risk came in February 2023 when a comment posted on Facebook called for the death of Vaguthu journalists in response to articles about extremism in Addu City.

Religious polarisation of politics in Pakistan, also found expression



The head of the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture attends an opening ceremony for a museum on February 24, 2023. With the Taliban solidifying control over Afghanistan, the country's media professionals face turmoil and desperation. CREDIT: KHAIRULLAH KHAIRKHWAZ / PHOTOGRAPHY FROM BENJAMIN GUILLOT-MOUEIX / HANS LUCAS VIA AFP

in violations against the media. The booking of a journalist under the blasphemy law for allegedly defaming Islam by reporting remarks ascribed to former prime minister Imran Khan saw widespread condemnation by journalists' unions and civil rights groups. In February 2023, the president of Digital Media Alliance Pakistan (DigiMAP), faced death threats and was hounded on Twitter for defending the rights of religious minorities and law enforcement agencies arrested and charged 62 social media users with posting 'blasphemous' material and propagating alleged hate speech.

Long arm of the law

The overreach of law by enforcement agencies in India deployed by the government to conduct raids, searches and "surveys" on intransigent media houses marked the period under review. On October 31, 2022, the police conducted searches at the homes and offices of the editors and a reporter of independent news website *The Wire* following a complaint by the national spokesperson and head of the party IT cell of the ruling party. The Editors' Guild of India termed the "surveys" as "excessive and disproportionate".

In February 2023, Income Tax authorities raided the offices of the BBC in Delhi and Mumbai citing income tax violations. However, the provocation for the raids appeared to be the release of a two-part documentary series titled "India: The Modi Question" critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The government blocked the documentary and anyone found screening it was penalised.

Another routinely used method of harassment was to file multiple First Information Reports (FIRs or police complaints) against journalists for the same offence across states. Many journalists particularly in Jammu & Kashmir were arrested under the draconian National Security Act, or Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) which saw them incarcerated without trial or bail for long periods.

In India, the upholding of press freedom by the judiciary in some cases was welcome. The Supreme Court on April 5, 2023, quashed the Centre's telecast ban on news and current affairs channel, MediaOne, declaring that an independent press is necessary for robust democracy.

Another ray of hope in India was the order passed by the Supreme

Court in May 2022, putting the contentious sedition law on hold and asking the Union and state governments not to register any fresh case invoking the offence.

The Lahore High Court on March 30, 2023, went a step further and struck down the colonial era Section 124-A of the Pakistan Penal Code, or the "sedition law", which had routinely been used as a tool to silence journalists, activists and politicians in the opposition.

June 2022 saw the enactment of the Evidence Act in the Maldives, that allows courts to compel disclosure of anonymous sources. Journalists who refuse to reveal the identity of a source could be jailed for up to three months. Concerns shared by the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) and the media council went unheeded. Following consultations with media rights organisations, the government proposed amendments in September 2022 to more clearly specify terrorism and national security-related offences and to determine factors that must be considered by a judge.

Stonewalling access

Lack of access to information, even in countries that have legal guarantees of the right to information was one of the biggest issues for journalists in the region.

The Taliban's blocking of access to information and invalidating the 2014 law is one of the biggest blows to the media in Afghanistan. A survey of in December 2022, by NAI-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan revealed that more than 95 per cent of journalists believe that the right to access information is severely restricted, censored, and under severe pressure.

In Bhutan, shrinking access to information marked the media scenario. Various government agencies put in place new rules preventing staff from speaking to the press. The Administrative Disciplinary Actions introduced in July 2022 by the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC), the central personnel agency of the government and the code of conduct introduced by the Anti-Corruption Commission barring public servants from sharing information were two such rules that threatened disciplinary action and even criminal sanctions on civil servants sharing official

The overreach of law by enforcement agencies in India deployed by the government to conduct raids, searches and “surveys” on intransigent media houses marked the period under review.

information without authorisation. A survey by the Journalists Association of Bhutan in August 2022 was revealing: 24 of the 30 respondents said that access to information is worse now than in previous years. The survey found that the elected government is more open than bureaucrats in terms of sharing information.

Almost a decade after the passage of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in the Maldives, a culture of secrecy persists, with information officers failing to respond to requests for information within the mandatory 21-day period. In February 2023, an RTI activist scored a significant victory when the High Court upheld an order for the Bank of Maldives to disclose staff remuneration.

Curbs and controls

Controlling the media followed certain patterns across the region: a multiplicity of government agencies issued broad and vague rules that allowed arbitrary interpretation, long and tedious legal procedures where the process is punishment and mere suspicion is enough to tie a journalist in legal knots for several years.

In Afghanistan, several agencies took it upon themselves to control the media. The Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC), the Government Media Information Center (GMIC), and the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue (MPVV) have all issued vague rules with unclear legal bases or consequences. The MPVV has banned programs with women actors and requires women news presenters to cover their faces. Other rules call on media to refer to the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” respect Islamic values, and coordinate reporting with state overseers.

In India, besides filing cases under counter-terror laws, authorities blocked journalists, especially Kashmiris, from international travel. Travel bans, “look out circulars” and “No fly” lists seemed to target vocal journalists and activists. Even those holding valid travel documents were stopped at airport immigration counters. In November 2019, following the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that granted J&K special status, there were reportedly 450 Kashmiris on such “no fly lists”.

Journalists with international publications reporting from India also reported facing harassment and hurdles in getting visas and permits to report from India, particularly areas considered sensitive such as Jammu & Kashmir or the country’s north-eastern region.

Regulating the digital space

Laws enacted to regulate online content consistently violated the right to freedom of expression and press freedom.

Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 has been weaponised to create a culture of self-censorship in the country. Since its enactment, at least 3,565 people were accused in the 1,257 cases filed till January 28 this year, according to DSA Tracker, a project of Dhaka-based Centre for Governance Studies (CGS). Almost 40 per cent were detained and activists and journalists were mostly the victims, while members of the ruling party and its affiliated organisations filed most of the cases. According to media reports, 60 per cent of all those prosecuted in Bangladesh for “hurting religious sentiments” under the DSA belong to the minority Hindu community.

Alongside, the draft Data Protection Act 2022 (DPA), the first law for data protection in Bangladesh, has engendered new fears. Critics say that the draft law poorly defines the classification of data and does not follow international standards of the definition of privacy.

In India, digital surveillance was ratcheted up, with major changes being made in information technology laws, ostensibly for national security and sovereignty. Vague definitions encouraged the arbitrary interpretation of such laws. Any critique of the government was construed as anti-national and therefore liable for punitive action.

In early 2023, changes were made to the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules by the Ministry of Electronics and IT, which mandated that intermediaries like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp take down any news about the central government or its agencies that is identified as fake or false by a fact-checker approved by the government-regulated Press Information Bureau. No definition of “fake, false or misleading” information has been laid down. The broad discretionary powers given to the government has been widely criticised.

In Nepal, online attacks against journalists spiked during the tenure of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, who urged his supporters to attack his critics “like wasps”. Alongside, Oli’s close aide Gokul Prasad Banskota, the then minister of communications and information technology brought in several bills in parliament detrimental to press freedom, including a controversial bill to amend and unify various telecommunication laws which allows the government to tap the phones and social media details of anyone without prior court approval.

Online portals were often at the frontline of reporting, a phenomenon that has prompted attempts at control and co-ordinated online attacks. Nepali journalists were also subjected to digital attacks with many journalists reporting that they lost access to their social media accounts.

Digital journalists in Pakistan continue to face immense challenges, according to the 2022 State of Digital Journalism report, produced by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA) which highlighted how digital news outlets were fighting an existential battle due to lack of resources, financial insecurity, and safety risks.

Pakistan’s internet and telecom regulator PTA blocked more than one million websites in 2022 in Pakistan, which figured among the top five requesters globally to Twitter and Facebook for content removal. PTA also asked Wikipedia to remove content alleged to be blasphemous and then banned it altogether. The platform was restored two days later after a public outcry.

The proposal put forward by Sri Lanka’s President Ranil Wickremasinghe in early 2023 to introduce a new bill to regulate social media and electronic media, similar to Singapore’s Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) Act 2016 was met with disquiet, since the IMDA has been used to silence dissent. A replay is quite likely in Sri Lanka, where journalists working in smaller media organisations, running websites or YouTube channels, were subjected to threats, intimidation and assaults.

Vilification and abuse

A phenomenon witnessed in almost all countries of South Asia was the systematic attack on the credibility of the media. Vilification of individual journalists and media houses, encouraged and endorsed by political leaders was also aimed at distracting from the real issues that these journalists were uncovering.

Independent Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* was subjected to a mob attack in April, when youth barged in, abused journalists and



Left to right from above: Image Television staff in Kathmandu protest the non-payment of wages on September 4, 2022. Journalists in Nepal have struggled with wage disputes and job insecurity for years, with non-payment of wages responsible for a significant number of employment-related complaints. CREDIT: FNU

Journalist Ahmed Azaan, from the pro-opposition outlet Dhiyares, walks down a street in the Maldives. Azaan was summoned by police in July after allegedly accessing unauthorised medical information in February 2022. CREDIT: MJA

Members of Bangladesh's transgender community hold a demonstration outside Dhaka's national press club on May 12, 2022, protesting for equality. In Bangladesh, minority groups and women are poorly represented in newsrooms and often face harmful coverage. CREDIT: SYED MAHAMUDUR RAHMAN / NURPHOTO VIA AFP

scrawled the word 'boycott' across the office. The incident occurred within two hours of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's declaration in parliament against the outlet. "Prothom Alo is the enemy of Awami League (ruling party), the enemy of democracy, and the enemy of the country's people," Hasina stated. The newspaper has since faced smear campaigns from various quarters.

In Nepal, adding to the continuing threats and attacks on journalists were digital attacks and attempts to demean journalism and journalists by political leaders. The newly elected Speaker of the House claimed that journalists were on sale and that yellow journalism was increasing. After flak from media and rights advocates, he retracted his 'accidental comment' and reiterated his commitment to the freedom of press and expression.

Similarly in July 2022, following reportage of misuse of the budget, Provincial Minister of Internal Affairs and Law Kedar Karki threatened male journalists saying he could frame them for rape.

Unfortunately, Press Councils and other media regulators in the region are either perceived to be politically motivated, as in Nepal, or lacking in autonomy and power, as in India. In the Maldives, regulatory bodies are vulnerable to government control through political appointees as in the case of the Maldives Broadcasting Commission, which accredits journalists and regulates television and radio stations. In contrast, eight of the 15 members of the Maldives Media Council (MMC) - which regulates print and online media - are elected by media organisations. In a move to ensure autonomy of the body, publications registered by government agencies were barred from voting. In the past, "shell media companies" that did not regularly publish were able to influence the council's composition.

Asserting the identity of a journalist is fraught in Sri Lanka. Some government institutions including the Sri Lankan parliament only allow government registered journalists to cover events and meetings. The survey conducted by the Free Media Movement found that only 55 per cent of journalists had the government-issued media identity card, which facilitate entry and some measure of security especially when dealing with the military and police.

The other half

Women continued their ongoing struggle to achieve equity in the media in South Asia, battling economic crises, along with discrimination and misogyny.

The situation was perhaps most stark in Afghanistan. According

to a survey conducted by the Afghan National Journalists Union in 2022, 87 per cent women journalists reported gender discrimination; 79 per cent said they had been insulted and threatened, including with physical, written and verbal threats, by Taliban officials; while 87 per cent said that they were not motivated to work in the current situation due to fear. Significantly, 91 per cent of working women journalists reported being the sole economic support of their families.

The few women journalists who remain in Afghanistan face restrictions on whether and how their faces and voices will go on air, in addition to the extra challenges of reporting in the field and even reaching workplaces, due to restrictions on their mobility.

In Bangladesh, a study found that only two of the editors of over 500 Dhaka newspapers are women, and only two women hold top positions - as executive editor and chief news editor - at private TV channels.

The picture is not dramatically better in India. A report on gender representation in newsrooms by NewsLaundry and UN Women, released in October 2022, found that 87 per cent of editors and proprietors at India's top newspapers are men. Surveys by media unions on women's representation in trade unions also paint a dismal picture.

In the Maldives, more than a quarter of women journalists have faced sexual harassment, according to a report on gender equality in the media by the Maldives Journalists Association. There were several female editors and heads of newsrooms, including two television stations, while women accounted for about 30 per cent of staff in mainstream outlets. Paid maternity leave is near universal, and some new mothers were offered flexible working options. The employment law grants a 60-day maternity leave but women who take longer maternity leave, sacrifice career advancement.

Women journalists in Nepal face severe online abuse. A study by the Media Advocacy Group released in December 2022 revealed that "an overwhelming majority" or 89 per cent of women journalists in Nepal have faced online violence. Disturbingly, 53 per cent faced violence perpetrated by their own colleagues in the media. The most common platform for online abuse was Facebook Messenger.

Even as online abuse is a growing phenomenon, the resumption of field reporting after the pandemic-induced hiatus brought back into focus physical attacks on women journalists. In May 2022, a Samaa TV reporter was attacked and her clothes ripped off while covering a PTI rally. In 2023, a group of 30 men at a PTI rally attacked and sexually harassed prominent journalist Quatrina Hosain and her



Unfortunately, Press Councils and other media regulators in the region are either perceived to be politically motivated, as in Nepal, or lacking in autonomy and power, as in India. In the Maldives, regulatory bodies are vulnerable to government control through political appointees.

team, leaving one person hurt and equipment destroyed. Anchors and reporters Sana Mirza and Maria Memon were attacked while covering a PTI gathering. Both incidents were captured on video, with PTI supporters seen hurling objects and shouting abuse.

A study in January 2023 by Pakistani non-profit Media Matters found that only 3 per cent of the women journalists surveyed were able to reach leadership roles; 89 per cent said their male counterparts got better salaries for the same work. More than half reported having faced workplace harassment. Another mapping of gender disparity in the media in 2022 by Individualland and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) found that gender discrimination in the media began at the time of recruitment itself. As many as 75 per cent of the respondents said that women faced difficulty in getting jobs in the media.

Women journalists continue to be a minority in Sri Lanka at 15 per cent, and only 2.3 per cent of provincial journalists are female. A study conducted in 2022 by the Hashtag generation, an online movement in Sri Lanka, found that Muslim women and transgender persons are more vulnerable to digital threats.

Corporate control

Press freedom in South Asia was increasingly impacted by the encroachment of corporate interests in the media.

In Bangladesh, press freedom has come to mean freedom of the owners of the media outlets, and corporate houses that control the media are in turn governed by their business interests and political affiliations. Journalists are bound to serve the interests of media owners, that too on precarious pay and in insecure working conditions.

The past year in India also saw media ownership become concentrated in the hands of corporate houses that acquired the few independent voices that remained in the electronic media. The takeover of NDTV, a popular independent television news group, by a corporate house perceived to be close to the government, was one such instance and led to a number of staffers and founder directors quitting the organisation. Media houses already owned by other corporations are restricted in their reporting due to their dependence on government largesse.

In Nepal, given the precarious economy still struggling with the Covid effect, the role of big business in media ownership and

functioning is a growing concern. Any coverage perceived as “negative” could lead to a blockade of advertisements. For example, When prominent Nepali daily *Nagarik* published a news report about NCell, Nepal’s largest private telecom service provider, advertisements stopped. Other newspapers went on to condemn *Nagarik*’s news report. With threats of withholding advertising revenue, media outlets practice a self-censorship of sorts by refraining from reporting on the doings of corporate houses.

Way forward

Amid the gloom and despair, the media managed to create space for independent and critical reporting. Unions and associations resisted the swirling current to stand firm against the corporate onslaught. Journalist organisations came together, putting aside differences, to address the new challenges that faced the media. New coalitions and networks, such as the Women’s Media Forum, Pakistan (WMFP) emerged, to act as an advocacy group to raise concerns of gender inequity in the media.

With newsrooms seemingly unable to cope, journalists are identifying needs and accessing resources to deal with pressing problems, be it training in fact-checking or countering disinformation.

International strategies and solidarity are also the need of the hour, especially in countries where internal checks and balances are under stress. For example, the diplomatic community must raise press freedom issues when negotiating with the Taliban, specifically pressuring them to reduce restrictions on women in the media. Conditionalities of autonomy, protection of rights, especially women’s rights must be built into aid conditionalities.

Effective collaborations such as that between the Pakistan Journalist Safety Coalition and the official Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners can move the agenda of journalists’ safety forward, with the UNESCO recommended “3P” approach of prevention, protection and prosecution to combat impunity.

Given the stupendous challenges, it is only unity among media unions and associations overcoming political polarisation, that can reinstate professional and independent journalism. •

SPECIAL REPORT

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY: THE DIGITAL PIVOT

“News organizations that have not yet fully embraced digital will be at a severe disadvantage,” warns a new report published by Reuters Institute and University of Oxford in January 2023. The report, ‘Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2023’, predicts that “[t]his will be a year of heightened concerns about the sustainability of some news media against a backdrop of rampant inflation, and a deep squeeze on household spending.”

The Russia-Ukraine war, global warming and the lingering effects of the Covid pandemic have generated uncertainty, including within the media industry, according to the report, which flags the arrival of the next wave of technical innovation: artificial intelligence (AI) which presents both opportunities and challenges for journalism.

Against this tumultuous global backdrop, how did the media industry in South Asia remain relevant, independent and sustainable?

Shutters down

The media in South Asia is gradually climbing out of the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic, with media companies re-opening shop after downing their shutters as revenue dried up during the Covid years. What was clear during the pandemic was the need for credible media amidst the cacophony of ‘fake’ news and misinformation. Audiences’ trust in media was a valuable resource to leverage.

Afghanistan saw one of the most dramatic upheavals in the media industry during the past two years, but that was also because of the Taliban take over.

The media landscape in Afghanistan shrank dramatically. According to a 2022 report of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC), 51 TV stations, 132 radio stations, 94 print, and 41 online media outlets ceased operations between August 2021 and February 2022. Financial resources, lack of access to information, program restrictions, security and threats were cited as reasons for the shutdowns.

Hundreds of Afghan journalists were forced out of jobs and many left the country. Those still working in the media under the Taliban, operate under extremely difficult conditions. Every day that they go to work, they put their lives at risk. The Taliban has imposed a new media control regime featuring three elements i.e. restriction, gender-discrimination, and repression with impunity. First, the imposition of constraints on press freedom and media rights. Any sort of critical reporting on topics related to the government or the public is banned. Second, policies targeting Afghan women in the media. Third, treatment of the Afghan media and media-related affairs as a security threat. The Taliban security and intelligence agencies are increasingly involved in controlling media affairs. The lack of donor support and internal revenue has made the media in Afghanistan largely unsustainable.

Over in Bangladesh, the situation is only a little better. A study by the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Begum Rokeya University, documents how the pandemic almost destroyed the media industry. Many local newspapers were severely affected by losses in advertising revenues during the pandemic. Advertisements have gone down by an estimated 70-80 per cent despite an increase in



television and online media viewership.

Many newspapers in Bangladesh have been forced to shut down publishing, others reduced their staff to cope during the pandemic and post covid. Cost-cutting also had an impact on content. For example, in the case of print media, many have reduced their pages. Additionally, multitasking is now very important for a reporter, who is not only required to collect information but develop skills to produce audio and video content. Moreover, the rise of social media and acceleration in mobile internet consumption has changed the way media companies traditionally drew revenue.

India, the largest economy in the region, also has the biggest media market. Much before the pandemic, digital news media platforms began making headway. Alongside online presence of legacy news media, many digital-only news media platforms emerged over the last decade. Nevertheless, covid left a massive impact on the sector in terms of decrease in advertising revenues. Print advertising revenue dropped from INR 206 billion in 2019 to INR 122 billion in 2020. Similarly, TV ad revenue dropped from INR 320 billion in 2019 to INR 215 billion in 2020.

Investments are hard to get and the overall faith in the business



of digital news, and perhaps media in general, is waning. As a result, most companies drastically cut costs, retrenched staff, reduced hiring, and began to look for new ways to generate revenue. Digital natives are coming up with alternate models like audience revenue, membership models and grants.

In the Maldives, a small country of 556,398, having 80.2 per cent internet penetration that is highest in the region, media is mostly reliant on state-funding or advertising revenue from politicians and business houses. Early in 2022, the president's office was revealed to have distributed more than MVR 1 million (USD 64,000) for positive coverage of government projects.

Surprisingly, the number of registered newspapers and magazines increased from 219 in 2020 to 268 in 2021. The new start-ups were predominantly news websites in the local Dhivehi language. But not all registered outlets publish regularly, and 47 inactive outlets were dissolved in March 2022. Popular proposals to ensure financial sustainability for startups included government subsidies, low-cost internet packages and a merit-based process for securing advertising from state-owned enterprises.

As more legitimate advertising revenue returned with the recovery

Bhutan's Prime Minister Lotay Tshering and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz hold a press conference in Berlin on March 23, 2023. Despite a lack of transparency from public institutions, Bhutan's Prime Minister Lotay Tshering has reiterated his commitment to freedom of information in Bhutan CREDIT: JOHN MACDOUGALL / AFP

The Taliban security and intelligence agencies are increasingly involved in controlling media affairs. The lack of donor support and internal revenue has made the media in Afghanistan largely unsustainable.



of the Maldivian economy from the pandemic, larger mainstream outlets were able to restore cut salaries. But smaller newsrooms continued to struggle.

Media platforms in Nepal also have been impacted by the pandemic, with decreased revenue from advertising and challenges in maintaining operations. In Nepal, where outlets subsist almost entirely on advertising, about a quarter shut down entirely. More than 1 in 3 print, television and radio journalists lost their jobs. Many who remained faced pay cuts.

Pakistani news publications had been losing audiences long before Covid hit. Unofficial statistics suggest that newspapers and magazines registered with the government's Audit Bureau of Circulation have lost their circulation by almost 6-8 times between 2012 and 2022. While the print media in Pakistan was ailing, the pandemic only hastened its terminal decline.

The main reason for this decline was technological disruption. The other major factor was the failure of the print news media to invest in investigative reporting and innovative ways of doing journalism that could keep it relevant in an age when news was breaking by the minute, especially on social media. The third was the strengthening of the state's censorship regime after early 2015.

News reporting on electronic news media outlets became even more restricted due to the Covid-mandated restrictions on travel, movement and assembly. The decline in viewership, was preceded by Covid and the decline in their revenues appeared to be one of the major reasons behind their failure to reverse the trend.

Amid the ongoing economic crisis in Pakistan, traditional/legacy media are surviving by cutting costs – sacking high quality and better paid staff, reducing investment in news gathering and news production and reducing the number of their bureaus and reporters in rural and remote regions of the country. Persistent loss of viewership and advertising revenue has forced many television channels to scale down their operations. Others (such as Public TV and Indus News) have completely shut shop while a few (such as Samaa TV) have been sold to investors with deeper pockets.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022, severely impacted the media industry, as shortage of fuel, printing materials, and suspension of imported printing machines and their spare parts, dealt a heavy blow. Newspapers reduced the number of pages in their print editions,

hiked their prices, and temporarily suspended printing certain editions of their publications due to shortage of paper.

The pandemic also had significant impact on digital media platforms in the country, with many experiencing a decline in advertising revenue and facing challenges in maintaining their operations. Community groups on social media quickly stepped into the breach, functioning as a vibrant platform for communication, information sharing even raising money for basics like food and medicines. Fact-checkers such as FactCheckLK and WatchDog online helped bust misinformation and fake news online. Restrictions and lockdowns during the pandemic triggered innovation in the media.

New normal

Despite the many challenges, some media platforms in Afghanistan have been able to adapt and find ways to survive. According to Ayesha Tanzeem, Director Voice of America South and Central Asia Division, Afghan media has fought back in three ways. One, media within country is still trying to give people news of relevance to them: what happened, how many people are dying of cold or hunger, what percentage of the population is facing poverty, when is aid coming? Second, exiled journalists who still have sources inside the country, have started their own websites, YouTube channels, social media pages, and much robust journalism is continuing. Third, international media organisations have now shifted to modes of delivery that are outside the control of the Taliban: 24/7 satellite TV channels in Dari and Pashto are reaching Afghanistan and local FM radio to shortwave and medium wave radio are now operating from Central Asia.

In India, digital natives have had to think out of the box to remain sustainable. Cost cutting, diversifying revenue streams, depending on grants, brand sponsorship and other non-profit projects and seeking support from high-net-worth individuals (HNIs) are some of the ways digital media platforms are trying to survive through the present situation. India is perhaps the only country in the region where innovative revenue models are being tested successfully. Online subscriptions and membership models are quite popular among emerging digital news media platforms.

For example, startups like Suno India ("Listen up, India" in Hindi) and The News Minute, are filling local news gaps across southern

The readership of the online Prothom Alo is around 5 million, while the Daily Star's website had over 4.4 million active users. The addition of local-language stories has attracted readers too.

Left: On May 28, 2021, a man checks WhatsApp Messenger Privacy Settings outside a Newspaper shop in Jammu and Kashmir. A government-proposed draft of personal data legislation from November 2022 was criticised for its potential to allow law enforcement to process data on national security grounds amid other reasons. CREDIT: NASIR KACHROO / NURPHOTO VIA AFP

Right: Students shout slogans during a protest demanding the release of detained journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams in Dhaka on March 30, 2023. Despite the election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the evocation of the 2018 Digital Security Act continues to result in the detention of journalists across Bangladesh. CREDIT: REHMAN ASAD / AF



India. Built on an initial product base of deeply reported narratives, Suno India seized the demand for information about Covid19 to pivot to harder news. Launched with personal savings and contributions from well-wishers, seed-funds from Google, and other media support organisations such as the Bengaluru-based Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation has helped scaling up. Steady revenue from producing shows for think-tanks, corporates, and NGOs has kept Suno India going. Subscription and other models are being explored for long-term sustainability.

Similarly, Citizens Matters is another model rooted in the activism of the community. The venture is meant to provide a local journalistic platform that empowers communities to engage in finding solutions for their own city. With a magazine format, the approach was to take deep dives on hyper local issues, a big departure from the Indian media's usual obsession with national news. They focused on retail donors (individuals), high-net-worth individuals (HNIs) and foundation grants. Contributions from individual readers make up around 20 percent of total revenue, grants around 25 percent, the rest are from HNI and other sources. From its base in Bengaluru in the country's south, the platform has expanded to Mumbai and other metropolises.

YouTube, as well as other online media, does away with the need for government licences and approvals required for the traditional television and print media. Prominent journalists from mainstream media like Ravish Kumar and Barkha Dutt have launched their own YouTube channels which quickly garnered millions of subscribers. Video is the fastest-growing segment of the digital advertising sector, and accounts for more than 15 per cent of advertisement revenue. The flexibility and relatively autonomous character are also factors fuelling its growth.

An example of the comparative autonomy on the internet is MediaOne, the Malayalam news channel. When the news channel's license was banned in January 2022 by the Central government, it continued broadcasting online, through its social media channels (the ban was lifted by a court order on April 5, 2023).

Go digital

The media in Bangladesh is seemingly flourishing. There are 3,176 registered newspapers and magazines according to 2022 data from

the government's Department of Films and Publications. But these figures might not reveal the true picture. Industry insiders say that these numbers do not represent credible media outlets. The number of authentic Bangla dailies published from Dhaka is more likely to be just 32, and there are fewer than 10 English dailies they say.

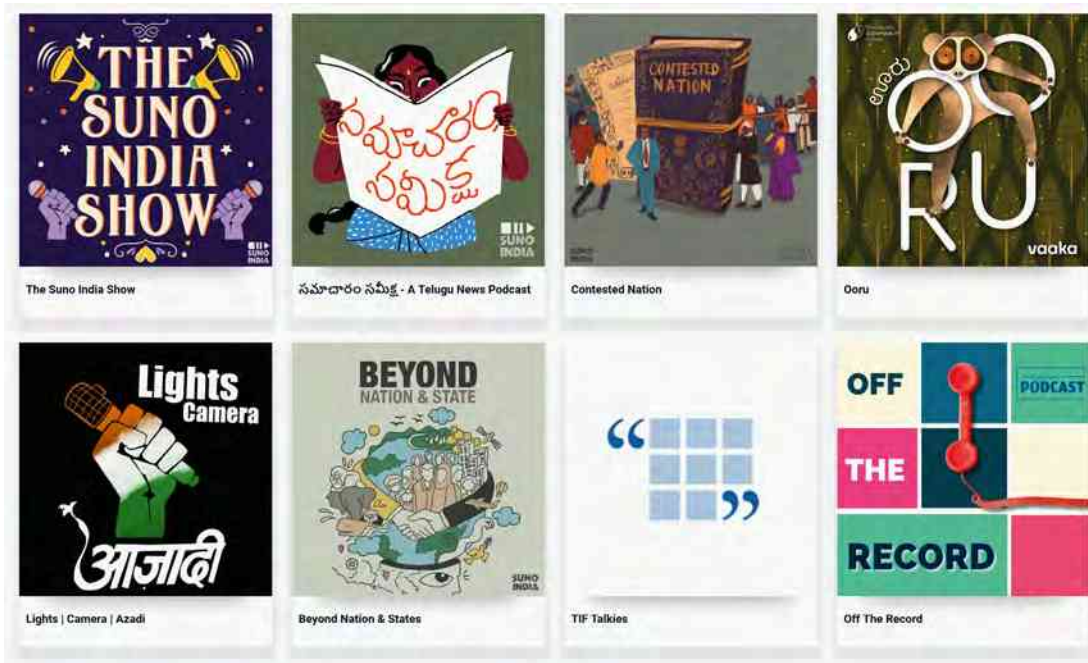
Transforming from traditional media to digital is widespread. The largest dailies in Bangladesh like *Prothom Alo* and *Daily Star* have their print as well as online streams. The revenue the newspaper earns from the digital version crossed USD10 million in 2018 and the amount is going up. The readership of the online Prothom Alo is around 5 million, while *the Daily Star's* website had over 4.4 million active users. The addition of local-language stories has attracted readers too. Prominent and interesting stories are being translated in Bengali and are being widely read. Prothom Alo's bronze award in the "Best Digital Subscription" category of the South Asian Digital Media Awards, 2022 instituted by WAN-IFRA Award is validation of its move towards sustainability.

The news website bdnew24.com is the pioneer of new media in Bangladesh and the first internet-based newspaper in the country. Bangladesh is now seeing several online newspapers over the recent years: bdnews24.com, banglanews24.com, risingbd.com, banglamail24.com, natunbarta.com, justnewsbd.com, Barta24. Net etc. However, despite the bright future of the digital media in Bangladesh, lack of skilled digital journalists, and lack of internet access for the masses remain some of the main obstacles.

Pivot and innovate

Post-Covid, media organisations read the writing on the wall and attempted to stabilise their revenue and began to grow their audiences by pivoting from print to digital.

Legacy media in India is well into a major digital transformation journey, and some have even completed the process. Legacy revenue streams like advertisements are still valuable, so companies are trying to juggle two balls - legacy revenue and emerging revenue streams. This is leading to a fair bit of short-term innovation, like ad packages with both traditional and digital media. Companies are also getting better at leveraging their traditional media content in the digital ecosystem. Companies are depending more on data, or the business of data, events, audience revenue and subscriptions, monetising their journalism



Left: SA screenshot from the online news platform Suno India in April 2023. Despite state attempts to control the digital frontier, new online start-ups provide an alternative to the throes of traditional media. CREDIT: SUNO INDIA

Below: A screenshot from Pakistani digital media advocacy alliance DigiMAP in April 2023. Solidarity and unity between digital publications, as seen through DigiMAP and neighbouring India's DigiPUB, have managed to preserve press freedom and resist economic pressures online. CREDIT: DIGIMAP

Right: The Maldives' small media sector has allowed government and business interests to flourish. President Solih's office was revealed to have distributed over USD 64,000 for positive coverage of government projects in early 2022. CREDIT: MJA

through other productions like cinema or podcasts etc. There is lot more innovation happening on the digital front.

In Nepal, the digital news industry today has stabilised somewhat, but it is smaller and less robust. The transition that began around the new millennium, has reshaped the entire Nepali media landscape as many consumers migrated from print to digital platforms. Dedicated news portals are outpaced by the social networking platforms whose priorities are only to attract and gratify consumers, and not necessarily inform them.

Internet penetration in Nepal has increased dramatically in recent years, and online news consumption has seen a similar rise because of the popularity of social media and the availability of cheaper Chinese or Indian smartphones. In recent years, some senior and well-known editors have invested in digital media outlets which has increased the impact of those media among political and social elites.

Overall, news media platforms that have been able to adapt and innovate during the pandemic have had a better chance of surviving. YouTube has emerged as one of the popular content dissemination mediums. Some of the YouTube channels have even formed an association and committed themselves to follow self-imposed ethical guidelines. However, the Press Council of Nepal, the media content regulatory body, recommended action against 34 YouTube channels in July 2022 for violating the code of conduct.

In Pakistan, digital news media has been a major beneficiary of Covid. With the availability of better internet connections and smartphones, an increasing number of people is consuming news online. Developments in information and communication technologies have also made it possible for people to watch only the most relevant pieces of news on their phones instead of having to watch a full bulletin or talk show and they can consume news at their own convenience.

To respond to the digital challenge, almost all the major news outlets in the country have set up their websites and YouTube



channels. Scores of small independent digital-only news outlets have also emerged over the last few years. These include Naya Daur, Soch, Humsub, The Centrum Media (TCM), The Current, Voicepk and Lok Sujag. Dozens of journalists, after having lost their jobs in print and electronic media, too, have started their own YouTube channels. Though online platforms associated with large print and electronic media organisations are attracting audiences in ever-larger numbers, their revenues have not reached such levels that can sustain them without support from their mother ships.

Among the digital media start-ups, some survive on grants and donations. For instance, HumSub almost exclusively runs on grants by international media development agencies. So do Voicepk and Lok Sujag. Naya Daur runs on small grants but it simultaneously collects donations from philanthropists and Pakistani expats. Soch is the media arm of a big tech company based in Karachi (and, therefore, does not need grants and donations for its survival). But its operations, too, remain small. Some other digital outlets, TCM being the most prominent among them, have tried another model: selling their production facilities and capabilities.

Working with media support organisations such as Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka (MEND), media organisations looked at stabilising their revenue and growing audiences by pivoting from print to digital. Relatively larger media houses such as Wijeya Newspapers, with 18 publications, managed to re-work editorial content and expand revenue by introducing



podcasts. Wijeya now has a full-fledged podcast network of 24 original shows. A new digital strategy developed by government-owned Lake House (ANCL), saw for example, one of its publications, Dinamina rising in the Alexa ranking – a global metric for ranking countries’ website popularity – from 350 to 127.

Startups such as Roar Media surged ahead to lead the digital news media race with its mobile journalism innovation during the pandemic called #FlattenTheCurve campaign and never looked back. EconomyNext, another new media publication redesigned its website, and enhance its user experiences with improved navigation and loading speed. Since launching the redesigned website in April 2021, EconomyNext’s audience acquisition has increased by more than 73 per cent.

Control and censorship

As the digital news media in the region became more robust, emerging in the frontline of reporting and truth telling, attempts to control and regulate media grew equally vigorously.

The growth of digital media outlets in Bangladesh was accompanied by the government’s heavy-handed regulation of the mushrooming online portals, social sites, newspapers and Tv channels is also problem. The Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 has been consistently criticised as ‘draconian’ and a ‘weapon to muzzle political dissent, freedom of expression and press freedom.’ The law has successfully created a culture of self-censorship in Bangladeshi media.

In the Maldives, the regulatory body for the broadcast sector remains susceptible to government control through political appointees, who are nominated by the president and approved by parliament. The seven members of the Maldives Broadcasting Commission, which accredits journalists and regulates television and radio stations, can be dismissed and replaced at will when the president’s party has a parliamentary majority.

In contrast, eight of the 15 members of the Maldives Media Council (MMC) - which regulates print and online media - are elected by media organisations. Moreover, a serious electoral flaw was remedied in October 2022 when inactive media outlets and publications registered by government agencies were barred from

Startups such as Roar Media surged ahead to lead the digital news media race with its mobile journalism innovation during the pandemic called #FlattenTheCurve campaign and never looked back.

voting. In the past, “shell media companies” that did not regularly publish were able to influence the council’s composition.

In Sri Lanka, in January 2023, President Ranil Wickremasinghe said that a new bill will be introduced to regulate social media and electronic media like the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) Act 2016 of Singapore. Given the restrictive nature of these laws, this move is being viewed with concern by media and human rights activists.

In India, the government attempted to rein in the vibrant digital news media through digital surveillance as well as tightened information technology laws supposedly for national security and sovereignty. Over-broad definitions and arbitrary interpretation of laws like the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (updated in April 2023) were a source of harassment for journalists in the digital media. Any critique of the government was construed as anti-national and therefore liable for punitive action and even raids and “searches” by other central government agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate which oversees financial probity.

Unity among digital news publishers in coalitions such as DIGIPUB in India and DIGIMAP in Pakistan has managed to stall bull-doing tactics of governments and big corporations and fly the flag of press freedom and autonomy. •

SPECIAL REPORT

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN: A PRECARIOUS EXILE

After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the media was particularly hard-hit with a sharp spike in harassment, threats, beatings, torture and detainments. Journalists who did not follow the rigid media guidelines laid down by the Taliban were strictly censured. Women journalists were particularly vulnerable after the Taliban issued diktats against women working in the media, demanded strict dress codes and clamped down on their mobility. They and their families were routinely intimidated. Many journalists fled for their lives.

According to the Union of Independent Journalists of Afghanistan (AIJU), almost 30-35 per cent of journalists left the country following the Taliban takeover and are living in exile. While some – particularly those working with international media – were immediately evacuated to North America and Europe, a large number fled to neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan, and others to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkey, hoping to relocate further to countries where they could ultimately live and work.

On September 3, 2021, a group of UN human rights experts including Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of expression, called on all States “to provide urgent protection to Afghan journalists and media workers who fear for their lives and are seeking safety abroad.” Specifically, the group called on all States to “do their utmost to preserve the hard-won gains for media freedom, including for women journalists and media workers.”

Responding to the crisis in its neighbourhood, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) provided support to Afghan journalists evacuated to Pakistan and was able to facilitate the stay of some journalists in Pakistan while they awaited relocation to Europe and North America. The PFUJ coordinated with the Pakistan Information Ministry to expedite approval of Pakistani visas for around 50 Afghan journalists.

Working with its affiliate the Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists, the union also rented a building to provide Afghan journalists and their families with accommodation, food and other support during interim stay, including practical help like ferrying them to and from airports. Both PFUJ and IFJ also collaborated to provide financial support to Afghan journalists who opted to live with their relatives in Islamabad.

Regional solidarity was an important component of support efforts. On August 15, 2022, a year on from the Taliban takeover, the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) a network of 12 media unions and associations in the region, called on governments and international agencies to “increase humanitarian emergency visa programs, ease visa requirements, expand resources for handling asylum applications and provide further support and resources for resettlement schemes for Afghan journalists and media workers.”

Mounting frustration

On February 26, 2023, hundreds of Afghan refugees protested outside the National Press Club in Islamabad to highlight the

In the weeks that followed the Taliban takeover, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) received scores of demands from journalists and media workers with estimates that up to 1,000 journalists had fled Afghanistan. The IFJ launched a special appeal to support Afghan journalists which raised more than 80,000 euros in support via individual and group pledges. The IFJ’s Safety Fund was in high demand both in the country and the surrounding regions and managed to aid over 1,000 journalists before the funds were exhausted. These funds have helped save lives, either by supporting those fleeing the country for passport applications and relocation to safe areas or by providing essential basic food and medicines for those who remained. But the demand remains and the fallout for Afghanistan’s journalists continues. Coordinating with governments and international organisations, the IFJ assisted where it could in the process of visas, relocation and resettlement of Afghan journalists in Europe, Asia-Pacific and North America – in most cases working together with its global affiliates – and working with coalitions such as the Journalists for Human Rights in Canada in a bid to smooth the process of relocation.

In addition to assistance provided by the Safety Fund during the Afghanistan appeal, IFJ affiliates around the world also offered various kinds of support, ranging from raising funds, providing humanitarian assistance, lobbying governments for emergency visas and resettlement, supporting evacuations, providing safe shelter and food, and providing solidarity and assistance when those seeking refuge reached other countries. Like other international support agencies and media development groups, the IFJ struggled under the pressure of the enormous outflow. Avenues for support or relocation soon disappeared despite this and the situation for support globally was further impacted with the onset of the conflict in Ukraine which sadly shifted international focus and support. •





Afghan refugees offer Eid al-Adha prayers at a mosque near Peshawar on July 9, 2022. An estimated 3.7 million Afghans fled to Pakistan in the wake of the Taliban's ascension in August 2021, of which over 500 are confirmed journalists. CREDIT: ABDUL MAJED / AFP

inordinate delays in granting of US visas. The protest was prompted by the stalling of the US government's Priority 1 and Priority 2, known as P1 and P2 refugee programs to fast-track relocation of "at-risk" Afghans, including journalists and rights activists facing persecution from the Taliban. Eligibility criteria included: previous work for the US government, a US-based media organisation or NGO in Afghanistan, and a referral by a US-based employer.

Delays of more than a year and a half have left applicants in a limbo in Pakistan, without access to basic services, and in fear of deportation.

Critically, Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees/1967 Protocol which offers refugees protection against deportation to their country of origin where they face threats to life and freedom. Nor has the country enacted any national legislation for the protection of refugees nor established procedures to determine the refugee status of persons who are seeking international protection within its territory. Such persons are therefore treated in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946.

On March 18, 2023, the Taliban regime's Refugees and Repatriation department, said that 1,851 Afghan refugees from Iran and 331 others from Pakistan had been returned to Afghanistan. Of 331 refugees

from Pakistan, 70 were released and brought from Pakistani prisons in Pakistan through the Spin Boldak border crossing. At least four Afghan refugees have reportedly died in Pakistani prisons.

In March 2023, a coalition of press freedom and free expression organisations, including Index on Censorship, the National Union of Journalists, PEN International and English PEN, demanded to know the details of the next phase of UK's flagship resettlement program, the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme (ACRS). Hundreds of journalists remain stranded in Afghanistan in difficult circumstances, even as the updated entry criteria for the scheme are unclear. According to an update presented on March 28, 2023 to the UK Parliament, 24,500 vulnerable people were relocated to the UK from Afghanistan, the numbers of journalists is not specified.

Displacement and despair

It is currently estimated that more than 600,000 Afghans fled to neighbouring Pakistan since the Taliban came to power in August 2021, many over land borders. The number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is now 3.7 million, only 1.32 million of whom are registered with the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, the only agency that grants legal refugee status or Proof of Registration (PoR) documents allowing them



Above: Children of Afghan refugees in Pakistan read from the Quran near Lahore on June 19, 2022. Afghan journalists in Pakistan face significant issues in finding secure housing, finding employment, and accessing healthcare and other essential services. CREDIT: ARIF ALI / AFP

Right: Afghan refugees seeking asylum protest, hoping to garner help from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Islamabad on May 7, 2022. Afghan journalists and media workers in Pakistan have said that the international community and journalist support NGOs are not adequately addressing their needs, as many wait in an administrative quagmire. CREDIT: FAROOQ NAEEM / AFP

to stay in Pakistan. A flood of applications and backlogs in granting appointments for interviews has left many applicants in the lurch.

Of the approximately 500 journalists living in Pakistan in 2022, some managed to get legal documents to travel to a Western country. According to recent estimates, more than 200 Afghan journalists are currently refugees in Pakistan, 40 per cent of whom are female.

These journalists and media workers say that the international community and journalists' support agencies have not paid proper attention to them. Among them, there are people who have been living in Pakistan for more than a year, waiting for their immigration documents to be processed. Those who escaped across the border to Pakistan are still hoping to relocate to a safe country where they can hopefully start afresh.

Displacement, uncertainty, lack of hope for the future, non-renewal of visas, financial hardships, various health related challenges including affordable healthcare, medicines, access to hospitals and clinics, as well as the risk of deportation to Afghanistan have put a number of these journalists under severe psychological pressure.

These are not the only issues that Afghan journalists living in Pakistan face. There are problems in housing, both long-term and temporary because house rentals require legal contracts. Many of them are forced to rely on their own resources, while a small minority have found support from international NGOs for the short term.

On January 29, 2023, a group of Afghan journalists living in Pakistan protested in Islamabad over their uncertain future. The protesters called on foreign countries and organisations supporting journalists to process their asylum applications. They drew attention

of the international community to their precarity and urged for their applications to be processed quickly.

Journalist Muzlifa Kakar also participated in this protest. "We have knocked on all doors in search of help but they refuse to support us, they are telling us that we were not working in a conflict zone and that we won't be granted support," she said. Kakar worked for various media organisations, including the Afghan Parliament House (Wolesi Jirga) TV. The channel, which received government funding, was generally critical of the Taliban and it is impossible for her to return, she said, amid fear of deportation.

The exiled journalists say that the support organisations told them that they could only help journalists who face "real threats". For Afghan journalists who worked under tremendous threat, promoted freedom of speech and raised the voice of people and connected them to the world, this seems somewhat of a betrayal.

Uncertain future

The children of Afghan journalists in exile in Pakistan have no access to education, they face communication issues, and a high risk of arrest as undocumented refugees. Children cannot be sent to school because they require IDs. "It's important to educate our children; if we can't educate them now, they will be a severe danger for the society in the future. And the responsibility would be squarely on the international community and the organisations who brought us here and forgot us," said a journalist in exile who preferred to remain anonymous.

Mina Akbari worked for more than five years with various media



On February 26, 2023, hundreds of Afghan refugees protested outside the National Press Club in Islamabad to highlight the inordinate delays in granting of US visas.

networks in Afghanistan before she was evacuated to Pakistan by an NGO. She lives in uncertainty. "Fleeing to Pakistan didn't address our concerns. We thought we would get to a safe country soon but did not realise that it would take so long."

Afghan journalists in Pakistan also face security threats. Many of their visas have expired, and most cannot afford to renew them. Pakistan's Ministry of Interior announced a visa amnesty until December 31, 2022, during which time authorities did not charge anyone who had overstayed their visa by up to a year. Now, violators could face up to three years in prison.

Hand-to-mouth

Dire poverty stares the exiles in the face. Many of the desperate journalists are ready to sell their belongings, one even his kidney. Sami Jahesh left Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover. He took to Twitter to announce: "I have no money, no food to eat, no other option, but to sell my kidney". Jahesh used to work for Ariana News, a private broadcasting channel in Afghanistan. Like other Afghan journalists and human rights activists, he expected to be relocated to a country accepting refugees, but still lives in limbo in Pakistan, struggling to overcome critical economic challenges.

There are few work opportunities. Only a few journalists have managed to get work online with some media outlets. It is particularly difficult for single female journalists or those who are caretakers of their families.

Voice of freedom

Afghan journalists in exile are not merely worried about their current situation; they are worried about the future of freedom of speech in Afghanistan. The international community must keep alive efforts to sustain Afghan media and freedom of speech they feel. Female journalists are now almost completely erased from the media.

Similar issues plague Afghan refugees in Iran, where more than a hundred journalists are trying to get asylum or visas for a developed country. A group of Afghan journalists and media workers in Iran said that the international organisations that support journalists have forgotten them.

In both Iran and Pakistan, the main challenges include non-extension of visas; fear of being deported to Afghanistan; access to healthcare and education; and economic and administrative issues.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has called on host countries not to turn away those Afghans whose lives would be at risk. The organisation has issued advisories and requested all countries not to repatriate Afghans especially journalists and activists whose lives might be at stake and has urged the international community to support them.

Journalist unions and support groups have been continuing to shine a light on the persisting – and worsening – situation of Afghan journalists in exile. Governments and international media support groups must work in tandem to alleviate their suffering and facilitate the achievement of a life of dignity and return to their professional lives. •



Protestors gather inside Sri Lanka's Presidential Palace in Colombo on July 9, 2022, demanding the resignation of former-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Essential goods shortages, threats to journalists' safety, and protest-inspired state repression of freedom of expression severely impacted Sri Lanka's media sector in 2022-23. CREDIT: AFP





21ST ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2022-2023

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