

“ I believe that the thinking of the government as well as the thinking of the people in media should be transparent. Whether news gets published is not the only thing in a democracy
- Narendra Modi (2019)



BITTER TRUTHS: MEDIA IN AMRITKAAL

APRIL 2024



All the data and analysis presented here is based on publicly available government data. We use data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and the now discontinued Employment-Unemployment Survey. The analysis is representative of 49 crore workers in the country for the year 2022-23.





The state of India's media is on a steep decline. It is divided and partisan. Never before have sections of the media so openly supported the government or used media platforms for inflammatory hate mongering. Other sections are pliant and quiescent. Independent media platforms and journalists who dare to question are jailed or face criminal action.

161
OUT OF
180

India's rank in
the World Press
Freedom Index
2023

GLOBAL RANKING OF INDIA

Sliding 11 positions in a single year according to the Reporters Sans Frontiers' World Press Freedom Index, India ranked 161 out of 180 in 2023! Security Indicator shows the worst decline among the parameters measured. India now has the dubious distinction of being "one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world."

“21 journalists deaths from 2014 to 2019, linked to their work.”

In 2017, Gauri Lankesh, courageous editor of Kannada weekly Gauri Lankesh Patrike was shot dead just outside her home in Bangalore, while returning home from work by right-wing assassins.

In 2018, Shujat Bukhari the founding editor of Rising Kashmir was shot dead in front of his office in a high security area.

40 journalists were killed from 2014 to 2019. Of these, 21 have been confirmed to be related to their work.

In 2022, 194 journalists, including 48 from Jammu and Kashmir and 40 from Telangana, were targeted in India. In Jammu and Kashmir, newspapers were banned, journalists were restrained from

travelling. Journalists, whether in Kashmir (e.g. Gowhar Geelani, Yash Raj Sharma, Masrat Zahra) or Manipur (e.g. Wangkhemcha Shamjai) are intimidated with show cause notices or summoned for questioning. Women journalists are harassed, both online and on the field, for their independent reporting and law enforcing agencies virtually ignore their complaints against right wing trolls.

Chequered Media landscape

India is one of the biggest media markets with 17,000 registered daily newspapers, 866 private and 49 state-run television channels, 850 radio stations, and produces on an average more than 1,000 films a year in various Indian languages. This may sound like a sign of media industry robustness and plurality of news and opinions. However, a handful of big conglomerates dominate both the national and regional language markets. Apart from the old family owned and political party affiliated media ownership, corporate media ownership has increased and the nexus between business and politics dominates information gateways.

BIG MEDIA HOUSES :

TV18 group owned by Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance

Times group owned by Bennett-Coleman Company

NDTV Group owned by Adani Group

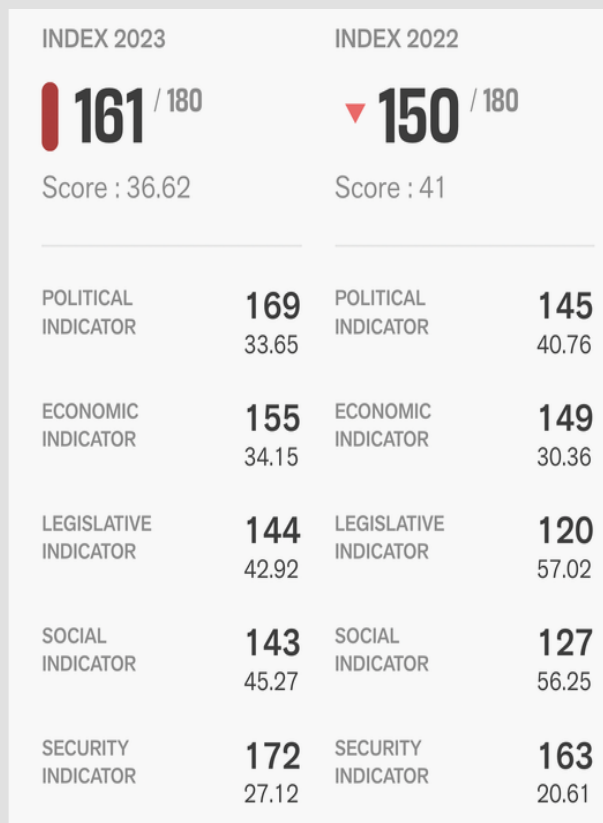


Figure 1: Data from Reporters Sans Frontiers’ World Press Freedom Index Website rsf.org

When the BJP government came to power in Delhi in 2014, the mainstream media were already in the process of being taken over by pro-BJP industrial houses. There was already a lack of social and ideological diversity in ownership of media. Post-2014, the process accelerated with Ambani acquiring around 70 media outlets and Adani taking over well-established media houses like the NDTV, the Quint, and IANS agency.

Control over information flow

Since 2014, in addition to the takeover of mainstream media houses, control over information flow intensified in various forms such as promoting, protecting hate speech, restraining independent news and simply failing to question government policy or hold governments accountable.

DIRECT INTERVENTIONS IN MEDIA OPERATIONS

- **Bobby Ghosh** the editor-in-chief of **Hindustan Times** in 2016-17, started “**Hate Tracker**”, a crowd-sourced database of hate crimes across India. The management of Hindustan Times succumbed to pressure from the government forcing Ghosh to leave the Hindustan Times and shut down the Hate Tracker project.
- **Media One**, a well-regarded news channel from Kerala, was taken off air for nearly a year by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for its reporting of the Shaheenbagh and farmers’ protests, before the ban was finally lifted on the orders of the Supreme Court.
- At the same time **Sudarshan TV** and several other mainstream channels were spinning the success of Muslims in any field as “jihad”, UPSC jihad for instance, and interreligious marriages between Hindus and Muslims as “Love Jihad”.
- The ministry was silent when several YouTube channels broadcast hate speeches by sadhus.
- **Siddique Kappan** the Kerala journalist, who was on his way to cover the Hathras rape case, was arrested and jailed for two years on flimsy grounds, even before he wrote a single word of the story he was there to cover.
- Other prominent journalists who were targeted and forced out of the channels they were working for include **Ravish Kumar, Punya Prasun Bajpai, Abhisar Sharma**.
- As of date, according to Free Speech Collective, 15 journalists have been charged under the draconian UAPA, at least seven of whom were behind bars for long periods.
- Eminent journalist **Probir Purkayastha** has been under arrest since October 2023 for using foreign funding to cover people’s movements like the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the farm laws.
- In “Behind Bars”, Free Speech Collective’s study of a decade of journalists arrested in India (2010-20), 154 journalists in India were arrested, detained, interrogated or served show cause notices for their professional work and a little over 40 percent of these instances were in 2020. Nine foreign journalists faced deportation, arrest, interrogations or were denied entry into India.

INDIRECT INTERVENTIONS

through expansion of **regulatory overreach**; the government brought in several regulatory changes, **strengthening its own direct control** over media content.



Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 enabled a government-led **Grievance Appellate Committee** to have the **final say** about the validity of content moderation decisions taken by all intermediaries (Facebook, X, Instagram etc).



The government has empowered the **Press Information Bureau** of the **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting** or **other agency authorised by the Central Government** to fact-check, in respect of any business of the Central Government. The PIB fact-checking unit will decide what is true or false and what information must be removed.



Using the 2021 guidelines, the government issued 105 blocking orders to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.



In Apr 2024, popular Hindi YouTube channels **Bolta Hindustan, National Dastak and Article 19** were served closure notices under Rule 15(2), IT Rules 2021 and Sec 69A, IT Act 2000. National Dastak serves Dalit, Bahujan and Minority audiences ignored by mainstream media. In all cases, the channels were not informed of the reason for the closure. The rules are facing a challenge in courts, but the government is using them to shut down channels.



→ More legislations are being planned to further tighten the grip of the government on information flow:

▶ **TELECOMMUNICATIONS BILL**

Telecommunications Bill of 2023 poses serious threats of surveillance, interception, encrypted services, duties of users and internet shutdowns. According to the new Telecom Bill, the government has the right to intercept any message communicated through any form, implying that even services like WhatsApp can be compelled to decrypt and hand over messages to the government. This would be a violation of individual privacy. The law also provides for search and seizure of telecom equipment that is “unauthorised”. The government will have the power to intercept messages communicated through any telecom equipment in the interest of “public safety.” The definition of “telecommunications services” is so broad that some experts say that the government has empowered itself to cover services like WhatsApp, PayTM, and Google Pay.

▶ **BROADCASTING SERVICES (REGULATION) BILL**

The draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill of 2023 aims to regulate/censor television, radio and online content including news, with vague terminology that leaves what can lead to interception, investigation, inquiry, or censorship unclear.

▶ **WORKING JOURNALISTS ACT**

The over 68 year old Working Journalists Act, 1955 was scrapped and replaced with the labour codes that further rendered contractual, unorganised working journalists powerless and vulnerable to job losses and mass retrenchments.

▶ **PRESS & REGISTRATION OF PERIODICALS ACT**

The amended Press & Registration of Periodicals Act, 2023 bars persons convicted of terrorist acts or unlawful activities.



CONTENT REMOVAL REQUESTS

3RD

highest content removal requests on global platforms

11,55,000

item removal requests to Google in 10 years

HIGHEST

takedown requests on Twitter in the world

- **India ranks the third highest globally** among countries that request for content removal from global platforms.
- Over the last 10 years, the Indian government requested Google to remove **11,55,000 items**.
- Between 2013 and 2022, the Indian government asked Google to remove content over 1,96,000 times! The top two justifications given were defamation (20.1%) and impersonation (16.3%).
- In 2021, the government of India ordered both **Twitter** and **Facebook** to remove content that was critical of the government's handling of the **Covid-19** crisis.
- As per the **Twitter Transparency Report** of 2023, India made the world's **highest number of takedown requests** in the world, which include requests to remove content, block accounts and URLs. India ranks 5th in the world.
- Twitter took the central government to court over its blocking orders, saying that many of its order did not provide a reason as required by law. And most requests target political and journalistic content which infringes on the citizen's right to freedom of expression (<https://globalvoices.org/2022/11/04/the-tweets-may-flow-a-look-into-indias-take-down-requests/>).
- In more recent times, the **BBC documentaries** on Modi and 2002 Gujarat carnage were not allowed to be shown in India and the BBC India office in Delhi was raided.
- The politically powerful Ram Rahim sought to block **Shyam Meera Singh's video** on his conviction for rape and the murder of a journalist
- The government does not provide any reason for the take down requests, and these are not available in public domain.

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

**WORLD'S
LONGEST
INTERNET
SHUTDOWN**

**811
INTERNET
SHUTDOWNS
SINCE 2012**

- ▶ India saw 811 internet shutdowns since 2012. From 2016 onwards the frequency and duration of the shutdowns has seen **rapid increase**. India has **topped the list in the world over the last 5 years**.
- ▶ India also has the dubious distinction of imposing the world's longest internet shutdown lasting **552 days in Jammu and Kashmir**. Internet was restored only after a Supreme Court order.
- ▶ There have been 433 internet shutdowns in **Jammu and Kashmir**, some lasting several months at a time. **Rajasthan** saw 100 shutdowns and **Manipur** 47 shutdowns. **Haryana** saw 38 shutdowns and Punjab 13.
- ▶ Apart from political reasons, internet is shutdown increasingly during examination times.
- ▶ On the one hand, the government compelled everyone to go online for all services, and then uses the shutdown of social services to bring people to their knees. The overall cost of shutdowns to the Indian economy is estimated to be \$184.3 million in 2022.

