**Narrative Management**

**free and independent press can be an efficient tool for keeping an eye on the misuse of authority and abuse of power.**

[Tarique Ahmed Abro](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/tarique-ahmed-abro)

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According to the research meth­odology used by Reporters With­out Borders (RSF) for compil­ing World Press Freedom Index (WPFI), “Press freedom is the ability of jour­nalists to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of politi­cal, economic, legal, and social interference, and in the ab­sence of threats.” Press plays an important role in safeguarding the rights of the citizenry by reporting on governmental shortcomings and excess­es. A free and independent press can be an efficient tool for keeping an eye on the misuse of authority and abuse of power, making it the proverbial “fourth pillar” of the state, other three being the executive, the judiciary and the legislature.

India, the world’s largest democracy, has been ranked at 161st position out of 180 countries in WPFI 2023. It is a twen­ty-one-point slip since Narendra Modi’s coming into power as the prime min­ister of India in 2014. The index high­lights the challenges faced by press and news media in India and underscores is­sues such as “violence against journal­ists, frequent internet shutdowns, and legal harassment” as contributing fac­tors to the deteriorating state of press freedom in India.

[OIC to hold meeting on Palestine next week](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2024/oic-to-hold-meeting-on-palestine-next-week)

Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Jana­ta Party (BJP) government’s crackdown against journalists and mediapersons has raised serious concerns about the state of press freedom in India. Interna­tional Press Institute (IPI), a global net­work of editors, media executives and leading journalists, had urged President Joe Biden to address concerns pertaining to press freedom in India during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s official state visit to the United States in June last year. The IPI had highlighted that “the mis­use of legal measures against journalists critical of Narendra Modi and his BJP-led government had become more prevalent under his leadership.”

Similarly, according to a 2022 news story published in Times of India (TOI), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a US-based NGO, had called on Eu­ropean Union “to hold India accountable for press freedom violations.”

[PPP leader stresses democratic values, national development](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2024/ppp-leader-stresses-democratic-values-national-development)

Karan Thapar, a distinguished Indi­an journalist and television commenta­tor, has opined that “Modi-led BJP gov­ernment seems to assert its ability to shape the narrative through media con­trol. This concerning pattern poses a threat to the fundamental principles of democracy.” Thapar’s words underscore a growing sentiment within the Indian journalism fraternity that the Modi gov­ernment’s attempts to shape the narra­tive are compromising Indian media’s ability to act as “an effective watchdog.”

One of the glaring examples of BJP government’s narrative management is the suppression of criticism by label­ling dissidents as “anti-national forces” by prime minister Modi. The journal­ists, media personalities, civil and po­litical activists who are critical of Modi government’s policies and actions often find themselves at the receiving end of harassment, intimidation and legal ac­tions. According to Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Asia Director at Human Rights Watch (HRW), “activists have been held in preventive detention to stop them from organising protests, while critics of the government are accused of sedition, criminal defamation, or terrorism.”

[Punjab Ombudsman resolved 35,202 complaints in 2023](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2024/punjab-ombudsman-resolved-35-202-complaints-in-2023)

Modi government’s approach to shap­ing public perception also involves in­fluencing the information accessible to the public. A clear example of this is the gradual undermining of Right to Infor­mation (RTI) Act 2005, which grants cit­izens the right to request information from public authorities, with the view to foster transparency and accountabili­ty. However, the amendments made to it by the Modi government have weakened its effectiveness, creating obstacles for both citizens and journalists in obtain­ing vital information.

The Modi government’s authority to determine what qualifies as propagan­da and fake news raises apprehensions about its possible misuse to selectively target inconvenient truths and dissent­ing voices. One of the most controversial legal frameworks in this context is Infor­mation Technology (Intermediary Guide­lines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules (ITR) 2021. Introduced by the Modi government, it gives government unprec­edented powers to regulate digital news media and social media platforms. The Modi government contends that these regulations are “essential to combat the dissemination of fake news and misinfor­mation.” However, independent observ­ers perceive them as instruments for ma­nipulating the narrative and suppressing dissent within the digital realm.

[Safe City cameras identify 79 stolen vehicles](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2024/safe-city-cameras-identify-79-stolen-vehicles)

Since 2014, BJP government has used various other legal frameworks such as counterterrorism laws, national securi­ty statutes, regulations governing for­eign funding, and income tax laws to target its detractors. In February 2023, the offices BBC in New Delhi and Mum­bai were raided by Indian tax officials in an apparent reprisal for a documenta­ry titled ‘India: The Modi Question.’ The two-part documentary highlighted Mo­di’s dismal track record as regards to protecting the Muslim community dur­ing 2002 Gujarat riots. The documenta­ry was instantly blocked across India by BJP government using ITR 2021.

The Editor-in-Chief of NewsClick Prabir Purkayastha, an independent dig­ital news platform, along with its HR Manager Amit Chakravarty, were booked on 3 October 2023 by the Delhi Po­lice under Unlawful Activities (Preven­tion) Act (UAPA) 1967 on the fabricated charges. The houses of forty-six journal­ists belonging to the same organization were also raided.

[MOU signed between AWT, University of Child Health Sciences](https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2024/mou-signed-between-awt-university-of-child-health-sciences)

The BJP government employs different types of pressure techniques and tools in an effort to make independent Indi­an journalists fall in line. According to a joint investigation report published by Amnesty International and The Wash­ington Post on 28 December 2023, “In­dia’s government has recently target­ed high-profile journalists with Pegasus spyware,” to snoop on them.

A police case was registered under UAPA on 10 October 2023 against Arund­hati Roy, a renowned Indian author and social activist, and former Kashmiri pro­fessor Sheikh Showkat Hussain, using a 13-year-old complaint for allegedly de­livering “provocative speeches” at a con­ference organized by the Committee for Release of Political Prisoners under the banner of “Azadi – The Only Way” on 21 October 2010 in Delhi. In that speech, Arundhati Roy had underscored that “democracy entails more than just the act of voting; it encompasses the rights to question and dissent.” The police case filed against them in October 2023 on the basis of the 2010 complaint accused both Arundhati Roy and Sheikh Showkat Hussain of disrupting social harmony and acting in “public mischief,” but more seriously, of sedition. Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy, a well-known Indian poet and fiction writer, underscored in her opinion piece published in The Guardian on 20 October 2023 that this police case was “absurd and a deadly threat to free­dom of expression” in India.

The assault on press freedom, carried out through strategies of narrative man­agement, has not only lowered the mo­rale of the journalistic community in India, but also jeopardized their lives, properties and careers. The deterioration of press freedom in India during BJP gov­ernment exposes Modi’s authoritarian style of politics, which is contrary to Ar­ticle 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution. The Article clearly grants a right to free­dom of speech and expression to the In­dian citizens. Thus, failure on the part of the Indian state to guarantee to all its citi­zens the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression constitutes a vio­lation of the Indian Constitution. It is for these reasons that India was classified by the V-Dem Institute as an “electoral au­tocracy,” in its 2023 report titled Defiance in the Face of Autocratization.

**Tarique Ahmed Abro**  
The writer is Research Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies Sindh (CISSS).