

The struggle for media freedom amid jihadists, gaggers and 'democratators'

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The New Censorship: Inside the global battle for press freedom, by Joel Simon.
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ONE of the ironies of the digital revolution is that there is an illusion of growing freedom of expression and information in the world, when in fact the reverse is true. These are bleak times with growing numbers of journalists being murdered with impunity, from the Philippines to Somalia and Syria.

The world's worst mass killing of journalists was the so-called Maguindanao, or Ampatuan (named after the town whose dynastic family ordered the killings), massacre when 32 journalists were brutally murdered in the Philippines in November 2009.

But increasingly savage slayings in the name of terrorism are becoming the norm. In early August 2015, five masked jihadists armed with machetes entered the Dhaka home of a secularist blogger in Bangladesh and hacked off his head and hands while his wife was forced into a nearby room.



According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2015), 506 journalists were killed in the decade between 2002 and 2012, almost double the 390 slain in the previous decade. (Both Reporters Sans Frontières and Freedom House also reported escalating death tolls and declines in media freedom.)

While there appear to be far more democracies in the world than ever before, the committee's executive director Joel Simon says there is a sinister new threat.

And this is in some respects more troublesome than the old style dictatorships. Simon describes this new scourge in *The New Censorship: Inside the Global Battle for Press Freedom* as the 'democratators', those leaders who profess to be democratic but are actually subverting their mirage of open governance.

What are these differences between dictators and democratators? Dictators rule by force. Democratators rule by manipulation. Dictators impose their will. Democratators govern with the support of the majority. Dictators do not claim to be democrats – at least credibly. Democratators always do. Dictators control information. Democratators manage it. (p. 33)

Simon points out that democratators win elections yet while they may be free, they are not really fair, meaning they are decided by fraud.

He has a growing list of leaders that fit this label, including Latin American ‘populists’ like Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, ‘European backsliders’ like Viktor Orban of Hungary and Viktor Yanukovich, the deposed former president of Ukraine, and African leaders such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Jacob Zuma of South Africa.

Undoubtedly, Fiji’s prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama should be on this list too since being elected last September, ending 8 years of military backed dictatorship and providing a figleaf of legitimacy while continuing to manipulate public debate and information.

However, according to Simon the most successful democratators include Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—with regular crackdowns on the media (more journalists imprisoned than in China and Iran) - and Russia’s Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs. Joining them would have been populist Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, only he died in March 2013 after a decade and a half in power.

It is critical for the democratators to win popular elections so that they can manipulate power and the institutions to perpetuate their control. Once elected they claim to be carrying out a popular mandate and acting within ‘international norms’.

Also high on Simon’s list of media threats is the way terrorism has impacted on how big media groups currently go about their global news-gathering. Conscious of the ever-present threat of ritualised kidnappings and bombings, journalists are sometimes forced to report from bunkers and are less enthusiastic about meeting uncertain sources in case they might be abducted.

Even the appearance of journalists sometimes makes them look like an extension of the military—with helmets, flak jackets and camouflage fatigues. This accentuates their targeting by fundamentalist groups who regard them as an extension of the ‘state’.

China is the elephant in the room when it comes to freedom of information. While China’s leaders embrace the internet, they believe they can, and ought to, control the web. It is clear that China has the technological means and resources to make internet control a reality.

With up to 700 million netizens (p. 96), it is already by far the largest online audience globally. China has also succeeded in creating and controlling its own parallel platform technologies, such as Sina Weibo—the equivalent of the blocked Twitter; the Facebook-like (also blocked) Renren and Kaixin social media sites; YouKu (equivalent to YouTube); and TomSkype, a joint venture with Skype.

Chinese authorities use monitoring and filtering to keep a lid on the cyberspace ‘conversation’ to prevent repercussions.

Far more serious is the leadership—and successful model—that China is providing among countries that want border ‘sovereignty’ over the internet.

While global freedom of expression advocates, including the United States, argue for a continued open policy, China and its supporters believe that ‘a free and open internet *and* [author’s emphasis] massive US surveillance are equally threatening to its national interests’. China wants the US-based internet infrastructure, including domain naming administration rights, to be transferred to the United Nations.

Also, US responses to the Wikileaks scandal in 2013 and the massive surveillance revelations by Edward Snowden encouraged allegations of hypocrisy from critics pointing out that Washington’s commitment to internet freedom dragged when its own geopolitical interests appeared threatened. As Simon notes:

In the Internet Age—when information moves at the speed of light—censorship should be a thing of the past. But it isn’t. Around the world information is censored for a variety of reasons. In China, ‘subversive’ websites are routinely blocked, and critical comments are routinely removed from social media platforms. In the advanced democracies of Europe, censorship is practised under a different and obviously more legitimate rubric. (p. 183)

Joel Simon believes that the global mediascape will continue to be chaotic into the future with world news groups competing

with regional and national outlets, activists, bloggers, citizen journalists and political organisations to ‘meet the world’s information needs’. But it isn’t all bad news.

He argues that journalists should join forces with media freedom advocates to form a grand coalition to defend the free flow of information, as expressed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is only when information is ‘democratised and decentralised, when news is truly harder to control and manage,’ ... ‘that the voices of the marginalised and disenfranchised are heard’. Only then will the full potential of the ‘information revolution’ unleashed by technological innovation be able to be finally fully realised. This book’s analysis is an essential part of digital democracy and ought to be accessible in all journalism school libraries.

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