

THE TARGETED ASSASSINATIONS OF JOURNALISTS AMIDST THE PANDEMIC'S REIGN OF TERROR"

SUBHA SATTWA BANDYOPADHYAY¹, DR KABITA CHAKRABORTY²

Research Scholar at Faculty of Law, ICFAI University, Tripura¹

Professor at Faculty of Law, ICFAI University, Tripura²

Subhasattwabanerjee@gmail.com

kabitachakraborty@iutripura.edu.in

Abstract- *The COVID-19 pandemic brought both advantages, such as remote work, and significant disadvantages, notably the targeted assassinations of journalists globally. This paper examines the harsh realities faced by journalists reporting on the pandemic across continents, enduring harassment, threats, and even death. It analyzes how political repression and societal instability during the crisis facilitated these crimes. The study also explores how violence and intimidation silenced critical voices essential for a healthy democracy. Government policies, including internet shutdowns, further hindered journalists' work. The paper discusses the pandemic's societal implications and its profound impact on individuals' personal and professional lives. Finally, it proposes measures to mitigate similar crises in the future, aiming to safeguard press freedom and uphold democratic principles.*

KEY WORDS- *Journalists, COVID 19, Internet, Pandemic, Shut down.*

INTRODUCTION-

In the turbulent landscape of the 21st century, where many crises in the world have affected economy, the role of journalists has never been so easy. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected many & have impacted their life, journalists too have faced many challenges which are new to them. The most important challenge that they has faced is getting threats & sometimes even getting killed for reporting something which seems to be true & authentic many a times but is not get accepted by the rich & powerful people.

These types of violence that are getting perpetrated on the journalists seems to affect democracy as the authentic & correct information is not getting reached to the people & Press which is considered to be the fourth pillar of the democracy & are the only medium through which transparency & accountability in the working organs of the government can be found out is affecting.

The author in this paper brings out the targeted assassination of the journalists amidst the pandemic which not only examines the factors, motivations & consequences of such crime but also gives an analysis of their impact on the society & on the democracy as a whole. By giving light to this topic the author in this paper also brings out the dark reality that journalism as a profession faces a critical situation in the times of global crisis as well.

FACTORS FOR INCREASING OF CRIME AGAINST JOURNALISTS-

In recent years, the rise in crime against journalists has become a pressing concern globally¹. Factors contributing to this alarming trend encompass a complex interplay of political, social, and technological dynamics². As journalism continues to evolve in the digital age, so too do the challenges facing those who seek to report and inform³. Understanding these factors is crucial in safeguarding press freedom and ensuring the safety of those on the frontlines of information dissemination⁴.

The various factors due to which an increase in crime against the journalists happened during the pandemic are as follows-

1. **Disruption of Normal Governance:** The pandemic have affected many people in many ways ultimately resulting into diverting resources away which was made for protection & safety of the journalists & upholding the rule of Law & democracy in society.

¹ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Global Impunity Index 2023."

² UNESCO, "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2022."

³ Reporters Without Borders, "2023 World Press Freedom Index."

⁴ United Nations, "Safety of Journalists: Ensuring Accountability, Visibility, and Justice."



2. **Spread of Misinformation:** The pandemic also have resulted into many kinds of misinformation getting viral on social media which includes face book, twitter, whatsapp which were spread by those groups & people who had some specific agendas with them to fulfill. The journalists who criticized those agendas became targets by these people.
3. **Economic Pressures:** As during the pandemic there were many job cuts & economy was disrupted so it has affected the profession of journalism as well whereby journalists were given pressure to provide stories quickly even if there was no authenticity in it.
4. **Political Instability:** The pandemic has also affected & has led to the killing of many journalists due to the political tensions that the country at that point of time was facing. Reporting on those sensitive issues & criticizing them was a major setback for the journalists.
5. **Restrictions on Freedom of Movement:** The pandemic have resulted into people working from home & impose lockdown by the state which have affected the work of the journalists & have restricted their movement & the advantage of which has been taken away by those people against whom media reported once & have made them accountable.
6. **Digital Surveillance and Threats:** As the world during the pandemic was working online so during this time many people committed many crimes against journalists as well like cyber crime & tracking digital devices which were done by those people against whom the media criticized.
7. **Lack of International Attention:** As every country was facing their domestic issues with the pandemic & saving the life of their citizens was their main aim, so there was less attention from one country to the other which have led to the fall of less pressure on the government to protect the rights of the journalists & uphold their constitutional freedom of free speech & expression which have further resulted the groups & people who were unhappy with their work to attack them & cause danger to the society & disrupt the forming of a healthy democracy.

These are the main factors because of which journalists during the pandemic have faced attacks for searching out the truth on sensitive issues which was disliked by various groups of people.

IMPACT OF CRIME AGAINST JOURNALISTS ON SOCIETY & DEMOCRACY

Crime against journalists reverberates beyond individual victims, profoundly impacting societies and democratic principles worldwide.⁵ As defenders of transparency and accountability, journalists play a pivotal role in upholding the pillars of democracy⁶. When they face violence, intimidation, or censorship, the effects ripple through society, eroding trust in institutions and limiting access to unbiased information⁷. Understanding these ramifications underscores the critical importance of protecting press freedom as a cornerstone of vibrant democracies⁸.

Crime against journalists has several impacts on the society, democracy & the people right to know. Below mentioned are some of the points of the impact on work of the journalists-

1. **Undermining Freedom of Expression:** As under the Indian constitution Article 19(1) (a) freedom of speech & expression applies to freedom of Press as well, so therefore affecting the work of the journalists, threatening them & by killing them affects bringing the transparency in the working of the organs of the government. When offence is made out against the journalists then it causes a problem in the covering of sensitive topic which the public has a right & interest to know which furthers & hampers the democracy.
2. **Chilling Effect on Journalism:** Attack on the journalists led not only to hamper transparency in the working organs of the government but also brings a hate against their profession which also to an extent affects their families, the reporting of which if not done then such violence may bring danger to the society as well. This kind of limitation on the role of the journalists also affects their fundamental right of speech & expression.
3. **Impact on Media Pluralism:** A diverse media is considered good for a healthy democracy. An attack on the journalists & inciting of violence against them & their families can let to force them to shut down their media house or channels as per the circumstance of the case. This

⁵ Reporters without Borders, "Violence against Journalists: Journalists Killed in 2023.

⁶ UNESCO, "Role of Media in Promoting Transparency and Accountability."

⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Impacts of Censorship on Society."

⁸ United Nations, "Protecting Journalists in Conflict Situations: Safety, Independence, and Accountability."



would further have large implications on the right to information of the masses about different issues & topics.

4. **Diminished Public Trust:** Increase in number of death of journalists & continuous violence against their working can put an end in democracy & in their reporting which further would lead to loss of people's faith in democracy & its process.
5. **Impunity and Lack of Justice:** In most of the scenarios it has been seen that accused who made crime against the journalists seems to go unpunished due to political support, corruption etc. This kind of attack gives support to those who wants to shut the voices of those who are critical of the government & of their working.
6. **Global Ramifications:** The attacks on the journalists & their families due to their critical voices on one country may affect journalists & their work on the other country which would hamper journalist's freedom of speech & expression globally which may be dangerous to the society, its people & for those who stands for the democrats & against the authoritarian.

So it is very important to understand that crime or offences made against the journalists not only affect & impact their rights, working, families but also is a threat to the democracy , bringing out transparency & ensuring the citizens of their right to information & participation in their daily lives.

SHUTTING DOWN OF INTERNET BY AUTHORITIES-

The practice of authorities shutting down internet access, often termed as "internet shutdowns," has emerged as a contentious issue in the digital age⁹. Whether employed during political unrest, protests, or to control information flow, these actions have significant implications for communication, freedom of expression, and access to information¹⁰. Understanding the reasons behind such shutdowns and their impacts on societies and individuals underscores the complexities of balancing security concerns with fundamental rights in the digital era¹¹.

Methods Used by Government-

1. **Total Shutdown:** This means to completely cutting of using & accessing the internet in the entire region or country as the need arises. This is usually done by mandating the internet service provider to disable access to their network.
2. **Partial Shutdown:** In this case government may select certain website & other social media platforms from accessing by blocking it while allowing other parts of the internet to function.
3. **Throttling:** Slowing down internet speeds to the point where access to online services becomes impractical or severely limited.

Examples:

1. In India internet shutdowns have been frequent in regions like Jammu and Kashmir as a response to security concerns and political tensions.
2. During protests and political unrest, the Iranian government has implemented complete shutdown of internet to control communication and prevent coordination among dissidents.
3. Also following the military coup in 2021 in Myanmar, the internet was frequently shut down to suppress protests and prevent the dissemination of information.


The shutting down of internet by authorities has led to the disruption of the work of the journalists in various ways. Below mentioned are few points.

1. **Censorship and Control of Information:** For protecting the National security secrets which are deemed very sensitive or could hamper the unity & integrity of the nation or could damage their interest, the government shuts down the internet which ultimately hampers the work of the journalists as the journalists rely more on the internet for dissemination of their news & for getting information & communication.
2. **Obstruction of Reporting:** The shutting down of the internet by the government ultimately makes journalists work very difficult to complete as they use internet for publishing & researching of various news & reports. Such obstruction also limits journalist's right & ability to cover important news & provide timely information to the public.

⁹ Access Now, "Keep It On: The State of Internet Shutdowns in 2023."

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "The Costs of Shutdowns: The Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Individuals and Societies."

¹¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, "Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and the Internet."

- 
3. **Impact on Media Organizations:** Shut down of the internet can also hamper the business of Media organization as these organizations depend largely on the social media which have more subscribers & viewers. A shut down of the internet disrupts their work, operations affecting not only the journalists but also editorial teams, support staff etc.
 4. **Economic Impact:** Shutting down of the internet also affects the economic activity of the media. The complete shutdown of the internet interrupts the journalists to sell their stories, communicate with their clients & ultimately reaching the deadlines which further results into losing of their revenue as well.
 5. **Diminished Freedom of Expression:** Shutting down of the internet also hampers the freedom of speech & expression & also curtails the flow of information from one person to other. This further led to the restriction of individual's opinion & grievances to get express & sorted & also prevents bringing out of the transparency in the working organs of the government.
 6. **International Reputation:** Shutting down of the internet by the government also further led to the hampering of reputation of the government of a particular state or of a nation internationally. Such activities of the government are undermined & criticized by many reputed organization like human rights organizations, press freedom advocates etc which further results into diplomatic tensions get created.

So therefore the topic of shutting down of the internet can be summarized as, shut down of the internet not only affects the work of the journalists but also limits & curtails the freedom of speech & expression & bringing out the transparency of the working organs of the government which is not considered good for a healthy democracy & further which also undermine the activity of the government get criticized globally unless the limitation or restriction is fair & reasonable as specified by law.

SUGGESTION TO MITIGATE FUTURE PANDEMIC

To mitigate the impact of future pandemics on society, several measures can be considered:

1. **Early Detection and Rapid Response Systems:** The first & the most suggestive way of mitigating the impact of future pandemic is to have early detection & form a rapid response system where potential outbreak of infectious diseases can be detected & can be encountered easily & such can be done by way of improving surveillance network & by investing on research.
2. **Global Cooperation and Coordination:** Impact of future pandemic can also be mitigated by way of strengthening ties with various organization like the World Health Organization (WHO) whereby for rapid response system, necessary framework can be adopted & can be implemented.
3. **Public Health Education and Awareness:** Public health education & awareness can also be a factor for mitigating the risk that a pandemic might cause & such can be given by way of vaccination, hand hygiene, and physical distancing. Also such can be done by promoting the actual information & by preventing misinformation that might cause chaos & panic.
4. **Support for Vulnerable Populations:** Support to the vulnerable population can be given by implementing social safety nets which would include access to health care, economic assistance etc.
5. **Preparedness Plans at National and Local Levels:** This would include such steps so as to develop and regularly update pandemic preparedness plans at national and local levels.

By implementing these measures, societies can be better prepared to mitigate the impact of future pandemics, protect public health, and maintain societal resilience in the face of global health threats.

CONCLUSION-

The targeted assassinations of journalists amidst the pandemic's reign of terror represent a chilling escalation in the threats faced by those who dare to speak truth to power. As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists found themselves increasingly under attack, both figuratively and literally. Beyond the immediate health crisis, the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities within societies, creating fertile ground for authoritarian regimes, criminal networks, and extremist groups to suppress dissent and control the flow of information.



Throughout history, journalists have played a pivotal role in holding power to account, uncovering corruption, exposing human rights abuses, and giving voice to marginalized communities. However, this very role makes them targets for those who seek to silence inconvenient truths and maintain their grip on power. The assassinations of journalists represent not only attacks on individuals but also on the principles of democracy and freedom of expression that underpin modern societies.

In recent years, the number of journalists killed in the line of duty has continued to rise, reflecting a global trend towards increasing intolerance of independent journalism. According to reports from organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 2020 and 2021 saw significant spikes in targeted killings, with many of these attacks occurring in regions plagued by conflict, political instability, or organized crime. The pandemic provided cover for some governments to further restrict press freedoms under the guise of public health measures, exacerbating an already precarious situation for journalists.

The methods used to silence journalists are as varied as they are brutal. From outright assassinations to arbitrary arrests, harassment, and online trolling campaigns, journalists face multifaceted threats designed to intimidate, discredit, and ultimately silence them. The perpetrators of these crimes often act with impunity, shielded by corrupt officials, complicit judicial systems, or a lack of political will to investigate and prosecute such attacks.

The chilling effect of these targeted assassinations reverberates far beyond the newsrooms and communities directly affected. It undermines public trust in media, erodes democratic norms, and perpetuates cycles of fear and self-censorship among journalists. When journalists are silenced, critical stories go untold, injustices go unexposed, and societies are deprived of the information needed to make informed decisions.

Moreover, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities within societies, making journalists more susceptible to attacks. Economic pressures on media organizations, exacerbated by the economic downturns brought about by COVID-19, have further weakened the ability of journalists to operate safely and independently. In many countries, governments used emergency powers to clamp down on dissent, restrict access to information, and silence critical voices under the pretext of combating the pandemic.

Addressing the targeted assassinations of journalists requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses legal, political, and societal dimensions. First and foremost, governments must uphold their obligations under international law to protect journalists and investigate attacks against them. This includes holding perpetrators accountable and ensuring justice for victims and their families. It also requires strengthening legal frameworks to safeguard press freedom and ensure that journalists can work without fear of reprisal.

At the international level, concerted diplomatic efforts are needed to pressure governments that engage in or condone attacks on journalists to uphold their human rights commitments. International organizations, civil society groups, and media advocacy organizations play a crucial role in monitoring and documenting attacks on journalists, providing support to victims, and advocating for policy changes to protect press freedom globally.

Media literacy and public awareness campaigns are also essential components of any strategy to combat the targeted assassinations of journalists. By educating the public about the importance of a free and independent media, fostering critical thinking skills, and promoting digital literacy, societies can build resilience against disinformation and propaganda campaigns that seek to undermine trust in journalism.

Journalists themselves have a vital role to play in defending press freedom and protecting their colleagues. Solidarity within the journalistic community, support networks for journalists at risk, and training in safety protocols can help mitigate the risks faced by journalists working in hostile environments. Journalists must also continue to uphold ethical standards, maintain independence, and strive for accuracy and fairness in their reporting, despite the challenges they face.

Ultimately, the targeted assassinations of journalists amidst the pandemic's reign of terror underscore the urgent need for collective action to defend press freedom as a cornerstone of democracy. The stakes are high; not only for journalists themselves but for the societies they serve. As the world emerges from the shadow of the pandemic, it is imperative that we reaffirm our commitment to protecting journalists, upholding human rights, and preserving the fundamental freedoms that are

essential to a free and democratic society. Only by standing together can we ensure that the voices of journalists continue to be heard and that the pursuit of truth and justice prevails over fear and censorship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Author would like to say thank you to his research supervisor Dr.Kabita Chakraborty who is the second author for this paper for her unconditional moral support during the writing of this research paper.

REFERENCES-

- [1] <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-killings-journalists-50-2022-half-targeted-duty>.
- [2] <https://freedomhouse.org/article/crimes-against-journalists-are-rise-and-are-seldom-punished>
- [3] <https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en/safety-journalists>
- [4] <https://www.mediadefence.org/news/15-years-of-impact-violence-against-journalists/>
- [5] <https://rm.coe.int/16806daac6>
- [6] <https://www.article19.org/resources/ending-impunity-for-crimes-against-journalists/>
- [7] <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000156773>
- [8] <https://time.com/6304719/india-internet-shutdowns-manipur/>
- [9] <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/blog/tracking-internet-shutdowns-in-2023>
- [10] <https://theconversation.com/internet-shutdowns-heres-how-governments-do-it-211081>