

The new censors

# The global gag on free speech is tightening

*In both democracies and dictatorships, it is getting harder to speak up*

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ON JUNE 22ND there was an alleged coup attempt in Ethiopia. The army chief of staff was murdered, as was the president of Amhara, one of the country's nine regions. Ordinary Ethiopians were desperate to find out what was going on. And then the government shut down the internet. By midnight some 98% of Ethiopia was offline.

“People were getting distorted news and were getting very confused about what was happening...at that very moment there was no information at all,” recalls Gashaw Fentahun, a journalist at the Amhara Mass Media Agency, a state-owned outlet. He and his colleagues were trying to file a report. Rather than uploading audio and video files digitally, they had to send them to head office by plane, causing a huge delay.

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Last year 25 governments imposed internet blackouts. Choking off connectivity infuriates people and kneecaps economies. Yet autocrats think it worthwhile, usually to stop information from circulating during a crisis.

This month the Indian government shut down the internet in disputed Kashmir—for the 51st time this year. “There is no news, nothing,” says Aadil Ganie, a Kashmiri stuck in Delhi, adding that he does not even know where his family is because phones are blocked, too. In recent months Sudan shut down social media to prevent protesters from organising; Congo’s regime switched off mobile networks so it could rig an election in the dark; and Chad nobbled social media to silence protests against the president’s plan to stay in power until 2033.

### **Tongues, tied**

Free speech is hard won and easily lost. Only a year ago it flowered in Ethiopia, under a supposedly liberal new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed. All the journalists in jail were released, and hundreds of websites, blogs and satellite TV channels were unblocked. But now the regime is having second thoughts. Without a dictatorship to suppress it, ethnic violence has flared. Bigots have incited ethnic cleansing on newly free social media. Nearly 3m Ethiopians have been driven from their homes.

Ethiopia faces a genuine emergency, and many Ethiopians think it reasonable for the government to silence those who advocate violence. But during the alleged coup it did far more than that—in effect it silenced everyone. As Befekadu Haile, a journalist and activist, put it: “In the darkness, the government told all the stories.”

Some now fear a return to the dark days of Abiy’s predecessors, when dissident bloggers

were tortured. The regime still has truckloads of electronic kit for snooping and censoring, much of it bought from China. It is also planning to criminalise “hate speech”, under a law that may require mass surveillance and close monitoring of social media by police. Many fret that the law will be used to lock up peaceful dissidents.

According to Freedom House, a watchdog, free speech has declined globally over the past decade. The most repressive regimes have become more so: among those classed as “not free” by Freedom House, 28% have tightened the muzzle in the past five years; only 14% have loosened it. “Partly free” countries were as likely to improve as to get worse, but “free” countries regressed. Some 19% of them (16 countries) have grown less hospitable to free speech in the past five years, while only 14% have improved (see map).

There are two main reasons for this. First, ruling parties in many countries have found new tools for suppressing awkward facts and ideas. Second, they feel emboldened to use such tools, partly because global support for free speech has faltered. Neither of the world’s superpowers is likely to stand up for it. China ruthlessly censors dissent at home and exports the technology to censor it abroad. The United States, once a champion of free expression, is now led by a man who says things like this:

“We certainly don’t want to stifle free speech, but ... I don’t think that the mainstream media is free speech ... because it’s so crooked. So, to me, free speech is not when you see something good and then you purposely write bad. To me, that’s very dangerous speech and you become angry at it.”

Really? Seeing something that the government claims is good and pointing out why it is bad is an essential function of journalism. Indeed, it is one of democracy’s most crucial safeguards. President Donald Trump cannot censor the media in America, but his words contribute to a global climate of contempt for independent journalism. Censorious authoritarians elsewhere often cite Mr Trump’s catchphrases, calling critical reporting “fake news” and critical journalists “enemies of the people”.

The notion that certain views should be silenced is popular on the left, too. In Britain and America students shout down speakers they deem racist or transphobic, and Twitter mobs

demand the sacking of anyone who violates an expanding list of taboos. Many western radicals contend that if they think something is offensive, no one should be allowed to say it.

Authoritarians elsewhere agree. What counts as offensive is subjective, so “hate speech” laws can be elastic tools for criminalising dissent. In March Kazakhstan arrested Serikzhan Bilash for “inciting ethnic hatred”. (He had complained about the mass incarceration of Uighurs in China, a big trading partner of Kazakhstan.) Rwanda’s government interprets almost any criticism of itself as support for another genocide. In India proposed new rules would require digital platforms to block all unlawful content—a tough task given that it is illegal in India to promote disharmony “on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, caste or community *or any other ground whatsoever*”.

One way to silence speech is to murder the speaker. At least 53 journalists were killed on the job in 2018, slightly more than in the previous two years, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a watchdog. Few of the killers were caught. The deadliest country for journalists was Afghanistan, where 13 were killed. In one case, a jihadist disguised himself as a journalist so as to mingle with, and slaughter, the first reporters and medics to arrive at the scene of an earlier suicide bombing.

Perhaps the most brazen murder in 2018 was of Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of the Saudi regime. A team of assassins landed in Turkey on easily identifiable private jets, drove in luxury cars to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and cut Khashoggi to pieces on consular property. Whoever ordered this presumably thought there would be no serious consequences for dismembering a *Washington Post* contributor. He was right. Although Germany, Denmark and Norway stopped arms sales to Saudi Arabia, Mr Trump stressed America would remain the kingdom’s “steadfast partner”.

On December 1st 2018 the CPJ counted more than 250 journalists in jail for their work: at least 68 in Turkey, 47 in China, 25 in Egypt and 16 in Eritrea. The true number is surely higher, since many journalists are held without charge or publicity. However, the number in Eritrea may be lower, since nearly all have been held in awful conditions since President Issaias Afwerki shut down the independent media in 2001, and some are probably dead.

Rather than risking the bother and bad publicity of putting journalists on trial, some regimes try to intimidate them into docility. In Pakistan, when military officers ring up editors to complain about coverage, the editors typically buckle. Ahmad Noorani, a reporter who dared to write about the army's role in politics, was ambushed by unknown assailants on a busy street in the capital, Islamabad, and beaten almost to death with a crowbar.

In India journalists who criticise the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party receive torrents of threats on social media from Hindu nationalists. If female, those threats may include rape. Reporters are often “doxxed”—pictures of their families are circulated, inviting others to harm them. Barkha Dutt, a television pundit, filed a complaint against trolls who had sent her a death threat and published her personal telephone number as that of an escort service. Four suspects were arrested in March.

Occasionally, the worst threats against Indian journalists are carried out, lending chilling credibility to the rest. Gauri Lankesh, an editor who often lambasted Hindu nationalism, was gunned down outside her home in 2017. Pro-BJP commenters celebrated. The man arrested for pulling the trigger told police that his handlers told him he had to do it to “save” his religion.

Intimidation does not always work. Ivan Golunov, a Russian reporter, investigated Moscow city officials buying mansions with undeclared millions and security officers going into business with the mafia. His stories were little known, published on a small website called Meduza. On June 6th police grabbed Mr Golunov, bundled him into a car, took him to a government building, beat him up and claimed to have found drugs in his backpack. The ministry of interior posted nine photos of drugs allegedly found in his flat, but then removed eight of them, admitting that they were taken elsewhere and saying they had been published by mistake.

Mr Golunov's supporters think the drugs were planted. To the authorities' surprise, the story spread rapidly on Facebook and Twitter—Russia does not have anything like China's capacity for suppressing unwelcome posts on social media. Street protesters demanded Mr Golunov's release. Foreign media picked up the story, which overshadowed Mr Putin's summit with Xi Jinping, China's president, that week. An embarrassed Kremlin ordered Mr

Golunov's release. When his new investigation was published by Meduza a few weeks later, it was read by 1.5m people—several times its usual audience.

## **Breaking the news**

As the advertising revenues that used to support independent journalism dwindle, many governments have found it easier to distort the news with taxpayers' hard-earned cash. The simplest method is to pump it into state media that unctuously support the ruling party. Most authoritarian regimes do this. China and Russia go further, sponsoring global media outlets that seek to undermine democracy everywhere. However, the problem with state media, from an autocrat's point of view, is that they tend to be boring.

So another method is to use government advertising to reward subservience and punish uppityness. In many countries the government is now by far the biggest advertiser, so newspapers and television stations are terrified of annoying it.

A subtler method is to cultivate tycoons who depend on the state for permits or contracts, and urge them to buy up media outlets. Unlike normal moguls, they don't need their media firms to make profits. The favours their construction firms receive far outweigh any losses they incur running obsequious television stations. Indeed, they can often undercut their independent media rivals, exacerbating the financial distress caused by the decline of advertising, aggressive tax audits, unreasonable fines and so forth. Cash-strapped independent media are of course cheaper for the president's cronies to buy and de-fang.

Several ruling parties use these techniques. India's uses most of them, as do Russia's and Turkey's. Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, is accused of promising favourable regulation to a telecoms firm in exchange for positive coverage on a news website it owns. In January, Nicaragua's most popular newspaper ran a blank front page to complain that its imported supplies of ink, paper and other materials had been mysteriously impounded at customs after it published critical reports about the ruling Sandinista party.

Such skulduggery has even crept into supposedly democratic parts of Europe. Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, has used public money to dominate the national conversation. The state news agency has been stuffed with toadies and offers its bulletins free to cash-strapped outlets. "When you get a news flash on [an independent] rock radio station, [it's]

totally government propaganda...because it's free, complains a local journalist.

The Hungarian government's advertising budget has swollen enormously since 2010, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán took power. His cronies have bought up previously feisty broadcasters and websites. "It's an unstoppable process," says an independent editor.

"Hungarians are used to the idea that online news is free. So [media firms] become reliant on the money of their owners. And many of the businessmen in public life are linked to the government." Last year the proprietors of 476 media firms, including practically all the local newspapers in Hungary, gave them without charge to a new mega-foundation run by a pal of Mr Orbán. Starved of cash, serious journalists find it hard to do their jobs. "It's practically impossible to investigate even the major corruption stories, because there are so many," says Agnes Urban of Mertek, a media watchdog.

Meanwhile, in mature democracies, support for free speech is ebbing, especially among the young, and outright hostility to it is growing. Nowhere is this more striking than in universities in the United States. In a Gallup poll published last year, 61% of American students said that their campus climate prevented people from saying what they believe, up from 54% the previous year. Other data from the same poll may explain why. Fully 37% said it was "acceptable" to shout down speakers they disapproved of to prevent them from being heard, and an incredible 10% approved of using violence to silence them.

Many students justify this by arguing that some speakers are racist, homophobic or hostile to other disadvantaged groups. This is sometimes true. But the targets of campus outrage have often been reputable, serious thinkers. Heather Mac Donald, for example, who argues that "Black Lives Matter" protests prompted police to pull back from high-crime neighbourhoods, and that this allowed the murder rate to spike, had to be evacuated from Claremont McKenna College in California in a police car. Furious protesters argued that letting her speak was an act of "violence" that denied "the right of black people to exist".

Such verbal contortions have become common on the left. Many radicals argue that words are "violence" if they denigrate disadvantaged groups. Some add that anyone who allows offensive speakers a platform is condoning their wicked ideas. Furthermore, as America has polarised politically, many people have started to divide the world simplistically into "good" and "evil" (or "progressive" and "regressive") camps. This has led to a

good people (who agree with them) and evil people (who don't). This has led to bizarre altercations. At Reed College in Portland, Oregon, Lucia Martinez Valdivia, a gay, mixed-race lecturer with post-traumatic stress disorder, was accused of being "anti-black" because she complained about the aggressive students who stood next to her shouting down her lectures on ancient Greek lesbian poetry (to which the hecklers objected because the poet Sappho would today be considered white). As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue in "The coddling of the American mind":

"If some students now think it's OK to punch a fascist or white supremacist, and if anyone who disagrees with them can be labelled a fascist or a white supremacist, well, you can see how this rhetorical move might make people hesitant to voice dissenting views on campus."

The habit of trying to silence opposing views, instead of rebutting them, has spread off campus. In Portland, Oregon, this weekend, far-right extremists are planning to rally, their "antifa" (anti-fascist) opponents are expected to try to stop them, and both sides are spoiling for a fight. When the same groups clashed in June, a conservative journalist, Andy Ngo, was so badly beaten that he was hospitalised with a brain haemorrhage.

Similar intolerance has spread to Europe, too. French "yellow jacket" protesters have repeatedly beaten up television crews. In Britain any discussion of transgender issues is explosive. In September, for example, Leeds City Council barred Woman's Place UK, a feminist group, from holding a meeting because activists had accused them of "transphobia". (The feminists do not think that simply saying "I am a woman" should confer on biological males the right to enter women's spaces, such as changing rooms and rape shelters.)

"It's nearly impossible to have a free debate [on this topic]. I've never seen anything like it," says Ruth Serwotka, a co-founder of Woman's Place UK. Today, the group only tells members where meetings will take place a couple of hours in advance, to avoid disruption. Feminists who question "gender self-identification" (the notion that if you say you are a woman, you should automatically be legally treated as one) are routinely threatened with rape or death. Some have faced organised campaigns to get them sacked from their jobs, barred from Twitter or arrested. In March, for instance, Caroline Farrow, a Catholic journalist, was interviewed by British police after someone complained that she had used



the wrong pronoun to describe a transgender girl. Another feminist, 60-year-old Maria MacLachlan, was beaten up by a transgender activist at Speakers' Corner in London, where free speech is supposed to be sacrosanct. ■

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