

Press freedom in India

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Master in Journalism

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“It will go up, but it will come down. And obviously, those oppressed, they will come to power one day and all the damages that were done to Indian democracy and Indian journalism will be undone. And this is a fantastic profession. Speak the truth. We are not truth. We reveal the truth, and we call bluff, and that is our job and to some extent we were not, we have not been able to do that in a free and fair way for some time. But I believe that things will improve.”

- Journalist 5

PREFACE

This thesis is the final product of three years of hard work. I'm incredibly thankful for everything I have learned over these years, and I will never be able to show my gratitude enough. In 2018, I graduated from high school and my first choice to study journalism was discouraged. Now six years, a degree in communication management and a transition year later, I can proudly say: I told you I could do it.

I have been asked countless times over the past year "why press freedom in India?" and I always answered honestly "because I didn't know anything about it yet". Whether that is the right motivation to choose a subject, I cannot say. However, I am convinced that I made the right choice. This master thesis has taught and enlightened me so much, something I will be eternally grateful for, but my own slightly overconfident idea to write a thesis on press freedom in India is not the only thing I want to thank. A thesis like this takes a lot of effort, work and need of support. I could not have possibly done it without these people. A sincere thank you to...

Chris Verschooten:

I thank Prof. Verschooten for more than just giving an enormous amount of her time to me and my thesis. She trusted me with her contacts and made me feel more like a true journalist than I ever felt. I'm thankful that I have found a genuine interest in a field I previously knew so little about and I only have her to thank for that.

All the journalists:

Every journalist who gave their time to me deserves (more than) just a thank you. Each journalist I spoke to, gave me their honest and personal opinions. With the current state of press freedom in India, this is something that goes beyond gratitude. Talking to experienced people across the world was by far the best experience of this thesis. I spoke to incredibly talented and interesting individuals who each taught me something new. In addition to the valuable information the journalists gave me, I was always left with the confirmation that this was a really important topic, which went deeper than the mark on my diploma. After every interview I felt passionate and motivated to write about it. Eleven *thank you's* for these people.

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Thank you to Annelies, my boss, who saw that working full-time whilst working on my thesis was taking the best of me. I have to thank her for encouraging me to take a step back and focus on my thesis. Her support and interest in my work made this thesis possible. She never made me feel that I was not putting enough energy into my job because of the master's thesis. Thank you Annelies for all the times I could leave a meeting early to do an interview and even more for all the times after an interview I had to proclaim every detail to the whole team.

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Is thanking your boyfriend in your thesis too much? Nigel had to endure endless rants about my frustrations, opinions and passions concerning this thesis. He helped me stay focused, gave me advice and comforted me when I felt the pressure to go out and fix the entire Indian regime on a Tuesday afternoon. Maybe I'm also thanking him, because I know he's going to check this on spelling errors. Thank you, really.

My roommates:

A big thank you to my three roommates: Elisa, Margot and Anais. Thank you for making the house as silent as possible during my interviews. Thank you for not complaining when I was video chatting with India, in the kitchen at 2AM. Thank you for being there, listening to my thoughts and opinions, supporting me and ensuring me everything will be okay.

As I look back over the past six years in higher education and a year of blood, sweat, tears and interviews, nothing seems better than to end with a quote from my (secretly) favorite respondent:

'It was un-fucking-precedented.'

Margot Verbaenen

12/08/2024

PRESS ARTICLE

The world's largest democracy's crumbling press freedom

Since 2022 India has dropped nine points on the press freedom index. A student at KU Leuven (KUL) in Brussels sought an explanation for the declining press freedom in the world's largest democracy.

Margot Verbaenen, a journalism student at KU Leuven, conducted 11 in-depth interviews with Indian journalists as a part of her master's thesis. Each journalist shared a unique perspective on the current situation in India. Through her research Margot aimed to shed light on the pressures that define journalism in India today and underlines the severity of the situation as she deepens into the challenges that are threatening the foundation of a free press in the world's largest democracy.

Analysing between the lines

The research focused on the key question: 'How do journalists experience threats, violence, and intimidation in their work, and what are the consequences for press freedom?' First, the student looked at the eventful history of press freedom in India. Later, using the Grounded Theory, she explains her main findings. The use of in-depth interviews provides a more personal view of the research. In this way, the experience of Indian journalists is strongly highlighted in a scientific way without losing the reality of the situation. She portrays harsh situations that create a personal dimension and a better understanding of the political situation in India.

Results that make you think

The interviews results show that the majority of respondents experience a decline in press freedom. Journalists experience psychological pressure, online harassment, physical violence and legal harassment for their coverage. These threats are often orchestrated by political entities, such as the Bharatiya-Janata party (BJP), extremist groups and industrialists with the aim of controlling the story.

The shadow of the BJP

The BJP is a leading, far-right party carried by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He and his allegedly questionable motives are often cited in the study. Under his leadership press freedom went down tragically and an environment of fear and threats against journalists emerged. This study concludes that experiences of violence and intimidation lead to self-censorship and suppression of critical journalism. As a result, journalists have to choose between safety and the duty to report, a dilemma that undermines the watchdog function of journalism. This affects not only the journalist as an individual, but the entire media landscape, as the media becomes increasingly homogeneous and critical voices are suppressed.

A systemic cycle

According to Margot, research shows that press freedom is under considerable pressure in India. "The threats, violence and harassment of journalists in India are not a few scattered incidents, but rather a broad and deep systemic problem with very dangerous dimensions regarding press freedom," she says.

Her thesis provides a contribution to understanding how the government defines the boundaries of press freedom in one of the world's largest democracies.

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INTRODUCTION

The current state of press freedom in India has been a widely discussed topic in international media in recent years. Challenges such as: political pressure, media ownership concentration, and legal restrictions are just some of the issues Indian journalists are facing. This research grew out of increasing concerns about press freedom in India, the world's largest democracy.

The topic of this master's thesis is carefully defined to examine the influences on press freedom in India. It focuses on the period after 2014, when Narendra Modi and his government came to power, and the following impact on the media environment. The core problem statement of this study addresses how far press freedom in India has declined under the influence of political and economic interference.

This master's thesis was completed within the Master of Journalism programme and uses both theoretical and empirical research methods to produce a detailed analysis. The research provides assistance at both theoretical and practical levels: theoretically, it contributes to the existing literature on press freedom in India. Practically, it provides insights that can be useful to policymakers and journalists who strive for a freer and more independent press.

The study is composed of several phases, starting with a literature review that reveals the historical and current state of press freedom in India. Next, qualitative interviews with Indian journalists are analysed to gain an understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of professionals. The results are then discussed and the conclusion answers to the central research question guiding this study is: How do journalists experience threats, violence, and intimidation in their work, and what are the consequences for press freedom?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis examines the complexity of the media in India, with a particular focus on press freedom, political influences, and the impact of digital transformation. Through a multidisciplinary analysis, a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Indian media and the challenges and opportunities it faces will be gained.

1.1. *Historical situation in India*

Journalism in India developed in three significant stages: pre-Independence, post-Independence and the post-Emergency era.

1.1.1. **Before Independence**

Indian journalism intersected with the British colonial rule from the beginning of its journey. Print controls were carried out by draconian enactments. The 1835 Press Act, also known as the Metcalfe Act, was one of the first attempts to control the press, obliging publishers to register extensive details about their publications. This was followed by other laws aimed at the Indian-language press to cut back their influence and reach.

In the fight for independence, newspapers began to assume a key role in articulating and recording public opinion. Journalism was used to make political changes and to inform people about the freedom struggle. Press took up a huge roll in the search for national identity and support against colonial rule (*Walley, 1997; Kohli-Khandekar 2013; Admin, 2023*).

1.1.2. **After Independence**

A new era began after independence in 1947. The Indian Constitution guaranteed the right to freedom of speech, which included press freedom

However, challenges remained. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed censorship during the Emergency, which curtailed press freedom significantly. During this time many journalists were jailed or silenced. This is often referred to as one of the darkest days in the history of Indian journalism (*Walley, 1997; Kohli-Khandekar 2013; Admin, 2023*)

1.1.3. Post-Emergency and challenges

After the Emergency journalism got its strength back and became more assertive. The press played a big part in holding the government accountable. In 1990 the liberalisation of the economy brought major changes in the media landscape with an enormous growth of private media and corporatization of the Indian news industry.

However, in recent years, new threats came forth for the Indian media landscape, when Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, as the head of a Bharatiya Janata Party-led government. The BJP found its origin in the organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing, Hindu nationalist. Right now the BJP is one of the largest parties in India (*The MIT Press Reader, 2022*).

Since 2014 government pressure and concentration of media ownership have increased. Laws are being misused to threaten and jail journalists, especially those who speak about sensitive issues, such as corruption, religious violence and freedom of speech (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024*).

Social and digital media became more and more prominent and offered new opportunities for journalists and citizens. Nevertheless, these platforms also came with challenges like fake news, harassment and propaganda. In conclusion India has a long complicated history with struggles for independence and current challenges in the political and media landscape. Press freedom is enshrined in the Indian Constitution and remains a cornerstone for democracy. However the current threats, misinformation, abuse and fear that is being spread by the government can no longer be ignored (*The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024*).

1.2. Media concentration

Media concentration in India has become an issue of debate in the diverse field of modern media, major conglomerates, which are usually mixed up with several sectors, are the entities that control a high percentage of the media in the country, no matter if it's newspapers, TV channels, or digital platforms (*India*, n.d.).

This centralization not only has marginalized the different viewpoints but also has sparked the main conflicts of interest. The intermingling of political power with media ownership creates more risk of censorship and biased coverage, thus jeopardizing the very element of democratic principle in the form of press freedom. As the media scene in India keeps on developing, so does the need for an understanding of the consequences of media concentration (*India*, n.d.).

1.2.1. Adani

Prime Minister Modi presented a new test case for press freedom in India. During his tenure there have been increasing concerns about the freedom of press and media concentration. In particular the involvement of big businesses like the Adani and Ambani group. Adani, led by Gautam Adani, has ventured into the media industry in the past years. Right now (2024) Adani has significant stakes in major media outlets. Adani and Prime Minister Modi are very close. Adani often openly supports Modi and the government. This move has raised concerns about media independence and the concentration of media ownership in India.

The amount of influence PM Modi wields on Adani is clear to the entire world. The Adani Group, acquisition of substantial shares in leading media companies such as NDTV has raised concerns about conflicts of interest and the larger question of editorial independence. This brings forth a sense of fear about biased reporting and less different opinions and views. The influence of corporate ownership on media content and the implications for press freedom remain critical issues in the ongoing discourse on media dynamics in India. This situation prevents journalists to practice their role as watchdog of the government (*Agence France-Presse, 2022; Sriram & Roy, 2022; Srinivasan, 2024*).

1.2.2. Ambani

Reliance Industries, controlled by Mukesh Ambani, again a personal friend of the Prime Minister, has had a similar entry in the media industry. The Ambani network holds and controls a significant amount of channels and publications (*India, 2024*).

The concentration of media in India raises concerns about diverse viewpoints and critical journalism. Politics and media are intertwined by the involvement of Adani and Ambani with Modi. As these business takeovers continue to reshape the media landscape, it becomes imperative to scrutinise and address the implications for editorial independence and the role of the press in Indian democracy (*Srinivasan, 2024, Bloomberg & Bloomberg, 2024, Palepu & Kay, 2024*).

1.3. Indian Media

India has a population of around 1.4 billion people. Indian media are diverse and they are offered on many different platforms. Only radio remains a state monopoly because of the government owned All India Radio (AIR) (*India, 2024*).

1.3.1. Print Media

The print media are an integral part of the Indian media ecosystem. 140,000 publications (*India, 2024*) are published including 20,000 daily newspapers. (*India, 2024*) Newspapers such as “The times of India’ or “The Hindu” have been around for decades. There are numerous newspapers in more than 20 languages all across the country. While the rise of digital media and social media has made the position of print difficult, the print media have been quick to adapt, and today most newspapers have a large and convenient online presence to go alongside their hard copy (*India’s Newspaper Revolution, 2000; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; India, 2024*).

1.3.2. Television

Television is one of the most important media in India. It covers nearly the whole country. About 197 million homes have a TV set. There are about 900 privately owned channels, 50% of those are dedicated to news channels like Aaj Tak, NDTV, Republic TV and BBC Hindi offering news, debates, and entertainment (*India, 2024*). The Indian film industry, Bollywood, further amplifies the influence of television, with numerous channels dedicated to movies and entertainment (*Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; ABC News In-depth, 2023; India, 2024*).

1.3.3. Digital Media

The rise of digital media has changed the landscape for journalism in India and dethroned print media as the main source of news. It is a fact that people are connected to screens due to the internet and smartphone revolution, so many forms of news consumption have moved online. While many Indians still consume news that appears in the physical newspaper on their doorstep, websites, social media networks and news apps have transformed into the go-to places for information, particularly among the young (*Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; PwC, n.d; India, 2024*).

The Wire (and other digital platforms) platforms like The Scroll.in and News Laundry to explore non-traditional topics which thrives on deeper analysis overlooked by traditional media. The large social medial platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Youtube have become news and public dialogue channels.

But the digital landscape is not without its drawbacks. There is a growing prevalence of fake news and online harassment. Those problems raise significant concerns. Despite this, digital media continue to grow and pave the way for innovative and independent journalism (*Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; PwC, n.d.; India, 2024*).

1.3.4. Godi Media

Ravish Kumar was the senior executive editor of NDTV, but resigned when Adani of the business conglomerate Adani Group took control of the television channel. Kumar now has a YouTube channel with about 11.3 million subscribers. He also introduced the term 'Godi media'. A play on the Prime Minister's name and the Hindi word for 'lapdog', because, as he states the media is merely a lapdog of the government. This term mainly comes from the extreme media concentration and government promotion that is happening in India and has now gained traction in the Indian discourse. The term is used as a way to critique the media that support the government at the expense of journalistic integrity. Positive stories are being amplified while negative stories hardly get any coverage. It expresses the concerns about media bias, press freedom and the role of journalism in a democracy. Critics claim that the media's role as watchdog is being undermined (Prabhu, 2020).

'Godi media' is a big concern as multiple opinions are necessary for a healthy media landscape. The term gives attention to the issues India and its journalists are facing. Addressing this is essential to restore a democratic society (*Bharathi, n.d., CAAJ Report: Journalists Attacked on Basis of Religion, Place of Work – Free Speech Collective; n.d., Shibboleth Authentication Request, n.d.*).

1.4. Press Freedom

Press freedom is a component of freedom of expression. This right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR is relevant to the UN and regional organizations such as the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Union. Despite its origin it is often seen as a Western concept due to its origin in the Enlightenment period and the influence of Western liberal- political thinkers. This makes the right to freedom of expression, and by definition press freedom, a predominantly Western concept. The right to freedom of expression is described in Article 19 as follows:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

India's media landscape is characterized by its diversity of languages, cultures, and communication channels. With a population of over a billion people, India is also the world's largest democracy. Despite this title, the country has dropped by as many as 9 points in the Press Freedom Index (PFI) since 2022 (*India: Press Freedom Ranking 2023 | Statista, 2023*).

The Press Freedom Index attempts to map press freedom in each country. The index is expressed as a score from 0-100, with 100 being the highest possible score and thus the highest level of press freedom. The score is based on two factors: a quantitative analysis of abuses against journalists and a qualitative analysis of the situation based on interviews with journalists from the country in question. These interview questions are based on five different pillars.

1.4.1. Political Context

With 33 questions, this pillar aims to measure respect for the autonomy of journalists and media in the face of political pressure. It also examines the extent to which various journalistic approaches, including politically-oriented and independent methods that meet professional standards, are accepted. Lastly, it assesses support for the role of media in holding politicians and the government accountable in the public interest.

1.4.2. Legal Framework

The second pillar investigates the freedom of journalists and media to work unhindered, without censorship, legal repercussions, or unreasonable restrictions on freedom of expression. It also examines the ability of journalists to access information without discrimination, including the ability to protect the identity of sources and the presence or absence of criminal immunity for those responsible for violent acts against journalists.

1.4.3. Economic Context

Questions under this pillar address economic constraints stemming from government policies, such as challenges in setting up a news media outlet, favoritism in the awarding of government subsidies, and instances of corruption. It also examines economic obstacles posed by non-governmental actors, such as advertisers and commercial partners.

1.4.4. Socio-Cultural Context

The research for the fourth pillar consists of two subcategories:

Social restrictions arising from derogatory behaviour and attacks on the press based on gender, class, ethnicity, and religion.

Cultural restrictions, including pressure on journalists to avoid questioning certain power structures and to avoid certain topics because they conflict with the prevailing culture in the country or region.

1.4.5. Safety

This pillar addresses the safety of journalists. In this context, press freedom is defined as the ability to identify, collect, and disseminate news and information according to journalistic methods and ethics, without undue risk of:

- Physical harm, including murder, violence, arrest, detention, forced disappearance, and kidnapping.
- Psychological or emotional distress, resulting from intimidation, coercion, harassment, surveillance, doxing (publishing personal information with malicious intent), humiliating or hateful language, slander, and other threats against journalists or their loved ones.
- Professional harm, such as job loss, seizure of professional equipment, or looting of facilities (*Methodology Used for Compiling the World Press Freedom Index 2023*, n.d.).

1.5. Press Freedom in India

As mentioned earlier, this research focuses on press freedom in India. The problem framework of press freedom in India is complex and encompasses various challenges and issues. Below are briefly outlined the most prominent constraints:

1.5.1. Political Interference

India's partition in 1947, which divided the country into Pakistan and India, led to many conflicts between the two communities (Islam and Hinduism). This made Hindutva a major force in India's political and cultural landscape. Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, is an ideology rooted in Hinduism that seeks to establish a cultural and political India based on Hinduism (*Kulik, 2023*).

Hindu nationalists came into conflict with liberals, and this affects the media. Journalistic pieces aligned with Hindu nationalist values are supported and disseminated by the BJP and PM Modi himself (*Chaturvedi., 2016*). The BJP pressures journalists or media organizations into leaving parts out of a story or not bringing a story at all. The Bollywood sector, for example, experiences a lot of political interference in freedom of speech. Actors and writers are jailed or threatened for making movies that don't support the BJP's values (*ABC News In-depth, 2023*).

1.5.2. Legal Constraints

Looking at the laws and regulations relating to press freedom, one finds a complex legal framework. A thorough analysis of the bond between media and politics shows a clear picture of the political influences on journalistic objectivity. The Defamation Act (Section 499-500, Indian Penal Code) and the Information Technology Act are among them. They are being used to intimidate or jail journalists. The Defamation Act gives an individual the power to claim harm to their reputation. For example, The Wire had been subject to multiple defamation cases from important individuals after publishing scandals or critical articles (*Jay Amit Shah's Case Against the Wire Is an Attempt to Censor, Intimidate Media at Large, n.d.*).

The Information Technology Act gives the government the right to harass or prosecute journalists for writing or saying offensive content (India, 2023).

1.5.3. Violence and Threats against Journalists

Journalists in India constantly face violence, intimidation, and threats from government agencies or groups associated with political parties such as the BJP. Moreover, it is not only journalists who feel restrictions on publishing their work. Various industries in India suffer under Modi's regime (*Back Story: How Media Freedom Shrank Between the Independence Days of 2019 and 2020, n.d.; Chaturvedi, 2016*).

1.5.4. Social Media and Disinformation

The stream of misinformation and fake news on social media have an impact on press freedom in the sense that journalists receive many online threats. Primarily women face a backlash from trolls online. These threats are often sexually explicit and have a significant impact on the reputation and credibility of journalists. 73% of female journalists reported being harassed online (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023*).

Often these troll accounts could be linked to members of the BJP-party, if not followed by Modi himself. Like many political parties, the BJP also employs people in their headquarters in Delhi to run an IT cell. This group of people conducts social media campaigns, but are also known to spread misinformation and hatred (*Chaturvedi, 2016*).

1.5.5. Comparison before and after PM Modi

Since 2014, the same year Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India, the press freedom index of the country has declined. In 2014 India ranked 140th out of 180 countries according to the press freedom index. Right now the country is placed 159th. Although it is ranked 161th in 2023 this is still a decline of press freedom in comparison to a pre-Modi India. A deeper analysis using the press freedom pillars provides a clear view of the current state of press freedom in Indian since Modi came to power.

1.5.6. Analysis

Political context

Reporters Without Borders states that Indian media has fallen into an 'unofficial state of emergency' since 2014. The way that the BJP is intertwined with the families who control the media shows little freedom. As mentioned earlier, journalists or media professionals who criticize the government are often threatened through their employer, social media or in real life.

Legal framework

Colonial era laws bring limitations to the media, anti-terrorism laws, defamation laws etc. However freedom of expression is still mentioned in the constitution. Modi and his party increased their grip on the media by enacting laws that criminalise dissent, such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and sedition laws, which have been used to arrest and further silence journalists who speak critical of the government.

Economic context

The main source of income for Indian media is advertising, which is almost completely funded by the government. The current government can exert influence by withdrawing advertisements from critical media outlets and using legal tools to suppress dissenting voices.

The concentration of media in the hands of Ambani and Adani also influences the economic context of the Indian media. Media that are critical to the government have almost no resources to stay afloat amongst media that received billions of dollars on funds.

Social-cultural context

India is an extremely diverse country that still has a very prominent caste system. The main part of the Indian media consists out of upper caste Hindu men. Most of the media are Hindi as well. This situation doesn't reflect the diversity of the country at all. Muslims, women or other minorities are rarely found in talk shows or on the radio and are therefore not represented in the Indian media.

Safety

Journalists with a critical opinion are far from safe in India. The environment has become increasingly hostile. According to Reporters Without Borders an average of three or four journalists are killed yearly in connection with their work. As mentioned earlier, intimidation and threats are also prominent. There is fear of being jailed or killed amongst journalists because of these threats from the government and Hindu-nationalists (*India, 2024*).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. *Problem statement*

Since Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, he has influenced the political and social state of the country. Given that press freedom is an essential aspect in a functioning democracy, this research examines the impact of Modi's reign on press freedom in India.

India is the biggest democracy in the world and has had a difficult relationship with press freedom in the past. However, Modi's leadership has brought new concerns about the suppression of press freedom. Different national and international organisations, such as Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), have commented on the decline of press freedom in the country. Journalists are being threatened, jailed and silenced by their own government.

The goal of this thesis is to acquire authentic experiences concerning press freedom from journalists in India, who are active in the field.

2.2. *Research Questions*

I have opted for a descriptive research question. An answer to a descriptive question outlines a situation. The data to describe this situation are collected through a literature review and in-depth interviews of journalists.

The central research question of this study is:

How do journalists experience threats, violence, and intimidation in their work, and what are the consequences for press freedom?

With sub-questions:

- What are the specific threats that journalists in India face?
- How does violence and intimidation affect the daily activities of journalists?
- Are there patterns or trends in threats against journalists in India?
- What measures are being taken to protect journalists?
- What are the potential long-term consequences of threats and violence for press freedom in India?

2.3. Research Approach

This research on press freedom in India aims to gain an understanding of the current state of press freedom in this country. The research approach encompasses several key aspects, which are crucial for understanding the situation of press freedom in India.

I started with a literature review, for which I consulted various sources from the internet, Limo and written literature. In combination with various interviews, this research aims to provide a clearer picture of the media landscape in India, the political context, and the state of press freedom.

2.3.1. Data Collection

Snowball method

Through Professor Verschooten I came into contact with five Indian journalists. From there on I used the snowball sampling technique, also known as chain sampling or network sampling, to collect more contacts and find people who were willing to video chat with me. In total I contacted 25 journalists.

With the snowball sampling technique participants are asked to identify other possible participants. I needed various Indian journalists, therefore the snowball method was ideal for finding people with the same profession (*Snowball Sampling*, 2017).

I specifically used exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling. In this subcategory of snowball sampling, one journalist can refer to multiple other contacts, contrary to the linear approach where every contact leads to a new contact. With the exponential discriminative snowball sampling approach, the researcher checks the given contacts, but does not use them all. I however did not discriminate in the given contacts so I could have an as diverse as possible pool of journalists.

Advantages

Snowball sampling increases the chances of an interview, because as a researcher you are able to use a common contact as a way of bonding. Besides that you form a pool of respondents that you might not be able to reach (*Nikolopoulou, 2022*).

Disadvantages

One of the disadvantages is that there is little control over the contacts you are given. Additionally, although the selection is random, it is not always representative of the population. It is possible that a contact refers to a like-minded person, which could form a research bias. The exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling can prevent that, but not entirely. I am aware that I have mostly spoken to like-minded journalists and I have taken a neutral position as researcher and interviewer (*Nikolopoulou, 2022*).

Reliability

The reliability of this study was ensured through several key measures. Each respondent was asked the same questions in the same manner to minimise bias. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture accurate data (Mathea, 2023).

Data processing

The data from these interviews were then processed using the principles of grounded theory. The results reveal how journalists in India experience press freedom and any limitations on it.

Transcription

This research worked with audio-recordings that later were transcribed. The pauses and slip of the tongues were kept in the transcription to provide a deeper understanding of the interview and which questions appeared to be harder to answer.

2.3.2. In-Depth Interviews

In total I conducted 11 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with journalists and media professionals from India. In in-depth interviews the researcher speaks one-on-one with the respondent. This guarantees safety and prevents the respondents of getting biased by each other. I used my literature review as inspiration for the questions and mainly asked about personal experiences with press freedom in India, including topics like government influence, incidents and threats, self-censorship, and social media (*“WORKBOOK E: CONDUCTING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS,” n.d.*).

The interviews were individual and planned in advance. Every interview was conducted via WhatsApp video chat, with one exception who preferred Zoom as a platform. I recorded the interviews by phone and didn't type or make notes during the interview, so I could give my undivided attention to my interviewee.

Conducting the interviews through video call came with obvious limitations. The connection often brought unnecessary noise and made it harder to put my interviewee at ease. The time difference also made scheduling difficult. On top of that, the election period became incredibly busy for journalists. I sent out multiple reminders and was prepared to the fact that they might not show up. But in the end, I managed to interview 11 journalists, which provided a lot of data to analyse and answer the research questions.

2.3.3. Grounded Theory

The Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method for constructing theory through methodical gathering and analysis of data. The founders of the Grounded theory are Glaser and Strauss. The theory first went under the name 'constant comparative method'. There are four steps in the Grounded Theory: data collection, open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In this case, the data collection involved interviewing 11 journalists (*The Practical Guide to Grounded Theory* — DeIve, n.d.).

Open Coding:

The first phase after collecting data involves breaking it down into parts and examining and comparing it. During this phase labels or codes are ascribed to the data.

Axial Coding:

In the second phase, connections are being made between the open codes. The objective is to find patterns and make categories in the data. This creates a network of interrelated categories, with the phenomenon you are investigating as its central point.

Selective Coding:

In the final phase the categories are being connected with each other until the core category is found (*Benders, 2023*).

To see the entire process of the Grounded Theory consult the code-tree in the appendices, where open codes, axial codes and selective codes are being summarized.

3. RESULTS

Unlike in the transcriptions in Appendix 2, the quotes in this chapter have been grammatically adjusted to increase readability.

3.1. *Government Influence and Control:*

Data from the interviews suggest that the Indian government plays a big part in the suppression of press freedom through monitoring, intimidation, gatekeeping data, misusing legal prosecution and economic pressure.

‘So, I cannot give you a very clear answer, but the problem is that this government is very sensitive towards criticism. They do not like to be criticised. Those who criticize, become a target, so that is the problem.’ – journalist 5

Most respondents raise their concerns about the Modi government, because they feel it exerts a great influence on the media. Modi and his government do this by installing fear into individuals. Respondents generally agree that it is difficult to be critical.

‘Basically, since 2014, when the present Prime Minister came to power, there has been a systematic suppression of this constitutional guarantee. He has done it in two ways. One, of course, is through controlling the media, the mainstream media. And he did this through a combination of patronage and punishment .’– Journalist 3

Respondent 6 also shared a story of a personal friend who was telephoned by the central minister with news suggestions for the day on daily basis. This was a way for the government to control the news and spreading propaganda.

‘There was a very strong perception in the first term of the Narendra Modi government that the Central Minister, a very influential Central minister, every day, apparently at 7:00 or 6:00, he used to call one of the most prominent newspapers in the country. Then he used to call the news bureau, the reporter and the chief of the reporter. And he used to suggest very politely what he thought was the most important news events of the day. So, it was considered an indirect way of telling these are the stories you should play the next day morning.’ – journalist 6

The majority of respondents spontaneously cited cases where the government exerted control over journalists, such as through self-censorship and the fact check unit. Two respondents were believed that the government does not exert pressure, but that the media exerts pressure on itself.

Several respondents also made it clear that one of the biggest challenges of a journalist in India is gathering information. It is difficult to obtain factual information from the government if you want to write critical pieces. Not every journalist gets access to everything. Often data must be obtained through private companies.

'For example, during COVID time, the information was curbed. The people were dying. You were not able to report it. Many media groups could not report it. We were able to report it, but when it came to getting the information, we were not getting any information.' – journalist 9

3.1.1. The Hathras-case

Four respondents spoke spontaneously about the specific Hathras case and the unjust incarceration of Siddique Kappan. Eight journalists discussed the risk and fear of being incarcerated while practising their profession.

'So the thing is when you look at press freedom. You could also look at, you know how many journalists have been jailed in India, for whatever reasons. So one case that comes to my mind is the Hathras gang rape case.' - Journalist 7

Regarding that same case that was brought up by multiple respondents, in October 2020, a Dalit girl was gruesomely gang raped by four upper-class men in Hathras. She was found barely alive and brought to a hospital in Delhi, where she gave the names of the four men that abused, paralysed and raped her. There she died from her injuries (Zaffar, 2020).

This specific case received a lot of media attention because, after she died, the police, government officials, burned the body of the 19-year-old girl in the middle of the night without the family knowing, without consent. Allegedly to dispose the evidence. This scandal was discovered by a journalist who happened to be there and posted images of the forceful cremation on twitter. This led to many protests from people seeking justice for the girl and inevitably, brought forth more media attention (BBC News, 2023).

'So there's this journalist from Kerala. He tweeted my picture. He was on his way from Kerala to Hathras he did not even reach Hathras. He was picked up by police from midway and then charged of sedition. I think he just recently got bail. He was in jail, not even reaching Hathras. Because he's a Muslim, it was very easy to frame him.' - Journalist 11

'I will give you some keywords and references in an e-mail and you can look them up because there's this 1 chap whose case went on for 2,5 years and he's a slim guy. He just went to report on a rape., an assaulted woman. And they picked him up and kept him in jail for two years.' - Journalist 2

3.1.2. The fear of being jailed

Siddique Kappan, a Muslim journalist, was on his way to Hathras to report on the case but was stopped by the police. Kappan and three other journalists were arrested on the charge of causing a breach of peace. Later, the charges were changed to sedition and violation of the anti-terror law UAPA and Information Technology Act. Siddique was in jail for 2 years. (Sravani, 2024)

The Hathras case is a good example of the government trying to control a situation by jailing an innocent journalist. The UAPA law, used to prevent acts of terrorism, is often used wrongly as a way to control and threaten journalists.

The majority of respondents agree that the government misuses laws to frighten journalists and impose their narrative.

The phones are basically put under surveillance. Under what law is the government or anybody putting a journalist phone on surveillance? I need to first know. Is there anybody who will give me this answer? How did you get an audio from my phone. How is this happening? – Journalist 11

Journalist 11 had a 17-minute phone conversation with the brother of the victim. During this phone-call she gave media advice and expressed support for the brother. This conversation was later leaked. It is suspected that the phone of the journalist was tapped by the government. However, this cannot officially be confirmed.

3.1.3. Fact check unit

Three respondents expressed concerns about the fact check unit the government wants to launch. They describe it as an attack on press freedom and democracy.

'His (PM Modi) government has introduced many laws and rules and regulations to control our digital media. Over the last two years especially so'. - Journalist 3

'But the government is coming up with different digital laws to impact their freedom and in the print medium. I'll say that a few newspapers are still working fearlessly, but most of them have more or less become biased.' - Journalist 9

On March 20, 2024 The Supreme Court of India has temporarily stopped the fact-checking initiative. The government proposed a fact checking unit under the Information Technology (IT) rules. This initiative sparked many different opinions, debating press freedom.

The fact-checking unit will be used to check and monitor online content that is deemed concerning by the government. The government considers the unit necessary to battle against misinformation and ensure that only accurate information is distributed (*Jazeera, 2024; India Top Court Puts on Hold Unit for Fact-checking Online Content About Govt, 2024*).

'You know, the government was very keen on bringing a fact checking tool from the government. So when you check the facts and then if it is found wrong, then those who produce that news could be prosecuted under the law.' - Journalist 5

However, there has been argued that such a unit would grant the government too much power and control over online media. There is fear that the fact-checking unit would only suppress critical opinions under the guise of misinformation. In response to these concerns, the Supreme Court of India issued a stay on the formation of the unit. This decision was a victory for journalists and press freedom. It was widely seen as a prevention of potential abuse of power.

This case enlightens the relation between the importance of safeguarding democracy whilst on the other side the need to address misinformation (*Jazeera, 2024; India Top Court Puts on Hold Unit for Fact-checking Online Content About Govt, 2024*).

'And according to that bill, the government will have a fact checking team, whatever their fact checking team thinks is wrong, is vulgar, is a wrong fact. They can actually put that content off and they can also prosecute you. And this is it. This is now. This will be a law which is going to be the last nail in the coffin of press freedom, because whatever they think is not right. They can just, like, go after us.' - Journalist 11

3.1.4. Self-censorship

Only three journalists admitted to self-censoring before. However, eight journalists do acknowledge it as a real problem and knew others who felt compelled to self-censor in a situation. Many of the respondents interviewed worked for an anti-government organisation, where the employer encourages publishing articles correctly. Even though some journalists recognise the problem of self-censorship and know other people who have already done this, two journalists believe that the problem lies with the journalist himself. When asked further about pressure from the government, this is denied.

'I have censored myself more several times. I belong to a print media, the traditional print media, which means the government can cancel our license if you step out of line.' ***'People censor themselves. Spike stories, bury stories, play down stories, kill stories because they think twice, thrice, four times. Is it OK to carry this? Should we do this? Is it worth it? This is all there is.'*** - journalist 6

Although a few respondents stated that self-censorship didn't affect them personally, they all agreed that it was a growing problem in Indian journalism.

***'They are not going to either lose revenue or get into the government's bad books because of their job. So, they will let all of them self-censor. There's a lot of self-censorship.'* – journalist 2**

According to some respondents the government often directly contacts the editor instead of the journalist in question in order to pressure the journalist into self-censoring. This is a rising problem for both domestic and foreign journalists. This forced journalists to approach their job differently and made them avoid certain subjects.

***'I mean, yeah, sometimes 2%, 5% of the times, even the best of journalists are self-censoring themselves. Because who would want to die? I mean, and you can actually, the threat is of dying.'* – journalist 11**

3.2. Impact on Journalists:

Journalists face numerous threats, both physical and psychological that directly and indirectly come from the government. These threats lead to self-censoring or biased reporting. These professional challenges hinder their work.

3.2.1. Trolling

***'There's trolling because they hired to troll, the government. Really. They have these IT cells, an information technology cell, which basically hires a lot of people to harass people, because ever since WhatsApp came in 2014, they (the government) discovered its potential. And they've been using it ever since.'* - journalist 2**

The Cambridge dictionary describes trolling as the act of leaving an insulting message on the internet in order to annoy someone. Trolling is a phenomenon that is facilitated to the online disinhibition effect, where individuals feel protected in their anonymity and don't feel the social pressure to behave in a socially desirable way. Women are more targeted than men and often receive comments that relate to their sex life, rape, sexual harassment or (photo shopped) nude pictures (Fichman & Rathi, 2022).

***'Then, there is the threat of physical intimidation. Assault is there, especially for young women journalists. They have faced a lot of trolling and abuse online. Especially now with online space, women journalists are targeted for this. So, the worst you can imagine about these kinds of threats have increasingly been felt in India by several journalists.'* - journalist 5**

Respondents were specifically asked about their personal experience with trolling. There was a clear distinction between men and women. Male respondents generally agreed that trolling is not a real threat as it is only online, whereas women saw a bigger problem in this.

Not all journalists linked trolling to the government, but there was a general consensus that trolling has an impact on press freedom. The majority of respondents also confirmed that journalists critical of the government are more likely to be victims of trolling.

***'The trolling and other things are being done by organized groups. They are not journalists, we had to be very clear about that, because we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. The media have nothing to do with this. Trolling is being done by organized groups, probably with the help of the political party.'* - journalist 6**

Most of the journalists did link trolling to the IT cell of BJP party. They did not feel supported by the government in challenging the threats and accusations sent by the trollers. Female respondents also confirmed that trolling is often not limited to matters pertaining to their profession.

***'A large number of journalists, not just one, you speak to any woman, most, I'm saying most women journalists, women who have been critical of the government who carry a critical report, their abuse is not limited, not confined to their professional expertise, it's plain expletives. It's filthy abuse it has nothing to do with journalism. This (trolling) is pure hate. Unadulterated hate and filthy language and death threats. This is rape threats and threats to attack their parents and their children, their families. This is the worst form of harassment.'* – journalist 6**

Every female journalist that was interviewed for this thesis had been trolled or witnessed trolling from close by at least once in their career. Trolling is a growing issue in the media landscape of India, that has a significant impact on journalists.

3.2.2. All eyes on Rafah

One respondent had a specific experience of trolling that she wanted to share for this study. She also agreed to release her name.

***'We do not always have to compare two tragedies and compare the killing of children. How low can you think? You can't compare these two things? Right? People went crazy. The right-wing trolls went crazy.'* – Journalist 11**

An example of trolling regards to the female journalists Tanushree Pandey. On June 9th a bus was attacked by terrorists in Reasi. The bus was carrying pilgrims to a temple, all nine were killed

during the incident. This attack happened a day after the murder of 45 refugees in Gaza following the “AllEyesOnRafah” hashtag that went viral on social media and online. After the attack in Reasi, the people in India started using #AllEyesOnReasi, Pandey wrote an article stating that these two incidents shouldn't be compared as the impact and the situation is entirely different. This resulted in extreme trolling and online harassment to the journalist and her family. The trolling went beyond mere criticism of her article. Right-wing trolls were quick to make extreme comments (Online, 2024).

***They started putting my Instagram pictures, my mother's pictures, my pictures in bikini, on Twitter. They started writing. 'This girl wants sex.' 'We will rape her, we will rape her mother. We will throw acid in her face.' I have been getting calls from people telling me: We know where you live. We will just pick you up and we'll abduct you and we'll do things to you have never imagined. I had to file a police complaint, but nothing is going to happen. And these are not one or two people. These are thousands of people and nobody stops it. That is being empowered and emboldened by the current regime. It is one of the biggest problems that right now, all journalists, especially female journalists, are handling. I don't know how to cope with this because it's absolutely crazy.'* – Journalist 11**

3.2.3. Professional challenges

Respondents were asked whether they thought media organisations should do a better job of protecting their journalists in relation to trolling, being threatened by the government, reporting in the field etc. Ten out of eleven respondents answered this question with a 'yes'.

***'Absolutely yes, media organizations should protect their journalists, because we have a press guild of India. But that's really toothless if somebody gets arrested, they can't even do anything. They can't even mobilize people. Get them on the streets to get a bail. Siddiqui was in jail for two years.'* – journalist 11**

***'He (senator that didn't want to talk to the journalist) was surrounded with his supporters because he was accusing me. He was abusing me like this. You're putting my, my, my security into threat. And he said that that's what you deserve. So, I mean that is the kind of, you know, if that is not a threat then what you call a threat, right. So, things have become part of our life.'* – journalist 5**

There was a consensus among respondents that being a journalist in India is a constant job of balancing several issues. Such as editorial independence and the policies of the media organisations. However, three journalists described this as something every journalist, regardless of the country, has to do.

3.3. Media Environment and Dynamics

Indian media face being influenced by political pressures and this is creating biased journalism, incorrect reporting and credibility issues. This has an impact on press freedom.

***'More and more we're becoming slave to it, and that is the real challenge. Many media organizations are being acquired by Adani. And then centralization of these media into 1-2-3 hands is not good enough because then there would be only 3-4 persons who have power.'* – journalist 1**

***'The media space is owned by businessmen, industrialists, right, who don't have an ABC like model in India, all the media outlets are owned by businessmen. Now the problem is, all these owners 90, 95% of these owners have their allegiance to the ruling party, the ruling dispensation in India.'* – journalist 5**

Three journalists spontaneously raised the issue of media centralisation in India. This phenomenon makes dissenting opinions stand out and attract a lot of criticism. On top of this, respondents share that the media are controlled by businessmen and corporations aligned with the BJP party. Media centralisation is a concern for most respondents.

***'You know, at times he does some press conferences, at times he gives some interviews. But they are all stage managed. The questions are sent to him in advance, in some newspapers, they get written replies and in some television interviews everything is fixed, everything is rigged. I mean, the Prime Minister doesn't give interviews to credible journalists, he gives interviews to film stars. And those film stars in the interview, they ask him, how do you like to have your mango? Do you want it as a juice? So, yeah this is a bizarre thing that's happening.'* – journalist 5**

Some respondents also cited that the news aired about the Prime Minister is irrelevant. They discuss his favourite meals, but not political issues. One respondent cited that the Prime Minister does not have to answer to his people in terms of press conferences or interviews where critical questions are asked. Respondents disagree on the necessary news coverage of the Prime Minister in a critical light.

***'They put some cases, redid the company, took ownership from it (NDTV), sold it to Adani. Adani is one of the biggest industrialists who is very close to Modi and they're running it now. They're running it as a PR, as a PR channel for the government. Every day there is a show on how the Prime Minister is great. How is amazing, how the things he wears are very cool and classy.'* – Journalist 11**

PM Modi, himself is very active on social media. He follows many people and likes and comments often. He also has a website with links to all his social media. It is clear he expresses his support

to individuals by liking their (harmful) tweets. Modi uses more than just social media to spread propaganda. Selfie-points are put up all around India. These are cut-outs of himself and photo booths with his pictures in front of schools, train stations, monuments etc. (Outlook Web Desk & Outlook Web Desk, 2024) His strong presence on social media is specifically mentioned by most respondents.

'It's bad because it's very restrictive and it's very, in a sense, punishment prone, if you do anything because he (PM Modi) has his agencies that are weaponized. Basically, this Prime Minister doesn't need the media. This is the holy person of social media and he has been very hot on social media for a long time. He looked at Barack Obama's first campaign and learned that you could use social media, and it had just come to India.' - Journalist 2

Two respondents also bring up the term 'Godi Media' after being asked about the link between the media and the government. The link is seen as problematic and hostile by most of the respondents. An atmosphere of fear surrounds the respondents. Some of the respondents do not dare to speak clearly or critically about the current media environment in India.

'I fear that if the Modi government returns to power, they will tighten the screws on the online space as well. Another important issue is that television licenses are renewed by the government after security clearance from the Interior Ministry, called the Union Home Ministry. This ministry has often been accused of taking arbitrary decisions to deny the renewal of licenses to channels critical of the government. If you are denied the license, you just go off air, which is like pulling the plug on a lifeline.' - journalist 6

Several respondents also come forward with concerns about how the government issues licences and visas. Critical journalists find it harder to obtain the necessary licences, which are needed to report.

'I mean, in Kashmir all the journalists, all of them. Their passports have been revoked. None of them can leave. So many of them have been called to the US to the UK to give speeches. They are not allowed to travel outside of the country only because the Kashmiri journalists, so many of them, have been arrested, put in jails, have been completely blocked. So this is this is horrifying. This is horrifying. And now this is what they are doing to India journalists. So this. I mean, I can't think of anything worse.' – Journalist 11

3.4. *Response and Resilience:*

The suppression regarding press freedom has been a widely discussed subjects throughout the last years in India. Journalists try to report truthfully through social media or digital media. Although most of them are aware of the situation, they show hope and no intention of being silenced.

When respondents were asked how they saw the future of press freedom, most were positive and hopeful. They stress that the media landscape is changing rapidly and there are always new opportunities. They do agree that the government or people in power will have to change for better press freedom. However, two of the respondents see a darker future and journalist 4 denies that press freedom is a problem.

***'If we keep fighting, we will get out of this decay and we will reselect ourselves. And the press freedom will emerge. So I think this is not dogmatic. This is this is dynamic. The barometer goes down, it goes up also.'* - journalist 9**

Although 9 respondents agreed that press freedom in India is at a low ebb, they see a brighter future for journalism.

It will go up, but it will come down. And obviously, those oppressed, they will come to power one day and all the damages that were done to Indian democracy and Indian journalism will be undone. And this is a fantastic profession. Speak the truth. We are not truth. We reveal the truth, and we call bluff, and that is our job and to some extent we were not. We have not been able to do that in a free and fair way for some time. But I believe that things will improve. – journalist 5

The respondents look at the history of the country and see the oppression of press freedom more as just government pressure and Prime Minister Modi. It is described as a regime that must fall with time and is carried by multiples.

Respondents still write critical articles despite the fear that comes with it. They find strength and meaning in expressing a critical opinion and do not intend to stop doing so.

Our press freedom has gone down. But yes, we, there are fighters. We are fighting it out. It is not as bad as you know, some Islamic country, it is not as that bad. I mean we are able to report. There is pressure on us, but they still report. We will see, I mean what will happen to us when we do report. - Journalist 9

It is notable that some respondents recognise that press freedom in India is diminishing, but bristle at the idea that it is worse in other countries.

'After each change of regime, it brings a new perspective. Things never change. It only changed psychologically. If after one month the government was you know, voted out. It would be an atmosphere that the country is neck deep in corruption. But we changed the perspective. Today, if this regiment goes, then we'll feel: 'Ohh the intolerance is over.' ***Psychological intolerance, may be related to this regime, if it is defeated. Than you will suddenly feel OK. It has vanished, but things in society will never change. It takes time to change.'*** - Journalist 1

3.5. Societal and Cultural Factors:

Societal and cultural factors have an influence on how people perceive press freedom. They are forced to either support or undermine journalistic freedom. This forms a societal pressure on journalists and individuals.

Naturally, there are also social and cultural factors that play into how journalists report. The historical tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities plays a big part in this. The BJP is a party that capitalises on this divide. The Muslim community is often portrayed badly, making it difficult to report objectively.

'But the political party in power in India, it's politics revolves around very divisive politics. You know, I mean, they create division between the Hindus and the Muslims. I mean their religion is a very important element of their politics. We do not believe it though. We believe in the secular and plural India.' – Journalist 5

In addition, a large caste system is still alive in India. These different classes in society also exert their form of pressure. Journalist 11 confessed during the interviews that this system can give some journalists advantages or disadvantages. It is easier to arrest media professionals of lower classes.

'I am massively privileged. If you talk about caste and the religion. I am not just a Hindu, which is the majority religion in the country. I am also a Brahmin. I had no idea that I am a Brahmin, but I apparently am a Brahmin. Which is the upper caste so-called upper caste. It's all bullshit but. It's very difficult to arrest me.' – Journalist 11

The government exploits this divide by punishing and rewarding media according to their political stance. One respondent phrased the situation as follows.

'And in this case, in India, we have a Hindutva driven, authoritarianism. So, it is a religiously driven authoritarianism that is emerging, and it is in fact a very common way of controlling the media. The independent media is first punished and pushed away, and those who are subservient to the government are encouraged and promoted, and over a period of time they become the voice of the media. So that's what is happening in India today.' –journalist 3

Journalist 4 believes that the government does not exert pressure, reasoning that journalists still write critical pieces. Incidentally, this respondent also felt that press freedom is not experiencing problems in India. When confronted with threats or the press freedom index, it is portrayed as propaganda from the Western world. When asked critical questions around the Prime Minister, the respondent quickly becomes more hostile. Other right-wing journalists also contribute to the socio-cultural atmosphere in the media landscape.

***'If I Margot put you under pressure about something I think you would fear to do so. I haven't seen the other section of the media who says that media is under attack, stopping and not criticizing. They're doing their job of criticizing and that is OK that is fine.'* – journalist 4**

The same respondent also further highlighted that the Prime Minister makes enough appearances in public. If she asks him a question, he will always answer, just not in front of a larger audience. This raises a bigger dilemma about what the responsibilities of a Prime Minister are or not are.

***'We do have off records with our Prime Minister. We do have off records with our Home Minister. We do have Diwali Milan with our Prime Minister. I don't think I've seen any other countries, President or Prime Minister, coming on Christmas and celebrating it with journalists and having selfies with them. Sitting in a room and asking 'Dear Prime Minister, I need to ask you a question but we can do it off record.' And if I must ask any question to my Prime Minister, I am absolutely free to ask him any question and he does, believe me, he does answer.'* – journalist 4**

Some respondents cited constantly feeling a dilemma between safety and correctly reporting a situation.

***This is how I kind of define the two challenges. One is on the professional front. Where you have to do things which you don't like. And if you try to do things which you like, then there is a possibility that you may lose your job. On the personal front, you are always facing attacks. In social media there are possibilities of you getting arrested. So, these are difficult times and it's very challenging.* – journalist 5**

Journalist 6 shared concerns about how social and cultural differences in India have changed with the impact Modi has since he came into power. After being asked whether threats or violence towards journalists are more common, almost all respondents mentioned a specific experience of a friend or acquaintance.

Another very important newspaper published from the Capital, New Delhi, during the first term of the Narendra Modi government. There was a surge of mass, mob lynchings, where people were being beaten to death because of the way they dressed or they the way prayed. When they spoke out about their identity, they were killed. This journalist at that newspaper started a series called Hate Tracker. Which used to list each and every incident of hate crime. That journalist, had returned from New York and taken up this assignment as the editor of this newspaper. Overnight, he suddenly disappeared, he just left, he just returned to New York after he was in India. – journalist 6

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. *Government Influence and Control:*

This section explores the influence the government has over the media and the impact on press freedom. Multiple respondents in this study talked about the extreme sensitivity to criticism from the government. Journalist 5 even noted that those who criticize the government often become targets.

The government shapes the press in India in a deep and extensive manner. This involves direct control through patronage and punishment, legal intimidation, surveillance, and fostered self-censorship among journalists. The Hathras case and the proposed fact-checking unit reveal the extent to which the government is prepared to maintain control of the narrative.

Indian journalists operate in an increasingly hostile environment, with the threat of imprisonment, surveillance, and professional repercussions. These threats have instilled a sense of fear among journalists, significantly curbing freedom of the press, with many journalists reverting to self-censorship or the direct suppression of work. Even though there are still some media houses and journalists who resist this pressure, the overall trend points to a shrinking space for independent journalism in India.

4.1.1. **Self-censorship**

In the discussions with respondents self-censorship emerged as a significant issue. Self-censorship is becoming a growing concern in India. It is driven by a combination of political, legal, and cultural pressures. According to a report by Reporters Without Borders, self-censoring happens mainly with journalists who are reporting on sensitive topics. The journalists will moderate their content or even avoid bringing it. Journalists in India are under extreme pressure from the government and influential businesses. They receive threats or denial of permits. Most of these permits are critical for journalists to live and work in specific areas, for example Jammu and Kashmir (*Reporters Censor Themselves in India to Avoid Losing Residence Permits, RSF Investigation Finds*, n.d., Doniger & Doniger, 2021).

The Reporters Without Borders report also addresses the impact of self-censorship on press freedom and the public's right to information. Self-censorship creates fear and an atmosphere where reporters can't investigate freely. The variety of different opinions will continue to decrease if there are no measures taken. The investigation advocates for protection against journalists and support to uphold press freedom in India (*Reporters Censor Themselves in India to Avoid Losing Residence Permits, RSF Investigation Finds*, n.d.).

Self-censorship is not always entirely voluntary, much of this self-censorship is sometimes due to direct or indirect pressure from the owners of media houses or their editors, who would like to

avoid confrontation with the government. According to journalist 2, in such an environment, where crossing the will of the government might mean losing one's job, landing in court, or worse, self-censorship normally turns out to be a matter of survival.

4.1.2. Threats

American Indologist Wendy Doniger discusses in a different research that these threats can range from legal action, like being sued, to actual physical threats and harm. These issues are also highlighted by respondents in the interviews. Doniger also uses her own experiences in her research. She notes that her book, "The Hindus: An Alternative History," was met with fierce opposition from certain Hindu nationalist groups in India. Eventually the book did not come out in India as she was threatened with legal action (*Doniger & Doniger, 2021*).

Respondents indicated that journalists often come in contact with violence or threats from the government. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) confirms this. The IFJ identified an increase in threats on journalists in India. Incidents that include various deadly threats against journalists, like Vinay Pande, physical attack on Bunty Mukherjee and an attack on Ankur Jaiswel. The IFJ and the Indian Journalists Union (IJU) have urged the authorities to protect press freedom and ensure the safety of media workers (*India: Journalists Attacked, Threatened / IFJ, 2024*).

The respondents all indirectly encountered threats related to their work. These threats manifest themselves in different ways and are not all necessarily directed from the government, but the government does install a hostile work environment and does not support journalists enough. According to the respondents, journalists who write critically about the government get threatened more often.

4.1.3. Gatekeeping information and data

Recent legal developments have given significant cause for concern regarding access to data and source protection within the work of journalists. The proposed Digital Personal Data Protection Bill of 2022 removes specific exemptions for journalistic work, unlike its predecessors. Subjecting journalists to these very data protection obligations might make them liable to disclose sources and justify the processing of personal data, which in their case will amount to proving that it is in public interest. The shift may instil a chill in investigative journalism and give individuals cold feet to come forward with information, and the media as a whole to provide their democratic role in discourse (*Aditi Agrawal & Aditi Agrawal, 2023*).

It also became clear from the interviews that many respondents experience problems with gathering data, the COVID pandemic being mentioned several times as an example. It is also

increasingly difficult for journalists to keep their own sources protected. This ultimately ensures that access is limited to information the government wants to disseminate.

4.1.4. Fact-check unit

The proposed fact-check unit was another concern for many of the respondents. Journalist 3 and many others felt that such a body would give the government unbridled power to quash content in the name of combating misinformation, thus threatening press freedom.

While the Supreme Court's temporary halt of this unit was seen as a victory for press freedom, as it averted what seemed to many like an imminent abuse of power, even the proposal for such a unit pointed to an underlying friction between the government's attempts to control the media and the media's watchdog function in a democratic society.

4.2. *Impact on Journalists:*

4.2.1. Trolling

Trolling is used by the government as a tactic to spread propaganda and discredit journalists or other individuals. The goal is to manipulate public opinion. This includes spreading provocative content, memes and rumours online. Political parties, especially the BJP use trolling against other parties or individuals who express opinions that don't align with the views of that party (*Shukla, 2023*).

The Indian government does not shy away from digital manipulation. A recent case involved Apple notifying several Indian journalists about potential state-sponsored spyware attacks on their devices. The government denied these allegations and dismissed the notification as fake news. Additionally, there were also reports of the government asking Apple to change the notifications (*Cushing, 2024*).

The respondents of this study indicated that trolling in India is often organized and politically led, with most of the respondents attributing it to the ruling BJP's IT cell. For example, Journalist 2 indicated that the government has involved IT cells in harassing people.

4.2.2. Neha Dixit

As earlier stated women journalists receive very severe harassment online. Death threats, threats of acid attacks, stalking and rape threats are common for women journalists in India. Neha Dixit is an example of a young female journalists with a critical opinion who endured severe trolling, mostly by right-wing groups. Her name was mentioned during the interviews (*#JournalistsToo: Evil Women Stick Their Necks Out | Neha Dixit (India)*, n.d.).

Dixit believes this harassment is a way to silence women and intimidate them. In 2016 Dixit wrote an article about the trafficking of young girls from Assam by the Sangh Parivar. She was not only charged with defamation and attempt to disrupt communal harmony, but severely trolled to the point it became physical. There were online threats discussing with what object Dixit deserved to be raped with, detailed death threats and many comments that don't relate to her investigative work. Later her address and personal number were also leaked. She was subjected to stalking and an attempted break-in at her house. Despite complaints to authorities there has been little to no support (*Unabated Attacks: Journalist Neha Dixit Faces Stalking, Threats and Attempted Break in – Free Speech Collective*, n.d., *Dailymotion*, n.d.).

4.2.3. Professional challenges

Journalists in India face many challenges concerning job security and protection. The lack of job security stems from several factors such as economic pressure. Traditional media houses are being funded by the revenue of advertisements. Most of these advertisers migrated to digital platforms. According to the digital news report of Reuters institute, many journalists have experienced job loss or a termination of contract due to media companies attempting to mitigate financial loss (*Newman et al., 2021*).

Besides working for media houses, many Indian journalists work as freelancer. Freelancers experience less protection and few to no benefits compared to full-time employees, who in India already face minimal security and benefits in journalism. Journalists who write about political and corporate interests often face threats to their employment. Media owners get direct calls from the government concerning their staff. This not only jeopardizes job security but also undermines journalistic integrity and freedom (*Ipi-Admin, 2021*).

In addition to a lack of job security, many journalists also face a lack of protection from harassment and intimidation in their job. As earlier mentioned there are many forms of harassment in the media landscape in India. Legal, online, and physical harassment. From 2011-2021, 51 journalists were killed in India. During the pandemic 56 journalists were arrested during their efforts to cover the pandemic, 14 journalists were victims of physical attacks by authorities (*Ipi-Admin, 2021*).

The findings from this study bring out the critical and urgent need for protection of journalists both offline and online, more proactive roles by media organizations in supporting their staff, making it more accountable to those responsible for engaging in or facilitating trolling. In the absence of such policies, the freedom of the press in India will remain under threat.

4.3. Media Environment and Dynamics:

Media centralization in India was brought up by many respondents as a factor harming press freedom. The media is in the hands of a few influential industrialists, close allies of the ruling party.

4.3.1. Centralisation of media

Media ownership is controlled by a small group of large business conglomerates, a situation that most of the respondents could acknowledge. Ownership concentration can lead to conflicts of interest. Reporters Without Borders states that the media ownership in India poses a significant threat to media independence (*Media Ownership Monitor: Who Owns the Media in India?*, 2024). This concentration creates an environment where journalists are afraid to express themselves and adapt stories. There will be fewer and fewer varied opinions. Some journalists even state that majority of the Indian media serve as a propaganda channel for the Prime Minister. Which has taken the credibility of Indian media down.

4.3.2. Licenses and passports

During the interview journalist 6 cites the situation of television channels and their licensing, for which the licenses are only renewed on condition of receiving security clearance from the Union Home Ministry. Critical journalists have a harder time receiving these licenses. This control mechanism, allied with a corporate media always toeing the line of the government, sets up an environment wherein only a narrow range of opinions is presented to the public. This makes the role of media as a watchdog of democracy almost null and void.

The centralization of media and government control over old and new forms of media are challenges to press freedom in India. These concerns are shared by the respondents to this research in regard to the shrinkage of space for independent journalism and the increase of government-aligned media. This leads to a fear of retaliatory acts that will drown free expression, be it through legal means, such as denial of licenses and visa issuance, or in terms of more direct harassment.

Journalist 11 highlights that the case of Kashmir stands out as an example of extremity in controlling the media. The revocation of passports and arrest of journalists from the region are some of the instances of how far the government will go in its attempts at Suppressing critical

reporting. This not only affects the journalists themselves but also deprives the public of vital insights into conditions in Kashmir and other regions sensitive to the government.

To access certain events or press conferences in India, a journalist needs accreditation by the Press Information Bureau (PIB). This accreditation can be revoked if a journalist was deemed to have violated certain norms. This limits their ability to cover news of government activities. Therefore it can be used to favour journalist who write positively about the government. To broadcast media a journalist or a company also needs a license. These broadcasting licenses are very strictly controlled by the government. There have been instances of denials and non-renewals for critical channels (Kaushik, 2022).

Not just Indian journalist, but international journalists have to follow strict rules. Foreign journalists need a specific visa to work in India. These visas are often denied or delayed for journalists who want to cover sensitive subjects. Foreign journalists were denied visas because of their reporting on sensitive issues such as human rights abuses and political unrest (*Foreign Correspondents Increasingly Refused Permits, Visas, Access in India, 2024*).

International journalists with a visa are not always granted access. Special permits are required to access certain regions. There have been reports from the committee to protect journalists, that proof access to these permits is often denied for journalists covering sensitive subjects (*Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024*).

The re-entry of (foreign) journalists into India is also controlled by the government. Journalists who have written negatively about the government, can be denied access to the country. This not only deters critical media in the country, but outside the country as well. The licenses and permits are tools of the Indian government to control the media. These measures have a negative impact on press freedom including domestic and international journalists (*Krishnankutty & Krishnankutty, 2024*).

4.3.3. Online space

Spiral of silence

The spiral of silence is a theory by German scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The theory rests on the idea that people's willingness to express their opinions on certain controversial topics is influenced by their perception of those opinions as being popular or unpopular. The perception that an opinion is unpopular tends to inhibit the expression of that opinion. A popular opinion gives the opposite effect (*Petersen, 2016*).

In the research 'Spiral of Silence' in India: A validation through public response to demonetisation in India by the researchers Sharma and Tewari discusses the spiral of silence further. The study compared online (Twitter) and offline (face-to-face group discussions) responses to the policy of demonetisation in India. The offline participants tended to avoid controversial opinions and were consistent with the spiral of silence, while online interactions had a more aggressive tone, where

users defended their opinions more assertively. The anonymity of social media was likely a big influence on this (*D. Sharma & Tewari, 2019*).

The results from this study provide additional significance when looking at the online media space in India. The online media is a place where more extreme opinions clash, while popular opinions prevail in other areas. For instance, being critical of the government is not popular and these opinions quickly end up in the spiral of silence, which subsequently leads to fewer and fewer people daring to express them.

During the interviews the respondents reveal a complex landscape for the online space in India, signified by government power, media control and fear amongst journalists. The restrictive nature of this space, as worded by the respondents, announces an important shift in the dynamic between state and media. This leads to significant consequences for freedom of speech and therefore, press freedom.

One of the more important subjects that came forward, comes from the statement that Prime Minister Modi does not need the traditional media as he relies entirely on social media. This points to a broader strategy whereby direct communication through digital platforms bypasses the control of traditional media. This tactic is not just a preference but a deliberate attempt to control the narrative by exploiting the reach and immediacy of social media. The comparison with Barack Obama's first campaign, is also very telling, which indicates that Modi's approach is based on a sophisticated understanding of the potential of social media to shape public opinion and mobilise support.

The term 'Godi Media', mentioned several times by respondents, sums up the government's perceived collusion with certain media outlets. This expression, now common in the political discourse in India, suggests a media landscape where critical voices are marginalised or silenced, while voices aligned with the views of the government are promoted. Media that has association with the government is seen as problematic and hostile, contributing to a climate where journalists feel restricted in their ability to report freely and critically. The atmosphere of fear described by respondents is indicative of a broader culture of self-censorship, where the potential repercussions of speaking out against the government deter journalists from exercising their right to free expression.

The insight of the respondents highlight the urgent need for a reappraisal of the relationship between the state and the media in India, with a focus on protecting the rights of journalists and ensuring that the online space remains a platform for free and open discussions.

4.4. Response and Resilience:

4.4.1. Free speech collective

Organisations like the Free Speech Collective give a voice to oppressed journalists and advocate for press freedom. Indian journalists fight for independence and credibility in the face of rising polarisation, censorship, and attacks.

An article from the Free Speech Collective looks at the South Asia Press Freedom Report 2023-2024 by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) that shows declining media freedom in India and South Asia. The report highlights the growing risks faced by journalists, including violence, legal harassment, and censorship, all of which undermine democratic. It says regional governments, particularly India, increase activities toward handling the media, eroding press freedom and driving a wider democratic decline. The IFJ demands urgent actions to protect journalists and uphold press freedom in these countries (*Sharma, 2024*).

4.4.2. The barometer of press freedom

Despite the pervasive challenges posed by government pressure, a majority of respondents remain hopeful about the future, underscoring the dynamic nature of the media landscape and the potential for positive change. Resilience is a recurring theme in the answers of the respondents. Most journalists acknowledge the decline of press freedom, but many believe this current state is not permanent. The metaphor of journalist 9 of the "barometer" of press freedom, which is falling but also has the potential to rise again, sums up the sentiment of many respondents.

This perspective suggest that these restrictions are viewed as a cyclical pattern, with the possibility of future recovery. Even though the respondents believe in eventual improvement, most do agree that there are significant changes necessary. The regime of Prime Minister Modi is often cited as an important factor in the current media challenges. In contrast to the generally optimistic outlook, there are two respondents who see a darker future for press freedom in India.

Nevertheless, even among those who are critical, the current struggle is being recognized and there is determination to keep reporting, despite the risks involved.

4.5. Societal and Cultural Factors:

The findings of this study underline the fact that social and cultural factors play a significant role in the practice of journalism and the state of press freedom in India. These interviews highlight how issues like religious differences, caste divisions, and their manipulation by the government have an influence on the media landscape.

4.5.1. Caste system

The caste system in India divides Hindus into four main categories (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras). Dalits are considered outside this caste system. Although the Indian Constitution prohibits caste-based discrimination, it remains prevalent (*BBC News, 2019*).

Journalist 11 acknowledged being a Brahmin and how her caste positions her better off to the extent that her upper-caste status affords her a level of protection that journalists from lower castes do not enjoy. There were more chances of arrest and harassment for the lower-caste person.

The government's ability to exploit these hierarchies further complicates matters, as the caste system becomes a tool for suppressing journalists.

4.5.2. Religious division

Another theme that was mentioned during the interviews was tension between Hindu and Muslim communities. This divide is being used by the BJP as a political strategy as journalist 5 points out.

This makes things difficult for journalists to work, especially on issues where they have to report objectively concerning these communities. The tendency by some media houses to report negatively on Muslims is often aided by government narratives, which puts them in a hostile environment where it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve balanced reporting (*Biswas, 2024*).

It appears that exploiting religious divides is not just a product of societal tensions, but a deliberate control strategy. Journalist 3 describes the current situation as a form of "Hindutva-driven authoritarianism," where independent media are being punished. This system ensures that those who align with the religious and political line taken by the government are elevated, while critical voices are marginalized. The strategy not only impacts freedom of the press, but it also fuels societal divisions that feed back in a loop where media representation entrenches further the existing prejudices.

4.5.3. Divided Perspectives

It is important to note that not all respondents agree on every issue. Journalist 4, who denies the existence of any major press freedom problems, reflects a point of view similar to that of the government. This respondent feels that the concerns about freedom of press are exaggerated or even influenced by western propaganda. This highlights the deep divisions within the journalistic community itself. Such attitudes contribute to the societal and cultural setting in which media functions. A statement that can again be extended to the spiral of silence. The opinion often shared in your environment is also more likely to be the opinion expressed by the individual in question.

The societal and cultural factors that influence press freedom in India are woven into the religion of the nation, caste-based, and political world. This makes it a complex, frequently hostile environment in which to practice journalism.

4.6. Limitations

In this section, I briefly discuss the limitations of this research. Because of snowball sampling, most respondents were like-minded people. Seven out of eleven respondents came out openly not supporting Prime Minister Modi. Additionally, because I don't speak Hindi, all interviews had to be conducted in English, so I automatically came into contact with English-speaking journalists. In total I interviewed 11 journalists, which makes the number of respondents of this study is limited compared to the number of journalists in India and thus generalisation of the results not possible.

In addition, it was also more difficult to make respondents feel comfortable without a physical interview. It is a controversial topic that can have many consequences for a journalist, so there is an anxious atmosphere. Many respondents were afraid to speak out fully or gave many disclaimers. This thesis conducted exploratory research on press freedom in India. For a follow-up study it would be an interesting suggestions to focus on interviewing more journalists on different sides of the political spectrum and on top of that, more respondents who work for Hindi media and speak only Hindi.

Furthermore, a study focusing on press freedom opinions among journalists of different social classes could also be interesting.

5. CONCLUSION

This master's thesis conducted a qualitative study through in-depth interviews on press freedom in India. The research question was: **How do journalists experience threats, violence, and intimidation in their work, and what are the consequences for press freedom?** 11 English-speaking Indian journalists were interviewed. The results were transcribed and dissected using the Grounded Theory.

Indian journalism is, from historical context, known for its fight to independence. However, recent decline in India's Press Freedom Index score, points to growing threats to such freedom. Political interference, legal constraints, and violence against journalists have formed an environment of fear and self-censorship.

While digital media offer new opportunities for journalism, it also presents challenges such as misinformation and online harassment. News platforms like The Wire and News Laundry continue to strive for press freedom and journalistic integrity, a counter-narrative of the mainstream media's often government-aligned reporting.

The results showed that the majority of respondents experienced a decline in press freedom. Journalists experience psychological pressure, online harassment, physical violence and legal intimidation for their reporting. These threats come from political entities, like the BJP, extremist groups and industrialists with the aim of controlling the narrative. This research concludes that experiences of violence and intimidation creates fear, self-censorship taking down critical journalism. Which results in journalists having to choose between safety and the duty to report, a dilemma undermining journalism's watchdog role. This impact does not stay with just the journalist as an individual, but also the entire media landscape as the media becomes increasingly homogeneous and critical voices are muted.

The thesis also asserts that the grave consequences for press freedom in India are undeniable. Tumbling global rankings and the increasing control over media narratives by powerful political and corporate interests are symptoms of the erosion of press freedom.

The threats, violence, and intimidation against journalists in India are not some scattered incidents, but rather a wide and deep system problem with quite dangerous dimensions concerning press freedom. Addressing these challenges requires effort from the government, media houses, and overall society.

This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the current state of press freedom in India, by exploring personal experiences of journalists experiencing the current situation. This thesis also calls for further research and interventions in protecting journalistic integrity in the world's largest democracy.

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7. APPENDICES

7.1. Code-tree

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Government monitoring	Government Monitoring and Surveillance	
Online surveillance		
Journalism under surveillance		
Digital attacks		
Structure		
Surveillance		
Government fact-checking		
Information control		
New regulations		
Legal persecution	Government Retaliation and Harassment	Government Influence and Control
Government retaliation		
Imprisonment of journalists		
Weaponized agencies		
Income tax raids		
Legal notices to intimidate journalists		
Arbitrary arrests and lack of reasons given		
Increase in journalist imprisonments		

Pressure to align with government stance	Government Pressure and Manipulation	Government Influence and Control
Avoiding government disfavour		
Self-censorship		
Editorial compromise		
Media compliance		
Journalist harassment		
Government-hired trolling		
Online harassment	Government-Related Threats:	
Social media manipulation		
IT cells		
Government branding		
Political propaganda		
Media control tactics	Government Interference and Bias	
Hindutva authoritarianism		
Extreme government-media relationship		
Government praise ensures safety		
Psychological impact of online threats	Physical and Psychological Threats	Impact on Journalists
Potential for physical danger		

Perceived cowardice of online attackers	
Online sexual violence	
Gender-targeted harassment	
Rape threats	
Death threats	
Fear of being jailed	
Fear of being killed	
Severe harassment	
Lack of special protections for journalists	Professional Challenges
Lack of job security	
Writing caution	
Limited access to officials	
Risk assessment	
Fear and caution in journalism	
Personal attacks	Personal Experiences
Family threats	
Young women journalists under threat	
Colleagues in ruling party states risk levels	
Public trauma	

Medical help		
Counselling		
Mental shackles		
Acknowledgement of fear in India		
Tough times		

Lack of media freedom	Media Independence and Integrity	Media Environment and Dynamics
Lack of support for journalists		
Loss of media independence		
Media centralization		
Media organization priorities		
Business interests over journalistic integrity		
Media bias	Bias and Credibility Issues	
Media polarization		
Lack of factual reporting by YouTubers		
Media coverage bias		
Media decline		
Erosion of media's credibility		
Disdain for social media ("filth pillar")	Political and Economic Pressures	
Election manipulation		
Revenue protection		
Advertising dependency		
Proprietor pressure		
Editorial interference		
Media house control		

Avoiding government disfavor			
Independent media resilience	Journalistic Resistance	Response and Resilience	
Positive digital media impact on press freedom			
Hope for the future of press freedom			
Resilience of journalists			
Persistence and resilience in journalism			
Documentation of abuses	External Support		
Use of social media platforms for sourcing			
Reliance on external sources outside government control			
Use of existing critical articles as proof of press freedom			
Impact of social media on journalism	Societal Impact		
Psychological change vs. actual change			
Persistent societal issues			
Perception of intolerance			
Fear of violence			
Religious discrimination			

Hindu-Muslim tension		
Public backlash	Public and Institutional Responses	Societal and Cultural Factors
Lack of protective institutions		
Institutional failure		
Ineffectiveness of the Information Act		
Government withholding sensitive information		
Challenges in reporting during the pandemic		

7.2. Interviews

Journalist 1 (male)

Margot:

So how are you?

Journalist 1:

I'm good. Uh, your correct name is Margot?

Margot:

Yes, yes.

Journalist 1:

If I'm right, you're doing journalism or?

Margot:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm a student in journalism in Belgium, and Chris is one of my professors.

Journalist 1:

And I was with Chris when she was in Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi.

Margot:

Yeah, she told me. So she's helping me find people to interview for my thesis.

Journalist 1:

Fantastic. What is your topic?

Margot:

It's press freedom in India.

Journalist 1:

Oh (laughs) it is.

Margot:

I'm just going to ask you questions. If you're not comfortable answering them, that's no problem.

Journalist 1:

No, I would like to answer them for as long as I can.

Margot:

OK. We'll I just see how it goes. My first question is, um, how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 1:

Uhm India is a free country uhm. And uhm so is press. As, uh, we have been taught. And uh. As in journalists, uh, for the last - I started my career in 1990.

I started full time at 24 so more than 30 years behind me. Uh. In my entire career I find that I'm as free as a free individual in this country. I'm not enjoying any special right as a journalist, even going by the law. Journalists are not enjoying any separate kind of freedom.

Margot:

Mhm

Journalist 1:

The freedom which is available to a common Indian person, the same law applies to a journalist so far as freedom of expression. And if it is infringing, if it is insulting to others, then it is level to legal prosecution, otherwise, thinking that I am a journalist and I should have more freedom than an individual Indian, that's not the case. It may be contrary in practice.

Actually, if you are a journalist, you may not be enjoying as much freedom as a normal Indian gets. But I say this in the sense that. I mean, I should be more responsible when I'm talking, when I'm writing, when I'm broadcasting something, because it has a certain effect. And I need to be more responsible as an individual. I don't need not to be as responsible as uh- I think the common citizen, so I have more restrictions- self-imposed restrictions on me and sometimes some borders of state of environment of your organization and that's obvious.

Margot:

So that that's like the key challenge for journalists in India you'd say?

Journalist 1:

Uhm. I mean, you answer this question in a certain perspective. Challenges are huge because there are certain changes which has taken place. So far as technology is concerned so far as governance is concerned so far as... It is mostly generated by political rivalry, competitive is concerned. So challenges are many fold uh, like how you would operate in a system or in an environment where, you are being watched carefully. You're-You're not. You're-You're -You're not. You're not being ignored.

Whatever you are writing, whatever you are saying. Is under scrutiny by society, by the political parties, and more so the government has more resources to monitor you.

That's why I feel that the first challenge is this: That you need to be very careful in your, in your - facts, in your opinion, in your, you know, overall behavior. Generally speaking, many technological changes have taken place. The things are coming through, you know, it's a bombardment of information. It's the right rates between print media, television media, between social media. So who's going ahead is also a challenge.

Also producing exclusive stories for your organization. Tensions of everyday, demand of your organization are also contributing to these challenges. If you want to hear that uh that journalism as such or freedom as such in India, or the press is in peril. I won't say this in as many words. It's very subjective, to I'm not, you know. You know, I'm, I'm not a journalist who will go to the rooftop and say that this Modi government is too repressive. That, uh, you don't have any liberty to write because, uh, in my organization, I was never- my hands were never tied. I may be lucky. (laughs).

Margot:

So do you think your personal experience shaped your view of the current press freedom?

Journalist 1:

(Thinking) Going by the period of time and the changes which have taken place. It is very subjective for journalists to enjoy freedom. You know, they were they were politicians who were accommodative. You know, they would not uh give too much of care to what you were saying every day. They were taking it lightly. If you have some personal thing to say or write in your newspaper, then they will understand. OK, it happens. But these days nobody is taking your writing in such a cordial or humorous way. They take it to their heart somehow. And you know, being, uh, you know, being, you know, micro monitored.

When you're being micro monitored then you feel a little uneasy. You may not see those hands. You may not see those eyes. But when you write something and the next day you're getting a call of your boss and they say that somebody called and said they read your article and you wrote something which is not in good taste to the government then, OK you feel more worried in what you did.

Margot:

Yeah. So do you think that the relationship between the government and the media is good? Does it have an influence on the press freedom or is that something entirely different?

Journalist 1:

The thing is that we, as a media, it's a kind of love and hate relationship between government media. Without media they cannot survive. So they may love media and they may hate media, but they cannot ignore media. So that's one case.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 1:

I mean, they want media to praise them all along. And as and when, uh, somebody is not praising them, then it becomes displeasing and then the nation is not as good as you feel. But as a media person, you need not care for that. You need to care about your own facts. You need to care about your own. You should not be uh agenda driven. Sadly this is not always the case. If I write something, I write. I have to write against the government. I have to write pro government.

This behavior of agenda driven journalism. It's not doing justice to journalism. You should be open enough for good things to breathe and to criticize. We have been doing this in my newspaper. Sometime it leaves the government (doesn't finish the sentence), but I don't care about relationship between my -being good to government- or doing my duties to the government.

Margot:

So you have never witnessed? Some of the repercussions of the government unto your work.

Journalist 1:

Ohh, luckily I personally did not. Luckily, because of one of my report which I feel that was very damaging to the government's reputation. Uh, I reported it last year. And I was feeling that, I may feel some repercussion of this report. Uh. what I felt was that my report made me, you know,

destroy or completely, you know, have a blow to the image of the government. The reports were correct and I did not feel any, you know, direct or indirect pressure, so I may be lucky enough. Uh, because I'll give you an example.

Last year, when everything was going smooth, with the government I reported from the LLC putting my army sources on various sources. The Chinese have built at least 200- 400 talents in in the territory claimed by India. So this report, uh, you know, came immediately before the winter session of the Parliament and entire Parliament session was watched because of this report. I did not receive any calls from anyone or any agency. But then again, it was correct, but even if it wasn't correct. It was not good for the ears of the government.

Margot:

Are there any? (Journalist 1 starts talking at the same time) - oh sorry

Journalist 1:

Don't feel any pressure. Everything I'm saying is personal experience.

Margot:

Yeah. Yeah. No, that's perfect. That's what I wanted.

Journalist 1:

Some six months ago. There was a report I stumbled upon from the inside sources that the army, since I covered defense, you know, so army and Air Force and Navy are being asked to put up selfie point of Narendra Modi. And various schemes that they have taken so I presented the support as a positive report for the government. That the Army and Navy and defense forces are helping government to propagate their schemes making selfie points. I was knowing this. That it would not be a positive report. Oppositional leaders tweeted that report. Saying that: OK, the resources of the government are being you know, you know respected in such a way. And being put online in such a way, in such work. Is not good enough for me, so I was feeling repercussions. Again I'm lucky not to get any call from any side.

Margot:

Are there any, um any existing laws or regulations on press freedom in India that impacted your work?

Journalist 1:

As I initially started, there are no separate laws in India, for journalists. Any law applicable to the expression- freedom of expression of a normal citizen. Are applicable the press also. There are no privileges available to press. That you may be speaking more out of turn or whatever. So we are not separate entities so far as common freedom of expression and our constitution is concerned.

Do I feel that we should, as a media person, since we are talking to a large number of people at a time? We have much more responsibility, but we should have much more freedom of expression and more safeguards and protections which are available to the common citizen. I should have more. I should be feeling more, uh, confident when I am talking to a large number of people with my report. Which is lacking, I think.

Margot:

Because I've been doing my own research and I saw that a lot of journalists in India got threats on social media or attacks. Do you think that's prevalent? That it affects reporting? Or it doesn't happen that much?

Journalist 1:

You're frankly speaking. Every journalist now is on a social platform, yeah. Feeling the pinch of troll army which we are facing on the social media. But that is the reality of the day. I call it, the fourth pillar, Media is the fourth pillar, we say in India. Like all social media, the filth pillar. So it's not fifth, but filth. Yeah everyone trained or untrained seems to be a journalist. Having you know, a weapon in their hand, which you know, they're not trained to take in their hands, really developed more complication of this line of this is story. With people having so much followers without any reason.

Margot:

Did you ever experience troll armies yourself?

Journalist 1:

I know many people who had issues with things like that. I haven't had any personal experience. I've seen them in tension. They talked about these things to me. So yeah, I don't. It is bad, you know not, not in not only in India. Journalists everywhere, social Media doesn't know any boundary. Everywhere they're facing this kind of uh troll armies. Who are guided from western interests we have to navigate in that bad water.

Margot:

Do you know any specific incidents from someone?

Journalist 1:

Uh. Last month one of my friend who tweeted that Nitish Kumar may switch over to BNP again and, that the government may fall. She was trolled and trolled badly. She was in tears. I said: OK, don't worry. If you report this well, well documented. Don't worry, this army will never come to your doorstep. They are social warriors only. Yeah, as long as the threat doesn't come to your doorstep. You should not care about it. Because you are in that space where people will certainly word you again sometimes. Virtual threats are very bad. You know sentiments and many things and hurting friends, but finally I know that this virtual warrior will never be brave enough to come to your doorstep. It may come and then it's really dangerous.

Margot:

Yes. Do you think some journalists might practice self-censorship because they're afraid for the contributions?

Journalist 1:

There are three things which are in you know, in, that level. One is self-discipline. Self-imposed discipline by journalists, that I would not report anything which may be incorrect, so I don't call it self-censorship. This is self-discipline, but when I feel that writing this, even if it is correct. It may have repercussions and I should not write it. That is self-censorship and 3rd level is when I feel

that what I'm reporting is correct and I'm daring to report it and my editor says no, it should not be reported as such ,because I don't think that government would like it. It is called the real censorship. When your organization is being controlled by uh by the imminent threat from the government. That level is not, uh, reasonable too much.

Know, there are reports. We have seen that some journalists were, you know, were jailed. These are, you know, the merits of the case isn't still, uh, being in the court or in some hearings. They're daily. And it's not so that media is sold out.

I can't say that you know, the freedom of press or threat of press in India and of course the level of my country's media freedom in in many reports or many surveys is going down. It is not as good as it should have been. And the reason is that uhm we have things are becoming more micromanaged. In some cases, I can say that: OK, you should not have been. Then uh, it becomes a case of, you know, media is not getting as much freedom as it should.

Margot:

So how do you navigate the line between responsible reporting and the pressure to self-censor?

Journalist 1:

(Inaudible)

Margot:

Sorry?

Journalist 1:

I won't say it is really competitive. I don't, uh, say this that-. It differs from organization to organization. And from various types of media. Television media is a very different media now in India. Print media is a very different media. The stories you are getting to see for an entire day on the television are not even being mentioned in the next day's newspaper. Not finding any mention. It means the story is overhyped. To give a narration or to create a false narrative. And we're not having any base so far as you know, regular or accountable reporting is concerned.

The issues have been in such a way, in a calibrated manner, we don't have any proofs. That the narrative, which is running entirely on television channels, is far from the reality.

Sometimes it's too much blown up and need not so much attention as it is getting. Hmm, You have more real issues, more encompassing and you know, in comprehensive conflicts that's the case.

Margot:

And do you think with the rise of digital media and- and social media, that it has impacted the press freedom in India?

Journalist 1:

Vice versa. You know when you see something on television, your boss is witnessing the television set in his chamber. You see it as a relative good today, yeah. And pressure to report it. But when finally we come to know the facts, Than we see it's blown out of proportion on what is going on at the end of the day.

You can count on fingers which channel is pro this, what channel is pro this,.. Then go to the source. YouTubers who are exposing Modi are not getting any facts. They don't care about facts. These YouTubers are having accounts to narrate. Both are not caring for what they are saying. I know many YouTubers who say: Sir we need to do this because we will generate traffic on our YouTube channel. Or saying something like this. Why you want to do this? Because people will listen. Maybe that's correct, maybe incorrect? Some people would love to listen to the senator Narendra Modi. So on both ways they are impacting and affecting each other. Somehow the print is insulated out of it.

Margot:

So the different media organizations. So not YouTube, like the different channels on TV and everything, do they have a role in the safeguarding of press freedom. Because you said earlier that you were lucky that you never felt that, you never felt any pressure. But maybe there are organizations bigger ones, that...

Journalist 1:

I won't name, but I can you know it's not, you know, since it is not going on air. There are certain wire services like the Wire, the click reporters, the news library. Some of the organizations I know that, they are hell bent to report in a way. There are certain YouTubers I can name Ramesh, who are never going to praise this government. Like Republic TV. They would never be decent, but only positive side of the government. So what to say about it? Many states are there.

Finally, at the end of the day you have to run your business. And uh, if you're getting revenue from some quarter, then you are bound to sing songs about that? It's happening.

Margot:

And do you think there's a way that media organizations can support journalists better?

Journalist 1:

Hmmm. Sometimes, yes, but they are more interested in their own interest, business interests. If it is going to hurt their interest, so I mean they won't care about it. They won't support as much as they should. Not the expected support a journalist should get from the employer. What is happening? Is that the government of today are the people who want to, you know, have media on their side? Are not talking to the common reporter who they're going the ground. They are indirectly touch with the owners of those media outlets. You know it well that what I'm what I will be doing may not be good so. I would be clever enough not to do that.

Margot:

But have you ever yourself felt, um, a conflict between the editorial independence and the policies of the media organizations you work for?

Journalist 1:

Mine is very different, you know it has not come down to any common thread, even when we faced CBI raids on our premises when we reported the death toll during COVID. And then you turn higher side. It was not being reported. Our newspaper just reported them. We face the burn

of that. The other promises more needed by the CBI. After all, we still did that that. And everything I worked is for this, that we are not, you know, providing pro government or pro opposition. People may not like it. They aren't working too please you or displease you.

Margot:

So now I have some questions about the more international perspective of press freedom. I presume you have had a few international interactions yourself?

Journalist 1:

My daughter is still based out in Spain.

Margot:

Ohh. Really?

Journalist 1:

And she's doing her masters in you know, right wing politics in India, social media. So they're also in touch with international advancement.

Margot:

How do they or rather, how do your colleagues from other countries perceive the state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 1:

I think the image of my press freedom in India is going *little down* so far as my international colleagues are concerned. There is unease in their eyes. They feel that we are being subjugated to certain situation we should not have been. The situation I feel is not so bad. I encourage them to not be so pessimistic about my country. So because we have seen many up and downs. I mean, I'm the one who was born at that time when things were very different well, I witnessed emergency drills during Indira Gandhi. So the complete press freedom was, you know at loss at that time.

The team was thrown out of power. She apologized for imposing the emergency on our country. Things come from a certain person, come to power, and they feel that they are out of, you know, grown out of, out of their popularity. And there's no need to question them. But this may be temporary. I'm very confident in that, the political democratic formation changes, yeah.

Margot:

Are there any lessons or practices from other countries that could be applied to the press freedom in India?

Journalist 1:

I think. If you see that, what should be the role model or role country for my country? I think media in UK is enjoying much more freedom as I. The US is, as irresponsible as, they may be in any other country. I feel that we should be enjoying more. Uh, more freedom like my European counterparts.

Margot:

Yeah. And do you have any personal experience in press freedom in another country? Did you ever have to report in another country or fall under different laws?

Journalist 1:

Yeah, but I've never faced such thing. But. I came across uh, reports that, that this journalist was in Afghanistan and was persecuted. So these are the cases which I feel that of course they are getting more threat than me, hmm? Like somebody went to Afghanistan, and of course many people are not going to go there. But there are journalists who go to such war situations and you know. Something gave them this courage to do this. It comes with upbringing of a journalist. I want to go there. I want to report it..

Many of my good friends in media in India went to cover Ukraine war, Hamas, Israel war. But they were, you know, it's comfort. They went to such zones which were very safe they were in their own compounds and reporting wherever they were. Not facing the real threats?

Margot:

And what steps can be taken to improve and safeguards of press freedom in India now, in your opinion?

Journalist 1:

(Laughs) That's a big question. Maybe the media organizations source of money, should not be depending on the other sources. Because it creates an atmosphere within the organization that if your main business is not the same as the media business is, then it is, uh you know, a supporting role you are playing to a bigger business interest. Which is happening. Many new channels have come up, who are being owned by people who are, who are having much larger business interests than media, and they have opened this outlet to safeguard them from the government, to have government access, to have government likings.

I think this division between the two, it's more important if we want to, you know, safe guard media in near future or long longer future. More they are depending on resources which are coming from other sources from media. More and more we're becoming slave to it, and that is the real challenge. Many media organizations are being acquired by Adani. And then centralization of these media into 1-2-3 hands is not good enough because then there would be only 3-4 persons who have power. That's a challenge and I would, I would love to see to it. That they have more depending on their own resources, yeah.

Margot:

And that brings me to my final question. How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India? What changes would you like to see or do you think are happening?

Journalist 1:

If it is right in the near future, I can't say. We have to see the transition which is taking place. In what way you know, you know 2024 would be a watershed dealer when the government of the day is passing desktop democracy. This year after 2-3 months, we'll have a big backlog of elections and the government that may come to power, may not come to power and that would depend. In what way the behavior of the political class changes or, you know, goes first. But too much power with one, is not good for any society. If you know you have a brute power with you.

Then you root ways to deal with such organizations or institutions which may challenge your authority for a good democracy.

It is always good that power is not centralized. If it is centralized, then you know it gives an impression to the rulers of the team that they are given the city. We should not have to check, we should not have be questioned by anyone. That would not be good. So this year would decide this.

Margot:

OK. It's a big answer for a big question.

Journalist 1:

(laughs) I really look forward to what is going to happen in this country

Margot:

Yeah. With the elections coming up.

Journalist 1:

(Nods in agreement) After each change of regime, it brings a new perspective. Things never change. It only changed psychologically. If after one month the government is you know, was voted out. It was an atmosphere that the country is neck deep in corruption. But we changed the perspective, OK? Today, if this regiment goes, then we'll feel: Ohh the intolerance is over.

Psychological intolerance, may be related to this regime, if it is defeated. Than you will suddenly feel: OK. It has vanished, but things in society will never change. It takes time to change.

Margot:

Thank you so much. I've asked all my questions.

Journalist 1:

You think I was honest and open enough in my answers?

Margot:

Yeah yeah you were quick! Also I'm going to use this for my paper that will only stay in Belgium and will not be published. If you'd like to stay anonymous that's okay.

Journalist 1:

No I stand by what I said. I don't care. It's my formal opinion. I don't care. I'm ready to face any consequences in whatever I say. Because when I'm saying it, I'm saying it.

Margot:

That's beautiful. I think that's a good. Good opinion to have. Do you happen to know any other journalists who would be able to speak with me? Do you have contacts who would participate?

Journalist 1:

I can introduce to you one of my friends, one or two of my friends who can talk to you.

Margot:

That would be amazing! Thank you so much.

Journalist 1:

I will. I'll give reference and they will be talking to you. One or two journalists.

Margot:

If there's anything you would like to ask.

Journalist 1:

It was nice talking to you

Margot:

Nice to meet you to!

Journalist 1:

If you're ever in India, my number is with you. Bye?

Margot:

I definitely will call you! Bye

Journalist 2 (female)

Margot:

Can you hear me right?

Journalist 2:

Yeah, I mean, It's all right. But tell me a little bit about yourself, I mean, why are you doing your master's about journalism in India?

Margot:

So, I study journalism at KU Leuven in Belgium and the subject of my thesis is press freedom in India.

Journalist 2:

So why did you pick that?

Margot:

Because I thought it was really interesting.

Journalist 2:

Have you been in contact with CENSORED Like, has he taught you something?

Margot:

No, we get like a long list of subjects to pick from. And I saw the subject press freedom in India, and I was really intrigued because I didn't really know anything about it. It's interesting for me as well because you're the second journalist I'm talking with now and I've learned so much already. It's interesting talking to real people who have real experiences.

Journalist 2:

So I don't come from that category in the sense that I'm haven't been a regular news journalist in a long time. I haven't been in a newsroom since the beginning of my career, for the first 15 years. But I've been looking at the media. So that's different, you know? I'm a journalist that looks at media and very few people look at media here. (laughs) So yeah.

Margot:

Yeah, but that's great as well. I want to speak to as many different people as possible, so my first question is: How would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 2:

It's uh, very restrictive. But you know, it's a very broad question. From our point of view, it's from the professional's point of view, there's only been one point of comparison, you know, in the 1970s. So, if you have read about press freedom in India, you must read about the emergency. Have you read about that?

Margot:

Yes.

Journalist 2:

That he had, you know, imposed emergency at one point for about 2,5 years, which was complete censorship and all of that. But after that, for the last, 15 years we've not had such a restricted climate. I don't know if you know the historical reason why, for instance, this Prime Minister comes into his, uh, you know, office with so much animosity towards the media. It's bad because it's very restrictive and it's very, in a sense, punishment prone, if you do anything because he (PM Modi) has his agencies that are weaponized. Basically, this Prime Minister doesn't need the media. This is the holy person of social media and he's been very hot on social media for a long time. He looked at Barack Obama's first campaign and learned that you could use social media, and it had just come to India. He has animosity towards media, because he thought they were attacking him. In 2019, the last election was over and he was reelected with a big mandate. I sat and did a sort of really long piece for a journal here on how all the things developed. The different ways in which they started clamping down and just not even clamping down, he'd just say, listen, I don't need any of you, I don't need the mainstream press, that is all. And then they start giving in and all of that. But basically it's as bad as it's has ever been.

Margot:

What do you think the key challenges are for journalists when it comes to press freedom?

Journalist 2:

OK, I should again go back a little bit. What you need to understand is that there's no freedom after media order, and all of them are, you know, very dependent on advertising in a free market and government advertising. In India, the government advertises a lot. In newspapers in particular. It's a huge source of income. It's a substantial source of income. So, our problem, the problem of journalists, is you will not get the backing of your practice, you don't need it if it's a truly independent newsroom, but increasingly it is not. Editors and the marketing guy has a lot of say in what goes into the paper. So, it's a different kind of thing that's been moving in that atmosphere.

Actually, you know, there's this site called News Laundry, which, you know, apparently, I don't subscribe to it, they are releasing a lot of stories about these revelations about electoral bonds and the money people paid the government and so on for elections, not the government but the parties. I haven't looked at that data yet, but you know, when you see that, then you'll get an idea. For me, the point of vulnerability is a journalist has no protection from their own publication, because the point of vulnerability is the vulnerable owner. And they started this thing off, when you're building up to an election year, to an election season, I mean, he has a press adviser

sitting in his secretariat, in the PM's office, Mr. Modi. And they watch everything very carefully and they ring up media houses. This started before the 2019 elections that you just ring up and you don't ring the reporter, you ring the proprietor. So, when you're getting calls from the PM's office because he doesn't like what your publication is doing, that's the kind of situation we're in now. And the journalist is vulnerable because if you're an independent or if you're a freelancer, and if you have something like The Wire, they've done something. You have to look at the whole history of how many times people get arrested, you don't get bail. All that goes on for no reason, without enough serious offence. So, all this has never been there before. It's what we call weaponization. They'll say that the homeowner has done money laundering, so there's an Enforcement Directorate, there's a Bureau of Investigation and they all get unleashed. And you don't need it most of the time because all of the media is very happily doing what they want them to do.

Margot:

Then how would you characterize the relationship between the government and the media in India?

Journalist 2:

All of this in you're still asking. So you want to me to give you one sentence answer? I said the owners of media are vulnerable. Because the government deals with them. It doesn't want to bother to deal with the reporters or anything like that. And the relationship with the media and the government is one of not being able to do your journalism freely in this country, at this point in time. You can do it if they approve of it, not if they don't approve of what you're doing.

Margot:

And have you ever had any personal, specific experience with this?

Journalist 2:

They don't bother with media critics and all of that. So no, that's what I'm saying. But I have had the person who I was writing for. I've written different columns for different people at different times and I used to edit this. I launched this media watch called The Hoot and those kind of things that, you know, they don't bother. They bother with the mainstream press. And the people I write columns for tend to be careful, so you can't write for most people. And actually, let me tell you, that's why I said I'm not sure I'm the right person to talk to you about this. Because I look at the media. It's the media itself that doesn't want to be looked at, right? They don't see why anyone should critique them, especially another person from another media. So, my problem is that you get the cold shoulder by... not just the cold shoulder. I mean you know you. You don't get the cooperation because they don't believe they need to be put under scrutiny. Other countries have their own media, and they have media correspondence, and they look at the industry. In India, they don't look at the industry. If I'm writing a column, I am going to view it as a columnist and outsider. So, if I'm writing a column in a certain newspaper and I'm talking about another newspaper about whom a very big story has just broken, they have a lot of trouble hearing that. They don't write about each other. That's the one sentence. They don't write about each other. They don't report on each other. And the digital media came along around 2011. In a big way,

they've all taken to writing about the media themselves, because, you know, they're not part of that mainstream media. So, they write. So that kind of freedom for a media person is missing. I started in 2001 when I was practically the first digital property. I mean, there weren't that many in those days, digital sites. Yeah, so there was a website which I used to edit. There's an app that you can look at, because I created an archive when I shut down the site. So, my situation is not of a reporter, because all my reporting and all that I did was before the 1990s. Now I've been in the profession I realized from the last 50 years, because when you know, in 1974 I joined my first newspaper, so my perspective in my professional life, the earlier period of the emergency loomed much larger because that was when I was, you know, in the profession. And now the people that I would run up against is not the government, which does not care what one media is saying about the other, but media itself. I haven't had personal problems or any problems with this government. They don't care and they don't look at the smaller media.

Margot:

I also read online a lot about cases where journalists had to deal with troll armies. Is that something you had to deal with?

Journalist 2:

Yeah, no. I mean, this is also what I don't understand. But for whatever reason, you see, when I was running this thing called The Hoot. I'm really not somebody who only covers one side of the ideological spectrum. So, I had people who are either centrist or who are pro BJP, anybody, everybody could write for it. So, I have both kinds writing. And for whatever reason, maybe because it's completely insignificant, but I just have never been trolled. It's so funny because it's not. I don't even write on the subjects that trolls get excited about. You know serious stuff. They couldn't be bothered. So that's what I'm saying. I'm not the right person to interview.

Margot:

No. But it's interesting to hear your side of it as well.

Journalist 2:

I just want to see if you've ever heard of the Hoot. Even if you have, if you didn't know there is an archive. At some point, you should look at it for specific things because you will get lots of small and big news items. And it's only about media and the press. So if you look at the different sections you will get some data there.

Margot:

I'll definitely do that.

Journalist 2:

It's called the Hoot.

Margot:

The Hoot, yes, I saw it on your Wikipedia page.

Journalist 2:

I don't know who put that there. They don't ask you. Somebody did it. But anyway though, so I'm just saying it's an archive that is useful for anyone doing any research. And News Laundry itself

would have a lot because they're also now a media watch site. They came after me, about 10 years after.

Margot:

I had some questions about self-censorship. Is that something you ever had to deal with or is that also different with you?

Journalist 2:

Yeah, you begin to think differently, and I've had to. In my case, I had to self-censor long before Mr. Modi came. I had to self-censor because the people publishing me would not want me to name other publications and all of that. I mean, they were dropping. I mean, I left work. There is a very big media house called The Hindu, which I wrote for a very long time, 20 plus years, 22 years. But when they took to dropping, because they were afraid of the government, or they were afraid of fellow media, and they took the tools in dropping the column and I quit. Because beyond what point? how much will you self-censor? Self-Censorship comes in now because if you can write for nobody and then somebody is willing to take you and they don't want to carry names then you have to see how you can write without mentioning the publication. Sometimes I'll still put it in there and see if they cut it out. And if they cut it out, tell them "OK, you could tell me, before you cut it out, before you publish it, and I'll tell you substitute sentence to use." So for me it's that kind of self-censorship where you cannot write about an industry and name them, it has nothing to do with the state of affairs in the country. Are you based in Belgium now? Are you in India at all or what?

Margot:

No, I'm in Belgium.

Journalist 2:

You're doing it all from Belgium. So, we have these major farmers' protests that took place once earlier and are taking place now. And if there is shooting you know, a pellet hits a journalist and all of that, you know. I remember being, I mean, I don't have specifics, I can't remember how it happened, but basically they would hesitate because they would say: "Ohh, but it's not been proven that he was hurt by the government's bullets", you know? So I'm just saying that it's very small in my case and it's small in relation to what I write as a media critic.

Margot:

Do you think that media organizations should play a bigger part in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 2:

They should and they don't. They let down the profession very badly. I'll tell you what the problem is with the city newspapers and so on. It's such a huge country. That's why I'm saying, you never come to India at all, is it?

Margot:

No, no, I haven't.

Journalist 2:

Yeah, I mean, it's a very big country, with big states and lots of rural hinterland and the newspapers which are based in the cities. But there also is the Hindi press. I wrote a book on it. It was on the Hindi press a long ago. They will not use journalists. They want news from every village because it's that kind of newspaper. People have pages for different districts and different areas, and they will hire, do you know what a stringer is?

Margot:

No, I don't.

Journalist 2:

What is a term that you use? I don't know. I mean, a Stringer is something the British would understand. A Stringer is someone you pay to send you a copy but you don't employ him. It's like a freelance journalist who writes for you. And yeah, he's paid by piece. OK, I don't know if you have that in your country, but it's such a small country compared to India. So here, you do that if you want every village covered. I mean, we have millions. So you do that and those people are very vulnerable, because they get a press card to show where they go and meet a district government officers and they say: 'Can you please tell me how this happened', 'What happened there?' And they say: 'OK, I represent Swanson newspaper' Because if anything happens to the guy, If he gets shot at, I mean there's no media organization behind him to protect him or to pay his bills or to do any of that. So, there's a vulnerability in that arrangement also. Basically, the media owners are not going to. They are not going to either lose revenue or get into the government's bad books because of their job. So, they will let all of them self-censor. There's a lot of self-censorship.

Margot:

Based on your international interactions, how do your colleagues from other countries perceive the state of press freedom in India? Do you think they that have a wrong image of it?

Journalist 2:

I don't have to have international interactions. Whenever I'm being flooded with whatever, you know, all these kinds of things, forget me and what I think. They're all like constantly writing about it. Washington Post has been doing a lot of reporting. Now if you want to know who's telling you the state of press freedom in India, you can look at the foreign press. They have Indian stringers and what they write gets gathered. And if they get into trouble, then those people will look after them. They're not as vulnerable as an Indian journalist. So, there will be their own foreigner correspondent here and he will have Indian, well, I call them stringers. I don't know what they call them. Or he'll have an Indian deputy reporter type of things who can go to the field work and file the stories. And the problem here is that they don't get carried if we write for English publications, they may not get carried or they may sensor, they may cut out. But in those publications and Indians writing for a foreign paper, we get carried. You have to see the kind of reports that these kind of people do and they will protect their journalist and the stringers, and move them out if they have to, if they're vulnerable, in fact you need to read into that. So, I will sent you a link to that long piece I wrote, because I write a monthly column on the media, on the state of the media, not

a critique column about what's coming on TV or what has been reported. Everybody else does that. But I write a broader page and I write a broader column on the laws that have come in the last month. Every month they come up with all kinds of rules. You can't do that, we're censoring this, censoring that. And if you look at that, I mean, the paper is called The Telegraph India. The name of the paper is The Telegraph India. If you do research on that, every major thing that's happened, you get a sense of how it is changing. A lot of it has to do with the rules in India. We have lawyers and then we have rules which often go beyond the law, because then they become all kinds of things that are spelled out in the room, so the media related laws. So, if you look at that, I mean if you look at what someone has written, you'll get a sense of all these things. If you just want a general thing about what everybody thinks of press freedom in India, then you just read up press freedom in India in CPJ, Committee to Protect Journalists and RSF, you read it up in Washington Post, New York Times, and you'll get your sense of what they're reporting. And there's this woman called Ranaub. Who basically only writes abroad now. And she gets harassed a lot by the government, because she had done a lot of investigative work at the time into Modi and his form of operating. So, she writes a lot about press freedom in India abroad. But it's all from her personal perspective. She actually doesn't practice anything here. You have to do secondary research now. The things are all there, everything, a lot, about every month it's something different. And every month they give you something to write about because they are always doing something.

Margot:

Could you maybe repeat the name of the woman?

Journalist 2:

Ranaub, She's on videos. She gets awards. Because she allows herself to freely criticize them, which is fine. But basically she's done some very courageous work in that early period of 2000. You know, when they did a lot of massacre and then a lot of other things. She done the work and then she got into the government's bad books then, and so now she doesn't write here, and I don't know how much she even lives here or comes and goes. She is the kind of person they pick up to write about a lot and to talk at events. But for me, the most vulnerable Indian journalists are not journalists. It's stringers. I will give you some keywords and references in an e-mail and you can look them up because there's this 1 chap whose case went on for 2,5 years and he's a slim guy. He just went to report on a rape.., an assaulted woman. And they picked him up and kept him in jail for two years. Some of us are pursuing his case with lawyers and all that, he finally got out. And so, he's a classical example of press freedom mistreatment. I mean, the attack on press freedom in India. So that's what it is.

Margot:

Do you think it's harder for women to be a journalist in India?

Journalist 2:

No, not at all. Women have a pretty good time. In the sense that they will do a lot of journalism. Nobody stops them. I mean, there's this whole gender hang up, but there is no gender issue in

journalism really. But yes, once you get out of the main cities and the English press and all of that, in the regional press and in the district press. India has districts within the state. You're not going to find much women and when they go to the field in that sense, if you go out and you travel and you have a Muslim name, let's say, or even if you don't. You can get harassed, its physical vulnerability. But for their journalism, they are as good as any. And they get a lot of challenging assignments, and they have no problems.

Margot:

Because I've read a lot of cases about women who were victim of revenge porn and they seem to be way more attacked by those trolling armies than male journalists.

Journalist 2:

No, no. So there are two or three women in the digital media for instance, who are trolled a lot. They're also strident and critics of the government. But the women who get trolled? There are women who get trolled, but they all belong, if you ask me, to the English press or Mumbai center. And it can be very bad, because...I mean they just get assaulted. It has never happened to me. It's been documented also but then you have to get that book. There's one woman who's written a book about it. So otherwise, not just for journalists, women are, not just editors, but everywhere else in the field, I mean, all other levels of newspapers and TV and so on, they're quite prominent. There's trolling because they hired to troll, the government. Really. They have these IT cells, an information technology cell, which basically hires a lot of people to harass people, because ever since WhatsApp came in 2014, Government correlated in 2014, and they discovered its potential. And they've been using it ever since.

Margot:

Do you think that the digital age might also have opportunities related to press freedom?

Journalist 2:

Of course it does. I mean, look, you actually look at the whole history of how it's developed here. You've had all these digital sites coming up, which I do, which have a lot more meaning: They can write more freely than the mainstream media. They don't have an industry, you know, they don't have businessmen, owners and all of that. Then it's so cheap it's like when I started my site, you don't need any money to do anything to start publication so it's definitely a good opportunity. Nobody is going to come after you. Unless you've been majorly a thorn in their side, which if you just try to do professional work now, they don't really get after you. They won't talk to you either. Because they don't talk to anyone except their own...

Margot:

Sorry, I think I lost Wi-Fi for a second. What was the last thing you said?

Journalist 2:

Ohh, I said. I forgot. Listen, I forget at my age, so uhm. I completely forgot.

Margot:

'They don't come after you.' That's the last thing you said. I think

Journalist 2:

That, they don't come to you unless you...see when you're small. When you're big or when you're widely circulated, there are little signs like instance the wire and there's something called Newslick. There are very strident critics of the government and journalists in those sites would get trolled, quite badly, including the women. yeah, so I forget what point I was making at that time, but basically this is it.

Margot:

That's OK. What do you think that are steps that can be taken to improve press freedom in India?

Journalist 2:

You know, we don't have proper institutions, OK, we don't have, like the US, the Committee to Protect Journalists and this strange thing called the Reporter Science Frontiers, you don't even have one body that documents, in a very thoroughly way, everything that's happening. OK I came in with a little site but you need an organization which tracks press freedom. Here we don't have that. We have organizations like The Editors Guild in India and nothing else, I mean. Every press club in Mumbai and Delhi organizes meeting and all of that. But uh, that's not, it's not very systematic. We don't have media owners who are even talking about how their reporters think or even how the government itself allows us to function. That doesn't happen.

Margot:

The last question I'd like to ask you. What do you think the future of press freedom in India is?

Journalist 2:

It depends on who's in power and I don't think media companies are going to suddenly become brave. But if the government changes? I can't say it's forever, but this is a regressive, government.

Margot:

I just had one more quick question. I talked to a journalist he and he told me about selfie points of Prime Minister Modi. What do you think about that?

Journalist 2:

Mr. Modi does a lot of things nobody else did before. First we're dealing with Gandhi who was a very large figure but even she was not somebody who was the only face of her government. And if she was, that was for a very brief period. But over here everyone in that party seemed to accept that you will only win an election in the prime minister's name. The selfie points is all the government schemes, schemes the taxpayer pays for are all in his name. It is not the PM's money. It's an Indian government, call it whatever you want. Of course when Rahul Gandhi had every scheme named after the family people, Rajiv Gandhi, but in this case everything has the PM's name on it. The selfie-points are because they believe that he's so widely popular that they will wait and be gratified that they can shoot a picture with him. And it's something a lot of citizens would do. It's a totally idiotic, weird thing, but it's with government money. So it's completely wrong, that the government would fund this nonsense. So there's just a lot of stuff happening

which has never happened before, you know things change, governments change and hopefully it'll be done some time, I don't know what he will change when he comes back.

Margot:

This was interesting, very interesting talking to you. I'm very happy that you could make time.

Journalist 2:

No problem, you can email me any question whenever you want.

Margot:

Thank you. I will transcribe the interview, if I have questions, I will definitely email you. Thank you so much.

Journalist 2:

I wish you the best, bye!

Margot:

Have a nice day, bye!

Journalist 3 (female)

Margot:

Yeah. Is it OK for you if I record the conversation?

Journalist 3:

Please go ahead.

Margot:

I'll just fire away with my questions. Is that OK?

Journalist 3:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Margot:

How would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 3:

You know that the Indian Constitution provides for freedom, a constitutional guarantee for speech and expression. The Indian Constitution has a guarantee in nineteen 1A in which guarantees freedom of speech and expression. So, this is something that is embedded in our constitution. However, over a period of time, you're not very sacred, I would say, very important, it has been. There are various ways, because you know that government wants to control the narrative. But what we are seeing are Modi dispensations from 2014. Basically, since 2014, when the present Prime Minister came to power, there has been a systematic suppression of this constitutional guarantee. He has done it in two ways. One, of course, is through controlling the media, the mainstream media. And he did this through a combination of patronage and punishment. Patronage in the sense that he would go out of his way to give access to certain, organizations that he feels that have covered him properly, who's faithful sort of record his views and replicated it in the media. So, he favours them, and he favours owners of the media. So, when owners are

taken over, as it were by the government, then it's very difficult for even independent editors to be able to sort of exercise autonomy. So that is the situation in India today. Over a period of time, a whole lot of laws have been brought in to control the media and under the Modi dispensation especially, there has been a focus on digital media. Because since he knows that print and television has been taken over because their owners are now very close to him in various ways. He's now focused on the independent digital news portals. And he wants to silence them. So, he's looking. His government has introduced many laws and rules and regulations to control our digital media. Over the last two years especially so.

Margot:

What are the key challenges for journalists in India when it comes to press freedom?

Journalist 3:

I think the key challenges arise from what I've just told you in terms of finding an independent voice. It's very difficult because the newsroom is now being controlled in so many different ways. It could be the proprietor of the organization that is telling people lower down how to cover news, what he wants covered, and so on. Or it could be editors themselves who have been suborned and brought into the general system of control. So, for a young independent journalist to want to break stories it is very difficult if those stories go against the dominant narrative. So, it is difficult. I mean there are other spaces. I mean you can write on other subjects, but if it has to do with politics, then it is a very difficult situation they are in.

Margot:

And can you share a specific moment in your career that reflects that?

Journalist 3:

You see, my career now, I am an older journalist, so I have in a sense not experienced the full blast of the Modi era in my work. But yes, in terms of the way one is constantly told not to, I do write, I do put out commentary, and you get an immediate blowback from what we call "the Modi", a digital army because he has lots of influences who make use of social media to actually attack those espousing views which are different from his. Now, I'm personalizing it because in a sense, Modi, because he's an authoritarian figure that represents the government, almost symbolizes it. So that is the thing. This entire structure of surveillance and attack, through online media especially has been set up. I don't know if you know about the Chinese instance of the 50 cent army. You know, people who have been given money by the Chinese establishment to report on their peers, or their neighbourhood. Or those who are seen and are actually shaped as the enemies of the country. So that kind of thing happens. I've faced it myself in terms of the ways in which people have responded to me, trolled me and so on. But I have not really been a young journalist in the full sense, under an authoritarian government. So there, of course it's a different kettle of fish, but very often they're not even allowed to voice their opinion because even social media posts that they may put out would be against the rules and regulations of their organization. So, the control is from top right down to the bottom, and it's very difficult for individual journalists to fight that.

Margot:

Do you think it's harder for younger journalists?

Journalist 3:

Of course, because they don't have an agency, they don't have the experience, they don't even know what it's like to function in a free environment. When I was a younger person, as a young journalist, I have gone through difficult moments. There was, for instance, the emergency in the 70s, in the mid-70s. When Mrs. Gandhi imposed the emergency on India and for 22 months India was under the control of the sensor and the police state. But it's been a long time since then. I was young. I had just joined journalism at that stage, so I knew exactly what being afraid is, being fearful is. You can't be a great journalist or a good journalist without being free of fear. Because fear is the is a shackle to the mind, and by extension, the body. Because you don't do things that your mind tells you to do.

Margot:

Has the influence of the government ever affected your reporting? Did you ever report differently because of press freedom?

Journalist 3:

To some extent, even today, what is put out there is what is known as surveillance from the government, and you get feedback from the government saying that you are now stepping out of line and your organization could find itself in trouble. You're not blocked. So those kinds of fears still exist, even for me as a senior person, you know. But for younger people, it doesn't come to that stage because they're not allowed to do anything that goes against the norms and practices of their organization. And the norms and practices of their organization are being controlled by the external political environment. That's the situation in India today and it reflects in many ways, including in the way people vote and so on, because the fear that spreads. The journalist in a sense is the first line of defence. If the journalist is not allowed to function as a journalist should, not allowed to be part of what is known as the 4th Estate. You've heard of the three estates, right? The judiciary, the executive, the legislature.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 3:

And the journalist is seen as the 4th estate. In a system of checks and balances, which is actually how democracies function. But the 4th estate has crumbled. It's very difficult to have the media perform its constitutionally protected, supposedly protected job guard democratic values.

Margot:

You talked about the loss of freedom of speech earlier. Do you think there are specific laws or regulations in India that have a significant impact on the work of journalists?

Journalist 3:

Yes, there are. In 2021 for instance, the Indian government introduced what was known as the IT Rules and Regulations. That is information technology rules and regulations, which had a system

of what is known as lateral surveillance. It empowered ordinary people to complain about the material that is being put out on your website or your portal, this is lateral. Once you get a complaint then the government can step in and take action, including action against the organization. So, people are really scared. Because of these different layers of control that have now come into play. You must be familiar with what is happening in Hungary?

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 3:

It is a similar kind of thing we know in Turkey, it's the same thing with all authoritarian leaders. And in this case, in India, we have a Hindutva driven authoritarianism. So, it is a religiously driven authoritarianism that is emerging, and it is in fact a very common way of controlling the media. The independent media is first punished and pushed away, and those who are subservient to the government are encouraged and promoted, and over a period of time they become the voice of the media. So that's what is happening in India today.

Margot:

I had an interview before with another Indian journalist and he told me about a selfie points that Modi put up. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Journalist 3:

Yeah, so basically all authoritarian leaders look to build their own cults. Their personal cult. So, these selfie points are really another way of ensuring that everyone is made aware that Modi is a figure, that people love, adore. To some, he's even God. That's the kind of cult building that's taking place. So, this selfie point was first introduced when he stood for elections in 2014. And he was actually anxious to get young people to vote for him because every year we have such a large population that the first-time voter is a very important segment of the voting public. And they are also easy to influence. So, we see that happening. So one way to woo them and get them is to use selfies, which is what young people do, you know. So, this was like a little trick that was introduced in 2014 and he won that election handsomely and many of the stratagems from that period he has used over the last decade of being in power. And recently these selfie points were again revived. It was set up in railway stations and public spaces so that people could then display their affection for the leader, the dear leader. It's not quite as bad as in Korea, North Korea, but here too, there is that cult building, which is the basic building block of authoritarian leadership.

Margot:

I saw there are threats and attacks against journalists in India. Do you think it affects reporting for a lot of journalists?

Journalist 3:

Of course, of course. Because can you report fearlessly if you feel you're under threat, can you report fearlessly, if you're sure that your editor has some connection with the top order and will not accept your story, can you? No, you can't. That is why freedom of expression, speech and

expression is so crucial to journalism. You can't have journalism, credible journalism, you can't have credible journalism without the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. So, when that is not being observed or that it is being undermined daily, then of course people will pull their punches. They will self-censor. You know, self-censorship is a huge challenge. Because one doesn't know if a story comes out, but one doesn't know if this is the whole truth, whether the journalist who wrote that story or photo, whether that story is the whole story. Or whether there is self-censorship that's going on, that the story is being tailored to keeping in mind the larger narrative that is being set by very powerful forces.

Margot:

And for you personally, does it affect your reporting? Because I think you sound very fearless or is that just an idea?

Journalist 3:

For one thing, I am not in mainstream journalism. I was with The Indian Express, which is one of the large newspapers in the country. One always had to be careful about whatever you did and said because it impacted the newspaper and that comes back to you. But right now, so, I have passed that stage. I'm retired now. But I am with The Wire. I don't know if you're familiar with the work of The Wire?

Margot:

Yes

Journalist 3:

But The Wire is one of the news portals which is independent and tries to be a function for true adversarial journalists. You can only have good stories out if you learn to question the government. The government is not an exception, they do not tell god's truth. Which is what many of the other mainstream, more powerful larger organizations have been forced to do, or have quite happily taken to doing, you know. Mainstream media has really been suborned to the past. The political past that be.

Margot:

How do you navigate the line between responsible reporting and the pressure to self-censor?

Journalist 3:

That is something that every journalist will have to set up their own red lines for. How far will they go? are they prepared to compromise on their integrity as journalists? This is something that everyone will have to ask sometimes, and sometimes they don't have a choice because they need the job, to carry on. They are at a stage of life where they need a regular income and so on. One understands how this happens because it's layer upon layer of intimidation. That has, in the long run, impact on what is put out in the media.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media and social media platforms has impacted press freedom?

Journalist 3:

We know that the internet, uh, started off as something that will definitely help freedom of speech and expression. We know that. But we know that over a period of time, the promise of the Internet has also been undermined by many forces. Including the big Internet companies that control the media in various ways, that control information in various ways, that what they do is to actually monetize information and therefore distort information. We know, for instance, how Trump came to power in 2016 by using media in a sense by putting out misinformation and so on. That is what is happening to internet media in India too, it's being hugely compromised in many ways. But like I said, there are a few independent sort of organizations that have really kept alive the idea of that fourth pillar of the four estates, they've kept that idea alive in many ways. For instance, we've recently had a scandal, a very large scam that involves the ruling party, and that is the electoral bonds story. I don't know if you've heard of it.

Margot:

No, I haven't.

Journalist 3:

OK, it's ELECTORAL, electoral bonds. BONDS. 2 words. This was a way to fund elections and the BJP. The BJP government in 2017 introduced it in Parliament saying that this is a transparent way of getting funding for various political parties. But over a period of time the ruling party gained the most out of it. So many transparency advocates and RTI, I don't know if you have RTI in your country which is right to information. They actually went to court and so on and recently the court ruled that the electoral bonds is terrible. It's a scam. The highest court ruled that and so that was a huge embarrassment for the BJP government, the Modi government. But this story had its genesis in 2017. And played out all these years but did not have a sufficient coverage. I mean the scam part of it got no coverage from mainstream media because the Modi government benefited from it, and no one wanted to write against it. It was only social media and it was only the new sport rules. The Internet media that actually could expose this over a period of time, they did it. Many of the stories that were broken over the years on electoral bonds came from internet media. So that tells you a little bit about the nature of journalism in India today. That there is this layer of journalism that is to some extent protected or at least has people who are willing to take on the government.

Margot:

Do you also think there are opportunities that are related to press freedom in the digital age?

Journalist 3:

Of course, one could say that there is, but I also see a creeping authoritarianism over the space as well, and it may soon be outlawed or controlled in different ways, in which case it will collapse. If these news portals are not allowed to function because you need to raise a little bit of money, you need to keep going, you need to pay your staff. If those people suddenly find that they cannot keep these operations going because of various pressures from the top, then even this promise will be nipped in the bud so that's how it is today. Yes, we are just hoping that we can carry on as

much as we can and extend the right to information and the right to freedom of expression and speech.

Margot:

You told me earlier that you were trolled before. Could you tell me a little bit more about that if you're willing to?

Journalist 3:

That's the usual thing. But it's an experience. In fact, I've escaped, there have been journalists who have been issued rape threats and so on. I came much later into it, in the sense that I escaped because, when I was as a young journalist I did not have to experience the kind of sexual trolling that many journalists today experience. So, my examples may not be quite the right ones to cite. Because it's different, I mean how many people remain like me at a different stage of life. And also, the younger ones, they face a lot of trolling and all kinds of revenge porn and all kinds of things, because of what they write, like one of my colleagues was told that her daughter will be attacked. You know, so the fear is constantly there. Trolling is definitely a weapon that the government has been using in various ways. That is because they have what is called an IT cell. The BJP, the ruling party. The job of the IT cell is to put out the BJP's view of the world and they are quite sensational, the way they go about it. They have a lot of power and money of course and they put out a lot of information, information which is not sort of accepted by a lot of ordinary people.

Margot:

The other journalists I talked to, He told me that he doesn't really, it was a man, he doesn't really worry about trolls until they show up at his doorstep. Would you agree with a statement like that, that it's only something to worry about?

Journalist 3

Yeah, that could always be there. Because the thing is, that is where your natural surveillance is a worry, your personal details, your telephone numbers, your residential area is tracked online. That's when online sort of attacks can become offline attacks and that has happened. It's not rare.

Margot:

Do you think it's harder for women?

Journalist 3:

Of course it's harder for woman. The sexual aspect of it is very important and it's very much a part of the reality of these people. Rape threats and so on. And Muslim women, for instance, have faced terrible kind of violations online and I don't know if you know about it? There was something called SULLIDIELS. Yeah you can perhaps Google it. And they put the ID of Muslim faces of active, young intelligent Muslim women. They put it out as bodies that can be sold and bought. They actually sexualize them and offer them to the public, as items on sale. I mean, these are not journalists, of course, but it shows you the level to which the Internet can be used against you.

Margot:

Do you think that the media organizations where these journalists work, should do more to safeguard their people?

Journalist 3:

Of course they should, but often they don't get that kind of support from their organizations because their organizations don't want to upset their relationship with the government. Also, there is the whole thing about securing the life of women journalists was a principle that many of us fought for in an earlier era. You know, for instance, we wanted women to do night duty, but in order that they do night duty, the organization should make available transportation after 12. So, these are principles that were fought for but with media organizations cutting back on investing in the journalists, some of these gains have been undermined or withdrawn, you know. So of course, the organization should take more care and you know, protect their employees, but they don't often do so. And in fact, over a period of time, their contribution to protecting and securing the lives of their journalists have actually come down, I would argue.

Margot:

Yes. But don't you think they might feel a lot of pressure as well so they can't?

Journalist 3:

In a sense, they're too big to fail, they're too big to be held accountable. Unfortunately, in India, and I believe in many other parts of the world, the public, the average person on the street is not sufficiently aware, the importance of the media in their lives, they take it for granted. Media is taken for granted; People hardly come out on the street to fight for media rights. You know, in Hungary, for instance, there were instances where the ordinary public actually came out to protest for a freer media. But you don't see that everywhere because people have to be made aware of the importance of what media plays in their lives. How they themselves benefit from free media. That link is often not realized sufficiently, at least that is my view.

Margot:

I will go straight to my last question if that is okay with you. How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India.

Journalist 3:

It is a bit dark, the prognoses, as you see, if you go by any of the indexes, we have really declined over the recent years, quite sharply. And that indicates that it is a slippery slope, and unless the government itself changes its ways or you get a government that is a little more sensitive to freedom of speech or expression. I believe that democracy and with that, Indian media, is really being undermined and perhaps will reach a point where India is finally recognized as a country that has turned to democracy. You know, right now, the countries of the world like glamourize in democracy, "the world's largest democracy" and so on. The picture is far more complex, the words that India like to indicate, "the world's largest democracy".

Journalist 4 (female)

Journalist 4:

I'm a senior correspondent, I was earlier with Republic for five years. I have 10 years of career.

Margot:

So you're really young, aren't you?

Journalist 4:

You can say that, I started very young, I think I started off back in 2014. When Prime Minister became the Prime Minister, so yeah, that was that was my beginning of my career.

Margot:

And how old are you?

Journalist 4:

I am 32.

Margot:

OK. I will just start firing my questions. If you don't want to answer one, that's fine. Is it OK for you if I record the interview?

Journalist 4:

Yes, it is. I mean like I don't really have an issue, but CENSORED said that it has to be anonymous.

Margot:

Yeah, yeah. It is.

Journalist 4:

Will it be the video recording?

Margot:

No, it's not the video. I'm sorry I'm going to close my window.

Journalist 4:

Right.

Margot:

Yeah, it's completely anonymous.

Speaker

Yeah. OK.

Margot:

So my first question, how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 4:

I really do not feel any scarcity or any pressure. I don't know whether the Western media thinks it, or there are parts of some Indian media that has gone with the narrative of stating that there is some kind of scarcity or there's not enough freedom of press that is being given in India, but I disagree completely. Why? Because it's, even, even I am one of the youngest journalist probably, working for 10 years in my career, I have blatantly asked questions to the ministers. It is nothing that I did not get answers to it and also in a country where the opposition is getting the right to criticize prime ministers to an extent that it also goes out wide in the world of their comments,

because by far I know when Rahul Gandhi goes to London and stating a lot about the situation about the Constitution or about the Prime Minister there at that point in time, if you're getting that kind of a freedom in a country like India, definitely press has a freedom. The narrative that is going to the western media being the Indian media. That the press is being pressurized. There's one way narrative that is happening. Absolutely not. Because in India, I think everybody, 99% of the people, are free to say anything. We see it all over YouTube as well or on social media that yes, people do have their views. People do criticize. Do you think in a country that has dictatorial leadership there would be this kind of a freedom given to either the opposition or the press or the influencers or the YouTubers to come be on the social media and criticize? So I think there is enough freedom of press and the current situation is absolutely fine. I don't really, really feel any need of you know, or I would say need of an hour that people have this narrative of being pressurized by the government. No, it is absolutely wrong.

Margot:

So then what are the key challenges for journalists in India right now?

Journalist 4:

Well, key challenges depends on the news break that you're on to. It completely depends whether you're doing political journalism, whether you're doing crime journalism. So of course, in India, we as reporters, we do have our beats, right. Either you're a political journalist or you're a crime-based journalist or you're a different journalist. There are different aspects of journalism that we choose for our careers to flourish in. So that depends. For political journalist, I can comment because I've worked in crime for a very short period of time when I was working with one of the organizations in India. So firstly I'll say for crime because that was a short period. The kind of situation that unfolds when you go for a crime reporting is it gets a little difficult on ground, because of course there's this equality that we see in male and female. But there are challenges to females on the ground when it comes to crime journalism. A little bit of challenges. I'm not saying physically, probably physically it can be.

But in political journalism, if we go into political journalism, it is that you really, really have to know what you're talking about. Your career completely depends on what kind of a news break you're giving, because one of my editors stated that a good journalist is a journalist, and you're a journalist, if you do not have a breaking every day or if you do not have a new news chunk, then there's no point of having or being a journalist.

So you know, to get something out that's really new, whether it be the alliance or what is going on in politics, who's ruling? How is it being ruled? Are there any changes? So to also do journalism and to understand the facts of what you are going to present is the major challenge. I feel as a political journalist, you need to be really aware about the history. You need to really study if you go on air. So there are numbers of topics that come your way in political journalism, I believe because every development, any case, any scam, be it the opposition, the ruling parties allegations towards each other. So you really need to read up. That's the biggest challenge. I believe that you need to brush up your facts. Every second. So yeah, major challenge would be,

yes, not 'reaching out to politicians'. I think that is the easiest in India. I mean that is what I can say. The politicians in India, if you're covering the beat or you're a political journalist. They're very accessible. So right. So I can say the major challenges is that if you do not read up and you go on air being like a person who doesn't know anything and just stating anything. That would be wrong. So yeah, for me it is or I would say for any journalist in India would be political or crime. You need to read up because in crime you need to read all the sections and now the that the laws that have been replaced by the IPC being replaced by a lot of things. So yeah, there are certain changes that happen. So according to the changes you need to read up.

Margot:

And how would you characterize the relationship between the government and the media in India?

Journalist 4:

That is what I said that I don't think so. Have you heard any kind of news that journalists are being threatened by the government? I haven't seen any in 10 years of my career, being the member of this fraternity, I'm really supportive of my fraternity. I mean, if anybody raises even a finger at my fraternity, I'm like you're not supposed to do that. So I think it's very cordial with that. I don't think so. OK, you can have different ideology. I believe in this. That yes, we have a ruling party in India. We also have opposition parties in India. They do have different ideologies, people covering or the journalists covering the opposition and the ruling party might have different ideologies on a personal basis. But as journalists, if a complete journalist. You've been given the freedom to ask questions. You go to Parliament, cover Parliament, go to Parliament, meet different people, and meet opposition leaders. You meet ruling party leaders. You're free to ask them questions because I've seen journalists who cover Parliament, they have the right and access to all the politicians and they be the opposition party politicians or the ruling parties. They do ask questions and majorly being a journalist you need to get your questions and the answers to your question.

So for me the relation between the government I would say, would be my questions as a journalist and their answers as a government. And I, as a journalist, do not have.. (stops sentence) Also, I need to understand that there's a thin line difference between being a journalist and being very conceited, of being a journalist, right? The concept that has gone out these days that people are really conceited of being a journalist or there's a narrative that the government is very dictatorial or they're very conceited of a ruling. I don't think so. If you're politely asking a question, even if it is not in the favor of the government, I guess that yes, politician might give you an answer in a 'No'. Or they would refrain from saying anything, because if it is not in their favour, but definitely you're going to get an answer. So stating or giving a narrative on the basis of different ideology, I won't call it journalism, but yes, there's a cordial relationship between the government and the Indian media. There hasn't been any protest so far that I've joined, that I've seen that journalists are doing. Yes, there are some journalists. Just because I think there has to be, I don't know. Somewhere down the line. I do feel that it is not about Indian media versus the government. It is the media versus media. That is what I can feel. So it is not about media versus the government.

Never. So it is internally you need to support your own fraternities. What I believe, because I haven't seen the ruling party fighting in public or commenting on any other leader. But in media, I've seen that few of the sections of media have named the other part of the media as Modi media or some have been named as leftist. So that I think should not happen. It is never media versus government. It is nowadays it is media versus media, a competitive spirit that has led to some long wrong, a very wrong narrative that is being led to or, I would say in the eyes of the people, that yes, if certainly somebody saying something against the government, they're not allowed, OK, if they're not allowed, then how is that person able to put it on social media. A very big question that nobody asked that if people talk about the freedom of press, like you correctly stated, that how it is. Because it is very much there in India. Because if you can post anything on social media and it is doing rounds it is going you know even the western media is looking at it. Even internationally it has a coverage and nationally, it has a coverage. So do you think or do you personally, as a journalist, also believe that yes, there the question: Why has nobody stopped this thing. You're able to put it on social media, so it is in India. I don't really think that there is any situation media versus the government. It is very cordial because I am telling you people who cover Parliament, all the seniors, they have good access to the opposition leaders as well as the England party leader. So I think it's got it.

Margot:

So you never felt any influence from the government on your work?

Journalist 4:

I haven't seen, personally, any of the ministers calling me and telling me: 'you're supposed to do this', no.

Margot:

OK.

Journalist 4:

I haven't. I haven't. Because I am a political journalist, I have in-depth knowledge about my, my, my political and current affairs of my country and you know a lot of things. But I haven't seen any minister calling me to plant any kind of anything? No, nothing. My Prime Minister goes on air. He wants to speak anything he speaks in the parliament. If you have a problem with that, you're also free to comment.

I think, I think there's, there's this thing that was based. I think we have much freedom in our country. Our Prime Minister is speaking in the Parliament and then as Indian media, we come outside, we do analysis of what our Prime Minister has stated then we have opposition leaders sitting on our debates and then taking out what exactly Prime Minister has stated and then we have debates about it.

So how do one say that, that Prime Minister or the ruling party has ever had any kind of influence? I think in the debate we also have opposition party leaders who are also participating in at the debates in the prime debates that the Indian media is doing.

So how come there is an influence to it? Because the debate is being decided by the channels or the person doing the prime show. If I am on the ground, I am giving each and every detail about what exactly the Prime Minister said. I am not adding up onto anything or I'm not adding up to any other thing that the politician has not mentioned on the record. So what kind of influence? I don't understand that people come up with that. I don't really understand how. Prime Minister goes on air Prime Minister, does rallies, the opposition criticizes openly? Media shows it openly. It is never the half story that is being showed. It is exactly and openly. It is shown on every television. So what kind of influence can a politician make? When everything is on record?

Margot:

So I've read in my research about a lot of threats and attacks against journalists, but are they prevalent or is that just misinformation?

Journalist 4:

Absolutely wrong. What kind of a threat have you read about? I want to know what kind of a source you have read it from.

Margot:

Mostly it's about the..(gets interrupted)

Journalist 4:

Because I think so. Any of the Indian journalists, I don't want to quote two of my seniors who've been always on an aggressive.... Or that there's, there's been.... If I am there, there's a, you know, Margot, there's a kind of a belief that has gone into the heads of the people nowadays that: 'whatever I do is right'.

As a journalist, also, if I can speak, show and influence, do you think government can influence people? No. We as journalists do have the power to influence people. Why? Because we do have those speaking skills.

Do you think any politician would come out on road and hit you? Nobody would do that. How is there an attack? Of course if I do any mistake or any kind of. You know. Goof up on air. There could be probably repercussions to that, but I would not say that there is.

I think it's an absolute wrong source that has stated that there's a kind of attack on Indian media. What kind of attack are they physically assaulted? No, they're not, are they stopped from anything. They're not. If they are, kindly show me one social media handle which does not criticize the Prime Minister. I think if I talk about North Korea and compare India with the North Korea, I don't think so. I haven't seen any of the journalists criticizing their government. So how can you even state this particular thing? I completely refrain from the fact that why do I have to get into a conversation when I've been given the right to question the government and I do get answers to it. Don't you think that all the big channels in India are not doing interviews these days, because we do have elections right, the upcoming elections, everybody is doing. If the media was under attack, if there was any kind of influence. Do you think that the other party would give any kind of interview statement to the media houses?

Firstly, no. The home minister, he talks to the media, he's giving interviews to the media. Prime Minister himself is giving interviews to the media, the leaders under his leadership, they are talking to media. I don't really understand that. What kind of a narrative is being made that the media is under attack in India. How? They're not being physically assaulted, they are very open to their thoughts. They criticize Prime Minister to an extent that it goes around on social media, abusing the Prime Minister. You've got all the rights to do so whatever you're doing is right. And if Prime Minister on a certain ideology has built up a party and is winning. And has also won the 2 elections. There must be something wrong with the opposition. There must be something missing. So if, as a journalist, I'm questioning the opposition as well as the ruling party, I think I'm doing the fair enough job and there is nothing whatsoever that states that Indian media is under attack. I haven't seen even a single journalist being beaten up so far. I haven't seen because we as Indians we are not that polite, right? OK? You're getting beaten up, and specifically journalists they don't get beaten up so easily, so I don't think so. Jokes apart, there's no physical assault. There's no mental pressure that is being built up, even if there was a mental pressure, then I really want to question how can they come up and criticize on social media if there was so much pressure. If I Margot put you under pressure about something I think you would fear to do so. I haven't seen the other section of the media who says that media is under attack, stopping and not criticizing. They're doing their job of criticizing and that is OK that is fine. But criticizing to a negative, OK, we do watch films and, just giving an example, we watch films. We do criticize either we like or we don't like, but not an extent of abusing the characters of the picture right? But here I've seen that as well that if it is not in my favour, journalist being a journalist, we do try to because we do have that right. We do try to criticize in a very negative, negative manner. So that I would say is not right. Healthy criticism is good and the other party takes it as well. In a very healthier manner, but if you keep on criticizing the other party just because you have gone into some ideological difference of covering a particular beat, that I would say that's wrong and stating that Indian media is under attack absolutely wrong.

Because if it was. Nothing would have been on air or on social media. I do see posts where there are a lot of people, who come up and say anything and everything about the government, so how come they can say that. If it be the journalists or the normal people? I don't think so. No problem.

Margot:

Do you think that the digital media and social media impacted journalism in India?

Journalist 4:

No, I mean, like I didn't get your question right.

Margot:

I've read this book, I think I. Have it here. I'll show you. It's this one. (I AM A TROLL) I don't know if you know it.

Journalist 4:

I'm a troll. Yes, I know about this book.

Margot:

I've read that book for my research, and I didn't know about troll armies and. I was wondering if you've ever encountered it. If it's false information? If it's something that really exists in Indian social media?

Journalist 4:

It's not about Indian social media, just a second. I got a call. It is not. About Indian social media, I think it is all over the world. If you're talking about particularly the trolls. If you're talking particularly about some fake news. I probably must not be that aware about your country's constitution or your politics or the government in your country? Probably not in a very clarified manner until unless I have a source to read. I am in no physical touch with any of the politicians or any of the journalists. My source could be either the politician itself or the source itself, right?

So, I think there are. I mean there's no influence about it. But yes, if we see social media. Overall, it does affect, if there is any kind of a fake news to it, I would say the media houses. Who are showing the actual facts of it, there could be a rumor on social media. But then as the media houses, we do give clarifications to it that if you are talking about so and so fake news, this is not because Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has stated and requested to a lot of media houses to help him.

You know if there is any fake news or a campaign against the fake news. So yes, I believe that somewhere on social media is an influence on everybody. I guess it is all over the world. So if it is not about India, it is all over. That false news should not be spread because there are educated and non-educated people who are watching social media. So what kind of influence do they have on their minds? Kind of affects a lot to what they perceive from the news, so I believe yes, there has to be a proper campaign to fake news from each and every media houses in India. I think we media houses have started with a small ticker on our shows that we do not support the fake news or any news in our name should be clarified or some something that Indian media houses have started. So yes, it does have an influence.

Margot:

Yeah, but you personally have never been trolled on social media?

Journalist 4:

Ah, personally I have been trolled in person. I was saying not on social media, but yes, I think we look, like I correctly stated previously as well, that is not media, Margot in India, it is not media versus the government, it is media versus media so in the in the competitive spirit, there's a narrative that is being from a section that was spread, I think in a farmers agitation that happened in India. That was covered worldwide, internationally as well. So the narrative before the farmers' agitation that took rounds was the Modi media one. The leftist media. So we do face a lot of criticism if we try to make the other person understand the fact of the situation. If the farmers were agitating, I ask them questions. Why are you agitating? What kind of a problem? Why it cannot be made a law. There's a lot of background. There's a lot of history. There comes the World Trade Organization. There comes India, have got sanctions. You can give favours to the farmers, but technically. We see there will be a bankruptcy if MSP is made long, technically. If you go down

the line, there must be a storage house somewhere. If you have a storage house, it can have crores and crores being invested to them. So technically, if you speak about it factually, if you speak about it to the other person who's agitating there, you get criticized. So yes, I on the field have got into a debate in situations like that, because I do cover a bigger political journalist, I do tell you, it's not that easy. There are things that we have to face, challenges on ground, so that is. That is what makes you a strong journalist. I believe every challenge makes you a strong journalist. So, yes, I've seen that. I've been trolled on the field, not on social media, but on field, right in front of my eyes. Somebody saying things like 'you can't say this', Sir, being a journalist, I cannot be loud enough. Because there are four cameras or 10 cameras or thousands of people. Standing there with their mobile phones on recording and the other person is abusing me, I must be quiet enough. Again, be contently. Yes, I'm doing my job. I am right in what I'm doing. I just have to explain it to this person and the other person is not stopping. So that has happened to me right in front of my eyes and those were like the normal people.

Margot:

That sounds scary.

Journalist 4:

Yeah so I've faced that but that didn't change my mindset for the farmers, no.

Margot:

Hmm. Yeah, cause you look like a very opinionated person. So then I think it's inevitable that sometimes you're going to have discussions.

Journalist 4:

Yes, I because I have covered the riots. I've covered the farmer agitation and I personally, Margot, believe that situation. You know there if I make perception out of situations then I think I'm not a fair journalist. I don't do that. I think there were so many farmers who were agitated on particularly something they were agitating on. The agitation came out to me because I was reporting there. So I if I make a perception, like I said, that it is not about the government, you have the right to agitate in a democratic country like India. You were doing so, but do you think you have the right to abuse me while I am doing my job? No.

But we do get abused and I have faced it personally, like right in front of my eyes. There were thousands of cameras recording me. There were people coming at me. I've been called names. You know, my cameramen was threatened. His camera was taken. They tried to come at me and I could not say anything. Why? Because I'm a journalist. If I say anything that I'm not liking, you're a male, you're attacking me, I'm not liking that. I cannot say that. Why? Because then I'll be grounded. As somebody acting in favour of the government and not of people who are agitating there. So, I had to be very calm. I went on being very calm and then I was like, OK, there was a situation that happened. We have to have a good start after that brawl we both sat with each other. I mean like OK I'll have food with you. You have food with me and then we are going to talk. We're going to talk like two mature people. You must have some problem. I think I was reporting in English at that point in time and he was unable to understand that. So, I said you can have

someone who can understand English or if you want, I can repeat it in Hindi and if you find anything which is not factual enough, you can please come and correct me. But you cannot abuse me like this, so yes.

Margot:

And have you ever felt the pressure to self-censor so you don't have to be in those situations?

Journalist 4:

No, never. Why? I literally -I don't feel any need to be self-censor. Why? I mean. (sighs) No.

Margot:

Do you think that other journalists had that feeling? That they're scared for what the media is saying?

Journalist 4:

I can't really comment on behalf of other journalists here, because that's completely a personal thing that you want to be self-censored or not. I as a human, I don't want to be self-censored. Why would I do that? Why would I in the face of earth do that? Every journalist has their own identity. Even for a smaller media house or for a bigger media house, every journalist is being entertained. Every YouTuber, influencer I think nowadays, I would say YouTubers and influencers are being more entertaining than the media houses. So there is no need of self-censor. No, I believe there is not. But if somebody does, I cannot comment on that.

Margot:

OK. So you you've experienced something that I would call scary. The situation that you just explained, do you think that media organizations should safeguard their journalists better or?

Journalist 4:

But then how can you do that? There are situations where you cannot do that, because Margot, we need to understand that in taking up this job we have to deal with public, right? And in public, we do have people who are educated. We do have people who are not educated, right? So we have to deal with that. I do not know the next person that I'm going to be talking with on field, what is his or her mindset? I have no idea about it. I am just doing my job as a journalist. If I know few facts. If the other person knows few facts, there could be a situation that could go worse. So, yes, you must be mentally strong enough.

I think media houses do enough to protect their own journalists who go on field. There's enough support that is being given by the editors to the reporters who are on field reporting on very sensitive issues and we as journalists also need to keep in mind if we are reporting on any kind of a sensitive issue it can be nationally or internationally. It is for all the journalists that we need to act sensible enough to this situation. We cannot be very irresponsible and act very, you know, insensitively to a situation which needs or is demanding a kind of sense to be put in that situation. Likewise, I said there could be an ideological difference, but as a journalist I need to read up before I go to field.

I need to be factually correct because there are thousands of people who are watching me and listening to me, so it is not the responsibility of the government or the people out there. It is my

own responsibility to keep myself updated, factually right, and also, if I am questioning the other person, I need to understand and I need to be prepared if he gives an answer in positive manner or negative manner, so I must be mentally prepared likewise.

Margot:

Have you ever had to report in another country than India?

Journalist 4:

Look, I am really fearful of the fact to do so. Why? Because, I think people who went to cover the Ukraine war and everything,... I am a very foodie kind of a person and completely vegetarian. So I have a particular eating habit, so I really am scared to leave the country unless I have a friend in the other country. You can just guide me of the food that I have. I'm so sorry. I could be a little illogical here, but I have this fear. I have this very fear in my mind. I'll do every kind of drama and tantrum that I can as a human to not have to go outside my country. Because one I feel very safe and secondly, my eating habits, I need to have a companion to make me understand that yes, this is vegetarian. You're supposed to eat it like this, because I cannot. I cannot. I need to have roti. I need to have chapatis. I- I need to have rice or a proper vegetable to fill my stomach. That is, I mean since childhood, so I'm a little choosy with that and I need to have that. So whenever there's a call from my office about leaving India. I'm like, please tell me, how do I deny? How do I deny? Like, is there anything wrong there? I will not get the food or something, so I cannot. I have this fear which I need to overcome. OK, so you've asked me a good question, I think. This was a question asked to me by my office as well. They asked what makes you resist to go outside and said I can't eat. I don't know. There needs to be at least one person I know in the room. I need to have that one person. I can make an eye contact when I'm not feeling good about the conversation and that the other person. Understand that we can, you know, we can change our minds and have a little bit of fun. So, until I'm confident enough that I'm going to get that, I don't know. Because in G20 we had the western media come to India. We did not have that kind of a conversation with them. I don't know why. We as Indians, I tell you we are very hospitable you ask us and we will take you everywhere to every corner of the city telling you what is the greatest food. What is not and what is spicy. But this time it didn't happen. So my fear to go abroad is my food, so I need to know one person in the entire country who can guide me of the food. Who's like: 'Your work is done. I am ready to take you out of here and we can go out, have something good food and you can breathe now'. So I need to have the confidence until I have that confidence. I don't think so. Even if I get married and after marriage, my husband needs to go out. I have a doubt in that. So that is my problem, I think. I need to have more trips with my Prime Minister. I will start with that.

Margot:

But you do have international interactions?

Journalist 4:

We do, but when I tell you, I can become a child at that point in time. I will throw each. I will. I will literally give you all the tantrums that I have. Give you all the reasons why I'm not supposed to

go? I will even. I can even cry then that the other person can be: OK. Go, lady, it's OK, fine. So, yeah, so I think I need to start my trips with Prime Minister. I think that is that is more that would kind of open my fear of food I can say. Not the country, but the food.

Margot:

But you said you knew people in in Italy? Because I wanted to ask you if you. Like how do your colleagues from other countries perceive the state of press freedom in India? Do you think it's faulty?

Journalist 4:

Well, I can tell you because we do meet a lot of Western media here in India as well. And there's this question, this is the basic question that Indian journalists come across is about the freedom of press. The basic question that every western media asked the Indian media is about the freedom of press and I don't know why. It just because you can speak with your Prime Minister or President makes you have that freedom of press abroad. We do have off records with our Prime Minister. We do have off records with our Home Minister. We do have Diwali Milan with our Prime Minister. Any other countries, President or Prime Minister coming on Christmas and celebrating it with journalists and having selfies with them? I don't think so. Sitting in a room and asking dear Prime Minister, I need to ask you a question but we can do it off record. And if I must ask any question to my Prime Minister, I am absolutely free to ask him any question and he does, believe me, he does answer. If I'm saying you he does answer, he does. He has the habit of replying in a way that even if he doesn't want to is OK. This comes as a negative question. He replied in a very positive aspect. Like there's a narrative that has gone out in the western media that. That there's no freedom of press, which is absolutely wrong. I would like to literally correct the Western media. If you are judging the Indian media on a state that Indian media does not show that whether they interact with their Prime Minister or the President or not. We do have off records with our Prime Minister and the other Minister, which I do not think needs to go on air. I don't believe that. I don't believe everything on social media is true. People do fake their lives as well. So, judging that, why do I need to have my Prime Minister coming and doing a press conference? He's not supposed to do that. He's running a country. So we need to please come out of that old paradigm that you know that the Prime Minister needs to answers to the media for there to be freedom of press. Why? He's got a cabinet, he's got ministers. You can put questions to them. They're supposed to answer. He's the Prime Minister of my country. He's got the cabinet. If I go by the rules, obviously there's a hierarchy, right? You need to ask questions. You cannot, You cannot be like 'Hi, Prime Minister. What's up?' Yeah, actually you can. We did that on Diwali. Hi, Sir. What's up? How are you? How are you feeling? He does reply. We - I think on my Instagram I do have pictures of that as well. So, he'll take your phone and he'll click a selfie. Like he's randomly walking, he'll take a phone. He'll say come we'll take a selfie. Do you think any other Prime Minister of any other country, the President or the Prime Minister has done that? No. Do we question the freedom of press in that manner. No. So Indian media being judged that Prime Minister doesn't speak is incorrect is absolutely incorrect.

There are off records. If you want to go, you can go to Prime Minister's office. Keep your word. You can discuss with the Prime Minister if you're facing a problem. I think. Yes, there is the official way of doing that. You need to write a letter. You need to write your concern and the office is going to reply or Prime Minister do gives a call. There's an incident that happened in West Bengal. In West Bengal, a place Sandesh Khani that was raised. That was an issue raised by BJP government where there was violence, women were raped. Prime Minister gave a ticket to fight the election to a normal lady of Sandesh Khani and not only giving the ticket, he made a telephonic conversation with that lady. Do you think any Prime Minister does that? Do we in Indian media question the western media or their Prime Minister or President not doing that. So, I don't think that Prime Minister not indulging in any conversation with the media, certainly on air or publicly. Can raise a question of freedom of press, which is wrong.

So India being judged on the context that there is no freedom of press. I'm so sorry there is. Even if there are people who do not match the ideology of the ruling party, they come up on social media and they do criticize Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And he literally takes that criticism goes to the rally, conveys it to the people. I know there are people who criticize me. There are people who abuse me. Do you think any Prime Minister would go and do that? Why do we question that? Just because we do not show a few chunks of our life to the Western media doesn't mean that we need to be questioned on that?

If I have any problem, I believe if I write it to Prime Minister's office today, that I'm facing so and so issue. Definitely 110% there is going to be a reply from his office and shortly he's going to speak, if he gets time out of his all the busy, busy, busy life that he has and busy schedule that he has for a 75-year-old man who's literally doing everything to make the country proud. I am so proud of my Prime Minister, I tell you, because I have seen him working day and night very closely, because I think in the Lok Sabha elections that are, that are that are coming. We're going to have elections right so. He's working till 4:00 in the morning and so are we. If we are working 4:00 in the morning, doing the bulletins at six. Stating that what all happened speculating on what could happen in a meeting, do you think that's not freedom of press?

How do we know that there's so and so speculation or that there could be a discussion in the meeting that could be the name, whether those names will be announced or not. So do you think that's not the freedom of press? That is so, I don't believe that. I know why people do judge, because I've spoken to few of the media personnel as well who questioned me with the same. I said that if your Prime Minister in a room is speaking to you when you showcase on air stating that Donald Trump has spoken with the international media or Justin Kindu has done the same. We do it off air. We don't really have to showcase that. What is important for me is that if I write to my Prime Minister, he ensures that I'm fine. I'm all right. Which I think is more important and should be more important and about freedom of press. If you're free to criticize your own Prime Minister to an extent that it goes to a negative criticism and is being watched in the western

media, then I don't think so. There's any kind of scarcity when it comes to freedom of press. So yeah.

Margot:

OK, that was very clear.

Journalist 4:

Now very clear, right. So that is what I say, Margot, because there's a kind of a speculation that goes on. Why do you have to compare it to other countries? Our Constitution is different than yours.

Margot:

Hmm.

Journalist 4:

Me as a person is different than you as a person, right? We're two different individuals. We're from two different countries. What happens in my country should happen in your country. We are secular. Are you secular? Pakistan is a Muslim country. Do we call India a Hindu country? No.

Margot:

Mm-hmm.

Journalist 4:

Why do we compare two things differently. If I don't think that talks with the prime ministers with the Indian media needs to be showcased on air and after that even if we did do that there. Again, there will come up a question that he does interact with this section or a handful of Indian media. No, my darling. There were so many media personals of the Diwali that he has interacted with. So I don't think so. Not any Prime Minister would do it on Christmas, come up and take selfies with the with the concerned media. I think the Indian Prime Minister does that and I am happy of the fact that as an Indian journalist, if I write something to my Prime Minister, he acknowledges that. Be the suggestion or the problem and he reacts to it. He will talk to you about it. So which I think is more important and he takes the criticism in a healthier manner. He doesn't keep it in the heart. He's not one kind of a person I've seen. Oh, you've said this thing about me. Now I'm going to show it to you. I haven't seen that. If that had been the case, I don't think there would be accounts on social media criticizing him. So I don't think so. The narrative is completely wrong.

Margot:

OK. Then I just have one more question for you.

Journalist 4:

Right, right.

Margot:

How do you see the future of the press freedom in India evolving? And this is a question that I'm basing on the press Freedom index. Because I saw that it that India went a little bit lower, how do you think that will be evolving.

Journalist 4:

Again, the same question, if I need to go by the index then again, it's...Do you think if the government changes, the index is going to improve? There's a question that I'm asking. The index is going to improve. How does this show the freedom of press in India? Any index cannot mark the freedom of press in India. Firstly, why I'm saying that. I'm not just saying that it also depends on the opinions, the questions that you asked.

From different individuals or different media personas. I'm counting I'm one of them, right? So it completely depends on that there is no hard data of it that any kind of a politician is going to come up to you and say that yes, we are controlling the press. No none you think press being the fourth pillar can be controlled? No.

We cannot. I'm telling you, we as journalists are very conceited, my dear. We do have this thing in our head that we are journalists. We are knowledgeable enough. So I believe knowledge without information is dangerous and information without knowledge is dangerous. They need to go hand in hand.

So I think the freedom of press in India is very absolutely, very fine. There could be two different parties, one which has ruled India for more than decades and one which is ruling. Certainly there are going to be changes. You cannot relate changes to pressure on press, no. So, I think it has not gone down. Why don't we then highlight the period of emergency that happened back in the 1970s? What was that? Wasn't it any kind of a scarcity on freedom of press? The black day, we call it the black day, but I haven't seen any person stating that in 1970s, there was an incident in the emergency where there was no freedom of press. Why? Why? There's a question being raised then. We never had international media ask us this question. It was that, that was not the freedom of press. If I am talking to you and telling you that what is happening in my country, that is freedom of press, I believe.

Which is very much there in my country. I do not know why people have this perception or why are they perceiving that Indian media is working under some kind of a pressure. No, we are not working in any kind of a pressure. I think the freedom of press is very much there.

There could be an ideological difference, but as a journalist, I don't really, as a person, I can have ideology. But when I'm reporting on ground. It must be factual. Even if I am quoting my Prime Minister, I need to understand what he has stated. If I'm quoting any leader of the opposition, I need to understand what he has quoted and if I have my opposition leader going to the country or going abroad and stating and asking questions which is non-relevant and not asking those questions in India. Do you think that is not the freedom and press?

We had one rally of my Prime Minister the first campaign election campaign rally needed. So we showed both equally. So that is not freedom of press? Yes, that is.

Margot:

OK.

Journalist 4:

Why so? I believe that there is freedom of press. And the index, I believe there's a bigger question like I said there was a government that ruled in India for decades and there's a new government that is ruling. Could be an ideological difference. You can face change. We do face changes in life from childhood *till* the time we grow old there are, you know, we go into a life cycle. So there could be some kind of a change that you might not like, but that does not make the other person question the freedom of press. I would say.

So the index I say that's based on opinion. Could be different, but for me working as a journalist in India, absolutely fine, very safe, very sound. I have every right to question anybody, even sitting at my home. I do have that. You know that right to make the video put it on social media without having my social media being banned. How can I have people or journalists in my country criticizing to an extent, and still they have their social media? They have their followers in 1,000,000. How?

Why is not this aspect of journalism being viewed. if it is viewed only that there is a question that the Indian Prime Minister do not come to the media, he does not speak? It is his personal thing first. I don't think so. Any Prime Minister or President. Is supposed to do. There's nothing mentioned in anywhere that the Prime Minister needs to do a press conference every now and then, because if he does it, he's going to do it in his party office. That is the Bharatiya Janata Party office. Right? And then if he's going to do that, you are going to say then again, there comes the question that he is the Prime Minister of Bharatiya Janata Party. So he's refraining from that. He's thoroughly going and talking to the leaders of the ruling party and people who are covering the ruling party thoroughly are talking to the politicians of the opposition parties. So I think that that gives a sense of freedom of press equally vocally ,very evidently. In a nicer place in India.

Margot:

OK. Thank you.

Journalist 4:

Welcome.

Margot:

Maybe I have just one more question. Do you have any suggestions for books or websites I could get more information of?

Journalist 4:

Oh I will. Have to research and tell you.

Margot:

Yeah, yeah, that's fine. That's fine. If you come up with anything.

Journalist 4:

Yeah, I'll drop you a text.

Margot:

That. OK, thank you. If you ever once you come to Belgium, then I'll help you find good food here.

Journalist 4:

OK, now I'm going to! Yes, please, please, please make me some good food.

Margot:

Thank you so much for your time. It was really, interesting.

Journalist 4:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Please do come to India. We'll have a good time here.

Margot:

OK, I will have a nice day.

Journalist 4:

Have a nice day.

Journalist 5 (male)

Margot:

Yes. Is it OK for you if I record the interview?

Journalist 5:

You want to quote me for records. Yeah, you can record, you know, that's not an issue. But It would be better if you use anonymous quotes, you know, because I'm not very comfortable being quoted given the situation in our country.

Margot:

That's OK, I will keep you anonymous. It's just for my master thesis here in Belgium, so it will probably only be my professor that will see it and it's no problem to keep you anonymous.

Journalist 5:

Right, Fair enough, so you can ask me anything.

Margot:

Do you have any more questions for me?

Journalist 5:

Yeah, I just wanted to know. I mean, what exactly is the trigger, you know? I mean, why are you suddenly interested in knowing about this, The press freedom in India? What makes you so interested in India and the press freedom in India?

Margot:

So, we got to choose subjects from a big document in Belgium and I saw the subjects, press freedom in India. And I was very intrigued because my first thought was 'what is going on with press freedom in India?' And then I started reading some more about it and I got really interested. When I talked with my promoter, she told me I could do interviews with journalists if I'd like. And that sounded like something where I could learn a lot from, from real people who are having real interesting experiences and that's why I chose to dive more into the subjects.

Journalist 5:

Fair enough, and you have, I hope, read about India and the Indian context and what is going on in India because, I will be telling you insight stories, right. So, if you do not know the Indian perspective, it will be difficult for you to figure out, you know what I'm saying. So I hope you have some understanding about India and the Indian political space and Indian media space.

Margot:

Yes, I did, there was a study I needed to do before I could start my field research. So, I did desk research as well.

Journalist 5:

Sorry, last question. You are with which university?

Margot:

The KU Leuven. I don't know if you know that one.

Journalist 5:

No, the name doesn't ring a bell.

Margot:

It is this the biggest university in Belgium. But I do not know if that's big enough for you to be on your radar.

Journalist 5:

No, I mean it's my ignorance. Not an issue, but I will read up more about your university. So not an issue. Tell me. I will let start asking me questions.

Margot:

If there's anything you don't want to answer, then you can just say.

Journalist 5:

Right.

Margot:

My first question is how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 5:

My answer would be a bit long. I mean, I joined this provision in 2000. And this is my 24th year in this position. And I think that we are in a in a very difficult state. In terms of the condition of press freedom. You know, ours is not a dictatorship. Obviously, it's not an army rule. India is still regarded as the biggest democracy. We also do not have any emergency kind of situation, so on the face of it, you won't think that things are bad. But the practitioners of journalism know that things are getting worse with each passing day. Why I say that you must have read. Over the past few years there were so many journalists who got arrested and they were languishing in jail for years. The charges against them were very petty, you know, very minor charges, and they were languishing in jail. This is 1. Number 2, as is the case globally. The media space is owned by businessmen, industrialists, right, who don't have an ABC like model in India, all the media outlets are owned by businessmen. Now the problem is, all these owners 90, 95% of these owners have their allegiance to the ruling party, the ruling dispensation in India. Because of that, what's happening in the Indian media space is, as again, I never studied journalism, you know, I mean,

in my graduation days and my masters days, I was a student of economics and mathematics, but somehow, I came to this profession because I thought that it's the most exciting thing. What are the basics in journalism? You ask questions to those who are in power. But in our country, what's happening is mainstream media is asking questions to the opposition parties. They are not asking questions to those who are in power. They are not holding those in power accountable because those who are in power in a democracy are supposed to answer to the people, right? They are answerable to the people. And media being the fourth pillar of democracy, I mean, media has the right to ask questions, but in our country? Mainstream journalism, mainstream journalists, you know, if you watch the television debates every night, if you read the mainstream newspapers, you will see that they are going after the opposition. They are not going after those who are in power. These are all symptoms that all is not well in the Indian media space. And the biggest example is that our Prime Minister, he's been the Prime Minister for the last 10 years. He hasn't held a single press conference in, in his ten years in his office. You know, at times he does some press conferences, at times he gives some interviews. But they are all stage managed. The questions are sent to him in advance, but in some newspapers, they get written replies and in some television interviews everything is fixed, everything is rigged. I mean, the Prime Minister doesn't give interviews to credible journalists, he gives interviews to film stars. And those film stars in the interview, they ask him, how do you like to have your mango? Do you want it as a juice? So, yeah this is a bizarre thing that's happening. Where media is not doing its job is a classic indication that the symptoms are very clear that that the owners of the media, the businessman, they do not want the journalists to ask tough questions to those who are in power and that is affecting the morale of journalists and in most cases, journalists are very confused. There are people who have lost their jobs because they were very critical of the government. These are all indicators of how press freedom is going down.

Margot:

Then, in your opinion, what are the key challenges for journalists in India when it comes to press freedom?

Journalist 5:

I mean, see there are, if you ask, ask me about challenges, broadly I can differentiate. I can categorize them into two sets of challenges. One is a professional challenge. Professional challenges where a journalist knows, you know, all these celebrated television anchors, they know it very well that what they are doing is not right. That is not journalism. But still, they are actually becoming like the PR agents of those who are in power. So, if you watch Indian television networks and I can give you names of a few. And you will see that these journalists are nothing but the PR agents. You know, I'm sharing a story with you which took place 3-4 days back, that there was a television debate going on. And there was a celebrity anchor. She had people from the government and some people from the opposition. So, there was an opposition leader. He was making some allegations against the Prime Minister. Then there was someone on the panel who was from prime minister's political party. Even before that person can respond. This anchor

bolts in and says that he will not allow you to criticize his Prime Minister on national television, but this is something I have never ever seen in Indian media before. Indian media has always been quite vibrant. So, the first challenge is the professional challenge, you know, I mean, but there are several people, journalists, who are very upset that they have to become the PR agents of the government, of those who are in power just to retain their jobs, internally they're very dissatisfied, but they know the price of it will be very high. The challenge is more to do with your conviction, you know. I mean those, as you are a student of journalism, you ask me questions about press freedom.

So obviously you are also someone who is excited to become a journalist and you want to ask tough questions to those in power in Belgium, right? But obviously you must be feeling sad. That some of your colleagues in India are becoming PR agents, public relations agents of the government. So that's a professional challenge. The other one is a personal one, the challenge is that at a personal level, those who are criticizing the government, there are YouTubers, there are some newspapers. There are some journalists like us who try to ask tough questions. Then we are trolled on social media. I told you about some journalists who got arrested by the government. Then you are attacked, you are abused, people call you names, people say that you are an agent of the opposition. Now it's so funny, it's so bizarre that those who are the agents of the government that nothing can be said against them. But if someone asks a question to the government, a tough question to the government, criticizes the government, then that person becomes an agent of the opposition. This is very difficult. This is how I kind of define the two challenges. One is on the professional front. Where you have to do things which you don't like. And if you try to do things which you like, then there is a possibility that you may lose your job. On the personal front, you are always facing attacks. In social media there are possibilities of you getting arrested. So, these are difficult times and it's very challenging.

Margot:

You just said something about trolling. Have you ever been trolled?

Journalist 5:

Yes, yes, yes, yes. I have been trolled, you know, I mean these things these have become very, very common affairs. You know, I mean you are and, you know that BJP, the party in power, they have, you know, this school of social media army, you know and, and their only job is to, you know, attack you on social media. They are troll brigades. It happens.

Margot:

Has that ever, um, let you to self-censor? that you were sort of afraid of, or didn't want to face the backlash and then didn't publish something or write something.

Journalist 5:

No, I mean, uh, you know, if you understand the Indian political context, you know? We are quite lucky. I mean, say I'm quite lucky because I work with a newspaper which is headquartered, which is not headquartered in the national capital. So, I because in India is, is it's a federal structure, you know, it's a, it's a union of states, right. So, there are states and then there is one

central government. So, my headquarters is not in the national capital or in a state that is ruled by the ruling party. My location is in a state which is not ruled by the ruling party, It is ruled by a party that is an opposition party. For this party is against the ruling party in India. And the Indian constitution is such that law and order is a state subject. I mean the police cannot come and arrest me here. Even if the central government and the ruling party is very upset with you because the state government is responsible for law and order. So in terms of that, I am quite safe for the time being. This the state government is unlikely to arrest me for asking difficult questions to the central government. But my colleagues who are located in states which are ruled by the ruling party at the Centre, their risk levels are very high, so that is 1. And the second thing is my newspaper is regarded as a newspaper, which asks questions to those who are in power. So my editorial line is more anti central government. So it's not that I have to put some stories under the carpet to save my job. You get my point. So one my employers are not that pro government. That's one, and the 2nd is I am located in a state which is safer because it is not ruled by the government which is in power at the center.

Margot:

And you're writing for the CENSORED NEWSPAPER now, right? Have you ever written somewhere else that wasn't state protected?

Journalist 5:

No, I have been based in Calcutta. I have been working with the CENSORED NEWSPAPER. So I haven't worked outside my state ever. I mean, I have visited other states for my stories. I've been to Delhi and all other places, but since I work in the headquarters, I have always been based in Calcutta.

Margot:

And have you ever witnessed some of your colleagues practice self-censorship? Do you think that it's a thing that's living with journalists in India to self-censor?

Journalist 5:

It is, you know, I mean say you will not be mentioning the CENSORED NEWSPAPER either, right? So, you keep it completely Anonymous. I know someone who is based in a state which is run by the BJP. He's a friend of mine. Who he keeps talking about us assumes that state is ruled by the ruling party that is the BJP. So, he has told me that life is so difficult for him because he's always under the scanner. He doesn't get to meet the senior ministers in that state. He's always very wary of what he is writing. He is, because he thinks that if anything goes wrong, he may be put behind bars because he doesn't enjoy the immunity that I enjoy in my state. You know it is not always that someone is putting a gun on your temple to scare you, right? It is not always that someone is calling you up and saying that, look, you are not going to write this. You know the environment plays a role. If you see that that there are people feeling scared, if you see that you know fellow journalists in other states are getting arrested, if you see that your owner, the organization where you work, that owners or that management is very much aligned to the ruling party. Then self-censorship slowly starts creeping in into your system. So, it is not always evident,

you know. How I began my answers that we are still known as the biggest democracy in the world, but we do not have any dictatorial regime. We do not have any emergency or state of emergency in our country. So, on the face of it, it is a functional democracy. But. But the symptoms are indicative enough, are loud enough. To realize that press freedom is on the veil, is declined.

Margot:

I've spoken to some other journalists, and they told me about getting calls from people higher up to not publish something or to change certain words from an article, do you think that media organizations should play a bigger role in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 5:

Yeah, it depends on organization to organization. I remember, I cannot say, 4-5 years ago. I, I was in my state. And I went to cover the rally of the Prime Minister of India. So, the day before the rally. I went to visit the venue where the rally will take place the next day before the election time. And there, you know, I wanted to see the preparedness, the mood and all that. So, there was a very senior leader of the ruling party in India, he was overseeing those preparations. So, I went, and I introduced myself because he's not from my state. I went and I introduced myself and I said that yes, I'm the political editor of the CENSORED NEWSPAPER. And then, and he was surrounded by, say, around 150, 200 odd people. He said that 'I can talk to any paper in the country, but not with CENSORED NEWSPAPER. What do you think of yourself? What you are doing is not right', you know, I mean the manner in which he was attacking me. So, I tried to reasonably argue with it, "Sir", I said "that you can always have differences of opinion with whatever we write.". But you know, I mean I think we have the right to ask questions. You know that that is what we are doing. And if you think that there is any story which is wrong, which is false. Please take us to court. You write letters to the editor, there are very established norms on how to take on news, which is not right, but instead you guys never did that and again so there are 150 to 200 odd people around him. He was surrounded with his supporters because he was accusing me. He was abusing me like this. You're putting my, my, my security into threat, he said. And he said that that's what you deserve. So, I mean that is the kind of, you know, if that is not a threat then what you call a threat, right. So, things have become part of our life. The other part of your question was that the organization, you know, the organization needs to support journalists. I mean that's very clear. The editor, I mean the chief reporter, has to back his reporter. The chief reporter needs the backing from the editor, the editor needs the backing from the chief editor, and the chief editor needs the backing of the management. But you know, we do not live in a perfect world. So there are these news organizations and the owners are always driven by profit. But there is something that you have to understand. I'm talking more about the print media. The worst, you know, the economy of newspapers in India is something which is horribly wrong. You know, I mean say to give you an example, say even if you need to spend 5 rupees to print, I mean these are all indicative numbers, right. So, but yeah, let me give you the example in Indian rupees. So if you spend 15 Indian rupees to print a newspaper, the newspaper is sold at a price of 5 rupees So

that means the 10 there is a loss on the cover price of the product to the tune of 10 bucks. Right. So how do you recover? You recover it through advertisements. So in our country, the government is a huge, huge, huge advertiser, say my newspaper. It doesn't get any ads. It is among the top newspapers in the country. And we have a legitimate claim on the advertisement from the government. Because there are certain rules which define how advertisements would be distributed among papers on the basis of the readership and everything. But we do not get ads from the central government just because of the very strong position. You know that we take handling the affairs of the central government on the editorial line is very clear that we believe in secular and liberal India. But the political party in power in India, you know, it's politics revolves around very divisive politics. You know, I mean, they create division between the Hindus and the Muslims. I mean their religion is a very important element of their politics. We do not believe it though. We believe in the secular and plural India. So obviously these things happen. We ask questions, We believe that there should be press freedom. We believe that the Prime Minister should be answerable. That we have in the past. We have raised questions when Prime Minister lied to the people. We did not go to the extent of Washington Post, which kind of everyday captured you know all the lies peddled by Trump but several times in the past. We call it the plot right of the Prime Minister. So, all these things went against us.

Margot:

Then how would you characterize the relationship between the governments and the media in India?

Journalist 5:

Here one has to understand that Media is not a homogeneous entity. Media is a very heterogeneous entity. You cannot ask me a question on what the relationship between the media and the government in India is. There is a section of media with which the relationship is very nice and there is a section of media in India with which the relationship is very hostile. So, I cannot give you a very clear answer, but the problem is that this government is very sensitive towards criticism. They do not like to be criticized. Those who criticize become a target, so that is the problem.

Margot:

Have you ever experienced or witnessed instances where the government influenced your report?

Journalist 5:

I have never been in this situation where my report has been affected by anyone. Sorry, no. But I know there are several instances. There are television networks you know of and say they are running a story in the morning. That story vanishes in the afternoon because some phone calls come from higher ups and a story slips through the cracks.

Margot:

Are there any specific laws or regulations that you think have an impact on the work of journalists?

Journalist 5:

There are some laws, you know, recently there was a law which the government would want to bring in. You know, the government was very keen on bringing a fact checking tool from the government. So when you check the facts and then if it is found wrong, then those who produce that news could be prosecuted under the law. We have got IT Information Technology Act and all those acts but thank God that our Supreme Court in India, it struck down that proposal because that proposal is essentially wrong because the government cannot check facts about reports on that. Because then you can't have a situation where you arbitrate on issues which involve you. So, the Supreme Court struck it down.

Margot:

You said earlier, if that's not a threat, then I don't know what is. How prevalent do you think threats against journalists are? Because of course, I see a lot of reports about journalists in India being threatened, being attacked, being jailed even. But I've spoken to several journalists already and there are a lot of different opinions. I heard people say it's all lies from the Western media and then I've heard that it is very real and it's happening here.

Journalist 5:

I believe that if you ask me, the truth lies somewhere in between. And I would go more with those who say that there are threats. When you ask me about threat, I give you the answer even before you ask me the question. There's something called threat and there's something called threat perception that is when someone comments on your temple and say that "what they have to write this, or you can't write this", but there's some threat perception and matter what sits down to write our story. She thinks that if she is criticizing Mr. X or Mr. Y, there is a potential threat from the supporters of Mr. X and or Y So, in India, there is if you ask me, the threat element, maybe it is small or the threat perception element is high and it's getting higher.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media has something to do with that? Are the threats getting bigger because of that.

Journalist 5:

I mean, I won't. I won't link it. It is the state of politics because finally, whatever it is. The state of politics in the country determines the overall environment. The proliferation of digital media has much, much, much more say in the UK or in the US or other parts of the world where you live right. In India, there's still a large number of people who do not know about digital media, people who do not have access to digital media. In the US, the UK and the Western world, the digital media is like alive, vibrant, thriving. But journalists are not getting threats. You know, Trump is calling names, but journalists are not getting threats. They can ask tough questions. So, I do not link it to the digital media, I link it to the overall state of political affairs in the country in which the politics revolves around religion and nationalism, and Hinduism. And any question that you ask to the government is seen as something I would say if you asked a difficult question to the government, there's every possibility that you will be called anti national. So that is the problem

right. If you are a student of history you will know that how this hyper nationalism created so much of a problem in Europe in the 1930s and 40s and lot of people say that what's happening in India Today, that religion, nationalism, politics, they see a lot of parallels with what you know, what history books have taught us about what happened in Europe in the 1930s and 40s.

Margot:

Another journalist told me about Selfie points that prime minister Modi put up selfie points schemes. I can't find anything about that online. Is it a scheme format?

Journalist 5:

Most of the academy institutes, the top universities and institutes. What they have done is put up photographs and cut outs of Modi and that place is promoted as a selfie point. So, students go there and take selfies with prime minister Modi. Modi is probably biggest the case study that India has produced in the last 10 years. And I'm sure that one day, probably after 10-15 years, this case study will be taught in marketing school in Harvard. Because he markets everything. There is that. Modi's advisors and Modi's intensive marketing team. The single point agenda has been to create a cult around him, that he's like God, you know. He is visible anywhere, he's seen anywhere. His PR machinery, every day releases his photographs, you know, every day he's going to four places. He will be seen in four different dresses, you know. Even the Hollywood actresses are probably scared. As scared as is he is with regards to his dresses. The way he has done Southern programs. He is wearing different headgear. There are photographs. And he's like coming out with these videos, the videos that are these days used by television news networks about Prime Minister that gives the impression that he is a superhero. It's a kind of cult that they are trying to create around him and that's why all his selfie points are created. What do they really want. Even the poorest of the poor living in the remote corner of India. They get to see photographs. The plan is to give him a larger-than-life image of prime minister Modi. Is this the first time that the world is realizing something like this. No in 1930, 40s. These things were known right.

Margot:

Do you have a lot of international interactions in your job?

Journalist 5:

What do you know, how do you define international? I do not only write on politics, I also write on strategic affairs. Relation between India's eastern neighbors. We are nestled on this eastern side of the country also. So, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China, I have extensive interactions with them. I travel abroad, I was in Turkey, China, Oxfam called me for some conferences. I do have international interactions.

Margot:

How do your colleagues from other countries perceive press freedom in India?

Journalist 5:

I do not give any generalized answers right. And again, since you are a student of journalism, you know, and since I'm slightly more senior than you in your profession and as a friend, I can tell you

that, never do such generalization. I let me give you some 2-3 nice examples, I was in in Nepal on a conference in February and there I met a journalist from Pakistan. Life is so nice there. Journalists have so much freedom. They're having such a ball. They are asking questions in our country. We can't, if I say something, if I criticize the government or the army, I will put behind bars. But see, India is learning the bad lessons from Pakistan. There was a journalist from Bangladesh. There was someone from Nepal. He was expressing concern about what's happening in India. You know, I was in Turkey. From those countries, from the Gulf countries, they were also asking me what's happening in India, we keep reading about, you know how things are changing now. Now, the thing is, there is always an element of exaggeration. You know, I can figure that out from your question. You know you are you are looking for a headline. You know you are. You are repeatedly asking me whether I faced any threats or hushed up a story which I wanted to write, but because of the threats I did not write it. So everybody's looking for some headline. Because everybody wants to write something which is sexy, I fully understand. But you know that information which is appearing in international media about what's happening in India and the Indian media space, a major part of it is right. Maybe something is a bit of an exaggeration. But yes, press freedom has declined. The journalists feel intimidated there. He is a threat. Perception which looms large, and things are not good. That's how I can sum it up.

Margot:

How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India?

Journalist 5:

It's a very general question, you know, I mean. Again, I'm not an astrologer, you know. I can't talk about the future, but what I can tell you is that it all depends. The future of Indian journalism in India will be critically linked to the future of democracy in India. So that's what my answer is, from here on. If the state of Indian democracy is on the decline. Then obviously it will have a negative impact on journalism in India, but again, I'm an optimist. You know, I believe if something is going up, it has to come down. And if something is going down, it also has to go up. You know it's cyclical. It is a good time for Modi. It will go up, but it will come down. And obviously, those oppressed, and they will come to power one day and all the damages that were done to Indian democracy and Indian journalism will be undone. And this is a fantastic profession. Speak the truth. We are not truth. We reveal the truth, and we call bluff, and that is our job and to some extent we were not. We have not been able to do that in a free and fair way for some time. But I believe that things will improve. And the manner in which I believe that democracy, the ethos of democracy in the pluralistic India, is very deeply entrenched. So, I believe that there will be a rebound of democracy and there will be a rebound of good journalism in in India.

Journalist 6 (male)

Margot:

Is it OK for you if I record the interview?

Journalist 6:

Yeah, sure.

Margot:

I'm Margot. I don't know if you have any questions for me. I'm doing this for my master thesis at the KULeuven.

Journalist 6:

OK.

Margot:

I will just start asking you questions. If you're not comfortable answering something or if you have anything else to add, that's OK. Feel free to tell me.

Journalist 6:

Yeah.

Margot:

My first question is, how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 6:

Yes. See, legally there has not been many changes so far about how the press can function in India. But in practical terms it is. I think it is one of the biggest crises we have had. I have been a journalist from 1990, that is almost 34 years and in my entire career, I have never found a more trying time to be a journalist. It is not comparable to anything. We had an emergency in 1975, between the years 1975 and 1977. I was a child at that time, but I do remember what happened. The key difference was, then is that it was a declared emergency. It was very difficult to be a journalist, especially if you want to question the government and ask uncomfortable questions. On the other hand, if you are part of what the government calls nation-building, which is basically being reluctant to criticize the government, you can have a very smooth career. That's the key difference. If you are considered hostile against the government or if you were seen as criticizing the government's action. It will be very, it's very, very difficult to function in India as a journalist right now.

Margot:

What do you think are the key challenges for journalists when it comes to press freedom?

Journalist 6:

But in India our Statistical Institute is one of the best institutions in the country. Data was always valued, but for some reason there has been a death of government data. Suddenly it dried up. And what is coming out is not reliable. The biggest challenge as a professional journalist is to get access to reliable data, especially about unemployment data. We often must depend on one private agencies, though these instances are very good, I am not sure how far reaching they are as India is a very, very big country. At least these private agencies are bringing out some data. The government has been very reluctant to come up with that. This is a very big challenge to get access to reliable data, especially about unemployment data. We often must depend on private agencies. Though these instances are very good, I am not sure how far-reaching this data is, as

India is a very, very big country. At least these private agencies are bringing out some data. The government has been very reluctant to come out with that. This is a very big challenge. Second, some media houses have failed because of actions by government agencies because they criticized them. The commerce and or economics-related ministries and government departments like the income tax department and the Enforcement Directorate often target media companies that have been critical of the government's actions with searches and tax liability notices. For example, there is a group whose coverage during the second wave of COVID in India reported that several people, much more than what the government has admitted, have died. The coverage by this group included very aggressive coverage, and they actually carried photographs of bodies suspected to be COVID victims floating down the Ganges. It was one of the most shocking pictures in recent memory in India, perhaps since the Bhopal gas tragedy. Soon after this coverage, there was an income tax rate, and they were given a liability notice of around 700 crore. These kinds of intimidation tactics are often there. The third issue is the job security of journalists. There's a critical difference in India between the media owners, those who own the media, and those who work as journalists. Often, journalists' job security is closely linked to the political position they take. If an editor is very aggressive against the government, there's no guarantee that they will keep their job. So, job security is the third most important threat journalists face. Then, there is the threat of physical intimidation. Assault is there, especially for young women journalists. They have faced a lot of trolling and abuse online. Especially now with online space, women journalists are targeted for this. So, the worst you can imagine about these kinds of threats have increasingly been felt in India by several journalists.

Margot:

How would you characterize the relationship between the government and the media in India?

Journalist 6:

I think the best characterization has been done by Ravish Kumar, he is one of the most popular television anchors in India. He coined the term called Godi Media. Godi media is means in Hindi "lap" and its translation of Godi media would mean "lapdog media". Since 2016 or 2014, ever since the BJP, the Modi government came into power, media has been involved in large sections of the media. Especially the legacy media or what we call as the so-called mainstream media. Large media sections have become lap dogs or Godi media and there is a very vibrant online community is continuing the fight, continuing the crusade. But if the Modi government returns to power, I am not certain how long this freedom in the online space will exist. Already, there has been a bill that equates criticizing the government with criticizing the country. This is a very, very dangerous conflation. In a modern democracy, you cannot say that criticizing the government means criticizing the country. Both are different entities. The country is a much larger entity, and the government is just one wing of the country. But now, increasingly, efforts are being made to equate the government and the country. Journalists are often called anti-nationals, meaning that they stand against the interests of the country. This is a very dangerous phenomenon, and I fear that if the Modi government returns to power, they will tighten the screws on the online space as

well. Another important issue is that television licenses are renewed by the government after security clearance from the Interior Ministry, called the Union Home Ministry. This ministry has often been accused of taking arbitrary decisions to deny the renewal of licenses to channels critical of the government. If you are denied the license, you just go off air, which is like pulling the plug on a lifeline. This kind of concentration of power in the government's hands is concerning. At every step of the way, political media is under several controls. Print media and television journalists face pressure to self-censor, but often, it is the government that dictates terms. Online media has been much more vibrant and independent, but I am not sure how long that can continue.

Margot:

Have you ever witnessed or felt government influence in your work?

Journalist 6:

Yeah, but that is more in a very crude manner and not in a concentrated way. I have had one Union minister and the federal minister calling me up and abusing me because he felt as I was insulting him in a headline. But that is OK, that is nothing unique or new. It used to happen earlier. Also, individual ministers, individual politicians, they feel aggrieved and it's OK. Like personally I haven't felt more than that, but I have heard several accounts from editors who have faced threats. I don't want to name the minister because he's normal. There was a very strong perception in the first term of the Narendra Modi government that the Central Minister, a very influential Central minister, every day, apparently at 7:00 or 6:00, he used to call one of the most prominent newspapers in the country. Then he used to call the news bureau, the reporter and the chief of the reporter. And he used to suggest very politely what he thought were the most important news events of the day. So, it was considered an indirect way of telling these are the stories you should play the next day morning. He will obviously try to protect those news incidents that are favorable to the government as the most important. Those critical of the government, he will not mention. That is a signal that they should not reply, that they usually are buried somewhere deep inside the places and especially the opposition parties. And this was seen as a direct fallout because this call, so much so that this central minister used to be jokingly referred to as the bureau chief. There are several incidents such as this. Another very important newspaper published from the Capital, New Delhi, during the first term of the Narendra Modi government. There was a surge of mass, mob lynching, where people were being beaten to death because of the way they dressed or they the way prayed. When they spoke out about their identity, they were killed. This journalist at that newspaper started a series called Hate Tracker. Which used to list each and every incident of hate crime. That journalist, had returned from New York and taken up this assignment as the editor of this newspaper. Overnight, he suddenly disappeared, he just left, he just returned to New York after he was in India. So the suspicion is, he has not spoken about it or officially confirmed it, but the suspicion is that the government exerted pressure and he had to pay a price for daring to start that hate tracker. And he had to leave. He had to give up his job. There's another instance of the magazine called Outlook. Like I told you, during COVID and this

alleged COVID mismanagement is happening and is floating on, he had carried a cover story with the headline saying “missing in action”. Basically he said Narendra was there. They put a picture of Narendra Modi government up, then “the Modi government is missing in action. The government is not performing its function when it was needed most” and then again soon after that the editor, there had to become a new editor, for another magazine. When you correlate all these events it appears that there is a very, very strong government interference and meddling in the affairs of the newspaper. There are several instances like that, a number of instances. Personally, I have not faced too much of interference. That is probably because I am based in Calcutta. The regional party in power, is an anti BJP party. It's a politically credible place because there is some sort of installation or protection. I'm not sure what but I think that obviously has helped.

Margot:

And how prevalent do you think those threats against journalists are? Because I've already talked to a few other journalists and I've talked to a woman who was very pro-Modi and she told me “It's just Western media who write about threats against journalists in India. It's not real. Nothing is happening here”.

Journalist 6:

No, no, no, that is not correct at all. I can, for example tell you about someone getting trolled. The kind of harassment she faced at the hands of the government agency. She has publicly spoken about the trauma, the trauma she suffered, and she had taken medical help, counselling and other things to cope with this kind of abuse. A large number of journalists, not just one, you speak to any woman, most, I'm saying most women journalists, women who have been critical of the government who carry a critical report, their abuse is not limited, not confined to their professional expertise, it's plain expletives. It's filthy abuse it has nothing to do with journalism. It is not a critique or it is not the kind of thing, you can always criticize news reports. Journalists are not beyond criticism. You can always say that your facts are wrong. Your interpretation is wrong. There can be a debate. There can be very loud debate. There's no problem with that. This is pure hate. Unadulterated hate and filthy language and death threats. This is rape threats and threats to attack their parents and their children, their families. This is the worst form of harassment. I don't know which journalist told you that this is a figment of imagination. You ask them to tweet something against the government and wait for 5 minutes, within 10 minutes, 10-20 minutes. If the person has significant following within a few minutes, you can see how the person is being trolled, even the so-called pro government person. How they are getting trolled. You have to see to believe it that such a thing is happening in a democracy, they are considering themselves the world's largest democracy. It's absolutely not a figment of imagination. It's very, very real.

Margot:

Do you think that some of the journalists practice self-censorship because they're scared to get trolled or threatened ?

Journalist 6:

Of course, really that is another dangerous, very alarming thing, because more often than not, I have censored myself more several times. I belong to a print media, the traditional print media, which means the government can cancel our license if you step out of line. Too much, so often, I have censored myself. I have been censured for headlines that was disrespectful, particularly one headline, which the Press Council of India, the watchdog here, they deemed it disrespectful of the President of the country. So, I have been censored. I've been asked to apologize, to withdraw the headline, which I have not done, so that is pending in court. But that is fine, then at least they followed the process. But often what happens is that when people are on their own. I have no problem if the Press Council held the hearing and they follow the process and then they found me guilty. That is fine. That is how it should be, but often it doesn't happen. People censor themselves. Spike stories, bury stories, play down stories, kill stories because they think twice, thrice, four times. Is it OK to carry this? Should we do this? Is it worth it? This is all there is. Before 2014, I will give you an example. In 2011 there was an anti-India. So it was an anti-corruption movement, desperately against the then Congress led government, a gentleman called Anna Hazare led the moment at that moment. You should look at the newspapers of the national newspaper of the time every day, more than 10 pages, one newspaper devoted almost 14 pages, 10 pages and 30 stories. You know, every single day for the for the 10 days it continued. It is that kind of carpet-bombing coverage that media gave whereas last month, when the electoral bonds controversy, undoubtedly, one of the biggest scandals in any modern democracy, when the electoral bonds the controversy broke, you should see how the media treated it. They did cover it because you cannot obviously ignore such big news. But the enthusiasm that marked the 2011 anti-corruption movement, that is completely missing in the newspapers, I cannot recall any paper carrying more than two or three pages on this on a day, whereas the comparison was with that other movement was 14 pages, 10 pages every day. You cannot compare, so obviously something changed drastically between 2011 and now and the big change obviously is that the BJP has come to power. The Narendra Modi government has power. There's a lot of self-censorship happening.

Margot:

Have you always worked for a newspaper as a journalist?

Journalist 6:

Yeah, I worked only for newspapers, not for the television. No other media.

Margot:

Do you think that media organizations should pay a bigger part in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 6:

Unfortunately, Indian media organizations, they collaborate only to raise prices of the newspaper. They never collaborate or join in on journalism. They rarely stand by each other on these things. But the only thing I can tell you, after the electoral bonds controversy, there was a remarkable collaboration in the online space. I think 3 website portals called News Laundry, New Spirit and Scroll. They have pooled their resources and plus some 25 independent journalists. They have

pooled all their resources. They are carrying a series of stories called Project Electoral Bond. This is a very new experiment in India and I think that it is the right way forward. Unfortunately, I don't see that kind of cooperation and collaboration between journalists in the traditional media, because the traditional media still is, unlike In the West, very, very influential in India. It may not be as influential as it was, let's say 20 years ago, but it still is. It is a very significant presence that cannot be ignored. But I have to say that the print media is not fighting back as it should have been. Whereas online, the media is doing that. So, my hope is increasing. If the Narendra Modi government comes back to power, the only hope is the online media because I don't think the traditional print media will change anytime soon.

Margot:

Do you think that they will come back to power?

Journalist 6:

The Modi government, has been successful in creating impression that they've already won the election. The Prime Minister keeps speaking about the 1st 100 days of the new government and what the officers need to do and all that is completely unethical. The first day of voting is today and the voting is going to last almost two months. How can you presume, even before the 1st vote, that you are going to the winner? You are taking the electric voters for granted. But undoubtedly with the help of the media they have, the Modi government has been successful in creating an impression that they will come back to power. But I think it is unethical to do so, and until the last vote is counted, we should not declare anyone, nobody has the right to declare the election. Because it is the voter who decides.

Margot:

You talked about trolling earlier. Do you think that the rise of digital media has impacted press freedom?

Journalist 6:

No, some people say that a section of the online media has been responsible for fake news and you know all these things, but I don't subscribe to it. When a new media comes, obviously there will be some sort of chaos. There will be a little bit of unrest, there will be a little bit of uncivil behaviour, but I don't think it is related to the rise of digital media, the trolling and other things are being done by organized groups. They are not journalists, we had to be very clear about that, because we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. The media has nothing to do with this. Trolling is being done by organized groups, probably with the help of the political party. Sexual digital media can be blamed for fomenting communal tension, for creating and spreading fake news, wrong news. But I don't think that it has reached such an alarming state that where it needs to be cited. The government itself cites the thing to bring in more control, but I don't think that should be done with this. The online media space should be given as much freedom as possible. I think its threats are being exaggerate. But the trolling has nothing to do with the digital journalism, this trolling is being done by a vast army of hired thugs, who are digital thugs, who are being paid by organizations.

Margot:

Have you ever been trolled yourself?

Journalist 6:

No, I'm not on social media like I told you. One minister called me and abused me, then another minister once called and threatened. Then leaders sometimes called but that is part of the job. It is nothing new about it. It's always been the case with newspapers. You say it's part of the job. You factor in a certain element of criticism. See somebody calling you and criticizing you or accusing you about the content, of the story, I think that's OK. But calling somebody and saying they will be raped, their family will be attacked. That has nothing to do with journalism, it's a crime and it has to be treated as such.

Margot:

Are there any specific laws or regulations in India which have a significant impact on press freedom and the work of journalists?

Journalist 6:

Yeah, there is a new law here. There are three laws that are coming up. See, the government, whenever they bring in control, they always project it as something good is happening. So, 3 laws are going to come up. One is about digital privacy, then another, I think, is the information technology transmission of news and 3rd like I told you is about criticizing government, which is a debatable point. The Government says that is not the intention to harm journalism. So, these laws can harm the journalist and there is already one. It's an irony in America, the 1st amendment protected the freedom of press, in India, the 1st amendment put the Constitution in control. It happened during Jawaharlal Nehru state during the first parade, the 1st amendment to the Constitution. It actually put controls on the media. But then the intention was good in the sense. There was a there was a fear that the right wing media was spreading lies and trying to foment communal tension.

It was a very sensitive moment. Immediately after partition there were riots, ethnic strikes going on, several large parts of the country and the government did not want 1 publication associated with the Hindu right wing. The governments was afraid that it would foment this. It will create mischief and create trouble. So the First Amendment was brought in, which is OK because it suggested that newspaper should not spread hate, it should not spread disharmony, should not pit one country against the other. Unfortunately one word was introduced. It said that newspapers should not contribute to public disorder. So, nobody notices at that time, it was because the country was going through a very tumultuous phase and the good intention and the goodwill of the law was taken into consideration. There was not much opposed to the law that took place, but later, much later, when it got to it, then the law was being handled by people who wanted to misuse power. This 'public disorder' suddenly became a very, very big threat to journalism because it's very difficult to define public. The thing is that I can publish some news in my name and 20 people go to the street to protest and throw stones at the bus or at the shop then it becomes public disorder. I have nothing to do with it, I just published this report and that is what

happened. But then, technically, the government can say that because you published the report, there has been public disorder and action can be taken against the newspaper and the journalists. It can be misused, and this is a threat. Often journalists have been harassed citing this law. These three new laws are being examined by a committee now. The full final picture of the three laws are not clear. The Modi government has not introduced any new laws to harass, they are using what is already there, or rather, they are misusing what is already there.

Margot:

How do you personally navigate between the lines of responsible reporting and self-censorship?

Journalist 6:

In reporting we have to be absolutely clear about our facts, that's a very, very big responsibility, because if you carry a wrong story, even if your intentions may be good, but you cannot justify yourself, there's no leg for it to stand on. So often, almost, 75% of our time, is taken up in cross checking facts. Earlier it used to be design, how to improve the text of the copy and then the stress was given on that. But now, increasingly we are realizing that more and more stress is being shown to cross certain facts and verifying facts, and that avoiding facts, avoiding information, if we cannot confirm it, that would be wrong. And this is the most important. This is how you navigate. The newspaper I have been associated with has been known for its headlines, we have been very critical of the government through our headlines. It's been difficult for the government to pin us down, but I don't know for how long. We use images, sometimes we don't mention names, we show the identities through the images. Readers will get to know who we mean, but we don't directly mention names. The print media offers that kind of space, it is still there.

Margot:

Have you ever reported from another country than India?

Journalist 6:

Yeah, I have reported, but not regarding conflicts, so I have gone to some conferences. We have foreign correspondents; they do that.

Margot:

And how do your international interactions perceive the state of press freedom in India? How do they look at it?

Journalist 6:

I have not found a single journalist who is associated with the ones who are saying that things are rosy in India. They are very, very concerned about it, for India and for foreign journalists. Foreign journalists who work in India has become very, very difficult to function. They need special permits and needs are denied. They can't travel freely. They are working under heavy load and if they carry something negative, for example the BBC, they carried a documentary for a while in Indian. Their India office has nothing to do with that documentary. It is a separate unit in London which did it. But then there was a raid here in their office and so much so that for the first time in BBC history, BBC has pulled out. BBC has pulled out of it, they had created a subsidiary

company now called Collectivistic, for the first ever first time in the world. They're doing it to protect its employees, protect journalists and they're doing it as foreign media. I don't think it they have ever faced more tough times than in India now. If you're willing to praise the government, I'm sure there are, you won't face much harassment.

Margot:

I had a journalist talk to me about selfie points.

Journalist 6:

Those are the propagator tools by the government, yeah.

Margot:

And the way I understand it, those tools are being bought and put up with government money? It is still a little bit confusing for me.

Journalist 6:

Yeah, it being put up with government money, but then the government will say that the government never admits that their promoting an individual. They will say that they are promoting a scheme that has a social messaging in it. They will say it is a cleanliness program, the Prime Minister standing with a broom and cleaning it. They said that the objective is to spread awareness about this program. This kind of misuse of official machinery always happens. It's not new. But Mr. Modi is doing it at a large industrial scale. And as a journalist, I'm willing to even overlook this. This is OK. This is a harmless thing, but not certain other things I told you that people are being attacked and trolled.

Margot:

How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India?

Journalist 6:

I find it very bleak and grim, even if there is a change of government. I'm afraid that this government has put in a template that others can also follow. Those who want to control the media, by no means they are limited to the Narendra Modi government. Every political party has people like that who want to control the media, who want to misuse the media. So, I'm afraid a template has already been put in place. So even if a new government comes into place, I am sure they will try to use some of these tactics to harass the media. The only silver lining is in the Congress party's manifesto. They have promised very, very cogent and clear policies favouring freedom of media. It is often promises by a party when they are in opposition, when they come to power, they conveniently forget it. So, whether they will do it or not, but at least the intention I think as of now, the intention is there. But I am still very sceptical, and the problem is not always the government. I don't find the will among the media owners, most media owners, most journalists, ordinary journalists, the field journalists. I have no complaints against them, but they are not being allowed to function and there is no pushback from editors. There's no pushback from media owners to the government, which they can easily do because the media companies in India is very, very large. Some of the media community versus the government cannot do anything with it, but they have become one. Building collaborators with that, that is where the

danger is. You can always fight governments, but you cannot fight congress elections that do not want to fight.

Margot:

OK, I've asked you all my questions, but you're obviously a very outspoken, very interesting person. I don't know if there's anything you'd like to share with me?

Journalist 6:

No, I don't have anything else to say, but in case later if you want to ask something, you can send me a message. We can speak again. That's not a problem or if you want any clarification.

Journalist 6:

Will this be on record? Will you be quoting me by name?

Margot:

That's up to you. If you want to stay anonymous, that's not a problem.

Journalist 6:

No, I have no problem in being quoted, but in case I am being quoted, is it possible for you to send me the quotes? I'll just cross check once again if there are legal problems. If your policy allows that.

Margot:

So I recorded the interview now and then I can transcribe it, then I can send you that.

Journalist 6:

I'm just saying that in case I want to relax something or delete something. I say when you speak you often. I am not sure if I have said anything against the law of the country or something. If so I will then remove it. I will ask you to remove it. That's it.

Margot:

Yeah, no problem. I will send you the interview. I will type it out and then you can see it.

Journalist 6:

Then you can quote my designation, it is editor at large.

Margot:

Yes. OK. Thank you so much.

Journalist 6:

Thank you. Yeah, thank you. Best wishes.

Margot:

Yes, have a nice day. Bye.

Journalist 6:

Yes, thanks.

Journalist 7 (female)

Journalist 7:

Hi I'm sorry I didn't receive the link at all. I'm really sorry.

Margot:

Ohh no, that's OK, that's OK. I did. I did have the right e-mail, right?

Journalist 7:

I'm not sure. Yeah, you did, but there was 'WN' in front of it. I don't know what that was though.

Margot:

Hmm, that's so weird. I'm sorry that it's a little bit later now. I hope that isn't an inconvenience for you.

Journalist 7:

No, that's no problem. I'm OK.

Margot:

OK. Can I maybe start with asking to maybe introduce yourself a little like how old are you? I know that you're working for the Hindu, is that right? But that's about it.

Journalist 7:

So I'm 35. I work as a senior assistant editor with the Hindu. However, that's just a position. The primary work is that of journalism reporting. So I identify myself as a reporter first. And I have been a health journalist for close to 14 years now. I started my career in 2008 and since then I have been reporting on public health issues at the civic level. I have later graduated to reporting on the business side of the medicine. So the Pharmaceutical industry. You know when COVID happened I started two or three years of hardcore COVID reporting at an intersection of business, health, technology and policy. Because all of these three aspects in terms of COVID and health reporting were very important from business.

You would like to sort of understand how the business of drugs vaccines and, you know, diagnostics works from the angle of health technology, how technology contributes to, you know, big data and analysis contributed to understanding of COVID and then generally the use of health technology in the field. I mean the use of technology and field of health in terms of policy, it was so important to understand how regulations were being made during the pandemic and all these three aspects were bleeding into each other. However, once COVID receded, I joined The Hindu. So I was with the Hindu business line and briefly, during COVID, I was with the startup called the Ken, which is a subscription based business journalism website. There I did investigative long form pieces also, apart from COVID on, you know, food safety regulations around how junk food affects the Indian public and the variety of the other topics. In the Hindu, I'm mostly doing ground reports. So what happens is, you know, I travel to wherever there is a story, and I do stories across the spectrum. So I have done stories on rural mental health. I have done stories on social justice around, you know, how the Scheduled Caste and Tribe people are treated. Dalits, especially are treated in the Indian fabric. One of the recent stories I did in the light of the Gujarat elections involved you know, people who are self-professed custodians of the cow? Because the cow has become a very political. The animal has become a political symbol in the Indian political landscape at this point because it is considered a holy animal and, you know, there are these

custodians of cows, which are affiliated to you know, radical rights within Hindu organizations and are sort of clandestinely supported by the ruling party and how they were not letting the cow skimmers who were the members of the Scheduled Caste, do their work. In Rajkot, which is a city in Gujarat and I discovered during my reporting, that there is an entire industry of, you know, based on the bone of the cow. Which exists in the underbelly of the rural village. But you know, these people are not sort of recognized for the work they do, but sometimes their licenses are under threat. They're beaten up. There are these anti cow slaughter lower sections, which are slapped on them, they are alleged to, you know, be selling cow meat illegally. Cow would mean you know a male or a female cow. It could also mean, you know, a Buffalo because that comes under the realm of the definition of beef in India. So my work did expand a bit where I was also looking at social justice in in my current sort of assignments. And also gender. So yes, that's pretty much about it.

Margot:

OK. Very interesting. Very interesting. I will just start asking my questions. If there's something you're not comfortable answering, you can just tell me. That's OK. So my first question is how would you describe this current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 7:

So when you look at the rankings and you look at international reports, then it is definitely on an all-time low. Even you know in the latest report the improvement in the rank is not so much so I think it was 72 and then it was 73 and 72. I'm sure you must have looked that up as well. In terms of the report as such, right, which is which is published by international organizations. And then the other way to look at it would be from the lens of a journalist who is working in this situation in India.

And you know, we are scared. All the time. So we have to be very careful about the way we approach things, write things. Defamation, which is an archaic colonial law, that ranges back to, you know, the 1800s or the 1900s in India and was brought about by the British. Has not only been a threat now, but has been a threat since the time it was brought up. The main question here was that are we going to do a wave with defamation? Because if say for instance this colleague of mine, you could ask him about the defamation case that he faced, you know, so this lasted for 20 years and he fought that case. I think it just got over and there was a settlement of some sort. He had started off as a trainee reporter and now he is the editor in chief of some organization. It lasted for like 25 years. So the main question here also was the current government was, just like all other governments, was turning a blind eye to that. In the sense of doing away with the law of defamation.

You could look up why, you know it is redundant now in in this time, day and age. So the thing is when you look at press freedom. You could also look at you know how many journalists have been jailed in India, for whatever reasons. So one case that comes to my mind is the Hathras gang rape case. So Hathras is spelled as HATHRAS and you know, Hathras is a small village. It's rural town near Delhi, where a class girl was, you know, raped by the upper class men. And you

know, her body was forced to be burned overnight by the police because they wanted to destroy evidence that this happened. I think in the last two or three years this case has been sort of very important, very, very shocking now how that affected journalists who were at the field reporting on this case was. You know, I haven't been there, but I heard this from friends.

So when they were burning the body, some, some photojournalist was quickly taking photos so that you know, you could sort of report the fact they're destroying evidence, right? And then those journalists on the field were threatened. They were bullied. So the safety of women, I think normally of the victim, but that was a woman photographer. She was a photographer named Manisha Mondal from the print. I would also give her number to you. Right. So you know, like, you know, when you talk about press freedom and when you talk about gender and women, then what did she face that night?

The other incident that I think off was a reporter or a journalist, a South Indian journalist, from a news outlet in Kerala. What the police had done is they had created barriers around the village after that case and he was not allowed to enter. And then he was just picked up and put in jail for like no reason. So we started getting a little concerned about these instances also you could ask *Journalist 9* on the 5th because he had reporters at that time. So every time a reporter gets picked up or jailed, that is when his organization does stories on that. Right?

Margot:

Mhm.

Journalist 7:

So what I'm trying to do is because I've not directly been involved with these things, but maybe talking to me would rather form a base or from there you could ask leading questions to others about these incidences, right?

So in terms of jailing, again, if we were to see. How many reporters got jailed then you would see that number has gone down. It was eight. And then after that, I think I read this on my social media feed, somebody posted that that went down to four, which means that the four others got released. So then these people were saying that, you know, we should come to a point where none of our journalists should be in jail without, you know, like a legal reason. Because they were mostly. You know, they were being jailed and they were being stopped from doing their work. You know, it's not like they have some fraud cases against them or some like criminal complaints against them, so it's very easy to do that now.

And also what is happening is intimidation. So for intimidation I work in a big media company. So I might not feel that enough, but one aspect of press freedom is that you know there is always this preventive barrier in our minds when we when we write. Thinking about what would be the consequences, right. But I mean I would just say that journalists are also a bit lazy people. So, you know, opinion is one thing. So when you look at freedom of press you could also look at it from 2 aspects. One is factual reporting and the other is opinion.

I mean I could just go and write like whatever I feel. But what I feel is that I think reporters are not doing enough in terms of you know gathering proof putting in the time that they need to do

actually that because I don't think in the Hindu if I had a good story, nobody would stop me from doing it. In terms of consequences? It's not like you know anybody just for something that they've written, picked us up and put us in the jail or something. So either we are not doing intelligent stuff because we are not gathering attention from the government, negative or positive. But you know, if you look at websites like news laundry, if you look at Scroll they are more direct in their attack on the government they are critical, right? And so that is a new breed of startups. And news laundry, for instance, got a lot of income tax rates, income tax notices. So again, that's something that you could ask *Journalist 9* about because at my level, in my organization, I wouldn't know.

Even if my organization is facing any real threat, because it's a legacy organization, there are thousands of people working, somebody else would be dealing with those not directly me. I mean, I have never been sort of stopped from doing my work. Yeah, maybe I feel that in terms of access, people have stopped talking. People have people are not as eager to meet. For instance, in ministries. If you look at press freedom that way, then you file right to Information Act applications under RTI to seek information. You are denied information on counts many counts, right? So I find that a little ridiculous. If you were to approach freedom from the point of view your access, then that's definitely. Not as great as it used to be. But yeah, we have to push and we have to sort of get information from, not like within the ministry, but from the outside. You have to go on LinkedIn, you have to do your sourcing you have to sort of go and see, you know like. Who would be ready to talk to? Just like I'm talking to you, right. So it's the same thing and so you just need to know where to look. And then probably get access to documents from somewhere and then do the story. But then I think that's always been the problem. I mean it's never easy to do an investigative story.

Margot:

And do you yourself feel a difference in press freedom from where you started your career and right now?

Journalist 7:

So for me, I think it's a-it's a barrier. It's a mental barrier, right? Personally. I have always pushed against the tide, so I haven't faced an incident where my press freedom has been curbed and you would find less people like that, but if you were to talk to journalists who went to jail for whatever flimsy reason, and there have been many, I mean, as I mentioned. So if you just look them up then they would be able to explain that better.

Margot:

Yes, that would be very helpful.

Journalist 7:

Try to do that because, they will not be difficult to find.

Margot:

Because I've contacted a lot of people already and read a lot of things online, but I haven't talked to someone who went to jail. I did talk to another journalist. Who was very controversial and had

very controversial opinions. She told me no journalist are in jail. It's all Western media. It's not real.

Journalist 7:

Well, that's ridiculous. So what I'm saying is I just Googled 'Indian journalist jail', you know. That's it. Yeah. So why don't you just note down some names, right? So what I'm going to do is I'm going to quickly put some names in the chat.

Margot:

Oh yeah, that's fine. Thank you.

Journalist 7:

I can actually vouch for these people who went to jail because, you know, that's something that we read in the newspaper every day. Let me actually also share some news articles with you, some reading first. So there's this person called Siddique Kappan.

Margot:

Ah yes, I see.

Journalist 7:

OK. Then there is Mandeep Punia. I think I have his number. I've also met him. So Siddique happens to be related to Hathras case. I'll also give you the reference for which off these people went to jail. See you must understand that cases of you know, gender violence for instance, like the Hathras case was a very sensitive case that the journalists were covering. So when you look at the incident, sometimes you'll try and understand how lives of journalists are shaped around that one incident and they were collateral damage.

So another such incident that comes to my mind is the farmers protest. So the farmers agitation in India has been, you know, very prominent. They've been blocking borders, drones have dropped, tear gas shells on them all. When journalists go to these fields, to the state borders where they're protesting. They also get sort of caught up in a lot of these agitations. They get bent up by police. You know, there is more violence, that happens. So Mandeep Punia, he was in the farmers protest. He's a freelance journalist based in Haryana. I'll pass you his number. He's a 29 year old person. He was arrested by Delhi Police during the farmers protest and he was sent to Tihar Jail for 14 days. So you know, you could talk to him and you could find out. It's so ridiculous. Right. Like he was covering the protest. But you know, He was just picked up and he was jailed.

Margot:

Wow.

Journalist 7:

Siddique Kappan is a journalist from Kerala who was imprisoned in 2020. You know, these are just the all of this has happened in the past three years, right? The unlawful Activities Prevention Act, does the UPA Act now? You have to also study the UPA act because they just slap this act on anyone because it's easy to arrest journalists if you if you slap this act. But these acts are actually, you know, for more serious crimes like terrorism, etc. So then you actually equating journalists to terrorists, that's what's happening.

He was arrested while he was on his way to Hathras. I just told you about the incident to report on a story of a 19 year old Dalit woman who died after being allegedly gang raped by four men. So you could talk to him and you could find out. Why did they put you in jail? Like I still don't understand. You know, probably also get first information reports which are FIRs and charge sheet always ask for charge sheets. So when you ask these people for charge sheets, everything will be written about their case in that. For your thesis.

Margot:

OK. Thank you. Thank you.

Journalist 7:

And also one more person of importance is Gautam Navlakha. So Gautam Navlakha just got released. He's also a journalist. So according to the CPJ, which is the Center for protection of journalists in India, 7 journalists were imprisoned. Jailed in India, which is Asia has highest behind bars. That's what CPJ said in December 2022. So CPC's annual prison reports mentioned Iran, China, Myanmar, Turkey, and Belarus as the worst offenders. And the number of journalists jailed for doing their job has touched a record high this year, seeing a jump of 20% as compared to last year, with the tally of 323, according to the annual prison census by the Committee to Protect Journalists India to continue to remain at a record high for the 2nd consecutive year, with seven journalists behind bars. Including six charged with stringent UPA.

Margot:

Okay.

Journalist 7:

So Asif Sultan Siddiqi, Japan Gautam Navlakha, Manandhar, Sajjad Gul, Fahad Shah and Rupesh Kumar Singh. I know the stories of Siddiqi Kapan. I know the story of Gautam Navlakha. And I also know the story of Mandeep Punia. So you could get numbers of all of them.

Margot:

Thank you so much .

Journalist 7:

These (link in the zoomchat) are stories from December 2022, and there's also an interview of Siddiqi Kappan. He spent 800 days in jail. 800 days in jail for I don't know what reason. So you know the News Laundry has an entire section on Siddiqi. Hmm, some of them are Hindi, some, but you could just see his video interviews and all of that.

Margot:

Thank you.

Journalist 7:

And similarly you could run more such searches on individual names and see what comes up for you.

Margot:

OK. Thank you. Have you yourself ever experienced like a phone call saying not to publish something or the fear of facing jail yourself.

Journalist 7:

Not jail but I mean, I've gotten three legal notices in my career.

Margot:

OK.

Journalist 7:

So it's very interesting, right? Press freedom can be hindered by multiple sort of agencies. So you know all of these people that I was talking about are the political agencies or the police or the legislature, the judiciary, they are the ones who are involved in this. And so, you know, when you talk about judiciary going the legal notice way is always sort of very interesting for corporates.

I mean I have faced bullying by corporates, by companies because I was also writing on the business of pharmaceutical. So I will share two reading materials with you for which I got legal notices. But, what happens a lot of time is like when you have enough proof, when somebody's trying to send you a legal notice to intimidate you and your company. You know why we think it's flimsy and frivolous is because we are 70-80% sure that this case is not going to go ahead because they just did it because they were offended or that they were sort of, you know, thinking that we sort of defaming them or their brand or whatever. Despite the fact that they're taken due care of asking them to respond, given them enough time to respond, which is 48 hours. And all of that and they themselves were involved in unethical or malicious, sort of activities of criminal intent. And I will, I will share those stories with you.

There was one which had gotten very early in my career in 2011 when I had not taken the name of the hospital, but there was this private hospital and in my story I had said that, you know, when it comes to eye transplants. You know, scooping out the eyeball of the patient after the patient has died, then you know the municipal hospital in that facility in Bombay, there was a private hospital as well. Now, this municipal hospital did not have the apparatus to process the eyeball, so they would send the eyeballs to this other hospital. But then that that hospital would do it for free for them, but they would just keep one eyeball with them. That used to sort of interfere with the way the waiting list for eye transplants works. Because if you're richer, then you can jump the queue and you can get an eye earlier than you know, the one who doesn't have that much money to shell out. So there were a lot of shady things happening? Yeah. So I got a legal notice from that trust. which was running that private hospitalization I had just suggested something because also, you know, I was really scared that I didn't have enough proof, right? But then it didn't go forward because I had not named them.

So that was one then the other one was, when I was doing this one story on in vitro fertilization company. And there's this one company called Christa IVF. So it came up in a new way in Delhi and other parts of India. And there were unethical activities happening of sex selection in the previous avatar or the previous version of this company, which ran in another name. And there was actually this, there were this court cases, so the founder was actually charged under, you know, sex selection. I went into the court, I saw all the papers, I got all the papers. I also tried and understand how he had formulated his company and what sort of integrity there was and I wrote

that in quite a bit of detail. So his company sent a very big legal notice and in that legal notice, every sentence that I had written was. Sort of picked up and questioned every sentence of mine in that story, which is like a 2000 word story, you know and yeah, I guess. I mean, my company did counter it. I formed a reply and I sent it in again. They never took it to court and that was the 2nd instance.

In the third instance I was doing this story on oils, vegetable edible oils that you use in cooking. Adani was involved in it. So Adani, I hope you've heard of this, this corporate entity in India. So there are like two big corporate entities in India, which the current government has been favoring Ambani and Adani.

Margot:

Yes.

Journalist 7:

So Ambani is ran reliance and Adani's ran, like a host. They visit their own ports, they have, you know, like interests in cooking oil, etcetera. In my story it so happened that I had just mentioned that the way cooking oil is refined, you know that process is a process which is deemed to be harmful for human consumption? Because certain, you know material that they use in processing the cooking oil are carcinogenic. They can cause cancer. I had mentioned Adani Wilmar in the branding section of the story where I had said that they don't label their cooking oils as healthy and you know, they claim it as that they sort of just take that healthy thing in under the name under the intellectual property and then in fine print, they will say that this does not. The name does not reveal the true nature of the product. Right. So I so I don't know why like they got really pissed and they were like this story. It's not doing well for our brand and they took it upon themselves. But in my story, I'd never said that Adani Wilmar's cooking oil is causing cancer. That's not what I had said. So sometimes what happens is, uh. Things do get misconstrued during, you know, editing or you are just putting in that brand name in some other context, but the next thing I know is I get a legal notice from Adani Wilmar saying maybe, you know, we are not comfortable being a part of this story. I never asked them to be a part of this story, but the label was for everyone to see in the markets, right?

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

Also Nestlé as a company has been sort of, you know, been involved in a lot of these unethical practices of, you know, putting more sugar in baby foods at their shelves. They are sort of selling in India. Guardian had done a whole story on that very recently. Right. So I've also written a lot on baby food, infant milk formula, and all of that, but I wouldn't say I mean, they never threatened me like that, but they were definitely like pissed. Danone is another company I had written about they were also pissed and they would not talk about it. They would not give their version. But I think because they are multinational companies, they didn't come down to very crude sort of

threatening tactics. So that has not happen. But uh. But yeah, I mean obviously if they send you a legal notice then you know you get a little worried about what's going to happen next.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

Yeah, yeah, that did happen to me so I, I mean, I'm more qualified to tell you about this from. A corporate perspective, which I did.

Margot:

Have you ever been trolled online? Because I read a lot about trolling in India. Have you ever experienced that?

Journalist 7:

Ohh yeah so. Yeah, I mean, we all do. But uh. So that's why what I did is, I had an anonymous Twitter account for the longest time and I also had a display picture of a man on my Twitter. Not a photo, but it was like. Some art form, right? Because people thought that I was a man or something of that sort. And I really didn't care so much about social media or being very open with it.

Margot:

Oh yeah.

Journalist 7:

I mean, I was open, open with opinions, but I felt more comfortable with being open, with opinions, anonymously for a very long time. But you should also interview for trolling Neha Dixit and also Vijeta Singh.

I think she had her nudes shared on the social media. I mean, her face shared on some nude figures, something of that sort. I mean, the nude figures were cartoons. They were some sort of illustrations.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

But her face was super imposed on those cartoon illustrations. She also teaches journalism. One of these universities, it's Ashoka. So she's on the faculty and she's an author as well. And Vijeta Singh covers internal security in The Hindu where I work. Right, so also because I think you should talk to Vijeta about trolling because. You know, she is very open with her sensitivity. So everybody gets like, you know, very politically charged up when they read something and they just come behind her. She recently had an entire army of trolls unleashed on her for something.

Yeah, sure, sure. So I I think Neha and Vijeta and Swati (*Chatuverdi I am troll*) would be like great people to talk to for trolling, Neha has also faced a lot as a woman again, all of them. I think Neha is someone who's faced these threats as a woman and she's never been to jail. But she's been threatened a lot.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

They're all very good journalists and Swati, of course, she's written this book.

Margot:

Have you ever felt any pressure for self-censorship because of this?

Journalist 7:

No, I mean, I wouldn't know. I mean I think the only censorship I've faced is because I didn't have the ability to go out and get that story.

Margot:

Mm-hmm.

Journalist 7:

I have felt unsafe in certain situations as a woman, because, I mean, I was going to cover stories of drug mafia in Punjab and I was talking to policemen who were trying to curb the drug addiction problem in Punjab. It's a very big problem, but were being persecuted for doing their job. So in that time like for seven days when I was reporting I felt like somebody could come after me as well because I was trying to get to the root of it and there were pharmaceutical companies involved.

Margot:

Mhm.

Journalist 7:

Thankfully nothing happened. I sometimes feel like you should know when to pull out of the field. When you're going on the field and you're reporting on the story and, you know, I haven't sort of pushed my limits. I mean, I did. But then I just kind of, you know, I gathered intuition to just pull out. I just pull out of the field. But yeah, I mean feeling unsafe as a woman when you are covering controversial stories is just like another level of risk.

Margot:

And how do you see that evolving in the future?

Journalist 7:

In the future if these chances to report on stories come up. I mean, I wouldn't want to take these risks repeatedly. If you know where the story takes you, maybe you know you did a story on drug mafia and Punjab and you don't want to do it again, right? I mean, maybe you don't want to revisit it.

Margot:

Mhm.

Journalist 7:

You know, because it's hard. So in the future you just kind of rethink your options, which would mean that if you didn't have assurance of safety by your organization or I mean that's the biggest problem we faced it during even 2611 terror attacks. If you look up in Bombay. You know, this

was the time when terrorists were just kind of shooting in great frenzy, do you know the Taj Mahal, the Taj Hotel attacks in Bombay that happened?

Margot:

Yes, I've read about it.

Journalist 7:

There was this called. Ajmal Kasab was caught alive, so you know, so that was a time in 2008 when. You had to go out on the road and you had to sort of report on these attacks, but you know, were we given those bulletproof vests? No. We never imagined that Bombay would be caught up in a terrorist situation? And how would journalists react in that situation?

I felt unsafe when I went into a village and it was getting really dark. And you know, this is about the Uttar Pradesh it's a state in India. Which is called the Badlands, side of India. So this is in another part of India and I mean I'm talking to you from Uttar Pradesh right now. It's just that I'm sitting in an urban situation and I mean, you know, few sort of. 100 kilometers from there, the villages and Hathras is also a recent rape case that happened there. So what happens is I went there with a woman photographer so we were two women and at night, you know, we were in our hotel and we could hear gunshots, you know, from the fields in the background. And sometimes what happens is during weddings, this is their way of celebrating, right. They will just fire gunshots in the air.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

To celebrate the wedding, you know, so that's the culture somewhere. How does that work? So there was this single road and our driver was asked by some of these village people if we are dance women, if we are dancers. Because it was election time and some dancers were coming into that village and the politicians had called these dancers and all the other women were in Wales. But the dancers were going to like, you know, *entertain* the men in the village and it was very crude form of ourselves. We were referred to in the *chanas*. Now *chanas* would mean dancers, right? So these men asked our drivers if you know, like, that's how they referred to us.

Margot:

Mhm.

Journalist 7:

So our driver came to us and said these men are very shady and, you know, you could get ambushed in sugar cane fields or, you know, you could get like, raped or whatever. Like, you know, there's nothing to say and you know, how is our puny driver going to protect us? So we were like, oh, it's already getting dark. So we should just kind of push off. And there was another instance in that same village.

This this was a village in Shamli district. So some political workers who were nice to us told us that one woman journalist was locked up in a room for like 2-3 days and her camera was trashed. So you know, if you are stuck in such a situation, and again that was also election time. So that

was in 2017. It was the up state elections. Now again 2024, you're looking at a national election here. So have to go and report on issues of gender based violence and caste based violence because these are two very, very real issues in Indian villages and in situations apart from all the other madness that happens in India, which is always on a multiple level because every day there are like 20 pieces of news breaking in each city or village. Sometimes it's very hard to keep pace with things that happen here and at what level they happen. So as a woman you're like, what about the future? Would I want to do that again? Like, would I want to go to that village again? Then I would say I don't want to, right?

Margot:

Mm-hmm.

Journalist 7:

Safety is actually a major concern. Physical safety of journalists, physical safety of women journalists particularly. I mean you cannot blindly trust people to have a good heart.

Margot:

Yeah. Yeah.

Journalist 7:

Especially in India and especially like you can't take those kind of risks. So for that you could also talk to so for instance, Ellen Barry, right? So Ellen Barry was former bureau chief of New York Times. In India, South Asia. She has done a very beautiful story. She went into the village and she did the story. It's actually a very impressive piece of journalism. I'll just share this one piece that she did, how to get away with murder in small town India. In 2017. And so this is a Nieman storyboard, and her piece is hyperlinked in this Nieman story.

Margot:

OK. Thank you.

Journalist 7:

Maybe. Maybe you could write her. I don't know if she respond.

Margot:

I can try.

Journalist 7:

Yeah, you could. I mean, she's lovely and you could take a perspective as a foreign woman journalist in India on press freedom.

Margot:

Mm-hmm.

Journalist 7:

How hard it is for her to go on doing her work. And how she did this story? And she'll always find I mean, whenever you talk to me or these other women and you'll, you'll always find that gender lens and focus in your essay.

Margot:

Yes, I've noticed that because I've talked to and men and women and both stories are very different. The men are always like: I'm not scared of the social threats. I'll be scared when they're at my front door. But it's a totally different story with the women.

Journalist 7:

So you're saying that the men are saying that the social threats don't scare them, but that women do?

Margot:

Yeah, yeah.

Journalist 7:

Yeah, because I think centuries of suppression makes us such an easy target, right? Like they always have to watch our back. It's sad.

Margot:

Mhm.

Journalist 7:

Wherever we go. Yeah, I mean, yeah. I mean, for whatever it's worth. Every time I've gone out, I have felt unsafe. But you know, I mean, we still keep doing our jobs, right?

My family was also always wondering, you know, what does this girl do and why does she go to these places alone? What's up with her? And I mean, is it like we want to go and put ourselves in danger? Like, are we walking into some sort of a dangerous situation? It's something that we always have to ask ourselves when we're going off alone, you know, in the field, for a story and that happens quite often.

I mean for me, like in terms of ground reports like almost every month. But not all situations are dangerous. I often now shortened my work trip. So for instance, if it was a week and I'd be like, oh, if this gets done in. 2-3 days. Then I would just come back.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 7:

Yeah, but now there has to be someone else. When you start your career, you are like very, very invested in what you're doing. So the next generation of reporters also has to be ready to, you know, start investing themselves in ground reports. And there are people who do that. Everybody does their work according to their individual energies and interests and their interest to dig deeper into a story. Or, you know, be satisfied with everything that you've got. You know, you can't, like, cut corners when you're doing ground reporting, because you need to have all your facts in place, you know all the names, all the ages, all the facts, all the documents, everything.

Margot:

OK. Thank you. I think I have an answer to all my questions. I'd love it if you can give some of your contacts. Thank you so much for all the information. Really it will really help a lot. I'm just trying to save the chat now.

Journalist 7:

Yeah, no problem. Take your time. And why don't you just go through my conversation? Everything else, all your notes. And why don't you send me a WhatsApp asking me for specific numbers of people, right? And I'll share contacts with you.

Margot:

Yeah. Yeah, that's perfect. Thank you. So thank you so much for your time and I will be texting you.

Journalist 8 (male)

Margot:

Hi. Is it OK for you if I record the interview?

Journalist 8:

Yes

Margot:

OK, could you maybe start with introducing yourself? Because I know you're a journalist , but that's about it.

Journalist 8:

My name is CENSORED. I've been working in Delhi for the last 30 years. In 1995 I have joined the Delhi and Hindi newspaper as a journalist, basically a Hindi newspaper correspondent. Now I'm working with a daily newspaper called Danik Bhaskar. Dhanik Bhaskar is India's largest Hindi newspaper, publishing from 12 estates and 66 editions. Before that I worked with India Today and ETV, Electronic television, ETV. I was working in Delhi with many newspapers and television channels too. So it's almost 29 years I've spent in Delhi in reporting.

Margot:

That's a lot of experience.

Journalist 8:

Yeah.

Margot:

So I will start firing my questions. If there's anything you're not comfortable answering, you can just tell me. That's fine.

Journalist 8:

OK.

Margot:

So my first question: How would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 8:

Press freedom in India.

Margot:

Yes.

Journalist 8:

In these days.

Margot:

Hmm.

Journalist 8:

Now this is, you know, very great question, very complicated question as far as India is concerned. Because it's the largest democracy and oldest democracy, India is the largest and oldest democracy in the world. So it means freedom. It existed in our blood. We are freedom flooding people.

My experience is that you know, as a journalist. If you are neutral, not biased, if you don't have any opinion. You are going to report what you are saying and thinking. Then freedom of expression or freedom in journalism is there. But in the last 10 years when Modi became Prime Minister of our country.

There's policy, every policy. It really defined or it's basically reoriented the system. So in India there is a system. If you are a reporter, I am talking about national reporter, National Bureau, not local reporting or local press. You are going to a ministry. There is a media cell, PR department. You show your ID, you go there. Talk to concerned officer and get information and then you can write whatever you want to write OK. But earlier it was possible for me to... Suppose if you go to the Railway Department in Indian Railway. You are not a PR. You are not in a media cell of railway. You are an officer, an officer or engineer, whatever. So I can go there. I talk to you. I come to you. Get information. Come to my office. Write a story. Even the media itself didn't know what was happening, who met whom and what. But now there is this, you know, standard rule, that journalist are allowed to come to the ministry, sit in a media cell, talk to both the right person or right media person, government media officers and come back if they want to go beyond that. This is the prior information. It's a grey area, that is, you know, a speed breaker of freedom of media.

If you are an officer, if you give me an appointment and if I write something bad is happening in a railway. Then you may be grilled by the government authority. Who was right? So the basic thing is my source is, you know, cut the size. So this is a challenge, but my point of view is that the government can do this.

The real challenge for journalists is the job, where you have to go you'll find many difficulties, but as far as writing is concerned. There is no, you know, there is no limitation. You can write whatever you want. Suppose if the GST came. The government has to do with GST, but I have Article 370. In that time, many journalists, including me, write in favor or write against your point of view, but no government official had told any reporter 'why you are writing this' and 'why you are doing this'. You can write, you can write whatever you want to write it may be against the against the government, it may be in favor of the government. You can write so this freedom is there. This freedom is there. I have freedom. I have to decide.

Now the other thing is perception.. Freedom is also caused by our bosses sometimes, by media organizations. Because. In all these years there are senior journalists. Some are left oriented,

some are, very few, are right oriented, some are central oriented, but they are not, you know, free of mindset, free of a political ideology, they maybe not be a supporter of Congress or BJP or some other party. But they are allowing it. So when they are editor, if they assign you a report, OK go and write on the BJP or write on Congress.

So what is happening in that organization? You are writing that? No, no, no, no. They don't like that. So now my question is who is responsible for, who is creator of this speech, the journalist himself? Or the government? If your boss dilutes your story. Then who will be responsible? If the government is saying no and the editor of some newspaper or some news channel is like 'that's my friend' or 'it's aligned to my ideology', they can intervene there. This is a, you know, a natural thing.

So in these days in the last 60-70 years in India, this is my personal view. You know what I have seen in lots of journalists that are left who say: 'No, no, no, no, no. Right winger is not good. Right winger is not good'. In a sense they brainwashed you. Now you are a tool for him. Sometimes. Some may come. Suppose they are supporting some leaders or some party or some ideology. OK, you are writing it according to them. Then suddenly, he got in a fight or there was a bad relationship occurred between that great editor and leader.

Then suddenly you'll have to write a negative story. So this is what's happening. The big story or a big policy matter that was going to be announced in the future, the government official or some leaders, they selectively link that story to their favorite journalists or media organization. But after 10 years on mobilizing the Prime Minister, they stopped this fact. That this time it means you are small. It doesn't matter if your organization is small or your organization is big. They call you same time. They're given the same information via tutor or via mail or via WhatsApp. Whatever. So selective leakage was there. Now it's stopped. So now the experienced journalists like 10 years-15 years, they are very confused. They are very confused. Because they are saying that what I am writing is good. No government official has the *thing*, but they warned me why? Why are you doing this and that? But at the same time, depending on my editor or my boss, they diluted by my story. So the perception is gone that the government has controlled the media organization. But as my organization is concerned, or my previous organization in India Today. I was never told to not go with a story by my editor or my boss. So I think there is this perception that in India, freedom of press is cursed. This is not a curse. This is reshaping again. This is reshaping again because for 40-50-60 years there were some aligned editors, aligned organizations with the government or something. But in between there are some journalists there are, you know, 60%, 70% that are very neutral. So they don't have any problem. But there is a clear cut indication or indication by statement. You can criticize government policy. You are free to criticize, but don't be personal. You can say the Prime Minister of India is going to lose or not very good leader. You can write this. But whenever you write about his personal life. He's married or not married? No, no, no. Don't cross the limit. There should be limitations and there was, you know? The second party, there was many proposal from media organization and all.

In fact, you know, they approached the government, dynamic media organization, approached the government they are saying. There should be guidelines for media persons also media organizations. You have a mobile phone and you are traveling one place to another place you see between there was a, you know, collapse of base or some cyclone or whatever you shoot it on mobile now you are spreading it on WhatsApp, so you are a journalist. What?

There are many YouTubers. 'I lost my job, I'll start my YouTube channel.' There should be a guide on who is a journalist, how experienced, how much experience they need. What they write, why they are writing this. But this time the entry of a journalist is important to the ministry, we have a press PIB card press accreditation card. In earlier days it was just showing my card, entering in any ministry. Here they are, meet up with them. And now this is restricted, no? Your media welcome in this ministry. Go to media cell, check there and there etc.

Margot:

Keeping that in mind what do you think the key challenges are for journalists in India concerning press freedom?

Journalist 8:

Challenges? Key challenges.? Yeah, OK. There are three key challenges for media. The first challenge is each journalist needs to think. Before you join journalism you need to think for yourself. In following each and every step of journalism. Is it moral, immoral, are there malpractices? Is what I am saying, as a journalist, unbiased. So when you are going to a foreign assignment, your mind is clear. OK.

The second challenge is. In the last decade or 15-20 years. There are many, you know, bad things have happened because journalists, some journalists, have taken some bribe, some type of favor from the government or any industry. So then they are very unserious about it. They'll say 'go sit, I'll write' So they did not do their.. How do you say? Their duty properly? Establish your reputation again. This is a challenge for every journalist in India. Establish a reputation, establish the reputation of a journalist. Your mind should be clear. Then the other thing. Maybe you are going to write something. Suppose that there is a story in a Hindu-Muslim area, right? If you are going there to cover that incident. Just go, cover, come back and write whatever you want to write. If you are going there and you become part of any ideology. If you feel like Muslim has done wrong or Hindu has done wrong. Then you are in danger. You may become a victim.

The third thing is now. There are restrictions, but after all, you are a citizen of your country. So the rules should be followed. Rules will be followed. Now the government has, the new ministry has, put out a rule that says don't write any story without consulting or without taking proper response from the ministry. It could damage the relationship between your friendly countries. Suppose if I write a story that hurts Belgium, but before writing my story, I have to go through the ministry. So there is this type of restriction there. But our government has, you know, established these rules. So being a citizen of the country, I have to face this rule, but that is contradictory to journalism. But these are the rules you have to follow. So it's that type of challenge. How do you tackle this, how do you tackle this?

So to go back to when I began my talk. Your mind should be clear. There is no restriction, but there are some, some, you know. When you speak loudly on television channel or radio. That is OK, but when you come to a platform that is for or against the government, you become a party. So you are visible. If there is a platform where you come and criticize this government or that government regularly. The government is watching that, OK, for example CENSORED is criticizing me everywhere, every platform. So his writing is out.'

Margot:

I was wondering, because you've been a journalist for so long, has your writing or your process to write something changed over the years?

Journalist 8:

No, it hasn't. It was improved. It is improving day by day, but not changed. My point of view is what I have seen. If you are selectively targeting something, then there is a problem, but suppose, there was a fire incident in Gujarat or in Delhi between four or five days where many children were burned, some are injured. So every news channel, every house are criticizing the state government, Everyone is right and you can see it on the internet also. Everyone is writing there, but your question is concerned to press freedom. So I think this question belongs to, you know, government policy. What's concerning, our government, the state government, is there. BJP ruled or Congress ruled or any other party ruled. If there is a fire incident. There is a rape incident, any crime or anything bad or whatever. If you were writing or criticizing that particular government? No problem. But there is a very interesting thing. Very interesting thing, In India, there is a state called Manipur. You know Manipur? It's a state in India. You might hear or read about that. There was violence on women, that is BJP ruled state. So every media house, those in favor of BJP also. Those are against the government or parties or the state government should be removed. Article 356. Evoke the state governments would be replaced because they are unable to control the situation. Ah. So this is a demand from media. The government is pondering. That Manipur government was elected by people.

Margot:

Sorry?

Journalist 8:

The Government of Manipur is elected by people of that state.

Margot:

Yes, yes. OK.

Journalist 8:

So it is undemocratic, if central government dissolves that, this is undemocratic or dictatorship. So this is not our, you know, DNA. Now what to do? Because we are seeing that, yes, there's the state government that should be dissolved immediately. Many media persons or newspaper or channels are saying no. They should be removed immediately. Article 356 is there. The Constitution of India has given power. Central governments will remove that. But the government is not doing anything, they are saying no, no, it's dictatorship. But what our opponent party was

doing last was, they resolved hundred elected state governments 60 year or fifty years. This is freedom of speech you are seeing. The situation is very bad, but this type of thing is also there.

Margot:

How would you describe the relationship between government and media?

Journalist 8:

If there is a relationship it's a very bad thing for me, in my opinion there shouldn't be a very good relationship or bad relationship with government. If you have a relationship with the government then you are not a true journalist. Why? I'm a journalist. The government is running this country. Every treasury, every power is there. So our duty is to criticize. If you are, you know, you criticize something, you are doing very good. But there are some layers there. This should be rectified. Being a journalist of this country, this is my duty. It depends on you. If you were talking like no, CENSORED is my friend and what he says is very good. But if I criticize you every day like, you know, your hair is not good, your eyes look very bad. Your hair. You are getting fat. You'll say: CENSORED, what is this? Every time you are criticizing me? No, I'm not criticizing you. I want to make you perfect. So that's why I'm pointing it out. So this type of the relationship is not a good thing, but these days, the relationship between the journalists and the government is not in a good shape, and I think this is very good for the future of journalism.

Margot:

And have you ever felt any government influence on your own work? Any personal experience?

Journalist 8:

No, when you write a story, you take information from sources. Some railway officer that's known to you, So you write something, you know? You ask me about my personal experience. I have written a story on the railway that the government is going to increase share by 2% or 5%. So that was a story that I have written. I've even spoke to a person who said we are going to increase fares. That story was published. The other day, the officer called. So I said I talked to you. You had your statement. They said: 'We are increasing our fare, but we are also giving facility to the customer. So you have to write that as well' No, I said. You didn't say that.

Margot:

Do you think there are any laws or regulations that have an impact on journalists?

Journalist 8:

Rules and regulations. Yeah, there are some rules and regulations. You know some are not rich and some are on return that you can't move here and there in any ministry. That is a restriction. Without prior notice, you can't go here or there. Otherwise we are free. Now we are restricted to a confined area. The media cell will say, talk whatever and come back. The policy there was a, you know, there was a facility by the Government of India. Railway concession for journalists and their family. You could get some premium ticket for coverage of news or with family. That was withdrawn. So that was taken back. Now we are not getting any off that.

Health facility also. If you are a journalist, you have to fill a form to get benefit of that insurance policy. The policy was not withdrawn, but the thing is there's very hard regulation to getting PIB

accreditation. Earlier it was if you have worked for five years or if you have worked for 15 years, then you can get a PIB card. If you have worked for five years, you have card, you can get a PIB. But if you're retired or you have freelance element, you are now imposed. If you are a freelancer, you should have at least published 24 articles in any newspaper or your card will be removed. So now this is, you know, maybe a tough time if you're writing.

You have a policy that you have to publish 24 articles in a year which means two articles per month. So it is possible for a journalist if I speak English and Hindi I can write one in Hindi. But there are limited people, limited newspapers, Where should I write? So this type of problem is there a little bit but, the rules of land, which also prevailed here.

Margot:

Has that impacted you personally in your own work?

Journalist 8:

No, no, no, no, no. I am a very different type of person because I have decided if you are coming to this field, if you are going to, you know, serve the country. Like in the army, one day you have to face bullet wounds. If you are doing politics. You may lose every day, so this is part of what we are in journalism. I'm going there. I have to have this problem.

Sometimes I may be fired without any reason. Sometimes I may be withdrawn by some facility by the government. So this is part of my life, my career. My passion is journalism, so this is a type of problem I'm facing, but it is not impacting me.

Margot:

In my research for press freedom in India, I also saw a lot of cases about incidents or threats against journalists, do you think they're prevalent?

Journalist 8:

OK, you know, physical assault and something like that.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 8:

That was what I elaborated earlier to you. The incident is, suppose if you are going somewhere to cover a story and you become a part of that. You may be in danger. Then you may be headed in danger, and that incident will happen. I have a witness that one of my friends who is from a minority community. He was there with an incident in western Uttar Pradesh. He is going to cover that story. And he was shouting this slogan. So you know government had him removed from this in the very start. He was arrested by the police and was in a jail for I think 1 -1/2 year. So don't become a party. You want to cover something and you start shouting. You're not a journalist, you're an activist. You can face the consequences. What I have also mentioned. Houses were deteriorated badly due to journalists not by the government. They start taking their facility from the government. They become a puppet of government, very badly treated. If you are going to cover something. Then you may be in danger. The incident was increasing day by day because social media is there.

There's mafia, they who are smuggling and you are going to cover that story. So you have to prepare for that. I'm going to a sensitive area. Policemen were also beaten. Majalis are also beaten, but it is true, that is some of my personal opinions and personal experiences. Incidents with brutality towards media persons and attacks on media persons have increased in the last 15-20 years.

Margot:

Have you ever faced any threats or intimidations yourself?

Journalist 8:

Yes, sometimes I feel it, sometimes, but just a little bit, I'm a political correspondent. Local reporting here and there. There was a threat phone call and everything, but that is not, you know, not very much.

Margot:

And does that change the way you handle the situation the next time?

Journalist 8:

Of course.

Margot:

So you're always kind of scared that something will happen, or can't I say scared?

Journalist 8:

No, no, no. Sometimes it's very stressful. If you have to write and some of the concerned persons, they threaten you. They'll say: 'I will see you.' 'You will lose your job.' 'I know your bosses' and something like that. If someone says: 'OK, you are going to lose your job' then suddenly you...you know, psychologically you come to think: 'Okay let me see what I want to do' So no serious threat.

Margot:

Do you think that leads to self-censorship for some journalists?

Journalist 8:

Yeah, yeah, they are doing that right now, because you know what? The media has gone wide. I know a person. He's a senior journalist now. He is associated with some political party. He also was a very good crime reporter. He was a very good crime reporter but, one day he wanted to seek, you know, a security person. To impress their neighbor. To be like: 'that's why I have police security.' 'This is how much of an important person I am.' So he talked to some character, small blast bomb blast around his house and he claimed that threat was on himself. But ultimately what benefit have you got OK, but then you know they deteriorated the reputation of journalism and journalists.

Margot:

Yeah. Have you ever yourself felt the pressure to self-censor?

Journalist 8:

Self-censor?

Margot:

Yes.

Journalist 8:

No

Margot:

No?

Journalist 8:

No.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media and trolling and everything, plays a part in the threats against journalists?

Journalist 8:

Yeah, to some extent. Some extent. As I said, everyone is a journalist. If you have a mobile phone in your hand, you're a journalist. So you perpetuate the information. But you never thought about if that information is intact. There was a rape incident There was a, you know, killing incident. Someone recorded that video. And they circulated it. But, even if you guys sell it, you know that you can't disclose the rape victim face or identity. This is removed. But if you are not a journalist, you can spread and spread it, so that is now social media. There is no restriction.

Then there is trolling. If suppose, if you write against or for, the result is suppose a result. On 4th of June. If you are a journalist. If you tweeted: 'Modi lost the election.' There are thousands of trollers there. 'Oh, you are puppet of Modi'. 'You you are puppet of Rahul Gandhi.' 'You are international', 'you are national.' So this type of division is there. Political division is there. That is why I'm not active on Facebook or Twitter. I won't be involved replying to a troller or a complainer. No, no, don't go there. Just go to the ministry or go to work. Come back. Have time with your wife, friend, daughter, children or your friends.

Margot:

Because I was going to ask you if you've ever been trolled yourself, but I suppose not. If you don't have any social media.

Journalist 8:

No, no, I'm on Twitter, but I'm not active there.

Margot:

OK.

Journalist 8:

One day I wrote a story and my organization put that story on social media, because this is policy. If you write a good story. There were thousands of comments not for me or for my organization. That's why I'm scared of social media. Why should I waste my time.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 8:

Stories published, read it. I don't care if the comments are good or bad. If I respond something then there may be a case of 'national' 'international' Whatever. Whatever.

Margot:

Do you think, because you said your organization posted something online, that media organizations should play a bigger part in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 8:

No, no, no, no safeguarding. If you write a story that was challenged by some people in court then, only media organizations come in your favor. But your personal, whatever personal thing is there, if you're getting a threat. They can call to a policeman in a personal relation. But there is no media policy that they will provide you your police support or that support. I don't know.

Margot:

OK. You're a political journalist, right?

Journalist 8:

Yeah.

Margot:

Do you have a lot of international interactions then?

Journalist 8:

I was in China. There is a India-China relationship, something like that. So I was a part of that delegation from India Media, Indian media persons visiting China. So I went there, I think for 10 days or 15 days. So I interacted with media persons. Then there are lots of my media friends. Chris (Chris Verschooten) is my recent media friend, apart from that I know some Reuters reporters, some special broadcasting service there. So like that. They are coming to India, they come to Press Club where my office is also situated. So. Through our common brand or in person, we interacted, yeah.

Margot:

And what is their view on press freedom in India? Do you think it's correct? Or that they have a corrupted view?

Journalist 8:

No. No, no. If you want to see the situation, You come to Delhi, you interact with me, some other person. For 5%, then went to some part of Eastern India. Were you interacted with two or three percent, then come back and come to a conclusion that the freedom of media is there or not. India is a very fast country. So this is not perfect information. They heard one thing, because you are working in a different environment under different rule and regulation. We are working on different environment, different rule and regulation. Our upbringing is totally different, totally different. Your upbringing is totally different. So it may depend. It will depend, but if you are living in a country, you have abided the rules and regulation of that country. And there maybe, you know, some differences. But overall international medias perception. As far as freedom of media is concerned India is not doing good. They think there is no freedom of expression or right or something like that, but that is partially true, partially true.

Margot:

OK.

Journalist 8:

Yeah.

Margot:

Then I have one more question for you. My last question is how do you see press freedom in India evolving?

Journalist 8:

Evolving?

Margot:

Yeah, in the future.

Journalist 8:

It will, you know. We are getting more freedom. But, journalists should care about their behaviour. What they are doing and if they have a right to freedom of media if he, himself or herself became party to a political thought. Left or right alignment of they are accepting things from the government: hotels and booze and all that. If you treated the government or any other government organization as your friend. Then you have to pay for that also.

Margot:

Yeah.

Journalist 8:

You are not friends. Why are you are saving your friendship. If you come to my house, if I come to your house, if you come to Delhi, I come to Belgium. We can sit. We can eat or drink. Lunch, dinner to each other to become your friend. But you are not expecting anything from me. You are not expecting anything from within. You just come. You are invited to come, please. The government is not there. The government is not your friend, no.

If you are taking some prestige from government, you have to pay for that also. And what will you have to do, you have to write for something. Compromise your writing. A journalist should be very careful.

Margot:

OK, thank you. I've asked all my questions. I don't know if you have any questions for me?

Journalist 8:

Thank you. Be in touch, give some insight about your country, about your research. I just want to know what type of freedom of media. What do you mean by freedom of media? Are you a journalist? What is your perception of India?

Margot:

My perception of India.

Journalist 8:

Yes.

Margot:

Right now, I've talked to a lot of journalists and I really tried to let my vision be guided by the people I talked to and not the things I read online, and I've talked to a lot of different people and I heard a lot of different stories, but the one thing I can say is that, like you said, you have to be careful and you have to keep a clear mind. You have to think about everything. So that's my image, that it's. Sort of walking on egg shells.

Journalist 8:

Yeah.

Margot:

Like you said.

Journalist 8:

OK.

Margot:

OK. Thank you so much. I probably will be texting you again if I have any more questions. Thank you.

Journalist 8:

Sure. Thank you.

Margot:

Have a nice day.

Journalist 8:

Bye.

Journalist 9 (male)

Margot:

So I'm doing my thesis about press freedom in India. And I'm asking journalists about their personal experience and ask some questions, I can just start firing my questions. If there's something you're not comfortable answering, that's fine. And we'll just move on.

Journalist 9:

Alright.

Margot:

Do you have any more questions for me?

Journalist 9:

No questions, please shoot.

Margot:

Can you maybe start with introducing yourself a little?

Journalist 9:

Well, my name is CENSORED, I have spent about 34, 35 years in the profession. And I have worked across the medium, whether it's print medium as well as television media. And now the digital media. I'm heading CENSORED. I'm editor in chief. For the past six years I have worked with major newspapers called Indian Newspapers, Indian Express. I've spent about 10-12 years in economic times and TV medium like NDTV and India Today. So I've worked and started my career as a reporter. And I was majorly into investigations, so I have done, many investigative reporting and I have also won a very prestigious award here, I have an award for foreign investigation.

Margot:

That that's a lot of impressive experience.

Journalist 9:

Yeah.

Margot:

My uh, my first question for you is how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 9:

The current state of press freedom in India is not good. We have seen very good times, you know, in the past, but ever since 2014, when the Modi government came into power, it started deteriorating. So we saw like in America, you have committed bureaucracy where the President comes in. He appoints his own persons as bureaucrats. And they the bureaucrats strongly serve the president. So here also, the media which was independent. It was gradually getting committed to the Modi government, it Co-opted the Modi government, I'm talking about the mainstream media. When I talk about this, I mean the mainstream media. You know, TV medias, the main say, you know newspapers, like Times of India, Hindustan time. This Indian express is fairly good, but the television media, it was completely coopted. So this is how the birth of digital journalism happened in India, digital journalism, this is an independent journalism and mostly who do not make advertisements. They are quite independent and they are working fearlessly. Including news Laundry, which I am at. So we have been working fearlessly, but if we work fearlessly and we have not been cautious about our reporting. The government has sent an income tax notice to us to put pressure. And has created several other obstacles, but yes, we are now fighting them in the judiciary, in the Court of Law. In the current state of press freedom, I would say the government is coming up at the policy level. They are coming up with several provisions which may curtail them here. But it is being thought in the Court of Law also, I'll give you exact data. This is at the policy level. The government has created some kind of fears psychosis by rating them who investigating agencies like Central Bureau of Investigation. Enforcement Directorate, so to strike fear among the government through the advertisement. The government is the biggest advertiser in our country. They exert Twitter on the television media specifically. So the TV media has been Co-opted. They are no longer going by it, they do bias reporting like fox does it in America. So we have the media walking along the line. There used to be one TV channel. It was

pretty good, which is called ITV, but that has also been bought. By Adani Industrial Group very close to the government, so the team immediately voted in the digital medium you have people, some people at the judiciary level and some people at institutional level who are working. But the government is coming up with different digital laws. To impact their freedom and in the print medium. I'll say that, a few newspapers are still working fearlessly, but most of them have more or less become biased.

Margot:

What do you think the key challenges are for journalists in India.

Journalist 9:

The key challenges? There are only two. One is gathering information. See for any report, if your report, or a newspaper or content generation, you need to gather information. You are not able to gather information if there are bobs on you. We had one permission act. If you write to the government for certain information, the government should be able to give that in public interest. So we have that right to that information under the Information Act. When we file, we ask for the information, we do not get it in most cases. I won't say that we entirely don't get it, but in most cases, if there is a sensitive information, which we want to know in the public interest, first we do not get that. That is the key challenge. How to gather information when the government has put so many curbs up. When the government does not let you enter into their institution without an appointment. The government does not hold any press conferences. So, gathering information and then publishing it is also very difficult. Publishing means we need to be very careful about our facts. We need to be very careful about whatever we report. We need to own up to every word. We take that much care. But still with that care we have that fear if we do this story, the government may come after us. So this is the main content generation. Generate content is the most difficult task.

Margot:

Could you share a moment from your personal career that reflects that?

Journalist 9:

Personal I mean. Personal experience in terms of content generation?

Margot:

Yes. Have you ever had difficulties yourself with publishing the information or gathering the information?

Journalist 9:

Publishing, since we are fearlessly, when we are doing our journalism. We do not take advertisements from the government and from the corporates. Our journalism is big on subscriptions. So we are not afraid of public things, so publishing is not a problem for us. The other media also I mean. Journalists, you know, working in other media groups, they are facing lots of problems when it comes to publishing a story. For example, during COVID time. The information was curbed. The people are dying. You were not able to report it. Many media groups could not report it. We were able to report it, but when it came to getting the information, we were

not getting any information. There was one after when the situation became very serious at 4:00 they used to have a digital press conference. Which you can just hear, you know, sitting in your house. But they were not letting us go out in the field to cover such COVID cases in the name of medical emergency. So, during COVID time, my experience is that it was very difficult for us to gather information. Secondly. Say if you want to do any database story, we do not get data these days. For example the last population census happened in 2011. In India, every 10 years you have to have a census. Suppose if you want to write a big economic story. How will you write an economic story on the basis of population. A report of 2011? The population had happened on 2021, so all your stories about price rise or any business activity is based on 2011 data and not on 2021 data. So there is a curb. The government has stopped giving data. So, if you want to do any database story, you are not able to do this database story. Again, we just recently had elections. So in 2020 election, the Election Commission delayed data, in fact, so much so that people have gone to the Supreme Court. That's why the election Commission did not release the data on time. So, we do not get data. For example I want to do a story on. "How many people could not vote." The voter suppression, you know, I mean, they had a legitimate voter count. But they still could do this story. How will I do it if I don't have the data with me? So nobody gives data. So I have to generate this data personally which I cannot in a country of 140 crore people. How will I generate it? The crowds of people who did not vote and the country I cannot travel through, I mean, I don't have that kind of bandwidth or in terms of sources and money that I'll go all over India and find out, find those crores of people who could not vote. So yes, I will use that digital media with the digital medium, but is not a very effective way. I mean some people may come up as props. So you need to hit the ground to ensure that you basing your stories on this process. that is my personal experience.

Margot:

And then how would you characterize the relationship between the government and the media?

Journalist 9:

It's very hostile. The government is very aggressive and hostile to anything that will report against the government.

Margot:

Did it ever affect your reporting? Did you ever get a call saying you can't publish this?

Journalist 9:

No it hasn't affected my reporting. For example, there are many notices, we have got. The government keeps putting pressures, you know, in different ways, but it hasn't affected our reporting so far. Only because we do not take advertisements. Imagine if you were depending on the government's ad money team. Then it would have affected us. But it is not affecting us at the moment.

Margot:

How do you perceive the impacts of the existing laws and regulations on press freedom in India?

Journalist 9:

We have some draconian like we have one law which is called the defamation law. The defamation law is criminal. This defamation law was introduced during the time when we were, you know, under the British rule. Now the British have gone. The British had the same kind of loss system in their own country in the UK, United Kingdom. Now they have abolished that law, but in our country that law continues. So evil, I understand, but criminal, even our own law committees, the experts, they have recommended that this law should be abolished. But the country, not just this government, even the previous government led by Congress, they did not abolish it. But the item they showed in any civil case you don't have the criminal law of defamation. Now the present government is making it more draconian. They are bringing in even satire, political satire, under the ambit of defamation. It is already at the proposal level. So if the government gets major, if they have full majority in the Court in Parliament, they can make bring these changes into the Constitution, they can amend this law and can add this that even the political satire would fall under it. If we do any video story on a political entity, even that will be counted as defamation. So you cannot do political satire in our country. This law is under proposal. First proposed in the previous government, but the new government, the same Prime Minister, is going to be sworn in, though his numbers have reduced. So let us see how it is going to fold out. But this is under proposal. This is the proposal. Then the digital media will have it very bad. Another way is they do not let foreign investment more than 25% in the print medium and the digital medium. People here with deep pockets, only the corporate groups are the ones who are able to run. You know, the Media Group. So for example, we have the richest Indian, the biggest groups who are listed as richest in the world. Also Adani and Ambani Buniions. In Tag Group and Adani owns it and both these groups are already hunting to increase their media empire. And they become the media tycoon. Indian business tycoon can invest money. But the small people, the startup groups don't have money. They either have to take that or they have taken the corporate ad. Otherwise, they cannot survive on their own. This is how we get affected. Mean this law is, the foreign investment law in particular affects us.

Margot:

And that has an impact on the ability to report freely?

Journalist 9:

No, not report freely. I mean, you just cannot start your venture. I want to start a media venture on my own as of today, I need some money or I need a sponsor. If the corporate group is my sponsor, his money is coming in. I am under his influence. If the government sponsors it. I am under their influence. But if I don't have that kind of money because starting a Media Group is not easy. News gathering operation requires lot of money. You need to travel a lot. You need to talk to people. You need to, and if you are making videos you need a camera. You need a camera person also and you need to pay those salaries. So where will I get it? So this is how it affects your reporting.

Margot:

In my research, I also read a lot about journalists who were getting threats or even attacked. Do you think those are prevalent? Cause I've talked to journalists who told me that's just Western media and it's not true. But I've also heard other opinions.

Journalist 9:

No, if you read news laundry reports, we have reported about the foreign journalists who were asked to leave because they reported. I mean the biggest example is BBC. BBC has wound up its operation in India. BBC had come to India. They had got the license, they did some stories against this government, the government, they did they initiated many legal, cases against them for not paying taxes. They asked, there were three or two journalists from Sri Lanka. So then their visa expired so they were asked to leave, their visa was not renewed. We reported that these kinds of threats are given to foreign nationals if they do not report sensibly in favour of the government. Their visa will expire or they will just be asked to leave the country. In our case, these kind of threats, we haven't gotten them. Tax threats, income tax threat, we have. Money laundering cases are being imposed on us. So they will initiate that kind of case. So those kind of pressures come, but personally nobody has threatened us so.

Margot:

Who sends those texts?

Journalist 9:

No, these are the text notices the government sends. The governments and threats means there is trolling. Trolling happens to everybody. So I don't count it as that. That is something that all of us have been facing. If you do a tread, some tweet, people will start trolling you. So, I don't count trolling as a threat, but yes, the threat is for example, if the government sends 64 notices to 65 notices to you to explain, where did you get this money from? And they keep giving same kind of notices to harass us. So that's the threat. It's harassment.

Margot:

You talked about trolling. Have you ever been trolled yourself?

Journalist 9:

Uh. I'm digitally a very shy person, so I don't. I don't tweet you know, anything except the news laundry stories. If you go to my handle, I do not bother. I don't want any extra thing. I have mostly worked in the print media. So I'm the kind of guy, I keep a very low profile. These days, the journalists are different, but I keep a very low profile. This is my kind of approach to it, since I do not let my opinion known to anyone. So I don't get trolled. But yes, my colleagues who work with me. They have been through troubled times.

Margot:

Do you think that there are journalists who self-censor because they are scared to be trolled or approached by the government?

Journalist 9:

There are many, many journalists who have self-censored, yes. There are many. But in my organization, we don't self-censor.

Margot:

Have you ever felt that pressure?

Journalist 9:

Uh. Not exactly. Pressure is the government that may send us to the jail. That pressure is there. Like for example in this election, yesterday, the result came that if the Modi government had come into power with full majority. We were expecting that at some point of time we will go to jail. We knew about it. Because we do our journalism fearlessly. So, we know about that, but yes, nobody has taken us to the court over our reports, our reports are very factual. And if it is against someone, we always take that person's opinion. We give 72 hours. We give them ample tactic. Even if we are in a hurry, we at least then give 24 hours to another person. So our reports have never brought any legal attention so far. I mean, in six years of my existence in News Laundry.

Margot:

How do you navigate between responsible reporting but also that pressure?

Journalist 9:

I think if you ensure that your facts are right, if you ensure that every word that you speak on video or you write in print and you are able to own up that word. Then I think we are pretty safe. You cannot hurt us. So that's what I do as an editor, I ensure that every word that gets published. I should be able to own it up, if I'm not able to own it up, that is why we do not indulge in the ranks. We do not indulge in opinions. We indulge in ground report. Factual reporting at the same time whoever involved in that report, we try to take their version, which is very important. That is how I ensure and I navigate. If the government comes up to us. We can't help it. Then I cannot do it, but this much I ensure my reports cannot be raised in any court of law for defamation, that's what I preach.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media has impacted the press freedom?

Journalist 9:

The rise of digital media is a positive step on press freedom. Yes, the rise of digital media is the only good thing that has happened in recent times, and this is something that you cannot ignore. Also the digital medium is quite powerful. It is a convergent medium. When I say convergent medium you can report all the three. Audio communication. Print communication and the video communication. You can do all the three communication which we have been doing on our platform. News laundry. So, so the three communication you can do. So it's a very powerful medium. And this is one good thing that has happened. And the Internet, I must say that is a huge leveller. We are able to take all the, you know, likes of Adani and Ambani, the big Media Group who have got big media houses, and crores of rupees dollars, you know, millions of dollars every year for the news gathering. But here we are. Internet is the great leveller for us. So with a small amount of money we are also able to report, you know, in a enough responsible fashion. So I think digital. I have worked all my life in the mainstream media. So this is my first major appointment in the digital media I worked earlier, also for a shorter period of time, but this is for

the 4th time I've worked for six years continuously in digital medium and I think this is the best medium that instant media comes in. But it needs to be done responsibly, that that is extremely important. Not all of them are responsible.

Margot:

Can you recite a personal experience where digital media helped you to report.

Journalist 9:

Digital Media has helped me hugely. Like I'm very camera shy. I never used to, you know, appear on this TV because, even today I don't. But in some TV shows, I have started appearing so, I do podcast, which I had not done in the past. So that is a huge learning. At someone who has spent 30 years with mainstream media and I didn't know about it. But I have learned TV media also very, very nicely and I have mostly worked in that media. So it was a huge help for me. So digital has helped me immensely. You know, as a journalist, I have grown as a journalist, I know all the three media. And I'm inventing many more. It's boundless. It has kept my curiosity. You know, even after spending 35 years in the profession, is very difficult to keep yourself alive. You know, if you have worked for 35 years in such conditions in India. India is very different. It's not a nine to five job. You are virtually working all the time. So yeah, it's a very different India, it's a different world altogether. You're working seven days a week. When you go to bed and you are thinking about tomorrow, what is your story like? Living like this for 35 years in this profession is not easy unless something new comes up. If there's something new, the digital medium has thrown that challenge. So that learning is keeping me alive.

Margot:

I can also imagine that digital media brought some bad things like you already said, the trolling or the online threats. Do you think that media organizations should play a bigger part in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 9:

Yeah. That is true. So with the media we have here, we always need to take a legal recourse, the institution, the Media Group takes the initiate, for a reporter or death person for any editorial staff or non- editorial. So yes, the Media Group should be responsible.

Margot:

Do you think they're already doing that? Or could they do that better?

Journalist 9:

At our organization, we are doing it. And I haven't come across any major case where the main actions are not being taken. So I presume they must be doing it. But at ours, yes, we do it. I can give you an example. There's one reporter who had a case of defamation filed against him or a report which was in used News Laundry. We successfully fought it in a court of law. We won the case. And he did he did not have to spend any money. The media spent all the money on the lawyer and his travel, everything.

Margot:

Have you ever felt a conflict between your editorial independence and the policies of the media organization you were working for?

Journalist 9:

In my previous job, yes I did. In present job I did not.

Margot:

And how?

Journalist 9:

In my previous job I was heading DNA newspaper. It has closed now. The newspaper's name was DNA and I had started the Delhi edition. It was based in Mumbai. So it had six editions. And there, the editorial independence they asked us to compromise. When the new government had come in 2016, they said that all the stories which are around the theme is nationalism, it is around nationalism, then we should not question those reports. We should just let them go. Whether it is in video form or in the print form, we should just run those reports and this was a dart which had come from the owners of the Media Group Z Media, Group DNA was owned by Z Media Group. So the owner himself had called all the articles and had told us this, that is what the new dictate is. I had two Muslims in my organization, so they had asked me to let them go. To sack them. I did not sack that. I stood my ground, I said "they are more nationals than anyone of us. So I don't have any ground to sack them. They are very good workers." Who I did not sack. But then I got sacked later. So I left that organization very happily. So I worked there for three and half years. And I won my award for investigations in that organization. So, there were pressures. So, in the previous job, yes, I felt that pressure, in my present job, I haven't had any pressure. I've worked with Indian Express for a long time, there I had no pressure. Indian Express is a very prestigious newspaper of India. That's it.

Margot:

Do you have a lot of international relationships in your in your job? Do you come into contact with a lot of other countries?

Journalist 9:

Yeah, we have. We have many subscribers, you know outside of India. So Princeton has called us, Princeton University. So if we go to the US or we go to Germany, we go to Europe, any country of Europe. We let our subscribers know. We have subscriber meetings. When we need to report, we collaborate also, there is one university in the US which had their students who are working on data. We commissioned one story with them. That if we can do this story with them. So they are required to do some kind of data mining. Data mining and interpretation of what we did. So yes, we have we have been reported by the internet, you know reported about us. In their blogs and others. So we recently we got featured in U.S. TV media reports which is very popular.

Margot:

And how do they perceive the press freedom in India? Do they have a correct image?

Journalist 9:

I don't think they know what we have gone down in the past 10 years. Our press freedom has gone down. But yes, we, there are fighters. We are fighting it out. It is not as bad as you know, there's some Islamic country that we have, it is not as that bad. I mean we are able to report. There is pressure on us, but they still report. We will see, I mean what will happen to us when we do report.

Margot:

And in your personal opinion, what are some steps that can be taken to improve and safeguard the press freedom in India?

Journalist 9:

I think it needs to be insulated from the government's decisions now, we already have the Constitution that has given us right to speech. Which is a fundamental right now. That law should be insulated, means no one should be able to and the government should not be able to make any law which contradicts right to speech. We will have our own freedom. And the second thing I think, the time has come for the digital medium and the subscription model. I think this advertisement model has failed miserably to defend the press freedom. That is major. That's what I feel that right to speech should be insulated from, all kind of further amendment to the Constitution initiated by the government should not initiate any amendment or any addition to this particular law. That there has to be a business model which should not be dependent on corporate ads or the government ads. If we do not have corporate ads and we do not have government ads. Then the press freedom will be intact.

Margot:

Then I have one last question for you. How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India?

Journalist 9:

I always feel that whether it is press freedom or whether it is development or whether it is politics, there is a theory of decay and progress. So anything that exist will decay. But also resurrection. It will emerge so, if there is an attack on press freedom here right now, even if even to the extent that people like us who have not done anything wrong and may land up in jail, it doesn't matter because at if we keep fighting, we will get out of this decay and we will reselect ourselves. And the press freedom will emerge. So I think this is not dogmatic. This is this is dynamic. The barometer goes down, it goes up also.

Margot:

That's a beautiful way of thinking.

Journalist 9:

Yeah. I'm positive about it.

Journalist 10 (female)

Margot:

I'm doing my thesis on press freedom in India and I am interviewing journalists, so I'll just give you some questions. And if you're not comfortable answering anything, that's OK. And then we can just move on to the next question, OK?

Journalist 10:

OK.

Margot:

My first question is, how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 10:

Can you please repeat it? Sorry, I was putting my phone on charge, so I did not hear the question properly.

Margot:

Yeah. No, problem. The first question was, how would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 10:

Look, India is a versatile country and we have different cultures, different opinions, different kinds of demography's. So when it comes to the press freedom in India, we can see that we have many, many kinds of press over here and they have their own opinion and thought. They have owned their news line also, but nobody goes to interfere in that unless or until they go beyond the limit of the country's safety and country's pride as you can see on social media. Many people are writing many things about many eminent personalities, but it is going on and nobody is bothering about that either. "Put in jail, taking any action." It's not like that. Sometimes people even use abusing language also, which does not sound very nice but it's their thought, it's their style, it's their way of life. But yes, I also agree that when it comes to our country, the country' pride or an internal matter, any kind of sensitivity, then there should be taken action. But sometimes it's also because, I can give you one example. It was an attack by Pakistan on Pathankot air base in our country. At that time, many new channels, it was a proper guideline by the government of INB Ministry, that's the information and broadcast ministry, that the covering will be from 200 meters away. And when it comes to the sensitive area, it cannot be shown by the camera on live telegraphs. It must be shot and recorded, because we have seen the penalty of it when there was an attack on Mumbai Trident and Taj Hotel and it was a live telecast, Pakistan was monitoring all the TV channels and it has taken lots of time to rescue the people. Since that time, the guidance that's been given by the Ind Ministry. But on that time few channels like ours, the candy TV and one more, I'm just forgetting the name. They have shown the live telecast after a certain time, when it comes to the knowledge of the home ministry, they have given them the notice for one day, one black day on the screen. But they have not shouted anything that it's a ban on press freedom, it's a restriction of press freedom. Government had uplifted that letter also. And the it

was not a single moment when they have went through with the black screen. So it's like that. But sometimes the over ruling the rule may be dangerous for the country also.

Margot:

Knowing that, what do you think the key challenges are for journalists in India regarding press freedom?

Journalist 10:

I don't think this kind of thing, and these are misperceptions. Because every thought, I'm taking it personally, I'm a journalist and I think 'this story will go in that manner only' and I will put it out because I want it. But my views cannot be the news' views. You know, my views are my personal view, when it comes to the news, when it comes to the write down, the news has a concrete value. It has a concrete road map and outline of it. If I would put my view on the news, it means we are serving our views, not news. So I can say that it's just a narrative and a perception. But the thing is that I have not seen, I have not felt that this kind of thing, that someone is restricting me, someone is avoiding me, someone is neglecting me. Even in previous government also and in this government also, I can say that I have written so many things very boldly and they have accepted it.

Margot:

Do you think that your personal experience as a journalist shaped your view of press freedom in India?

Journalist 10:

I think we should come on the same platform. We should discuss our experiences. They should come on, why someone has faced some kind of restriction, why was it not with me. When we go through the lines, the words, the storyline, the, the fact check, then only we can decide. Yes, there are some kind of press restrictions existing in India. All the journalists will not talk together. They will not come on the same platform, one platform, and they will not share their own experience based on fact checking. Then it's very difficult to say what my personal experience is and what others personal experience is because my personal experience may say something different as compared to others.

Margot:

Could you share a specific moment from your career that reflects that? What you just described, is there anything that comes to mind when you talk about press freedom and the experiences you've had? Because you had a lot of experience, right?

Journalist 10:

I have covered political parties and the Ministry of External Affairs, including the Home Ministry, for two or three years, I have also covered the Supreme Court. When you cover the Supreme Court, you have to follow all the rules regulated by the court premises. You cannot go inside the courtroom with your mobile phone, you cannot talk inside the courtroom, and you cannot flash news from the courtroom. You have to come out when you are flashing any news when the

verdict is going on, every time I have seen that if some regulations have been passed by the institution, whether it's a court, ministry, or government, I have not faced any kind of hard and fast rules. But yes, when I was covering ministries and institutions like the court, they have their rules and you have to follow them. Otherwise, you will be barred, no matter if it's me, Barkha Dutt, Ravish Kumar, Ajit Anjum, Arnab Goswami, or anyone else. For example, when covering the defence sector, I am not allowed to show everything because it is sensitive news. The defence ministry, the army personal, the air force personnel, the Navy. They don't want to show certain areas because of security matters. So you cannot show that, you cannot force yourself as a newsmaker. If this is my journalism: No. This is the journalism that they have. They have given certain rules that you are allowed to cover this. But this is a matter of security. You will not cover them. You are not allowed because every country has certain sensitive areas. Every country has certain secret topics and their own areas. It doesn't mean that it's a restriction of freedom or of the press. It is, I think in every country. Advair Dashka was commissioning to India as a Vikram Aditya, and I was in North for this topic in Archangels. But they have told me that if you are in our Navy base area, you will cover only this part of this ship. We are not going to allow you to go deep inside the ship, you will not use a camera if you are moving our base, you will not use your camera, only when I will take you to the certain point and we will allow you to. Then only you will cover that. This is I think in every country. That they don't allow certain things to cover it.

Margot:

How would you describe the relationship between the government and the media in India?

Journalist 10:

It depends, because in a relationship I will say you that in every government there is a rule by the political party. And if you have a good relation with them, that means you are in pro of the government. If you don't have that kind of relational, you are anti the government. So it depends on that, what kind of line you have taken with your news.

Margot:

Are there any instances where you believed the government has given influence on media outlets.

Journalist 10:

I don't think so. We have certain news media houses like the Tribune, Hindi, and at some points, there are so many stories against the government. They run propaganda as well. But I have seen plenty of government ads on their news channels and in their newspapers. So it depends. It depends on the individual. I can share one incident. I was writing a story against a high-ranking politician from the ruling party who had done something wrong. When the story was published, it was based on statements from both parties, what that person is saying and what the view of statement of the person who was releasing that politician is. When the story was published. The party was not annoyed with me. For a certain time, that person was not happy with me and he was avoiding me because he thought I had done propaganda. And it was the facts, it was not shown properly. But it was not my views. It was the story that was built from statements from both

the parties. So that party has not avoided me. That person did. So again it's a person. Because if someone was writing something against certain people, obviously they will not like you.

Margot:

How do you perceive the impacts of the existing laws and regulations on press freedom?

Journalist 10:

Laws and regulations are as usual as it is. There is no changing in the inb ministry. The law is the same as it was. If the media is running against the country, the sensitive area of the country. If the media releases some secret news about the country. If the media gets a hold of it. And the press is writing in pro of the enemy country. If a deep rift is going on between both the counties, then obviously it's a matter of whether to take action or not or give notice to or not.

Margot:

Have you ever encountered any specific laws or regulations that impacted your work, or your ability to report freely?

Journalist 10:

No, we have had freedom of expression for a long time. From Article 19 to 29, it assumed that you, not only media, every person has freedom of expression, freedom of speech. They can speak about what they feel, they can write what is based on the facts, what they want. Based on the fact they can obvious their views to the masses. They can put any allegation if they feel that that person is harassing or doing something wrong with them. So we have in our Constitution Article 21 to in fact Article 15 to 29. We have all the dos and don'ts about freedom of expression and freedom of speech.

Margot:

In my research I found a lot of cases online about some incidents and threats against journalists in India. How prevalent do you think those threats are?

Journalist 10:

I have not faced any so I can cannot comment on that. Because nobody has stressed me, nobody has kept eyes on me. I have written so many story. Also I have written so many against the story. Also I had question institutions like the Supreme Court, I made many judgments, I have questioned the parties also, I have questioned the government also but nobody has issued any kind of notice or harassed me or have blocked me, I have not felt that.

Margot:

And you also have never been trolled online?

Journalist 10:

What I tell online is when my views do not match with some others views. So they will troll you so many times. I have been trolled many times. It's not about the government, the social media troller, they are a nuisance mask, if they do not agree with your point of view, they will start writing any kind of abusing language. I don't mind them. Please go ahead.

Margot:

Do you think that maybe other journalists will feel the pressure to self-censor because they're afraid?

Journalist 10:

That is their problem. If they are putting their views on social media, they have to get ready that many people will be with them. But many people will not agree with them, so whoever will not agree with them, they will write any kind of words. They will use any kind of words to prove themselves right. So I don't mind. Go ahead. Whatever you want to write, write down. It's my publicity and it's it doesn't matter. It's a good publicity or bad publicity. I take publicity as a positive thing.

Margot:

So you've never felt the pressure to self-censor yourself?

Journalist 10:

Never, never, never, never. I enjoy it. In fact, sometimes, I laugh, people, they have so much time that they're wasting their time on my one post at 1 AM.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media has impacted press freedom?

Journalist 10:

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I am not very much pro digital media because digital media has created untrained journalists and they don't know the ethics of the journalism. They don't know the deep sense of journalism, but everyone thinks that "I am a journalist, because I have one YouTube channel. Because I have a very good reach on Instagram. have a very good followers on Twitter, so I'm a journalist." This should not be the criteria because as I feel I have done my work, then after that, I was given my time in search of my job. Then I got an internship, my senior had given me strict kind of work and I had to do that. I have learned from them and they have not. It was not like they were treating me as a fairy land kind of thing. So I have faced so many worst and good things but I was there because I have to learn the journalism, I have completed my master. I have given my 18 to 20 years in this. Then I become a journalist. And someone is just writing 1 post on social media and they are saying that I'm a journalist and I posted this. I'm a journalist. So It's an untrained crowd which are moving like an unguided missile.

Margot:

Have you always worked for media organizations?

Journalist 10:

Yes.

Margot:

And do you think that media organizations take care of their people in the in the right way? Do you think they could do more to support journalists?

Journalist 10:

I don't think media has a very good kind of work culture. Anywhere in the World.

Margot:

Do you have a lot of international interactions in your work?

Journalist 10:

Yes. I have seen almost more or less, the same kind of work culture in every part of the world. Every organization or media houses in every part of world I can see. Especially a female employee, they are not very well. I can see it.

Margot:

How so?

Journalist 10:

A female employee, they have not that kind of a comfortable work culture because, there's a female employee, when they get married, they have a kid. They must give time to your kid also, you must give time to your organization also, the organization. they don't have that kind of setup that many corporations have, if you have children, you have family. They work from home. Many media houses don't have the crutches. Also, you are in field work as a reporter, so you can't carry your baby with you yourself. And sometimes the ill people are also in the organization who treated you in a very wrong manner. So these are the things which I feel that media houses should improve their work culture.

Margot:

How do you think they could do that?

Journalist 10:

I don't think so.

Margot:

When you talk to your international colleagues, do you feel that they have a wrong picture of the press freedom in India?

Journalist 10:

Sometimes. I have explained to so many of my international colleagues that the perception you are trying to visualize is wrong. They should come here. You should work with us because I have seen it many times in the US. I have seen that. That someone has written against the president and they are issued by the government and all that, in Britain also, I have seen it in Pakistan and everywhere. There's a bad situation in Saudi Arabia and Middle East country. But everyone has their own perception, I don't want to waste my time on that. Whatever I'm telling you, please try to follow that and experience it on my words. When they will feel that, They can have their own views. So they thinking like that. OK. I can only say that I can only tell them this thing. You must move like that because look, when you are covering, and I was covering it. In my initial days I, was covering crime. I was covering the many stories about murder. Being a journalist at that time, you are forced to overrule the rule because you must gather the news. So sometimes if you are smart enough and people are don't got you at the same point and they have not given you some notice and all that, then it's OK. But sometimes it's a bad day also. So when you call. When you are overloading the rule, they will serve you the notice. They will tell you that you are barred from

these premises for 10 days. It's OK. It's fun because I had done something adventurous. So I had to bear that.

Margot:

If you look at the Press Freedom Index, you see that India dropped a little, what do you think about that?

Journalist 10:

I don't agree with that because day by day the freedom is going like hell, people are writing anything. I don't know who has made this press freedom index and why they have put India down. They have their own criteria. They have their own point. Maybe on that point it was not matched as per their criteria. But it's not like that to be very frank, I've told all my experiences. Yes, I have overhauled the rule and they have blocked me. I was in to police headquarters. I had to gather news about certain murders. I was talking to the cop and I was not allowed to go beyond that. But I have given some excuses that I have to use the washroom. I'm going and I will come out. I would take pictures also. So if you will overrule the rule naturally you have to face some certain points of difficulties. But yes, as a journalist, I have to do that because I have to prove my story right. If it is right. But if some person, if they do it when it is a databases story, and it's a propaganda, then I don't agree with them. Please don't do that. Such a statement cannot be the proof. True statements is a statement. If you want to prove the story, you come up with the facts also.

Margot:

How do you think that will be evolving in the future?

Journalist 10:

It will evolve because of media houses, which are not behaving as mature organizations. They should behave like an industry, but they still feel like they are an organic entity. They are putting up their periphery. I don't know what will happen, but yes, social media is evolving into a very vast platform. I think the government should play a role in regulating who can be a journalist on social media and in generating fact-checking mechanisms. However, I don't think it will be so easy for them to do that.

Journalist 11 (female)

Margot:

OK. Thank you. How have you been?

Journalist 11:

I'm good. Really busy. We also had a terror attack, so I was traveling. So that's that. Also shooting two documentaries simultaneously. So yeah.

Margot:

Oh no, that's a really busy schedule.

Journalist 11:

Yeah. It's just this year is surprisingly busy.

Margot:

Could you maybe start with introducing yourself a little because I googled you of course, but I'd love to hear it from you

Journalist 11:

Yes. Just one second, one second.

Margot:

Yeah, that's fine.

Journalist 11:

Yeah, OK, so my name is CENSORED. I'm right now working with BBC investigations. It's been 11 years now since I have been working in the India's mainstream news channels. Actually, worked with all of them. Started with CNN IBN then now it's CNN News 18 it was bought out by industrialist. Last change was NDTV. Ever since then I have been freelancing. So now I write for CNN International, Al Jazeera and work for BBC investigations. And yeah, making a film on my own. So yeah, that's that. I expertise in investigation. And yeah, that's that.

Margot:

And how old are you? You have so much experience at such a young age, right?

Journalist 11:

I'm 30! I started working when I was very young actually. I got a job at CNN, when I was just 20. I was just out of college, so yeah.

Margot:

OK, I have a couple of questions. I will just start firing the questions at you. If there's something you're not comfortable answering, that's fine and we can just move on. My first question is already a big one. How would you describe the current state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 11:

The current state of press freedom in India actually is at its absolute low. And I wasn't born in it, but we have heard and read from people who reported during the Gandhi time, who was our Prime Minister, when there was an emergency in the country. That there even was a space for an official emergency, there was a space for newspapers to express their protest by leaving a blank column.

So, there was always a space, but right now it's a very systematic kind of fall down, which the country is witnessing because most of the news channels, actually all the news channels, the mainstream news channels have been bought out by industrialists who are extremely close to the government.

And if some are not out rightly bought out. They are so scared, they are made to be so scared that they are towing the government's line like nobody else's business. Also almost becoming the government's spokesperson. Like we have an agency called ANI, the head of ANI did an interview with the Prime Minister and you should have seen the questions she was asking. And

then, she says that, oh, no, I'm just doing my work. I'm not bought out. So there is no other reason for you to ask a question like, you know, is this an election? Just a formality because all of us know you're going to win. No journalist should be asking questions like that to the Prime Minister when there are so many important questions to be asked about employment, about jobs, about complete crucifixion of dissent agencies. So, right now, the mainstream media is at its absolute low. It has been thrown to the dogs by the government. Having said that, there are some digital organizations, independent organizations, like the wire News Laundry, scroll. Who are doing phenomenal work. They are going against all odds, crowdfunding, taking money from the people to keep news independent. So that's fantastic work and most of the people who worked with these news channels have been forced to leave and now they are either on their own YouTube channel and saying the truth as it is, or they are forced to work with organizations, international organizations which are registered outside of the country. Like CNN International, like BBC, like Al Jazeera. So that's the theme. That it's unprecedented that the press freedom is constantly declining. And the government doesn't bother. The Prime Minister hasn't done a single press conference, not even a single press conference at the in the last 10 years. And I think that says it all so yeah. It's really bad.

Margot:

In your opinion, what are the key challenges for journalists? Regarding press freedom.

Journalist 11:

To bring the story out because often, in the process, either they are being jailed or there are massive seditious charges, sedition charges are being put on them. All kinds of efforts are done to stop a journalist, prevent a journalist from bringing a story out. If that story is not aligning with the governments. Yeah. Or that story is showing the government in a bad light, something as simple as that. A journalist did a story, a local journalist from a rural area in India did a story of how children are getting extremely substandard food in their mid-day meal. He showed it and he was jailed for showing a ground reality. So it is as simple as that. It's not that I'm not talking about big scams, not that a journalist is doing a big scam and he is being jailed. That probably happens in all the country. But here the government is so vicious that they are going after everyone. I did something. I covered a rape story. That girl, the rape victim was forcefully cremated by the police and I happened to be there. I shot it. I put it out, it got it, went viral, every channel, every international press covered it and I had an FIR in within 24 hours against my name. With sections of UAPA on for just doing my work. It's absolutely bizarre. So the first challenge is to first do the story.

If we were doing a scam related story, it is so difficult to bring things out because this government is so tight and each and every person working for them is so tight and so scared that no document is coming out of the system of the wrongdoing. The second, one of the biggest challenges, which I personally as a female journalist, face on everyday basis. Like yesterday I was facing it. That as soon as you say something which is logical, but it's not suiting the government's agenda, they have a right-wing troll army that goes after you like nobody else's

business. They will not just abuse you. They will threaten you with rape, murdering your family, throwing acid on your face and thousands of people are doing it. Some of them are followed by the BJP minister. BJP is the ruling party of our country. Now (after the 2024 election) it's ruling with coalition, of course. And the threats are so real. So I actually wrote we had a terror attack. And before that, everybody has been putting all eyes on Rafah, which is a global concern right now. Something happened, a terror attack happened. Absolutely no person in a sane mind will not condemn it. I was doing a story on it. So there is a person who out rightly promotes the government's agenda. He is a self-acclaimed political analyst. He wrote that, you know, if something like this happens to Hindu pilgrims. He basically quote the other person, you know, Babasaheb Thackeray, Balasaheb Thackeray was this toll senior politician from Maharashtra. So Balasaheb Thackeray said that if anything happens to the pilgrims going to a Hindu pilgrimage, we should absolutely ensure that no Muslim should fly off or Hajj to Mecca. And he wrote it I simply said that you know what you are doing is making the terrorist work easy because terrorists are spreading terror. You are using that terror to spread more hatred and division on the ground in a country you should not use. It's a terror attack. Let the investigation agencies let the government deal with the terrorists with the Harshest punishment possible, but that doesn't mean that you use it to terrorize and to spread hate against the community in our country.

These are our people. It has nothing to do with pilgrims going on Haj. I also wrote that all eyes on Rafah is one thing. It started trending in India. All eyes on Syriac. It is the area where the terror attack happened. I simply said that: We can condemn what happened in Riazi separately. We do not always have to compare two tragedies and compare the killing of children. How low can you think? You can't compare these two things? Right? People went crazy. The right-wing trolls went crazy. They started putting my Instagram pictures, my mother's pictures, my pictures in bikini, on Twitter. They started writing. 'This girl wants sex.' 'We will rape her, we will rape her mother. We will throw acid in her face.' I have been getting calls from people telling me: we know where you live. We will just pick you up and we'll abduct you and we'll do things to you have never imagined. I had to file a police complaint, but nothing is going to happen. And these are not one or two people. These are thousands of people and nobody stops it. That is being empowered and emboldened by the current regime. It is one of the biggest problems that right now, all journalists, especially female journalists, are handling. I don't know how to cope with this because it's absolutely crazy, like we had a journalist named Gauri Lankesh. Somebody shot her nobody knows who till date. Know who I mean? You know, it's this. This feels so real that somebody can you know, because these people have my number. They have my address. Not that I will stop. I'll be scared, but i won't stop doing my work. But they can actually do anything. Why is it so many of these trolls are actually followed by BJP ministers on Twitter? So this is absolutely bizarre. They have a proper tools, they have very high tech roles, to harass female journalists online. And Twitter as a platform, Instagram as a platform, is not doing anything. When you put a post for Palestinian. They will put your post down saying this content we don't show. It breaks the rules of meta. But they have not been saying anything about the rape threats. This has been happening. I

don't know if it has happened to you. Instagram shadow band me, because I have been constantly putting Palestinian, pro-Palestinian tweets. I mean, you know, what's happening, what's happening to the children in Gaza, things like that. But there are thousands of people giving rape threats to a female journalist. Why are you not doing anything about it as platforms? So this is one of the biggest problems we must, I mean deal with it. And the third problem is when you do a story, it's only professional to do a story and report from both sides. Whenever you take a question to any of the Ministers, they are just not ready to answer. And when you report the story ultimately. Publish it. That is, when they will jail you. They will file FIR. They will do complaints. They will call the owner of the channel and ask them to throw us out of jobs. That's actually literally what has happened.

So it's very bad time to be a honest journalist in India. To be a journalist who is sold out. It's a great time. I think it's one of the best countries you can earn crores in. If you are ready to sell your soul and spit pure venom and hatred against minority communities in the country. But if you want to be honest. It's one of the worst times to be alive in this country.

Margot:

That sounds terrifying.

Journalist 11:

Yeah, I can send you the screenshots. I can tell you the meaning because you won't understand these are all Hindi slangs and slurs and all of that. But I'll send you the screenshot. It's disgusting.

Margot:

Yes, thank you. I've talked to a lot of other journalists and I asked them about trolling. They always could tell me all those horrible things, but none of them had actually lived it. This is the first time I really talked to someone who had it happen to them.

Journalist 11:

No, I don't. I deal with it daily. And you know, I mean I am. I have been brought up by a single mother. and my mother is though she knows what I've been doing. And she now knows. But she also gets terrified sometimes that what if someone does it to you? Our life will be over. Why don't you stop? Because our lives will be ruined. If somebody does something to you. And I say: OK, OK. If you think that me saying that all our eyes on Rafah and all eyes on Riazi should not be compared. It is fine. Just give me space to explain myself. If you do not agree with it, it's OK. Let's agree to disagree. People are so aggressive, the right-wing troll armies so aggressive that they will, they are ready to just kill you. At the first thing you have said, which doesn't align with their idea or ideology, they are ready to kill you, rape you, do the worst thing possible, and with female journalists they find it very easy you know, if we just give rape threats or if we say that, oh, this deepam girl. More often than not, girls will actually keep quiet. Because that's how women have been conditioned. They know that. Oh, we threat her with rape twice and she will be quiet. This is wrong. This needs to go government. This. To do something about it, but they have they don't do

anything. That's the saddest thing. They don't even solve in solidarity. Also, they do not even say that it is wrong. So that's really bad.

Margot:

You talked about a rape case earlier. Was it the one Hathras?

Journalist 11:

Yeah, yeah.

Margot:

Because I talked about that with another journalist and she told me about a man that went to jail because of it. How how did that go? Did you come into contact with police?

Journalist 11:

What did this journalist tell you?

Margot:

Someone took a picture of the burning. What happened with the body of the girl and he went to jail because of it.

Journalist 11:

He wasn't there. It was me. So this journalist actually never even reached Hathras. So the rape happened. The forceful cremation happened overnight. And I was the only person there. I happened to be there with this other girl, this me and CENSORED from the print we three were there. We three were the only people there and they were clicking pictures. It's a print medium. So they were writing. I was. I was all over the place. I was recording them and I immediately put it out on Twitter so that if they kill me, the story should go out. Next day it became like national, international news. So there's this journalist from Kerala. He tweeted my picture. He was on his way from Kerala to Hathras he did not even reach Hathras. He was picked up by police from Midway and then charged of sedition report and then I think he just recently got bail.

He was in jail. For not even reaching Hathras. Because he's a Muslim, it was very easy to frame him. I am massively privileged. If you talk about caste and the religion. I am not just a Hindu, which is the majority religion in the country. I am also a Brahmin. I had no idea that I am a Brahmin, but I apparently am a Brahmin. Which is the upper caste so-called upper caste. It's all bullshit but It's very difficult to arrest me. They also know they are going to face a lot of backlash. So what these people do is I had to leave my job because my channel asked me to. They made a setup for me to leave, so I was thrown off my job because the government asked them to do so for my work. I was massively told I was defamed. My audio was put out. I had an affair against my name. This is all what they can do. If you are a Hindu. If you're a Muslim, they can just put you in jail like they did with Siddiqi Kapan. So that is. It's that easy.

Margot:

And did you put a story out about the case?

Journalist 11:

Yeah. Yeah, it was all there. I'm also doing a documentary on it. It was all there. I put it out. I did reports on it. I mean, yeah, that's it. But the channel asked me to leave after a month or so, they

asked me to say that we can't do it. So we are demoting you and putting you off there. I said OK, I'll leave then. They said OK, cool. And that was the biggest story of that year from the country so yeah.

Margot:

How would you describe the relationship between the media and the government? In India.

Journalist 11:

The media and the government. The mainstream media is actually, in the words of a senior veteran journalist who also won many awards, Ravish Kumar, I think you must have heard his name. He's one of the most celebrated journalists in the world. He gave a very nice term to it. He coined a term called Godi Media, Godi means lap. So the media is on the lap of the government. They are sitting on the lap of the government like a kid, like a dog. They will do whatever they have been asked to do and that's about it. We have a state where there is a civil war going on for the last more than one year. No channel reports about it. because that's the dictate which has been given by the government. Only people reporting about Manipur, about the northeastern state, are digital channels and people like us who are working for international organizations. So the media and the mainstream channels are it's not even hand in glove it's just out rightly partisan. So, that's the kind of situation, and it's not just that people have governed and bought them out, but also fear. Massive fear The last channel I was working for, was the last honest channel, it was ND TV. It's one of the most celebrated news channels. Across the world. When people did not toe the government's line? They put some cases, redid the company, took ownership from it, sold it to Adani. Adani is one of the biggest industrialists who is very close to Modi and now they're running it now. They're running it as a PR, as a PR channel for the government. Every day there is a show on how the Prime Minister is great. How is amazing, how the things he wears are very cool and classy. That's about it. A channel which used to show truth is now actually doing PR. So this is what they can do if you don't stop, they can put cases on you. They can get you arrested, they can shut off your company, they can ensure that you don't get any ads. So a lot of things. That's why people are also extremely scared. Channels are extremely scared of what level these guys go to because they're vicious. They can do anything.

Margot:

How do you perceive the impact of laws and regulations on press freedom in India?

Journalist 11:

I actually did not understand the question.

Margot:

The impact of certain laws or regulations on journalists in India.

Journalist 11:

We have a bill, which will be passed . The government is back. The Parliament is going to start the session. They are actually going to pass it. It's called the IT. And according to that bill, the government will have a fact checking team, whatever their fact checking team thinks is wrong, is vulgar, is a wrong fact. They can actually put that content off and they can also prosecute you.

And this is it. This is now. This will be a law which is going to be the last nail in the coffin of press freedom, because whatever they think is not right. They can just, like, go after us. Then they will have a law, they can lawfully go after us. As of now, there is no regulation. They do all kinds of shady things, like in Hathras. So the IT cell head, the ruling parties, Bharatiya Janata parties, IT cell official head, put out a video they first got on my phone. What do you call it? Hacked. They got a video out of audio out of me speaking to the brother and telling him nice things. The brother of the victim. They gave that audio to the news channels. They defamed me, left, right and center. So you see what I'm saying. Because there was no lawful court the judge said: the journalist has visuals to corroborate her story. So the in the court, the things will fall flat. Outside of the court, they harass you so much that ultimately you only will say that, OK, we are sorry. We are leaving journalism. So this is the kind of harassment which takes place now. Did I go and file a case of defamation against the IT cell head for putting my audio out? No. Because who is giving them the permission to hack my phone in the first place? Hack is not the right word. I'm just forgetting the words.

The phones are basically put under surveillance. Under what law is the government or anybody putting a journalist phone on surveillance? I need to first know. Is there anybody who will give me this answer? How did you get an audio from my phone. How is this happening? Are you using some big tool? Some big tool bought from Russia? Who is doing this? I want to know this, but is there anybody to answer this and who has the time and the money and the bandwidth to go and file a case against the government? Do you think I would have won? So that's that. But now we actually might have rules and regulations which can just make our case more difficult. I mean, in Kashmir all the journalists, all of them. Their passports have been revoked. None of them can leave. So many of them have been called to the US to the UK to give speeches. They are not allowed to travel outside of the country only because the Kashmiri journalists, so many of them, have been arrested, put in jails, have been completely blocked. So this is this is horrifying. This is horrifying. And now this is what they are doing to India journalists. So this. I mean, I can't think of anything worse.

Margot:

Do you think that there are a lot of journalists who self-censor because they are scared of what will happen?

Journalist 11:

Oh, yes, absolutely, yes, absolutely. In fact, I am, very outspoken, but even I think sometimes that OK, I might just not say this. Let this be sometimes I actually want to write about what's happening in Palestine and stuff. I don't write it because I know that it's just going to get me so much flack for no reason. Just get me like abuse and threats. Yeah, we are self-centered too many times because you. I mean, yeah, sometimes 2%, 5% of the times, even the best of journalists are self-censoring themselves. Because who would want to die? I mean, and you can actually, the threat is of dying. It's not a threat of you know, they can put you in jail or somebody will troll you. It's actually a threat of getting killed. And when that is the kind of threat you face, you

don't want be at the receiving end of it. We are doing our work. Let your stories speak for itself. People are blessed to have organizational backup, but freelancers who do not have an organizational backup. It's very difficult. So we have to protect ourselves. Also tell the story. So people are finding, ways to navigating through it, finding a middle way.

Margot:

How do you? Navigate line between responsible reporting and the pressure to self-censor.

Journalist 11:

Because I'm an investigative journalist also, I work with BBC and BBC has crazy rules, especially after the Modi documentary they made, I'm sure you know about it. They made a documentary and they were, they were raged on the BBC company. So they are very particular. So I have learned a lot of things. So for first of all what I do is. I get my facts right. I mean, until and unless you do not have it from 10 good sources, I don't write about it. I do not put it on Twitter. I don't put a story out on that until and unless I have it absolutely confirmed, I have it on record. I refrain of putting anything out, especially on sensitive content. Otherwise I can't think of any other kind of self-censoring which I personally do.

If I'm reporting on something, I just get my facts right. And I'm thinking about if this goes to court, how will that go? Trolls, I really don't care about. If somebody has to kill me, they will kill me. But in case it goes to court, how are you going to fight then? Will the prosecution have enough evidence against me? That is what I am constantly thinking about. Then legally. Where am I standing? I need to have my facts right. I need to have things to corroborate what I'm saying. What I'm reporting, it can't be reckless, actually incorrect report, because that would take the credibility away. So I think that's the only self-censoring I do. Personally, I'm not sure about what other people do actually.

Yesterday I've also started to put stop putting my mothers or my brothers pictures up, because I have just completely locked my Instagram and I have removed all my pictures of them. I have not removed my bikini pictures because it's my personal profile, but I've removed their pictures because it's just unnecessary. So there is no way to trail me back to somebody else. I'm ensuring, that's about it. I put effort. If I'm somewhere I'm not going to put it right there on Instagram, on Twitter. Always do deferred postings it's just a basic security you follow as journalists, that's all.

Margot:

Do you think that the rise of digital media has impacted press freedom as well?

Journalist 11:

The rise of digital media has not impacted press freedom. It had to come. Because the press freedom was taken, so the digital media needed to come actually in our country it's the other way round. The digital had to come and take the space. For two reasons. Because people were tired and fed up with the news channels. With the noise. That's one. Also because their press freedom went for a toss. So many independent journalists started to put in money and start their own digital ventures. And which is working great. Which really I think is only taking the press freedom up because they are really ensuring the press freedom remains intact. They do not have money,

but they still do commissioning project. So yeah, I don't think so. I personally do not think for that the rise of digital media has impacted the press freedom negatively. They have worked in favor of the press freedom, I think.

Margot:

Because I imagine that all the trolling wouldn't be that bad if social media wasn't so permanently there.

Journalist 11:

Are you saying social media or are you saying digital media?

Margot:

I mean social media. Yeah, I'm sorry.

Journalist 11:

Social media is there in the world. There is Instagram, Instagram is global, not just a platform available to our country. It's my profile. It's my personal life. I can do whatever the fuck I feel like doing. Sorry about the language, but. I don't think so. It's what was the question?

Margot:

I'll rephrase it because I've heard a lot of other journalists say because of social media, everyone thinks he's a journalist. Everyone thinks his opinion is important and reacts to everything he wants to react. How do you think that impacts press freedom?

Journalist 11:

See, I mean there are pros and cons to everything. YouTube, there is a massive rise of YouTubers. Now what is happening, it has penetrated the rural parts and people who are sitting at home. They are making some good food. They are putting it out and can monetize through it. It's a good thing what this has also done is that now every. Tom, Nick and Harry. With a camera, everybody has a phone. Everybody is recording videos, putting it out, giving their opinion. So there is a boom of content, boom of everybody. And nobody is fact checking them. Nobody is fact checking. They're barring one or two organization. Surely it definitely is impacting the press freedom, but these are things we can't stop. These are things we cannot control. That is why there are credible journalists who are followed and things like that, but I think. The government should do what they can. They should step in where all they can. I don't think so.

The press freedom is actually impacted by social media as much as it is impacted by the current government here. Social media is moving at its own pace. See people's attention span has gone for a toss. Even content creators are calling themselves journalists, people who have not gone on field. Or even one they are calling themselves journalists. Can we just go and shut their mouth? We can't, right? We just keep doing our work. It's OK. There is a content creator who is doing fantastic work. He's going now. He's going because he has money visiting these villages and putting out content. Good, old school journalism. Now, who am I to go tell him that? Listen, you are not a journalist. Why are you doing this? He's doing it. At least he's getting something good. At least he's not spreading hate out of his content. And so I don't think we can stop that. There is a boom of social media for sure.

Everybody has an opinion on everything for sure, but the social media boom is also passing, I mean, it's also it's the only reason that I'm sitting in India and can actually be aware about what's happening in Gaza because a girl sitting in the night is live tweeting the war. I'm also able to know through social media, what's happening with children in Gaza and Rafah and Palestine everywhere. So I don't think it needs to be blamed for the press freedom, the government should be blamed for the press freedom in those many words there, I don't want to do any sugar coating here. It's the government that is responsible for taking it down so low that now it's just doesn't exist anymore.

Margot:

With the fear the government gives journalists, do you think that media organizations should play a bigger part in safeguarding their people?

Journalist 11:

Absolutely, 100%. Absolutely, yes. The organization should do all they can to safeguard, to back up their journalists. Absolutely yes, because we have a press guild of India. But that's really toothless if somebody gets arrested, they can't even do anything. They can't even mobilize people. Get them on the streets to get a bail. Siddiqui was in jail for two years. So yeah, I think we need like more solid reforms and solid laws to protect journalists. We have no laws to protect the journalists. How are we supposed to work in this country? How are we supposed to bring the stories out? It's crazy. People are being thrown out of jobs for doing their work. The best of journalists today are out of jobs. They are collaborating with international organizations. Opening their YouTube and I'm talking about the cream layer of the very best journalists they are out of a job. So it is crazy and this government thinks that they are their enemies. We are not the enemies we love this country, but criticizing the government doesn't mean criticizing the country. You are a government chosen by us. We are. It is our work. We are the fourth pillar of democracy. You cannot fuck with us if we stop speaking, getting the stories out, stories of those people out who are not allowed to speak, then who is going to do it? Who is going to bridge this gap between the powerful and the powerless? So that's. I think it is very important.

Margot:

Have you, yourself ever felt a conflict between your editorial independence and the policies of the media organization you worked for?

Journalist 11:

It happened in Hathras. I mean. Yeah, all the time. So many cases I won't be able to name a lot of them, but in Hathras it was a classic example also it is on the public portal. Otherwise all the time I have had there were massively different editorial lines taken on stories on subjects which were very important to be told. I mean Hathras is a classic example of how the channel chose to do damage control. A story which should be about a forceful cremation. The police have taken the basic human rights of a rape victims family.

I have simply reported it recorded a video, got the person on camera, on record, put it out. Why? I mean there is no good reason for the for a channel to go against this toy and blast the reporter

who has done this? But they did it. So all the time, all the time to answer your question all the time, I won't be able to go into the details of all the stories, but at the print at the at CNN Ibn at India Today, even NDTV, after it was bought out, I was there for a month so massive editorial differences. I mean the story is something else they. Make something else. They make absolutely something else out of it and then sell it. It's crazy. It is. We had a death of Bollywood actor. It was a mental health case and the channels made it about a murder case by a girl who did some kind of black magic. And it was one of the biggest con stories ever told to the Indian public. Manufactured within The Newsroom and the entire country. Believe that one story until Supreme Court or whatever. The agency said that we do not have any evidence against the girl. Imagine that's the kind of power they enjoy. They can make a story. They can spin a story, give it some other color, and there are riots. There are crimes happening because of these kind of stories on the ground. It has real repercussions on the ground. I have no idea why these people are not understanding and what stops them from doing this. from not doing this, sorry.

Margot:

That's so crazy. I have to let it sink in.

Journalist 11:

No, I can understand.

Margot:

Yeah, I look, I look up a lot of things on the Internet, but it's so different talking to people than just reading things. And I also don't always see that the sources who are clearly guided by the government or sources that are real, independent journalists.

Journalist 11:

I'm so sorry. Your voice is breaking up.

Margot:

Sorry. I think it's hard if I look up articles on the Internet about press freedom in India, it's hard to see which sources are guided by the government and which sources are real, independent journalists. So it's interesting.

Journalist 11:

Yeah it is. It is, actually. If you do a little bit of homework, you will just get to know which one are the credible journalists, which one are not. It's as simple. They expose themselves every day based on an everyday basis. They keep exposing themselves. Yesterday, the government has said that they are going to prosecute Arundhati Roy, who is one of the biggest intellectuals of the world. Arundhati Roy, have you heard her?

Margot:

No I haven't

Journalist 11:

You have to Google her. So the government is going to prosecute her on a 15 year old case and it is the charges of sedition and UWP have been put basically if she gets prosecuted, she's never going to see the day of the light ever again. It's on a case which was 15 years old. They have now

taken it out to prosecute her. She is one of the best intellectuals our country has ever had. She's a celebrated journalist. She is a global journalist and this is what the government does now. There are sell out journalists who are writing what is wrong with this? Did she not say that army has illegally occupied the parts of Kashmir? So that's what I'm saying. If you do a little bit of homework, it's right. It's writing on the wall. It's right in front of your eyes. Which one are sellouts? Which one are credible? So it's really simple.

Margot:

Do you have a lot of international interactions in your job.

Journalist 11:

A lot of international interactions. Ohh yes, absolutely, because my entire team, because I work for BBC investigation, the entire team is in London. So yeah, I have.

Margot:

How do they see the state of press freedom in India?

Journalist 11:

They also know it, I mean, BBC did a story and BBC India did not do it. BBC World Services, one of their international journalist, flew in and she did a story on the documentary. The channel got so scared for her well-being that they had to actually airlift her, send her back, did not disclose her location because the kind of threats she started to get after that documentary were unmatched. It was un-fucking-precedented. It was so bad. So they have it. They have a first time experience and the next day their entire company in India was raided by the Enforcement Directorate, so they experienced it first hand, so they know. They are very scared. All the international organizations are extremely scared to work in the country. They choose which battles to fight and which to lose, and it's OK.

Margot:

I have. One last question for you. How do you see the future of press freedom evolving in India?

Journalist 11:

After the election results, now I think people on the ground have really showed the government and really saved the democracy. If you know about the election results, people were thinking it would be completely one sided the biggest pollsters of the world said that it's going to be 1 sided in favor of the BJP but they were forced to make a coalition government. Ram Temple, one of the biggest poll plants of the current regime for which so much bloodshed happened. That constituency voted them out. They save democracy. They showed you must be humble. You can't be passed after that. Now I have a lot of hope. Hope is a great thing. Hopes also very dangerous. But I have a lot of hope. That things will be good again. It will be good. But right now it has to touch the absolute low, I think and the revolution will come. But I can only, I mean, I really hope it becomes better. The next five years are going to be extremely. Interesting, yeah.

Margot:

I'm hoping I'm hoping with you.

Journalist 11:

Sorry.

Margot:

I'm hoping with you.

Journalist 11:

Oh yes, absolutely. Thank you so much. All of us. We should only grow. And if there is any confusion with any answer, you can whenever you want, you can reach out. You can text. I will explain what I meant. If you want pictures of any thought, let me know. I'll send it to them. Send it to you. Thank you so much. Sure.

Margot:

Thank you. Yes, thank you. I would love the screenshots that you talked about.

Journalist 11:

I'll send you everything. Also, where is there going to be published and? In what form?

Margot:

This is my thesis actually. So my graduation thesis. So it's not really going to be published yet, but of course I'm going to write an article about it and hope I can do something with it, but it's not yet finished.

Journalist 11:

You will do great. You'll go places with it. All the best. Thank you so much for speaking. Taking choosing such an important subject. And yes, let me know if I can be of any help.

Margot:

Thank you so much for your time.

Journalist 11:

Thank you. No worries. Thank you.

Margot:

Have a great day. Bye.