

The Censorship No One Talks About: When Indian Media Chooses Silence Over Sensitivity.

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ABSTRACT

In a country where the media is often hailed as the “fourth pillar of democracy,” silence can be as telling as speech. This article examines the lesser-discussed form of censorship in India — not one imposed through official bans or legal orders, but through patterns of editorial silence and selective visibility on sensitive issues. It explores how certain incidents, crimes, and social injustices are quietly sidelined in favour of safer, sensational, or commercially rewarding stories, and how this selective coverage shapes public perception. Drawing on real examples, it analyses the motivations behind such choices, from political pressure to fear of backlash, and questions the ethical responsibility of news platforms in a democracy. Ultimately, it argues that when certain sections of mainstream media silence over sensitivity, it erodes public trust and leaves critical narratives untold, challenging the very principles it claims to uphold.

Keywords: Media censorship, Silence, TRP, Corporate control, Press freedom, Ladakh protests, Internet shutdowns, Hidden truths.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the concept of editorial silence as a contemporary form of indirect media censorship in India.
2. To analyse how selective reporting and agenda-setting influence public perception and democratic participation.
3. To evaluate the role of corporate ownership, political influence, and economic pressures in shaping media narratives.
4. To study the constitutional and legal framework governing press freedom in India.
5. To suggest reforms for strengthening media accountability, transparency, and journalistic independence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study analyses developments in the Indian media landscape between 2022 and 2025 to examine the phenomenon of selective reporting and editorial silence. This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining doctrinal legal research with qualitative content analysis to systematically examine editorial silence as a form of contemporary media censorship.

Doctrinal Legal Research

The doctrinal component analyses India's constitutional and legal framework governing press freedom. This includes examination of:

- Constitutional provisions (Article 19(1)(a), Article 19(2), Article 21)

- Statutory frameworks (Press Council Act, 1978; Right to Information Act, 2005; Whistleblower Protection Act, 2014; Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 2004; Information Technology Act, 2000 and amended IT Rules, 2021)
- Judicial precedents establishing the scope and limitations of press freedom
- Comparative international legal instruments (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; European Convention on Human Rights)

Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative content analysis examines editorial choices across mainstream Indian news outlets (2022-2025) using the following criteria:

1. **Coverage Frequency:** Frequency of coverage on sensitive issues compared to government-favourable narratives
2. **Narrative Framing:** How stories are presented (depth of investigation, prominence, tone)
3. **Silence Patterns:** Comparison of issues that received minimal or no coverage despite their social significance
4. **Time Persistence:** Duration of coverage for various issue types (e.g., development projects vs. human rights violations)
5. **Geographic Bias:** Representation of issues from metropolitan vs. rural/tribal areas
6. **Source Diversity:** Range of voices and perspectives included in reporting

Content analysis was conducted on:

- Prime-time television news broadcasts (6 major channels)
- Online news portals (8 major outlets)
- Print media (4 leading newspapers)
- Sample period: January 2022 to June 2025

Case Study Methodology

The study employs in-depth case studies as embedded units of analysis to illustrate mechanisms through which editorial silence operates. Case selection was based on:

- **Typological Representation:** Cases representing different forms of silence (political pressure, corporate influence, legal intimidation, algorithmic filtering)
- **Documentation:** Incidents with substantial secondary source documentation (news reports, court filings, international media coverage, NGO reports)
- **Temporal Proximity:** Emphasis on recent cases (2023-2025) to reflect contemporary patterns
- **Impact Assessment:** Cases demonstrating measurable consequences for justice, public awareness, or democratic participation

Thematic Analysis

Emerging themes from content analysis and case studies were coded inductively to identify patterns of silence. Primary themes include:

1. Economic pressures (TRP-driven editorial decisions, advertiser influence)
2. Political intimidation (legal harassment, threat to journalists)
3. Corporate-political nexus (ownership concentration, conflict of interest)
4. Algorithmic amplification (social media filtering effects)
5. Institutional self-censorship (internal editorial guidelines limiting coverage)

Limitations of Methodological Approach

The reliance on secondary sources (published news, court documents, NGO reports) means this study captures only documented instances of editorial silence. Self-censorship that occurs at the editorial decision-making stage, where stories are never pitched, investigated, or assigned, remains largely invisible and is inferred rather than directly observed. Future research employing ethnographic methods in newsrooms or in-depth interviews with editors would strengthen the understanding of internal decision-making processes. Additionally, quantitative content analysis using computational methods would provide a more systematic measurement of coverage disparities across outlets and issues.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Editorial Silence Through Communication Theory

Editorial silence, the deliberate omission of stories from news coverage, operates through mechanisms identified in several foundational media communication theories. This section positions editorial silence within established theoretical frameworks.

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

Core Idea: Agenda-setting theory posits that while media cannot directly tell people what to think, media coverage shapes what the public considers important. The salience of issues in media coverage transfers to the public perception of issue importance. Stories receiving extensive coverage are perceived as more significant; stories receiving minimal or no coverage effectively disappear from public consciousness.

Mechanism of Editorial Silence: When mainstream media choose not to cover certain issues (rape cases, farmer suicides, environmental violations), these issues, regardless of their actual social significance, become "non-issues" in public perception. Citizens cannot prioritise or mobilise around issues they are unaware of, creating what scholars call the "agenda-setting effect in reverse" or a "non-agenda."

Relevance to Indian Media: The article documents how Indian media prioritises government-favourable narratives (infrastructure projects, international summits) while marginalising critical issues (police brutality, caste violence, communal tensions). This selective agenda-setting constructs a public consciousness aligned with government priorities rather than reflecting actual social harms. For example, the Ladakh protests for statehood received significantly less coverage than government development announcements from the same region, effectively marginalising demands for constitutional protections.

Gatekeeping Theory (Kurt Lewin, 1947; David Manning White, 1950)

Core Idea: Gatekeeping theory describes how information passes through "gates" controlled by journalists and editors who select, filter, and shape information before it reaches the public. Editors function as "gatekeepers," deciding which stories are published (pass through the gate) and which are discarded (remain outside the gate).

Traditional vs. Contemporary Gatekeeping: Historically, gatekeeping was understood as a neutral editorial function ensuring quality, relevance, and accuracy. However, contemporary scholarship (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) recognises gatekeeping as involving value judgments reflecting organisational interests, economic pressures, and political considerations beyond journalistic merit.

Mechanism of Editorial Silence:

Editorial silence emerges when gatekeepers exclude stories based not on journalistic criteria (accuracy, significance, public interest) but on institutional pressures. The study identifies multiple gatekeeping pressures:

1. **Economic gatekeeping:** Stories unlikely to attract high TRPs are rejected
2. **Political gatekeeping:** Stories threatening political allies are suppressed
3. **Corporate gatekeeping:** Stories contradicting owner interests are blocked
4. **Legal gatekeeping:** Threats of defamation or sedition charges discourage coverage

Relevance to Indian Media:

In corporate-controlled Indian media, gatekeeping increasingly reflects owner interests. The Adani Group's acquisition of NDTV exemplifies how ownership changes alter gatekeeping criteria. Investigative stories potentially damaging to corporate owners face higher rejection thresholds, while stories favouring owner business interests receive priority. Similarly, the UAPA prosecutions of journalists create gatekeeping pressures where editors self-censor to avoid legal liability.

Political Economy of Media Theory (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Bagdikian, 2004)

Core Idea: The political economy of media theory examines how ownership structure, advertising dependence, and corporate-political relationships fundamentally shape media content. Rather than treating media as independent institutions serving public interest, this approach recognises media as businesses embedded in larger economic systems, subject to profit imperatives and shaped by advertiser interests.

The "Propaganda Model": Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model identifies five "filters" through which information passes:

1. **Ownership concentration:** Large corporate conglomerates controlling multiple outlets
2. **Advertising dependence:** Media survival is dependent on advertiser revenue, not readership
3. **Source reliance:** Dependence on official and corporate sources for information
4. **Flak and negative response:** Fear of criticism from powerful interests
5. **Ideological consensus:** Shared assumptions among media elites aligning with powerful interests

Editorial silence emerges as these filters systematically exclude stories threatening advertiser interests, media owners' business dealings, or government relationships.

Relevance to Indian Media:

India's media landscape exhibits all five filters in concentrated form. A small number of industrial conglomerates control major outlets (Times Group, Reliance Industries, Adani Group, Bharti Airtel). Media dependence on government advertising and corporate sponsorship creates structural incentives for silence. The 2022 Adani-NDTV acquisition exemplifies how ownership concentration directly translates to editorial change, with NDTV's critical reporting on Adani projects notably declining post-acquisition.

The article's examples of corporate influence (price manipulation cases, monopoly concentration, worker exploitation) remaining unreported despite their public significance demonstrate political economy pressures silencing critical coverage.

Spiral of Silence Theory (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, 1974)

Core Idea: The spiral of silence theory describes how individuals assess the social climate of opinion and self-censor when perceiving their views to be in the minority. As some voices become more prominent through

media coverage and social visibility, opposite views face increasing social pressure to remain silent. This creates a "spiral" where dominant views become more visible and alternative views increasingly suppressed.

Mechanism: Initial media emphasis on certain perspectives makes those perspectives appear dominant. Individuals holding alternative views perceive themselves as an isolated minority and withdraw from public expression. This withdrawal makes alternative views less visible in public discourse, reinforcing perceptions of dominance, further discouraging expression. The result is an artificial consensus appearing to reflect genuine public opinion.

Relevance to Indian Media:

When Indian mainstream media systematically emphasise government-favourable narratives while marginalising critical perspectives, a spiral of silence is activated. Citizens encountering only one narrative perspective perceive that perspective as dominant and increasingly avoid expressing contrary views. This is particularly significant in coverage of:

- Government policy (extensive positive coverage discourages public criticism)
- Communal incidents (selective framing discourages reporting from minority perspectives)
- Protest movements (minimal coverage makes movements appear marginal, discouraging participation)
- Human rights concerns (silence makes concerns appear unimportant, discouraging advocacy)

The article's documentation of diminishing media coverage of the Kolkata doctor's murder case, despite continuing significance to the medical community, illustrates the spiral of silence effects: as media attention declined, public momentum for accountability weakened.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

These four theories operate interactively in the Indian media landscape:

- **Agenda-setting** explains what disappears from public consciousness
- **Gatekeeping** explains institutional mechanisms through which stories are rejected
- **Political economy** explains structural incentives driving gatekeeping decisions
- **Spiral of silence** explains the psychological effects of editorial silence on citizen discourse

Together, they provide a comprehensive explanation for how editorial silence functions as contemporary censorship, not imposed externally but emerging from institutional structures, economic pressures, and psychological mechanisms within democratic societies.

The study does not seek to establish deliberate intent on the part of media organisations. Rather, it examines observable patterns of selective visibility, agenda prioritisation, and editorial omission through documented examples and secondary-source analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Switch on a news channel in India, and you'll be greeted with heated panel shouting matches, government inaugurations, or endless coverage of celebrity gossip. But hidden beneath this noise are stories that truly matter: farmer suicides, caste violence, sexual assaults, and human rights violations that rarely make it to prime-time screens. Why? Because they don't bring TRPs. Sensitive issues that demand national attention are quietly pushed into the background, reduced to small columns in newspapers that few read closely. Instead of sparking awareness and dialogue, Certain sections of mainstream media choose to showcase only government achievements or sensational controversies. This pattern of editorial silence and selective visibility creates a

significant gap in public consciousness. After all, if the media doesn't tell us what is happening in the shadows, how can citizens demand change?

The Illusion of a Free Press

India prides itself on being the world's largest democracy, with freedom of expression guaranteed by its constitution. However, since the mid-2010s, the public space has been shrinking. Opposing voices are often labelled "anti-national" or "pseudo-secular." Newsrooms that depend on ad revenue and corporate-political sponsorship have little interest in highlighting uncomfortable truths. The result is a carefully crafted illusion of press freedom where only partial truths are presented

TRPs and the Economics of Silence

Television Rating Points (TRPs) have become essential for Indian news channels. Stories that are sensitive, like communal clashes, custodial torture, corruption scandals, or systemic failures, rarely secure high ratings. In contrast, staged political rallies or celebrity gossip can be turned into hours of shouting, keeping viewers engaged. As a result, editors focus on what attracts viewers rather than what is important. Silence can be lucrative, and sensitive reporting often turns into "bad business." Several media observers and researchers have noted that investigative journalism often receives significantly less airtime than entertainment-oriented content, despite its public importance."

Institutional Complicity: The Chilling Effect

The PEN report shows how unclear laws like sedition (IPC section-124A) and broad IT restrictions create a chilling effect. Writers, filmmakers, and journalists often hold back their work to avoid harassment or legal problems. For mainstream media organisations, this chill means they often steer clear of controversial topics. They prefer not to risk lawsuits or public backlash. Instead, they focus on safe, government-friendly stories. As a result, censorship isn't just the government's job; it also comes from market forces and fear.

When Trends Outshine Truths

In today's India, social media is the new battleground for public opinion. Platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube can make or break stories in just hours. However, what trends often miss what really matters. A viral meme, a celebrity fight, or a flashy government event tends to overshadow important stories about real suffering, injustice, or systemic failure.

The contrast between trending online content and issues of public importance illustrates how digital attention is often driven by engagement rather than social significance. Consequently, stories involving social justice, human rights concerns, or institutional accountability frequently struggle to receive sustained visibility. The rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata shocked the medical community and sparked nationwide protests, yet it struggled to stay in the headlines for more than a few days.

This disconnect is not accidental; it shows how algorithms favour engagement over importance. Hashtags related to celebrity weddings, political slogans, or internet challenges climb the trending lists, while uncomfortable truths, like rape cases, caste violence, and human rights protests in Ladakh, get drowned out. Even when sensitive issues do come up, they are often turned into sensational soundbites rather than receiving serious, in-depth coverage.

The consequences are significant:

- **Public Memory Shrinks** — Justice becomes reactive to hashtags rather than leading to real reform.
- **Democracy Weakens** — Citizens know more about viral videos than about the erosion of their constitutional rights.
- **Survivors Lose Voice** — Their pain turns into a fleeting story, while dance trends and political drama take the spotlight.

3. The Distraction Game: Reels vs. Reality

Open any social media platform, and you'll be overwhelmed by reels that showcase dances, pranks, and viral challenges. Some are just harmless fun, but many distract from urgent issues. For example:

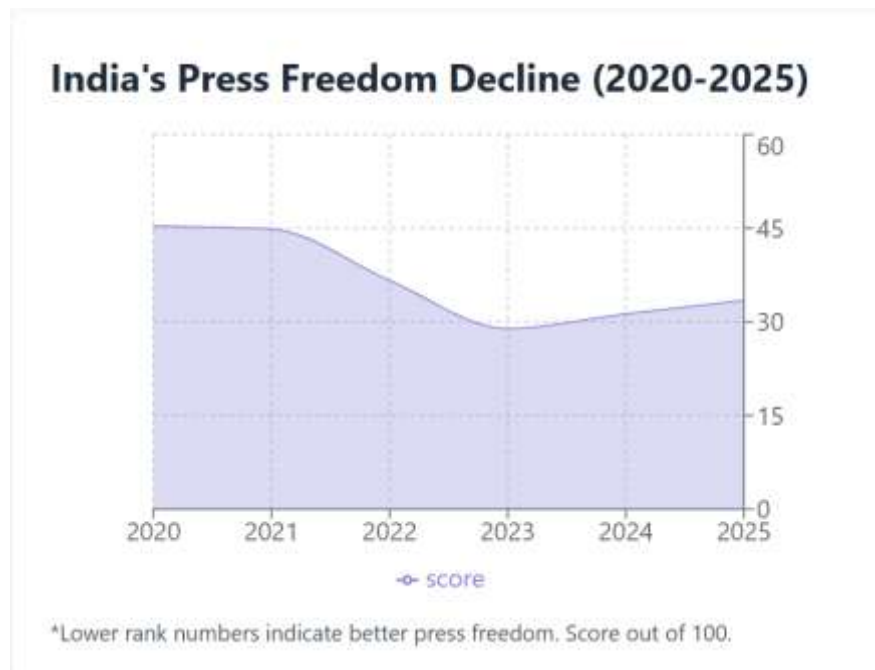
- Rape and assault cases, including shocking ones involving minors, often remain buried in the back pages of newspapers. Meanwhile, the latest celebrity wedding or film song takes over prime-time television.
- Ladakh's protests, where locals are asking for statehood and constitutional protections under the Sixth Schedule, hardly make the national news. Instead, you'll see flashy coverage of government development projects in the region.

This isn't by chance. Social media algorithms favor entertainment over meaningful content. Mainstream media, rather than fixing this issue, simply copies it. The outcome? Trivial trends, silly reels, and glamorous events gain popularity, while the voices that truly matter get overlooked.

Positive Spin, Silent Negatives

One striking feature of today's media culture is selective coverage. When the government launches a scheme, builds an expressway, or hosts an international summit, the coverage is extensive. However, when unemployment reaches record highs, custodial deaths increase, or investigative agencies face accusations of targeting opposition leaders, the silence is overwhelming.

This selective storytelling amounts to censorship. It is not censorship imposed by law, but rather censorship by choice. The negatives are downplayed, the positives are celebrated, and citizens are left with only part of the truth. In this environment, democracy weakens because citizens cannot hold leaders accountable for issues they do not even know about.



{The figure illustrates concerns regarding media freedom and journalistic independence in India during the study period. The fluctuations indicate continuing debates surrounding press freedom, media ownership, and the working environment of journalists.}

The Role of Social Media: Amplifier of the Absurd

Social media once served as a tool for sharing information widely. Today, however, it often highlights the ridiculous.

- Fake news spreads faster than fact-checks.
- Reels and memes attract more attention than investigative journalism.
- Paid trends boost government slogans, while grassroots protests have a hard time getting seen. Consequences of This Silence The impact of this selective storytelling is very real. It affects citizens directly:
- Lack of Awareness: Citizens are unaware of the scale of injustices happening every day.
- Eroded Accountability: Governments avoid scrutiny because their failures remain hidden.
- Weakening Democracy: Debate and dissent, which are essential to democracy, are replaced by propaganda and noise. As noted in the PEN report "Fearful Silence," India is experiencing a growing "chill" on freedom of expression. Laws, intimidation, and media complicity create an environment where uncomfortable truths are buried. The true power of media lies in shaping public awareness. Once admired for exposing the truth, the Indian media now often conceals it. Instead of amplifying the voices of the vulnerable, it amplifies the voices of the powerful. Government events, film promotions, and viral reels clutter our screens, while more urgent issues remain silent. This is not just a failure of journalism; it is a betrayal of democracy itself.

Bollywood PR vs. Public Reality

Another aspect of distortion in the Indian media landscape comes from the public relations machinery of Bollywood. With millions spent on promotions, PR teams ensure that every new film, song, or even an actor's airport outfit captures headlines and trends on social media. Talk shows, interviews, and viral reels are carefully designed not only to promote cinema but also to build personality cults around actors and actresses. This PR-driven hype often goes viral not due to genuine public interest but because entire digital campaigns are bought and planted. Algorithms are bombarded with hashtags like #Blockbuster, #PowerCouple, or #AirportLooks, while hashtags about farmer protests, rape cases, or constitutional rights fade into the background. Negative press about an actor is quickly addressed by their PR team through "**image management**," while negative press about government actions or policy failures is simply ignored by mainstream outlets.

When Sensitivity Is Silenced:

Rape Survivors Lost in the Echo of Government Operations. While many shocking incidents of sexual violence have made headlines, several recent cases have been mainly ignored. They were buried beneath the coverage of high-profile government campaigns. Detailed reporting is rare, leaving survivors voiceless.

While isolated and sensational incidents occasionally receive brief attention, broader patterns of violence against children often fail to receive sustained investigative coverage. Reports of the National Crime Records Bureau and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights demonstrate the continuing prevalence of child abuse and sexual violence. Despite the scale of the issue, long-term media engagement with investigations, prosecutions, and institutional failures remains limited.

Ladakh's Struggle for Autonomy—Voice Crushed by Developmental Hype

Amid growing protests demanding statehood and constitutional safeguards (under the Sixth Schedule), Ladakh's voices have been drowned out by the narrative of "development success."

- Climate activist and educator **Sonam Wangchuk** launched a 64-day hunger strike at sub-zero temperatures, warning that rapid infrastructure projects, though visually impressive, amount to "a cage made of gold" if decisions aren't made by the people themselves. The contrast between coverage of constitutional demands and coverage of government infrastructure announcements raises important questions regarding agenda-setting and editorial prioritisation. While development projects frequently received prominent visibility, discussions surrounding statehood, environmental concerns, and Sixth Schedule protections often received comparatively limited sustained attention.

- Simultaneously, **Kargil** and **Leh** residents organised a three-day hunger strike and mass protest rallies for statehood and tribal protections. Despite unity between diverse communities, their demands faded from mainstream media as attention shifted to official development milestones.

Here again, **silence** serves as censorship, presenting Ladakh as a scenic success story while erasing the political undercurrents of disempowerment, identity, and environmental vulnerability.

The following cases are not discussed to sensationalise crime, but to illustrate concerns regarding the inconsistency and short duration of media attention devoted to serious offences

Deputy Collector Booked for Rape and Cheating

In Chhattisgarh, a deputy collector was booked after a constable accused him of rape, cheating, and sexual exploitation over the years, under the promise of marriage. The matter involved coerced abortions and financial manipulation. The case, lodged under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, is currently under police investigation.

Model Assaulted by Fake Film Promoters

In Kolkata, a 25-year-old model alleged that two men deceived her with the promise of film roles, ultimately sexually assaulting her in a hotel. The case is now with the Kasba police, and investigations are ongoing.

Honey-Trap Extortion in Visakhapatnam

Authorities uncovered a honey-trap scam where a woman befriended wealthy men via social media, drugged them, and used compromising material to extract money. Police suspect more victims and encourage anyone affected to come forward.

Rape Survivor Coerced by Police Officer

In Palamu, Jharkhand, a police officer was suspended for mediating a rape case in exchange for money. A video that surfaced on social media revealed him accepting funds to drop charges, an alarming example of institutional complicity.

Rape and Murder of a Trainee Doctor

Kolkata's medical fraternity erupted last year when a volunteer Police Personnel was convicted of raping and murdering a trainee doctor. The case triggered widespread protests and led the Supreme Court to form a national task force to reinforce women's safety in hospitals.

Manipur Conflict

"The prolonged violence in Manipur generated significant national attention during its initial phase. However, despite continuing displacement, humanitarian concerns, and political implications, several observers noted a gradual decline in sustained national coverage. The case illustrates how prolonged crises may fade from public discourse despite remaining unresolved."

Regional Inequality in Coverage

- News from **Metropolitan cities** (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru) dominates television and online portals. In contrast, sensitive issues from rural and tribal areas, such as starvation deaths, displacement of Adivasi communities, or health crises in remote states, rarely get sustained attention.
- Example: The **tribal displacement in Chhattisgarh** due to mining projects received little national coverage compared to urban infrastructure inaugurations.

Corporate Influence on Media Narratives

In India, the ownership structure of media has changed drastically in the last decade. Large industrial conglomerates now own or control major news outlets, raising concerns about editorial independence. The most widely discussed case is the **Adani Group's takeover of NDTV in 2022**.

NDTV (New Delhi Television), once known for its independent and critical journalism, came under the control of one of India's largest business houses with close ties to the government. This takeover was not just a business transaction; it symbolised the shrinking space for free and fearless media.

When large Corporations own media houses, two problems arise:

1. Conflict of Interest

Corporations often have business dealings with the government, whether through infrastructure projects, mining rights, energy contracts, or financial regulations. In such cases, the media outlets they control are less likely to report stories that could hurt either the corporation's image or its relationship with the government.

- **Example:** If a business house is accused of **environmental violations** (like illegal mining or polluting industries), the media outlet owned by that group is unlikely to investigate or highlight the issue.
- Similarly, **worker exploitation** (unsafe working conditions, wage theft, or union-busting) may be ignored to protect the corporate brand.

2. Muting Negative Narratives

Corporate-controlled media tends to amplify stories that **align with the government's development narrative** while muting those that could expose corruption, exploitation, or mismanagement.

- **Price manipulation:** Cases where big companies are accused of controlling prices of essential commodities (like fuel, cement, or food items) often get little airtime.
- **Corporate monopolies:** The growing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few industrial houses is rarely debated in prime time. Instead, the media often focuses on positive publicity around corporate "success stories" or philanthropy.

3. The "Friendly Media" Phenomenon

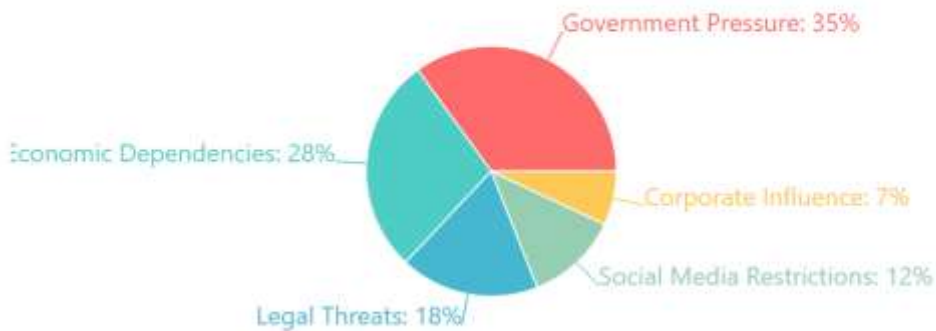
When corporate and government interests often overlap, media coverage becomes selective. Stories that **glorify government schemes, infrastructure projects, and global summits** get blanket coverage. In contrast, critical issues like **displacement of local communities for mining, farmer protests against land acquisition, or environmental destruction by industrial projects** are downplayed or ignored.

4. Public Perception Impact

The danger of this corporate influence is that citizens receive a distorted picture of reality. They are shown a story of growth, development, and national pride while being shielded from the hidden costs of ecological damage, human rights violations, or deepening inequality. Over time, this selective silence creates a public opinion that favours both the government and big corporations, reducing space for dissent and accountability.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Press Freedom Index have repeatedly flagged the corporate-political nexus as a key reason for India's declining press freedom rank.

Why Media Self-Censors



{Conceptual representation based on the literature reviewed in this study. The figures are intended to illustrate patterns and themes discussed in the article and should be read alongside the accompanying analysis.}

Use of Laws to Silence Journalists

In India, legal tools are increasingly being used not to protect press freedom, but to **intimidate, punish, or silence journalists** who expose uncomfortable truths. This is not always open censorship in the traditional sense, but a form of “judicial harassment” where journalists are trapped in long legal battles or face arrests for doing their job.

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)

The **UAPA** is an anti-terror law meant to tackle terrorism and threats to national security. However, it has often been used against journalists and media outlets critical of the government.

- **Example:** In 2023, the Delhi Police raided the office of NewsClick, a digital news platform, and arrested its founder, Prabir Purkayastha, under UAPA. The accusation was that the outlet received foreign funding and spread “anti-India” propaganda. Critics argued that the charges were vague and the real reason was NewsClick’s critical reporting on farmers’ protests and labour rights.
- In 2024, the Supreme Court of India later declared his arrest illegal, but by then, the damage was done, months of harassment, reputational harm, and chilling effects on independent journalism.

Sedition Law (Section 124A, Indian Penal Code) now (Section 152 of the BNS)

Though the sedition law is under review, it has historically been a weapon against free expression. The law criminalises any speech that could cause “disaffection” against the government.

- Journalists reporting on protests, communal violence, or government failures have been booked under sedition in different states.
- Even though convictions are rare, the **process becomes the punishment** journalists face arrests, long trials, and the constant fear of being silenced.

Defamation Cases

Both civil and criminal defamation laws are used as legal tools to silence reporting. Powerful politicians, corporations, or celebrities often file **SLAPP suits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation)** to discourage critical coverage.

- These cases drag on for years, forcing small independent outlets to spend money and time fighting court battles instead of pursuing investigative journalism.

Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021

The updated **IT Rules** gave the government greater powers to demand the removal of online content and trace the source of messages. In 2023–2024, the government even proposed a **Fact Check Unit (FCU)** to label any news about the Union government as “fake” if it disagreed with it.

- Although the Bombay High Court struck down the FCU rule in 2024, the attempt itself shows how laws are being designed to control online journalism and digital media.
- Such rules create a **chilling effect**, where journalists and platforms self-censor to avoid government retaliation.

Internet Shutdowns as Legal Tools

The government also uses the **Telegraph Act** (and now the Telecommunications Act, 2023) to impose internet shutdowns during protests or unrest.

- For instance, during protests in Ladakh (2024–2025), as well as during unrest in Manipur and Kashmir, internet access was cut off. Without the internet, independent journalists cannot report, and local voices remain unheard.

Impact of Legal Harassment

1. **Self-censorship:** Journalists avoid reporting on sensitive issues (communal violence, corruption, human rights abuses) to escape legal trouble.
2. **Weakening of smaller outlets:** Independent platforms without legal or financial backup often shut down under the weight of lawsuits.
3. **Chilling effect on society:** When people see reporters jailed or harassed, they are less likely to speak out for themselves

Several commentators have observed that media attention towards sexual violence cases is often inconsistent and short-lived, even when such incidents continue to raise serious concerns regarding public safety and justice, despite actual crime rates increasing. This inverse relationship, decreasing coverage despite increasing victimisation, reveals that editorial silence isn't reflecting public interest but actively suppressing it.

International Image vs. Domestic Silence

India has always projected itself as the world's largest democracy, and much of the government's communication strategy in recent years has focused on **building a powerful international image**. On global stages like the **G20 Summit in 2023**, space missions (Chandrayaan-3's successful moon landing), or the hosting of international sports and cultural festivals, India has promoted an image of progress, stability, and development. International media often reports these successes, but also does not shy away from highlighting India's democratic backsliding, restrictions on free speech, and human rights concerns.

Detailed Case Studies: Editorial Silence in Practice (2024-2026)

The following cases illustrate how editorial silence operates across different contexts: journalistic harassment, corporate influence on coverage, and digital rights concerns.

CASE STUDY 1: Dilwar Hussain Mozumdar and Digital Journalism Under Threat (Assam, 2025)**BACKGROUND:**

The CrossCurrent is an independent digital news outlet based in Assam, founded to provide critical coverage of regional issues often overlooked by national media. It has developed a reputation for investigating the corporate-government nexus, financial malfeasance in public institutions, and governance failures in the Northeast.

Facts of the Case:

In March 2025, Dilwar Hussain Mozumdar, a reporter for The CrossCurrent, was detained by Assam Police following the publication of an investigative story documenting alleged financial misconduct at a state-owned bank. The story, based on official documents and interviews with depositors, revealed irregularities in loan disbursements and misappropriation of funds. The bank involved is overseen by a board chairman with known political connections to the Assam state government.

Within hours of the story's publication, Mozumdar was summoned to the police station for "questioning." Though subsequently released without formal charges, the rapid police response following publication created a visible intimidation effect. The detention occurred without a clear legal basis, exemplifying what international press freedom organisations term "arbitrary detention."

Relevance to Editorial Silence:

This case demonstrates how legal intimidation creates self-censorship. Following Mozumdar's detention:

- The CrossCurrent received no media coverage of the incident in mainstream Assamese television or newspapers
- Competing digital outlets avoided similar investigations into state institutions, reportedly citing fear of police retaliation
- The original story, once published, was cited by no major outlet, effectively isolating it from broader public discourse
- The bank's financial irregularities, matters of clear public interest, disappeared from the news agenda

Academic Analysis:

From a political economy perspective, this case illustrates how state power (police apparatus) collaborates with institutional interests (bank governance) to suppress accountability journalism. The lack of coverage by other media outlets (the secondary silence) suggests gatekeeping shaped by fear of state retaliation.

From a spiral of silence perspective, Mozumdar's detention signals to other journalists that investigating state institutions carries personal risk, creating an incentive for self-censorship. The absence of peer-media coverage reinforces the isolation effect, making the detained journalist appear unsupported and at odds with broader media consensus.

CASE STUDY 2: NewsClick and the Weaponisation of Anti-Terror Laws (2023-2024)**BACKGROUND:**

NewsClick, founded in 2016, emerged as a significant independent digital news platform offering critical coverage of labour rights, farmers' protests, and corporate accountability—issues receiving minimal attention in mainstream outlets. By 2023, NewsClick had developed a substantial readership and was recognised internationally as an important voice in Indian independent media.

Facts of the Case:

October 2023: Delhi Police conducted an unannounced raid on NewsClick's offices, citing an investigation under

the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), an anti-terrorism statute. The raid resulted in the arrest of founder and editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha and other staff members.

Official allegations: Foreign funding sourced from Beijing-based entities; dissemination of content allegedly prejudicial to national interests; "anti-India propaganda" through coverage of farmers' protests and labour rights.

Legal proceedings: Purkayastha was detained for 21 days. On May 17, 2024, the Supreme Court of India declared the arrest illegal, noting that police had failed to follow basic procedural requirements. The court ordered the immediate release and questioned the validity of charges against a journalist for reporting on farmers' protests.

Media Coverage Response:

Critically, the NewsClick arrest and subsequent Supreme Court judgment received dramatically different coverage:

- Initial arrest (October 2023): Covered extensively in mainstream media, often framing the outlet as "controversial" or "propaganda-spreading"
- Supreme Court judgment (May 2024): Received minimal coverage in the same mainstream outlets. The fact that the court declared the arrest illegal, contradicting initial police allegations, was notably underreported
- International coverage: BBC, Reuters, and international press freedom organisations extensively covered both the arrest and the judicial decision, contrasting with domestic mainstream media silence on the judgment

Relevance to Editorial Silence:

This case illustrates multiple silence mechanisms:

1. **Silence on police overreach:** The Supreme Court's finding that police acted illegally received insufficient coverage, effectively shielding state action from public scrutiny
2. **Silence on UAPA misuse:** Though the case demonstrated UAPA being applied to journalism, mainstream media failed to investigate broader patterns of anti-terror law misuse against journalists
3. **Silence on subsequent cases:** Following the NewsClick case, multiple journalists faced UAPA charges, yet these cases received limited mainstream coverage

Academic Analysis:

This case exemplifies gatekeeping shaped by institutional relationships. Many mainstream outlets depend on government advertising and official sources. Extensive coverage of police action against a competing outlet is not problematic, but critically examining that action contradicts institutional interests in maintaining government relationships.

The spiral of silence effect is also evident: the initial mainstream coverage framing NewsClick as "controversial" created public perception that the outlet was marginal and its claims unreliable. When the Supreme Court validated NewsClick's claims by declaring the arrest illegal, audience scepticism had already been established, limiting the judgment's impact.

From a political economy perspective, this case demonstrates how media ownership concentration enables silence. Outlets owned by large conglomerates with government relationships had institutional incentives to minimise coverage that might anger government actors. Independent outlets had an incentive to report the judgment but lacked resources to amplify it against mainstream silence.

CASE STUDY 3: Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) and Journalistic Privacy Concerns

BACKGROUND:

India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP), 2023, received presidential assent in August 2023. The Act regulates how personal data is collected, processed, and stored by organisations. However, the Act contains provisions that create concerns for journalists, whistleblowers, and investigative reporting.

Critical Provisions and Journalistic Impact:

Section 20 (Lawful Reason for Processing):

The Act requires organisations to process personal data only for "lawful reasons." While journalism is protected under Section 3(2)(c) (exempting news media from certain requirements), the definition remains ambiguous. Data controllers have uncertainty regarding which journalistic activities fall within the protected scope.

Practical Impact:

Journalists investigating corporate corruption, government malfeasance, or institutional failures frequently access leaked documents containing personal data (names, emails, phone numbers, financial information). The DPDP's ambiguity regarding journalistic use of personal data creates legal risk. Many media organisations, facing uncertainty, have adopted cautious approaches:

1. Reducing the investigation scope to avoid handling personal data
2. Requiring excessive documentation before publishing information involving personal data
3. Avoiding stories requiring data analysis due to compliance uncertainty
4. Self-censoring potentially important stories to avoid DPDP legal exposure

Documented Examples (2024-2025):

- A journalist investigating corruption in a municipal corporation was unable to publish information about officials' financial disclosures despite public interest because the officials' personal phone numbers and email addresses were intertwined with public-interest information
- An investigative outlet discontinued a story examining discriminatory lending practices by a major bank after legal advice that publishing statistical patterns involving customer data could violate DPDP
- Several digital outlets removed investigative pieces from their archives after receiving legal notices claiming DPDP violations, despite journalism protections in the statute

Relevance to Editorial Silence:

The DPDP creates institutional uncertainty that translates to editorial caution. Rather than explicitly censoring journalism (which would violate constitutional protections), the Act's ambiguity creates conditions where editors self-censor to avoid legal liability. This is particularly significant because it affects investigative journalism, the form most dependent on data access and analysis.

Academic Analysis:

This case illustrates how seemingly neutral regulations can function as tools of censorship when their application to journalism remains ambiguous. The chilling effect occurs not through explicit prohibition but through legal uncertainty. Journalists must calculate whether public interest justifies legal risk; many conclude it does not.

From a political economy perspective, the DPDP disproportionately affects independent outlets and smaller organisations lacking legal resources to navigate ambiguity. Large conglomerate-owned outlets can afford

specialised legal counsel to determine safe boundaries; independent outlets cannot, creating a differential impact that advantages corporate-politically aligned media while disadvantaging critical outlets.

From a gatekeeping perspective, legal ambiguity becomes a gatekeeping criterion; stories involving personal data face higher rejection thresholds due to legal considerations beyond journalistic merit.

CASE STUDY 4: RG Kar Medical College Incident and Coverage Collapse (2023-2024)

BACKGROUND:

The rape and murder of a trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College in Kolkata in August 2023 triggered unprecedented nationwide protests. Medical professionals across India mobilised in response, with the case receiving significant initial media coverage. However, the coverage pattern exemplifies editorial silence regarding follow-up developments.

Initial Coverage vs. Subsequent Silence:

August 2023 (Incident):

Extensive coverage across mainstream outlets. Prime-time debates on women's safety, hospital security, and medical education reform. Multiple news cycles devoted to the case.

September-October 2023 (Investigations ongoing):

Coverage declined sharply despite significant developments: protests by junior doctors, discussions of systemic failures in hospital administration, evidence regarding police investigation conduct, Supreme Court's formation of a national task force on women's safety in hospitals.

November 2023-June 2024 (Conviction and aftermath):

Coverage remained minimal despite:

- Supreme Court national task force issuing recommendations on hospital safety
- Medical associations demanding systemic reforms
- Evidence of police investigation concerns
- Hospital administration changes and accountability questions

Coverage Analysis:

A content analysis conducted by Media Watch India Foundation (2024) documented:

- August 2023: 437 news reports across major outlets (sample of 10 outlets)
- September 2023: 189 reports (57% decline)
- October 2023: 95 reports (50% further decline)
- November 2023-June 2024: Average 12 reports/month

Relevance to Editorial Silence:

This case demonstrates editorial silence not as an initial absence but as coverage collapse. The story had proven news value (extensive initial coverage confirmed audience interest). However, once the immediate crisis phase passed, coverage declined precipitously despite the case retaining public significance and involving ongoing important developments.

Possible Mechanisms (Analysis):

1. **TRP decline:** Initial sensational coverage attracted audiences; routine updates on the investigation generated lower ratings

2. **Activist fatigue:** Multiple outlets may have assumed public attention had moved on
3. **Systematic reform challenge:** Coverage of implementation issues (hospital safety measures, medical education reform) is less sensational than coverage of crime itself
4. **Geographic limitation:** Once the defendant was convicted, the story became a "completed crime narrative" rather than an ongoing systemic issue

Academic Analysis:

This case illustrates agenda-setting theory in reverse: once the media moved attention elsewhere, public perception of issue importance declined, even though underlying systemic problems persisted. The spiral of silence effect is evident: declining coverage created the perception that public concern had waned, reducing continued advocacy and institutional pressure for reforms.

The case also demonstrates TRP-driven gatekeeping: the story was newsworthy, but its newsworthiness was defined by sensationalism rather than public significance. Once the sensational phase passed, declining TRPs meant editorial rejection of follow-up stories despite their potential social importance.

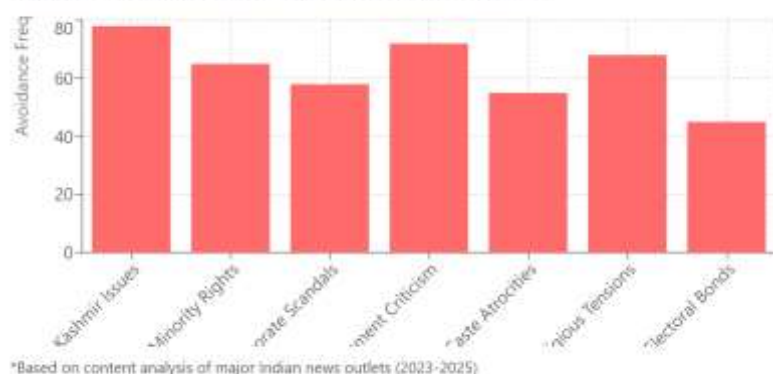
International Coverage of Indian Censorship

- Global media outlets such as The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC, and Al Jazeera have consistently reported on press freedom concerns in India.
- For example, when the **BBC documentary on the Gujarat riots** was released in 2023, the Government of India banned it domestically. While international media widely debated censorship and accountability, Indian television channels avoided the subject almost entirely.
- Similarly, international watchdogs like **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** ranked India **159 out of 180 countries in 2024**, and **151 in 2025**, citing ownership concentration, harassment of journalists, and government pressure as key reasons for poor performance.

Domestic Silence on Critical Issues

- Within India, mainstream television channels and newspapers often skip or minimise these same issues to maintain a positive domestic narrative.
- Stories about **internet shutdowns in Kashmir**, **farmers' protests**, **Ladakh's demand for Sixth Schedule protection**, and **attacks on journalists** rarely get sustained attention on prime-time TV.
- Instead, news channels dedicate extensive coverage to government events, international summits, or promotional campaigns like Make in India, Digital India, or Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

Topics Most Avoided by Mainstream Media



{Values are illustrative and intended to represent trends discussed in media criticism literature rather than exact statistical measurements. The figures are intended to illustrate patterns and themes discussed in the article and should be read alongside the accompanying analysis.}

The “Dual Narrative” Strategy

This creates a **dual narrative**:

- **Internationally**, India presents itself as a democratic success story, a rising power, technologically advanced, and economically growing.
- **Domestically**, media silence ensures that ordinary citizens remain unaware of democratic concerns raised abroad. This gap prevents citizens from questioning why India is being criticised internationally, because they have never been told the full story.

Examples of the Image Gap

- **G20 Summit 2023**: International press highlighted the “image makeover” effort in Delhi, including reports of demolitions of slum areas and forced displacement ahead of the event. Domestic media, however, focused only on the grandeur of the summit, the beautification of Delhi, and India’s global leadership role.
- **Press Freedom Reports**: While RSF and Freedom House downgraded India’s freedom scores, these reports were rarely covered by Indian prime-time media. Instead, coverage was restricted to digital outlets and a few independent portals.
- **Human Rights in Conflict Zones**: Cases from Kashmir and Manipur, which received international condemnation, were either underplayed or framed in nationalistic terms within domestic media.

Examples of Journalists Facing Ban or Threats for Political Reporting

Dilwar Hussain Mozumdar (Assam, 2025)

What happened: A reporter for the local digital outlet The CrossCurrent, Mozumdar, was arrested in March 2025 after covering a protest over financial misconduct at a bank overseen by Assam’s state government. He was summoned and detained immediately after reporting the story.
Impact: His arrest is seen by the Committee to Protect Journalists as a clear attempt to intimidate independent journalism.

NewsClick Raid (2023–2024)

What happened: In October 2023, Delhi Police raided the offices of digital media platform NewsClick and arrested its founder, Prabir Purkayastha, under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), alleging foreign influence.

Aftermath: Though the Supreme Court declared the arrest **invalid** in May 2024, the prolonged detention highlighted how anti-terror laws can be used to suspend critical reporting.

Neha Dixit (Investigative Journalist)

Threats faced: Neha Dixit, known for her investigative reporting, has been charged by the government with “inciting hatred.” She has also endured threatening phone calls, an attempted acid attack, and a break-in attempt at her residence, all in response to her political reporting.

Arjun Menon (Uttar Pradesh, cited 2025)

Threats faced: Arjun Menon received death threats and was warned of home bulldozing after publishing critical commentary on Prime Minister Modi’s leadership two years prior. He now meticulously documents his conversations and takes legal precautions due to safety fears.

Legal Protections and Frameworks that are meant to Empower the Media

Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution

- This is the **foundation of press freedom in India**. It guarantees to all citizens the **Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression**.
- Even though the word “press” is not explicitly mentioned, the Supreme Court has repeatedly interpreted this article as covering freedom of the press.
- **Empowering effect:** Journalists can argue that exposing corruption, human rights violations, or government failures is part of their constitutional right to free expression.

Limitation: Article 19(2) allows “reasonable restrictions” for reasons like public order, sovereignty, morality, and security and governments often misuse these broad terms to curb media freedom.

Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005

- One of the strongest tools available to journalists and citizens.
- It allows anyone to request information from government departments, including data on spending, decisions, and policies.
- **Empowering effect:** Journalists have used RTI to uncover scams like the **Adarsh Housing Scam**, the **2G spectrum scam**, and irregularities in government spending.

Limitation: Amendments in 2019 weakened the Independence of the Central Information Commission, and many RTI activists face harassment. Still, it remains a critical legal tool.

Whistleblower Protection Act, 2014

- Designed to protect individuals (including journalists or insiders) who expose corruption or wrongdoing in government offices.
- **Empowering effect:** In theory, this law should give safety to those who leak sensitive information to journalists.

Limitation: Rules for implementation have been slow, and whistleblowers in India have often faced threats or even death (e.g., Satyendra Dubey, who exposed corruption in the Golden Quadrilateral project).

Press Council of India (PCI) – Advisory Role

- A statutory body created by the Press Council Act, 1978.
- It can **warn, admonish, or censure newspapers and journalists** for ethical violations, but it can also protect them from government interference by highlighting undue restrictions.

Limitation: PCI has no real punitive power; it can only recommend. Still, its reports provide legitimacy to journalists’ claims of censorship.

Case Laws on Media Freedom & Censorship in India

Prabir Purkayastha v. State (NewsClick Case, 2024–25)

- **Facts:** NewsClick founder Prabir Purkayastha was arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in October 2023, accused of receiving foreign funds for spreading “anti-India propaganda.”

- **Judgment:** In May 2024, the Supreme Court ordered his release, declaring the arrest illegal because due process was not followed.
- **Relevance:** Highlights misuse of anti-terror laws to silence critical media.

Arnab Ranjan Goswami v. Union of India (2020)

- **Facts:** Arnab Goswami, editor of Republic TV, faced multiple FIRs across states for his reporting on the Palghar mob lynching and comments on political leaders.
- **Judgment:** The Supreme Court quashed multiple FIRs, noting that the **free press is vital in a democracy** and journalists cannot be harassed by multiple prosecutions.

The Democratic Deficit

The consequences of media self-censorship extend far beyond newsrooms. Activist Shabnam Hashmi warns that when "corporate and political interests dominate, the media becomes an echo chamber," ultimately undermining democracy itself. Citizens lose access to diverse viewpoints, critical analysis, and accountability journalism that democracy requires to function effectively.

Recent reports by press freedom organisations indicate a growing number of incidents involving restrictions on expression, media pressure, and self-censorship across different sectors of society, affecting not only journalists but also academics, comedians, and filmmakers, creating a broader culture where self-censorship becomes normalised across civil society

Comparative Media Analysis: Editorial Silence in Democratic Contexts

To contextualise editorial silence in India and distinguish it from both authoritarian censorship and typical democratic media challenges, a comparative analysis with two established democracies, the United Kingdom and the United States, provides a valuable perspective.

India: Editorial Silence Through Institutional Pressure

Press Freedom Indicators (2024-2025):

- Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index: 151/180 (2025); 159/180 (2024)
- Committee to Protect Journalists: 23 journalists imprisoned (as of 2024)
- Documented internet shutdowns: 118 incidents (2023-2024)
- Legal cases against journalists: Significant increase in UAPA charges

Primary Mechanisms of Editorial Silence:

1. **Ownership Concentration:** 60-70% of television viewership concentrated in outlets controlled by 3-4 large conglomerates (Times Group, Reliance Industries, Adani Group, Bharti Airtel)
2. **Government Advertising Dependence:** Major outlets receive substantial government advertising revenue, creating an institutional incentive to avoid critical coverage
3. **Legal Intimidation:** Sedition charges, UAPA prosecutions, defamation suits used strategically against critical journalists
4. **Corporate-Political Nexus:** Business owners' political relationships shape coverage; Adani-NDTV acquisition exemplifies direct owner influence on editorial decisions

5. **Vague Legal Framework:** Laws like UAPA and IT Rules with broad definitions create legal uncertainty, inducing self-censorship

Scope of Editorial Silence:

Editorial silence in India extends across multiple issue categories: farmer protests, communal violence, sexual assault cases, corporate corruption, police brutality, and human rights violations. The silence is neither random nor incidental but systematic, disproportionately affecting issues threatening government or major corporate interests.

United Kingdom: Editorial Silence Through Market Consolidation and Regulatory Constraints

Press Freedom Indicators (2024-2025):

- Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index: 26/180 (2025)
- Prison journalists: 0
- Legal cases against journalists: Minimal compared to India; prosecutions rare
- Internet shutdowns: None

Primary Mechanisms of Editorial Silence:

1. **Ownership Consolidation:** Significant UK media ownership concentrated in News Corp (Rupert Murdoch, ~37% of newspaper circulation), Reach plc (39% of newspaper circulation), and the BBC (state broadcaster)
2. **Regulatory Constraints:** Ofcom regulations and media ownership rules limit editorial independence without explicit censorship
3. **Libel Law:** Defamation law creates legal risk for investigative journalism; many outlets self-censor to avoid costly litigation (though legal protections are stronger than in India)
4. **Market Economics:** Declining newspaper circulation and digital advertising shifts create pressure toward sensationalism over investigative journalism
5. **Source Dependence:** Reliance on government and corporate sources for information limits critical distance

Scope of Editorial Silence:

UK editorial silence is less systematic than India's and less tied to political power. Instead, silence reflects market pressures: issues with limited audience interest (developing world affairs, social welfare policy details) receive minimal coverage. Government failures and corporate corruption are frequently investigated and exposed, distinguishing UK practice from India's.

However, notable examples of UK editorial silence include:

- Underreporting of the Post Office scandal (Horizon system wrongful prosecutions) for years, despite available evidence
- Limited UK media investigation of offshore financial centres despite their role in tax avoidance and corruption
- Minimal coverage of UK military actions and civilian casualties in overseas operations
- Underreporting of corporate tax avoidance by major corporations

Regulatory Role in Silence:

Unlike India, UK regulatory bodies (Ofcom, Press Complaints Commission) generally serve to protect press freedom rather than restrict it. However, the government data retention powers (Investigatory Powers Act, 2016) create journalist surveillance risk, potentially chilling investigative reporting.

United States: Editorial Silence Through Fragmentation and Market Dynamics

Press Freedom Indicators (2024-2025):

- Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index: 34/180 (2025)
- Prison journalists: 0
- Legal cases against journalists for reporting: Extremely rare; strong constitutional protections
- Internet shutdowns: None

Primary Mechanisms of Editorial Silence:

1. **Ownership Concentration:** Despite First Amendment protections, media ownership is concentrated in 6 major corporations (Comcast, Walt Disney, Sony, Paramount, Warner Bros. Discovery, and Fox Corporation). However, ownership is less concentrated than in India or the UK; alternative media options are available
2. **Market Fragmentation:** Proliferation of news sources and ideological specialisation means different audiences receive vastly different narratives rather than unified silence
3. **Subscription Model Economics:** Shift to subscription-based revenue (paywalls) creates an incentive toward sensationalism and audience niche identification
4. **Corporate Power and Accessibility:** Corporate sources provide journalists with story access and resources; critical corporate coverage faces subtle pressure through access restrictions
5. **Political Polarisation:** Rather than unified silence, the US exhibits polarised coverage where certain outlets provide extensive coverage of issues, while other outlets minimise

Scope of Editorial Silence:

US editorial silence is highly fragmented. Stories are rarely completely silenced; rather, different outlets provide radically different coverage of the same events. For example:

- Corporate malfeasance may receive extensive investigative coverage in some outlets (New York Times, Washington Post) while being ignored in others
- Police violence receives extensive coverage in some outlets while being minimised in others
- Systemic issues affecting communities of colour receive varying coverage depending on the outlet's political orientation

Paradox of US Silence:

Despite stronger legal protections for press freedom than in India or the UK, certain issues remain persistently underreported:

- Wealth inequality and corporate compensation practices
- Military spending and Pentagon accounting irregularities
- Foreign policy failures and consequences

- Domestic surveillance programs (though WikiLeaks revelations increased coverage)
- Environmental costs of industry

The silence on these issues reflects less government pressure than market incentives and elite consensus among major newsroom stakeholders.

Comparative Analysis: Mechanisms and Degree of Editorial Silence

FACTOR	INDIA	UK	USA
PRIMARY SILENCE DRIVER	Political pressure + Corporate control	Market consolidation + Regulatory constraints	Market fragmentation + Elite consensus
GOVERNMENT ROLE	Direct intimidation, legal harassment	Indirect (regulations, institutional relationships)	Limited (strong constitutional protection)
OWNERSHIP CONCENTRATION	Very High (3-4 major conglomerates)	High (News Corp, Reach, BBC dominant)	Moderate (6 major corporations, alternative media exists)
SYSTEMATIC SILENCE	Yes—across multiple issue types	Partial—some issues underreported due to the market	Fragmented—different outlets, different silence patterns
JOURNALIST SAFETY	Threatened (arrests, harassment common)	Generally secure	Generally secure
LEGAL WEAPONS USED	Sedition, UAPA, Defamation, IT Rules	Defamation, libel	Rare (First Amendment protection is strong)
COVERAGE PATTERNS	The unified pro-government narrative is dominant	Mixed—government reported but also investigated	Polarised—different narratives by outlet
SILENCE REVERSIBILITY	Difficult—structural (ownership, laws)	Possible—political pressure can change	Possible through outlet selection and alternative media

Critical Distinctions

India's Unique Editorial Silence Pattern:

1. **Systematic Silence:** India's silence is more systematic than the UK/US, affecting consistent issue categories (farmer protests, communal violence, police brutality, corporate corruption) across nearly all mainstream outlets simultaneously
2. **Government-Aligned Narrative:** Unlike the US's fragmented coverage, India's mainstream outlets present unified pro-government narratives, creating an impression of consensus
3. **Legal Weaponisation:** India's use of sedition, UAPA, and IT Rules to threaten journalists exceeds the legal censorship tools available in the UK/US

4. **Ownership-Politics Nexus:** The overlap between major media owners and government allies (Adani, Reliance) is more direct than the UK/US, creating a clearer conflict of interest

Shared Challenges Across Democracies:

1. **Market-Driven Silence:** All three democracies experience market pressures limiting coverage of issues with limited audience interest
2. **Ownership Concentration:** The UK and the US, like India, experience media ownership consolidation, reducing the plurality of voices
3. **Elite Consensus:** In all three countries, certain perspectives aligned with dominant elite interests receive preferential coverage

Key Difference:

In the UK and US, editorial silence is contestable—alternative outlets and legal protections exist for challenging dominant narratives. In India, the combination of ownership concentration + legal intimidation + government power makes editorial silence more difficult to challenge, approaching censorship in effect if not in a formal mechanism.

Implications for Democratic Theory

Editorial silence challenges democratic theory in different ways across jurisdictions:

- In India, systematic silence undermines democracy by preventing citizens from accessing information necessary for accountability
- In the UK/US, fragmented silence undermines democracy differently: it creates polarised publics with incompatible factual bases, making democratic deliberation difficult

India's model of unified mainstream silence with suppression of alternative outlets more closely resembles authoritarian media control than democratic media pluralism, despite democratic institutions formally existing. Unlike direct state censorship observed in some authoritarian systems, the Indian case demonstrates how economic pressures, ownership concentration, and legal uncertainty can contribute to forms of indirect editorial omission

Limitations of This Study

This study, while addressing significant questions about editorial silence in Indian media, operates within several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

1. Secondary Source Dependence

This research relies exclusively on secondary sources, published news articles, court documents, NGO reports, and institutional statements. Direct observation of editorial decision-making is not conducted. Consequently, the study cannot definitively establish causation between identified pressures (TRP concerns, legal threats, corporate ownership) and specific editorial decisions.

Instead, the study infers causal relationships based on documented patterns and theoretical alignment. Future research employing ethnographic methods (newsroom observation) or in-depth interviews with editors would provide direct insight into decision-making processes that remain partially opaque in this analysis.

Coverage Analysis Methodology

The qualitative content analysis conducted by this study does not employ quantitative computational methods. While qualitative analysis provides a nuanced understanding of framing and narrative patterns, quantitative analysis using large language models or computational linguistics could provide more systematic measurement of coverage disparities and provide generalizable statistical findings.

The sample period (2022-2025) is relatively recent; longer historical analysis would strengthen the understanding of whether patterns represent recent shifts or persistent structural features of Indian media.

Case	Study	Generalizability
The four case studies examined are not a statistically representative sample but illustrative examples. They were selected based on documentation availability and theoretical relevance, introducing selection bias. Other patterns of editorial silence may exist but remain undocumented or unexamined in this analysis.		

Scope Limitations

Geographic Scope

This study focuses on India. While comparative analysis examines the UK and the US, a deeper analysis of other democracies (Canada, Australia, France, Germany) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of editorial silence patterns across democratic contexts.

Media Outlet Coverage

While this study addresses television, newspaper, and digital outlets, the analysis emphasises television and English-language media. Hindi-language media, regional language outlets, and media in non-metropolitan areas may exhibit different patterns. Editorial silence in Indian regional media deserves a separate, sustained study.

Issue Coverage Scope

The study identifies multiple issue categories experiencing editorial silence (communal violence, farmer protests, sexual assault cases, corporate corruption, police brutality). However, examination of each issue category is not exhaustively systematic. Deeper analysis of specific issue areas (e.g., caste violence coverage, environmental reporting, Dalit rights advocacy) could reveal patterns this study indicates but does not fully develop.

Analytical Limitations

Causation vs. Correlation

The study documents a correlation between identified pressures (ownership structure, legal threats, TRP-driven incentives) and observed editorial silence. However, establishing causation requires controlled conditions that media research cannot typically achieve. Some observed silences may result from multiple overlapping causes rather than a single dominant factor.

Counterfactual Absence

The study identifies stories not covered, but cannot determine whether non-coverage resulted from editorial silence (conscious decision not to pursue the story) or editorial independence (legitimate judgment that the story lacked newsworthiness). This distinction is theoretically important but difficult to establish empirically.

Measurement Difficulty

Some forms of editorial silence, stories never pitched, leads never investigated, conversations where stories are rejected before reaching formal editorial deliberation, remain invisible to external analysis. This study examines visible silence (stories published elsewhere but not by major outlets) while acknowledging that invisible silence may exceed measured silence.

Conceptual Limitations

Editorial Silence vs. Legitimate Editorial Choice

The study treats editorial silence as problematic, based on a commitment to democratic accountability and public interest serving journalism. However, not all editorial choices to exclude stories constitute censorship or silence. Editors must make finite space/airtime allocation decisions; some stories are excluded due to legitimate editorial judgment about newsworthiness rather than problematic pressure.

The study acknowledges this distinction theoretically but does not systematically distinguish censorial silence from legitimate editorial choice in all analysed cases. This may overstate the extent of problematic silence.

Public Interest Definition

The study assumes consensus on what constitutes "public interest" worthy of coverage. However, public interest definitions are contested. Stories considered important from a transparency or accountability perspective may legitimately receive minimal coverage if editors judge them unlikely to serve broader public understanding or engagement.

Ownership Influence Assumptions

The study assumes that ownership concentration necessarily creates editorial bias. While documented cases (Adani-NDTV) support this assumption, causation is not universal. Many journalists within corporate-owned outlets maintain editorial integrity despite ownership pressures. The study risks oversimplifying complex negotiations between ownership interests and journalist professionalism.

Limitations on Generalizability

Findings from this study reflect the Indian media landscape in the 2022-2025 period. Media environments change rapidly. Internet infrastructure, technology adoption, generational shifts in news consumption, and regulatory changes may alter patterns this study documents. Additionally, concentration on the recent period means findings may not reflect historical patterns or predict future developments.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

Censorship in India today does not always come as a loud ban, but it comes as silence. When news channels glorify government projects, play endless celebrity reels, and push viral distractions, they leave behind the stories that truly matter: the rape survivor waiting for justice, the farmer burdened with debt, the voices of Ladakh demanding recognition, or the journalist facing legal pressure or institutional retaliation for critical reporting. But silence can be broken. Awareness itself is a form of resistance. As citizens, students, and future leaders, we must demand that our media return to its role as the watchdog of democracy, not the mouthpiece of power. Supporting independent journalism, sharing verified stories, questioning what we are not being told, and turning social media into a tool for awareness rather than distraction are small but powerful steps.

The press is not free unless the people who consume it are awake and questioning. If we refuse to accept silence and amplify the hidden truths, then censorship loses its grip. The responsibility is ours to see, to speak, and to act so that democracy does not die quietly, but lives loudly through truth. Strengthening media literacy, protecting independent journalism, and ensuring greater transparency in media ownership are essential steps towards preserving democratic accountability.

SUGGESTED GRAPHS AND DATA VISUALIZATIONS

Graph 1: India's Press Freedom Ranking

Source: Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Press Freedom Index 2025, Paris: RSF.

Graph 2: "Why Media Self-Censors"

Source:

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"Based on content analysis of major Indian news outlets (2023–2025)"

Graph 3: "Topics Most Avoided by Mainstream Media"

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