

Introduction

Since early 2019, covid-19 has impacted the world in many negative ways. Nations were forced into lockdown to try and protect their citizens from the deadly disease that was sweeping through the world. Through this health crisis, there was a significant impact on the media around the world. Authoritarian governments utilized the pandemic to control and constrain the media freedom their press held. Along with this, covid-19 exposed and expanded the digital divide of those with access to the internet and those without it. All this adverse effects from covid-19 on the media is causing a lack of information about vital, life saving information to reach people, whether it be from governments or lack of internet access. This paper investigates the impact that covid-19 has taken on media freedom and freedom of expression in several countries around the world. In relation, it looks into the digital divide and how covid-19 negatively influenced it, limiting global access to information. Finally, it offers solutions to help increase the access of information that people receive during these times when media is crucial to save and protect lives.

Governmental Oppression on Media in the Philippines

Covid-19 has handed many countries an opportunity to control the media and to limit the amount of press freedom journalists and media outlets have. Freedom for Media notes in 2020 that, “restricted space for free speech and press freedom, control of media being a part of the authoritarian approach to a health crisis around the world.” Laws and measures that were initially meant to promote safety have now turned into ones that control, restrict and harass the media. Many authoritarian governments are under the impression that the health crisis means

limiting freedom of expression and the press (Elena, 2021). Journalists are left with the inability to properly report on medical health measures during the pandemic and to challenge corruption or disinformation of governments during this time. A 2020 study was conducted by the Committee to Protect Journalists that looked at the amount of journalists that had been jailed around the world. It was found that over 274 journalists were jailed due to coverage they had done over the pandemic (Elena, 2021). This is an issue being seen around the world where “journalism is currently completely blocked or seriously impeded in 73 countries,” (Torsner and Harrison, 2021). One country that is a prime example of using covid-19 as an excuse to control the media is the Philippines.

Since June 30, 1965, the Philippines has had a republic modeling that of the United States. It consists of a president, who currently is Rodrigo Duterte, and three branches of government with equally divided amounts of power. Prior to the start of the pandemic, the Philippines saw press freedom being upheld and censorship almost nonexistent (Lee,____). Once in office, President Duterte made it clear that he was in opposition of press freedom, even before covid-19 began. President Duterte threatened the media by saying, “Just because you’re a journalist, you are not exempt from assassination if you are a son of a b*tch. Freedom of expression cannot help you,” (Reporters without Borders, 2021). A major shift was seen to more control over the media. In 2017, media organizations began an investigation into the victims of Duterte’s controversial “War on Drugs” campaign. In response to this, Duterte began honing in on these media organizations to censor the content that they were putting out. This shift of media control only worsened. Now, according to Freedom House, the Philippines is one of the most dangerous places for journalists. Getting a ranking of 56 out of 100 countries, President Duterte

has created a hostile environment for the media that targets journalists and news organizations that report anything outside of what the Duterte administration approves of.

Once covid-19 began, the Philippines is no exception to the trend of using the pandemic as an excuse to control the media and limit press freedom. Katherine Jacobsen, a reporter for the Committee to Protect Journalists, writes how “the pandemic has provided governments with a new excuse to wield laws criminalizing the spread of ‘fake news’”. One such law is the Anti-Terror Act. The act took effect on July 18, 2020 and it allows authorities to detain activists or journalists without a warrant (Public Media Alliance, 2020). Victims of this act can be detained for weeks on end with no true evidence to hold them there. The aim of this act was created with the purpose to go against fake news that media organizations could publish about the pandemic or the government and to protect “democracy” and “free expression”. In reality, it was a way for the Duterte administration to control the media under the guise of eliminating fake press about Covid-19. The Public Media Alliance details an example of this act in use with the arrest of Maria Ressa in June of 2020. She had written an article that exposed malpractice of a company during Covid and corruption of the CEO. Maria is facing 10 charges that are “all equally far-fetched” and if found guilty, she could face up to 100 years in prison (Reporters without Borders, 2021). On July 21, 2020, following her charges, Maria wrote, “these charges are politically motivated and are meant to harass and intimidate.”

There are several ways that President Duterte is harming press freedom. One way is extreme violence against journalists including many killings. There have been 22 journalists killed since Duterte took office in 2016 and each killing goes unpunished by the government. In 2020, four journalists were beaten to death by thugs hired by politicians in efforts to silence

information they deemed negative against them (Reporters without Borders, 2021). One such brutal killing was of a journalist for the *Bandera*, *Manila Times* and *Manila Standard* named Jesus Malabanan. In 2021, he was shot in the head by gunmen who broke into his home while he was watching TV. Malabanan was targeted simply for doing his job as a reporter and no investigation followed. Freedom House explains that under the Duterte administration, “there had been no major efforts by state agencies to investigate serious incidents or otherwise address the problem.” Cases just like that of Malabanan go without punishment for the government does not pursue any action against the perpetrators. Violence is not the only way President Duterte is attempting to silence the media. Another way is by implementing heavy lawsuits and jail time. On November 29, 2021, the secretary of the Department of Energy for President Duterte filed several lawsuits against 21 journalists and 7 media houses for a story going against a policy he was working on (Conde, 2021). In addition to this, President Duterte is shutting down media organizations. Back in 2016 when President Duterte was running for office, the oldest and largest media outlet in the Philippines, ABS-CBN, had refused to run political ads in support of President Duterte’s campaign. A year later, once in office, President Duterte publicly went against the media house for being biased and “swindling him for not airing his paid political ads,” (Santos, 2020). In May of 2020, President Duterte found an excuse to shut down the media house. ABS-CBN had been crucial in supplying information on the pandemic to citizens but once their operating license expired, President Duterte shut down the media house. While the license can be renewed, it has to be voted on by congress. Since the congress is under the control of President Duterte, congress voted in July of 2020 against ABS-CBN getting their renewal. Subsequently, this has forced millions of citizens to be deprived of critical news about

and during the pandemic because of the forced closure of ABS-CBN. Along with this, President Duterte has brought back “Red Tagging” which individuals or groups (mostly consisting of journalists and media organizations) are seen to the authorities as targets “for arbitrary arrest or, worse still, summary execution,” (Reporters without Borders, 2021). This is a practice that has not been seen since the end of the Cold War and adds fuel to the fire that is burning through press freedom in the Philippines.

Through all of President Duterte’s tactics to take away press freedom, it not only is affecting the journalists and media organizations, it is greatly affecting the public. With the extreme restrictions that are in place and lack of news coming out of media organizations, citizens are being denied information about the pandemic and other crucial topics.

Covid Increasing the Digital Divide Across the World

Covid has not only limited access to news through authoritarian rule but also by expanding the digital divide. The digital divide has long been an issue facing the world but with the emergence of covid-19, it has exposed the uneven access to information. With the pandemic shutting down numerous nations, forcing citizens to remain at home, more people have turned to the internet. A comprehensive study done by researchers Rahul De, Neena Pandey, and Abhipsa Pal examined the increased usage of the internet. They found that internet usage has increased to 100% after the lockdown compared to just 40% prior to pre-lockdown (De, et. al., 2020). This usage consists of shopping, social media, and most importantly, news access. Research manager for Freedom House, Amy Slipowitz, stated in the time of the global pandemic, “dissemination of vital, factual information is vital to people’s lives.” However, many lack access to this vital

information. Around the world, over 3.7 billion people have no access to the internet (Broom, 2020). There are two main reasons that cause expansion of the digital divide.

First, covid-19 has increased the cost of the internet. With an increased demand, the prices for internet usage have climbed rapidly to compensate. Africa is a prime example of this occurring. Regional coordinator in Africa for the World Wide Web, Onica Makwakwa, explains how 80% of South Africa did not have internet access due to cost before the lockdown happened. Now, the pandemic has only made it harder for people to afford the internet. On average, 86% of the African population makes less than \$5.50 per day, only \$154 total per month (Broom, 2020). For just one gigabyte of data, only about one hour of internet usage, is worth 40% of their monthly wages (Broom, 2020). Making roughly \$154 per month, 40% of their wages would be \$61.60 going to the internet alone. This leaves a mere \$92.40 per month for people to try and survive on. Before covid-19, one could easily go without the internet, avoiding paying outrageous prices. In today's time though, "internet is life changing - especially in times of crisis," (Web Foundation, 2020). Internet access has become a necessity that the average person cannot afford to have and cannot afford to go without.

Second, broadband access and capabilities limits access to the internet and vital information about covid-19. According to professional investor and writer, Jason Fernando, broadband is the highest-quality way to transmit data long distance and around the world. Compared to other forms of transmitting data, broadband allows for "quick access to information," (Fernando, 2021). With how efficient broadband has become, the majority of the internet, about 92.6%, uses broadband to transmit information. While broadband is the best and most common way to utilize the internet, many people around the world lack access to it. In

Australia, an estimated 3 million people (13% of the total population) have no access to broadband (Broom, 2021). In the United States, 157 million Americans lack broadband (Broom, 2021). The President of Microsoft, Brad Smith, says that no broadband connection means that people cannot get access to information. This information includes telemedicine, businesses, and covid-19 related news. Not only are those without access affected but those with access are also influenced. Since the pandemic, internet usage has skyrocketed, putting a strain on broadband to keep up with the high demand. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that in Korea, the internet traffic reached over 60% of their broadband capacity. OECD also found that in the United Kingdom, their broadband usage exceeded 35% of their capacity. This trend is seen all around the world, including France going over 80% of their capacity (OECD, 2020). This overuse of broadband capacity causes slow-internet speeds and poor quality overall. In return, people are not able to easily access accurate information about the pandemic quickly and timely.

Solutions to Media Freedom Attacks

Of course, one would find it difficult, almost seemingly impossible, to find a solution to fix the hold that authoritarian regimes have over media freedom. In every negative situation though, there are some possible solutions. The main solution is for activist groups and citizens of these governments to protest against the violations of media freedom. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists and other human rights groups have protested against governments, advocating for the release of journalists who were wrongfully imprisoned (Bloom, 2021). Along with this, the International Federation for Human Rights has filed for an appeal to

the case of Maria Ressa for false charges against her. It calls for citizens of the Philippines to write to the United States and Philippine government to conduct a fair trial for Ressa and other journalists who have been imprisoned with similar charges. It also states citizens should write to have the government follow the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that protects all people. This is a prime example of how local citizens in these authoritarian countries can help to bring back the media freedom that was seen before the pandemic.

Solutions for Digital Divide

The main issue to the digital divide is the high costs that individuals are being forced to pay for internet access. Since the main reason that people need access during these times is for critical access to covid-19 related information, the best solution is to make covid-19 related websites free to the public. In Africa, this solution was put into effect. Covid-19 websites were free of charge, requiring no data and used broadband access to ensure the best and fastest quality (Broom, 2021). The digital divide is an infrastructure investment challenge. Solutions need to include help with affordability of data, increased support of affordable devices, and digital skills content (Manzar, et. al., 2020). Governments and stakeholders need to take action to bring about these programs and free websites to be able to help support and inform the public about vital covid-19 information.

Conclusion

Overall, covid-19 had impacted the world in many different ways. It has changed the way our lives function on a daily basis and has created a new perspective of what “normal” is.

However, this new normal should not include limited press freedom and an expanded digital divide. Human rights groups and citizens around the world need to step up to fight against the oppression that these governments are putting on media freedom. Journalists should not be jailed just for doing their job to inform the public about the pandemic. Citizens should also have appropriate access to information, not have to spend over half of their monthly wages for internet access to inform them about life saving information. Covid-19 is a problem that has created many problems around the world and we must all come together to restore media freedom and eliminate the digital divide.