

A Systematic Review of the Impact of Media Censorship on Governance and Development in a Society

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Abstract

The basic role of the media is to inform, entertain and educate society. In some parts of the world, large segments of the population are no longer receiving unbiased news and information. This is because the media has fallen prey to more nuanced efforts to throttle their independence. This paper is a report of a systematic review range of quantitative and qualitative studies to assess the impact of media censorship on governance and development, to create an understanding of the media roles in a modern society. The paper provides an understanding of the different roles of media; media censorship patterns and strategies; who censors media, as well as the impact of media censorship on governance and development. The paper further identifies that media censorship must be understood within the context of nations as each civilization has special political, social, and religious traditions. While there are situations like war, where restricting the flow of information between the government and the people through the media might be warranted, free flow of information in the media is critical for the functioning of every contemporary political system. The paper adds to the understanding that freedom of media cannot be exercised in the complete absence of some level of censorship. With the growing age of internet use where anyone can report, control measures to avoid extreme reactions like anarchy are needed. This paper highlights that there is need for further research to investigate how power, oppression and privilege are products of certain forms of communication throughout society; and that exploration of control of language to perpetuate power imbalances, and the role of mass media in dulling sensitivity to repression is needed.

Key Words: Media Censorship, Governance, Information Manipulation, Systematic Review

1.0 Introduction

Media is owned by government, individuals, the public and sometimes a small group of people with similar interests. Ownership and control of the media dictates the content flow within the media (Djankov et al., 2003). In an era where information can be accessed by the click of a button, control over such information is increasing so much so.

Governments have since moved from spectators in the digital revolution to sophisticated early adopters of advanced technologies that allowed them to monitor and direct the flow of information across all media platforms. Around the world, governments are using strategies to manipulate the media and in relation to also manipulate the information flow in the countries. Because of the introduction of the internet and therefore its tools like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, powers have/are shifting from the government to the civil society. (Bennett & Naim, 2015).

As we advance more in the digital world, and with social media rising by a storm, we have seen countries block access to some of these platforms to maintain control over the flow of information in their countries (Barry, 2022; Groenewald, 2019)

Media Censorship in authoritarian states like China has seen the government limit the free flow of information and manipulate information to allow citizens access only what the government intends for them to. The government uses libel lawsuits, arrests, and other means to force Chinese journalists and media organizations to censor themselves. Thirty-eight journalists were imprisoned in China in 2017 (Xu & Albert, 2017). While it can be argued that China being an authoritarian state, a sense of dictatorship and control is expected, the question of how the government's censorship and control of media affects the people is always there. Would censorship expose such a regime to some long-term risks by undermining its image of competence?

There are countries that take freedom of access and expression a bit more seriously. In Kenya for instance, there is the Access to Information Act of 2016, which allows the citizens the right of access to information held by the State or any other person and where that information is required for the exercise, or protection of any right or fundamental freedom (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2016). Does this Act limit the government from censoring information in the media?

Whereas it can be argued that media censorship establishes some sense of benevolence control, it is important to note that there are significant effects of the same. For instance, how would citizens of a country with overly censored media react when they stumble upon information about their government that was never reported in their own country? What does this do to the levels of trust in government? How does the public respond to denial of resources necessary for informed opinion formation?

Activists' groups like Anonymous, a decentralized international activist and hacktivist collective and movement primarily known for its various cyberattacks against several governments, government institutions and government agencies, are on a mission to uncover that which government keeps censored, hidden, or manipulated. In April 2012, Anonymous hacked over 400 Chinese government websites, some more than once, to protest the treatment of their citizens. This is just (Anonymous') second attack (on Chinese websites), the first one a few months ago had been a corporate attack against a Chinese company and it had exposed corporate fraud. This time, of course, the message was more general about online censorship in China (Chan, 2012). This just goes to show that a significant effect of media censorship would be illegal access and dissemination of information (without any form of gatekeeping) to the public.

It is growing more difficult to evaluate the type of governance and service delivery citizens receive if the flow of information, and how and what is shared is significantly controlled by governments. It is for this reason that this systematic review is undertaken to bring an understanding to this impact.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

- i) To examine the vital role of mass media in societies.
- ii) To assess the impact of media censorship on accountability, public perception of government competence, and the ability of citizens to make informed decisions.
- iii) To identify existing gaps in existing literature and propose recommendations on the same.

3.0 Methodology

This paper is a systematic review of the impact of media censorship on governance and development in a society. As is defined by Russell et al. (2009), a systematic review is a protocol driven comprehensive review and synthesis of data focusing on a topic or on related key questions. This review involved a comprehensive search strategy that included journal articles and online publications over the past ten years. The search parameters employed key terms such as censorship, media censorship, information manipulation, effect and impact of censorship, and censorship and governance. A total of thirty-four (34) articles were included in the review, covering both quantitative and qualitative studies.

The review used a narrative synthesis approach to integrate findings from selected studies, allowing the identification of key themes and patterns related to the impact of media censorship. The exclusion criteria for articles not aligned with the study's focus are provided in *Table 1*, ensuring the inclusion of relevant and impactful literature. The data extraction focused on understanding the role of media, the impact of media censorship on accountability, public perception of government competence, and citizens' ability to make informed decisions.

The excluded articles in this systematic review are as follows:

	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reason for exclusion</i>
1.	Flew et al. (2019)	The article had a biased focus on the current global ‘techlash’ towards the major digital and social media platforms. This was far off from the main topic of discussion.
2.	Luo & Harrison (2019)	The article focused on citizen journalism in relation to censorship as opposed to mass media / communication.
3.	Melis (2003)	The paper’s focus was on financial reporting in relation to governance. This was far from the topic of discussion.
4.	Tierney & Minor (2004)	There was no mention of censorship, with the focus being primarily on the role of communication in academic governance.
5.	Zhuravskaya et al. (2020)	The article’s focus was on how the Internet and social media affect political outcomes as opposed to the topic being reviewed.

Table 1: Excluded Journal Articles

4.0 Results and Discussion

Censorship and Information Manipulation

Censorship is defined as any regime or context in which the content of what is publicly expressed, exhibited, published, broadcast, or otherwise distributed is regulated or in which the circulation of information is controlled (Oxford, n.d.). On the other hand, Information manipulation is undertaken to shape public opinion or undermine trust in the authenticity of information (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), 2022).

Role of Media

The role of the media is to inform, entertain, and educate society on what is going on around the world (Sen, 2011). Media censorship therefore means controlling what is shared publicly on media platforms.

Mass media is critical for the functioning of every contemporary political system. Thus, we can expect a variation in media freedom depending on the type of government since political regimes differ regarding the political, legal, and economic framework in which news coverage operates. Politicians rely on mass media as a communication channel to manage their public relations and persuade voters, but also as the realm of public discourse, which signals the preferences of the population. Citizens rely on mass media as an information distributor, public agenda setter and professional watchdog keeping politicians accountable (Stier, 2015).

In modern societies, free mass media are an external factor in fighting corruption. They can be an institution of checks and balances (Starke et al., 2016). By exposing corrupt public officials, mass media contribute to vertical accountability. Media can have a relevant impact when civil society demands accountability from elected leaders. However, despite the

media's potential to curb corruption, they are often restricted to bolstering government accountability for citizens. Aside from the Internet's allowing access to professional journalistic information, the onset of social media over the last decade has created new opportunities to accelerate the dissemination of information by amateurs.

The value of free speech is central to mass communication. However, it is not always the case as sometimes other issues take precedence such as moderation of obscene language, and enactments of copyright laws. Freedom of speech also does not always mean complete freedom. This is where those known as gate keepers come in. The gate keepers determine whether a story will make it to the public or not. They are part of society and have their own biases and values. There is an instance where media coverage of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was barely covered and some argue that this was because of gate keeping. Gatekeepers have always had strong influence in media. They controlled how many pages a story would have on newspaper, and how much airtime it would have on the television (Anonymous, 2016).

Abbas & Zubair (2020), argue that freedom of expression is a basic human right for all the citizens irrespective of any kind of discrimination, and a backbone of democracy discusses the balance between the assurance of freedom of expression amid peace and security and ensuring law & order as one of the greatest challenges democratic governments faces.

Mass media is critical for the functioning of every contemporary political system. Citizens rely on mass media as an information distributor, public agenda setter and professional watchdog keeping politicians accountable (Stier, 2015). Freedoms of speech, assembly/association, religion, and movement are at the very broad category of civilian autocracies (Stier, 2015).

To add on to this discussion, Starke et al. (2016), mention five distinct roles that the media play:

“First, as watchdogs, the media hold political decision makers accountable for their actions; Second, mass media strengthen checks and balances between equally powerful actors; Third, mass media provide a civic forum for voicing complaints and contribute to forming public opinion; Fourth, by providing information about corruption, mass media contribute to a general climate of transparency within the society, which curbs corruption on both the systemic and individual levels; and Fifth, watchdog media can have a preventive effect.” (Starke et al., 2016 pp. 4703 - 4704).

Censorship Patterns and Strategies

Recent studies on media censorship accord a great deal of attention to censorship strategies and patterns. There is less control over social media censorship as compared to media censorship. Control over news media is considered to be tighter due to the stronger and wider influence of press information compared to the Internet posts (Kuang, 2018).

Nevertheless, there are situations in which restricting the flow of information between the government and the people through the press might be warranted (Hayes & Reineke, 2007). For instance, when a country is at war or facing a crisis, there is information that must be kept from the public. If information is not censored at such times, especially with the constant rise of social media, there is a very possible rise of propaganda, a way to influence and persuade audiences for personal gain, and it becomes difficult to reel in the control. Censorship is less costly than propaganda in the age of social media (Wong & Jiachen, 2021).

Maintaining an orderly state is a common reason for censorship, while the underlying motive is to prevent the public from knowing information that may threaten the authorities (Abbas & Zubair, 2020).

According to reactance theory, threats to or elimination of a freedom can elicit reactance of varying strength depending on such factors as the importance of the freedom to the person and the perceived legitimacy or justification of the threat (Hayes & Reineke, 2007). Thus, the notion that censorship of any form from any source will prompt a detectable reactance response may be an oversimplification of the process.

In a conference paper, Ahmad (2019), brings to light four dimensions of censorship and highlights how each impacts media. These are a) moral censorship, whose impact on democratic and non-democratic countries vary; b) “government or military censorship”, discussed as a hazardous kind of media censorship; c) “political censorship” that usually happens in countries when they want to hide secret information from the public to maintain social control; and d) “religious censorship” which happens mainly in Islamic states. Of any other forms of censorship, these four have the most impact in the media and in relation to the perception of citizens on proper governance.

Chen & Yang (2019) present media censorship as a hallmark of authoritarian regimes. While contributing to the growing empirical literature on the endogenous formation of beliefs and preferences when authoritarian regimes have a direct incentive to intervene on information flow, Chen & Yang analyse the actual impact that censorship has on citizens.

Free access to information does not induce citizens to acquire politically sensitive information; temporary encouragement (a push by media or other factors) to find this information leads to a persistent increase in its acquisition; and that acquiring this information then brings changes to knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and intended behaviours (citizens have a say and have a feeling of being called to action with a need to hold the government to account, and may yearn for more information pushing them to even pay for access to restricted information) (Chen & Yang, 2019).

Kuang (2018), rather than looking at Censorship and Information manipulation as a national / wide coverage issue, takes on this topic to bring attention to the strategies and patterns used by various levels of governments in control. Kuang argues that various levels of government censor and control information flow based on different reasons and employ different strategies as well.

Who Censors Media?

The idea that the state mainly censors news that possibly questions the legitimate ruling of the state also means that not all negative news issues are being censored. Some negative news items about local officials, for example, may not be censored, as they are not considered harmful to state ruling (Kuang, 2018).

Censorship, as discussed by Wong & Jiachen (2021), censorship is not executed by an individual, but the state, and when noticed, worsens individuals' assessment of governments. The justification for censorship is that it is less costly than dealing with propaganda especially in an authoritarian state.

Quoting Hook (2011), Kuang (2018) notes that in such censorship strategies where censorship happens at different levels of government, "The state has increased spending on Internal security, which indicates that the central state is nervous about escalating public unrest." By this analysis, we can note that governments are clear on censorship and have varied reasons for putting it into place. Governments also need checks and balances especially when it comes to dealing with issues of corruption. Given that corruption is an issue that comes up whenever governments are looked into in terms of service delivery, by exposing corrupt public officials, mass media contribute to vertical accountability in that media can have a relevant impact when civil society demands accountability from elected leaders (Starke et al., 2016). However, despite the media's potential to curb corruption, they are often restricted to bolstering government accountability for citizens.

Toettoe & Jiang (2022) show how democratization and censorship relate in reference to globalisation and foreign influence on a country's censorship policies. Toettoe & Jiang use China as a case study and analyse how the rise of China on the international stage, has caused the foreign democratic countries to have a say and influence the spread of undemocratic norms, values and standards in China. The economic, political and security linkages with China, an authoritarian country, contribute to the prevalence of media self-censorship, a behaviour which has been associated with democratic backsliding in transitional regimes.

Regime legitimation and governance are the driving forces behind diverging media policies in autocracies (Stier, 2015). Thus, we can expect a variation in media freedom depending on the type of government since political regimes differ regarding the political, legal, and economic framework in which news coverage operates.

Impact of Media Censorship

Pop-Eleches & Way (2021) present an informational theory of repression to account for findings on the impact of censorship. According to Pop-Eleches & Way, the impact of repression hinges on the degree of censorship and where alternative media is present, violence is more likely to increase support for opposition. Where alternative sources of information are limited, repression may reduce support for opposition and increase support for incumbents (Pop-Eleches & Way, 2021).

In an effort to further bring to light the impact of censorship and information manipulation on citizens' perception, Chen & Yang (2019) posed the following questions:

“Does providing access to an uncensored internet lead citizens to acquire politically sensitive information? Does the acquisition of politically sensitive information change citizens' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours?”

Following their analysis, they concluded that;

“Answers to these questions are far from clear. Citizens with access to uncensored internet may not seek out politically sensitive information, due to lack of interest in politics, fear of government reprisal, and unawareness or distrust of foreign news outlets. Even if they do acquire such information and become fully informed, their attitudes and beliefs may not change.”(Chen & Yang, 2019, p 2295).

Seeing the role that media plays in society, media censorship can destroy the transformation of accurate information from Mass media to its consumers (Ahmad, 2019).

War, or any crisis could be used by governments as justification for censorship. With the constant rise of social media, audiences / citizens can be influenced and persuaded audiences for personal gain, making it difficult for authorities to have any control over such situations. Looking at the reactance theory that states, threats to or elimination of a freedom can elicit reactance of varying strength depending on such factors as the importance of the freedom to the person and the perceived legitimacy or justification of the threat, to argue out their idea (Hayes & Reineke, 2007). War or a national crisis is not the only justification governments use in censorship. Akabogu (2004) pointed out a few other reasons the government censor media such as *Concept of fair play, Check on freedom of the press, Right to rebuttal, and enhancement of national unity.* (pp. 176 - 177)

In discussing the implications of censorship on the individual and the society, it must not be seen from an all-negative angle (Akabogu, 2004). Akabogu further points that there are several positive and beneficial things can be derived through the censorship of the mass media such as *Lack of interest on local news, patronage of foreign media, loss of objective reporting and journalism, check on press freedom, economic loss, erosion of local value system, infringement on the fundamental right to information, corruption in governance, fostering national unity, promotion of justice, and consumer protection.* (pp. 178 - 180)

On the aspect of the impact that media censorship, and in relation information manipulation has on governance, Wong & Jiachen (2021), have actually helped to answer the direct question *‘What is the impact of censorship on citizens?’*. They argue that when censorship comes to citizens' attention, it may create an impression that the government is unable to address a certain social problem, so that it has to rely on information manipulation to dodge it. A competent government should confront social problems instead of avoiding them (Wong & Jiachen, 2021).

What is already known about this topic

Censorship is a complex phenomenon that must be understood within the unique contexts of individual nations, considering their distinct political, social, and religious traditions. Each civilization employs censorship as a tool to manage the flow of information, reflecting the values and priorities of its society. While often viewed negatively, censorship is a multifaceted practice with both advantages and disadvantages for individuals and society at large.

Media censorship has been identified as a hallmark of authoritarian regimes, where control over information is wielded as a means of maintaining power and quelling dissent. In such political systems, censorship becomes a mechanism for suppressing alternative viewpoints and preserving the ruling authority's narrative.

In certain circumstances, such as during periods of war, there arises a perceived need to restrict the flow of information between the government and the public through the press. This restriction is justified on the grounds of national security and preventing the dissemination of sensitive information that could compromise the country's strategic position. This recognition highlights the nuanced nature of censorship, where situational factors and the broader context play a pivotal role in shaping its implementation and impact.

Modern societies recognize the role of free mass media as an external force in combating corruption and serving as an institution of checks and balances. Mass media, through investigative journalism and exposure of corruption, contributes to fostering transparency and accountability within governance structures. The acknowledgment of this role emphasizes the importance of media freedom as a mechanism for promoting societal well-being and democratic values.

What this paper adds

This paper introduces an understanding of the relationship between media freedom and censorship, while emphasizing the need for a balanced approach. It recognizes that the complete absence of censorship, particularly in an era of widespread internet access and citizen reporting, may lead to potential challenges. The acknowledgment of potential drawbacks associated with unrestricted information dissemination reflects an understanding of the complexities involved in managing information flow in contemporary societies.

The influence of advancing technology, especially the internet, on media censorship is a central theme in this paper. It explores the challenges posed by decentralized and accessible information dissemination in the age of the internet. The paper recognizes the need for control measures to prevent extreme reactions, such as anarchy, that may arise due to unregulated information sharing. This insight positions the paper within the ongoing discourse on the evolving dynamics of media censorship in the digital age.

Moreover, the paper indirectly provides valuable insights for policymakers and regulatory bodies in governance. It prompts consideration of policies that strike a delicate balance between freedom of the media and the necessity for some level of censorship to maintain order and prevent potential harm. This recognition highlights the importance of informed

decision-making in crafting policies that align with the evolving landscape of media and technology while addressing the inherent challenges associated with censorship in contemporary societies.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Media censorship, whether applied to mass media or mainstream media, emerges as a significant challenge to accountability. While there are situations where censorship is argued for, such as during times of national crisis to control the spread of propaganda, it often presents the government as ineffective and unable to address social issues inherent in governance. The reliance of citizens on mass media as an information distributor, public agenda setter, and professional watchdog highlights the crucial role media plays in keeping politicians accountable.

In recognizing the pivotal role of information in enabling citizens to make informed choices, ensuring sufficient access to diverse information becomes imperative. However, this review highlights the need for further research to explore the intricate dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege embedded in various forms of communication across society. Additionally, an exploration of language control's role in perpetuating power imbalances and the mass media's potential role in desensitizing sensitivity to repression is recommended.

This paper suggests that the impact of media censorship extends beyond the immediate curtailment of information and has deeper consequences for societal dynamics. To address these issues comprehensively, it is recommended that future research explores how power structures influence the narratives that are subjected to censorship and the subsequent effects on public perception and understanding. Moreover, an examination of the role of alternative media and emerging technologies in circumventing censorship mechanisms can provide insights into mitigating the negative consequences associated with information suppression.

While this review provides a comprehensive overview of censorship and its broad impact, there remains a necessity to contextualize the issues of censorship within the unique political, social, and religious traditions of each nation. Understanding censorship in this nuanced manner is vital for developing effective strategies and policies that respect diverse cultural contexts while upholding principles of transparency and freedom of information.

In conclusion, this review emphasizes the multifaceted implications of media censorship on governance and society. Moving forward, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and contextual dimensions of censorship, urging policymakers, researchers, and advocates to consider these complexities in addressing the challenges posed by media censorship. It is essential to formulate policies that strike a balance between preserving national interests and safeguarding the fundamental right to access information, fostering a more open and informed global society.

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