

Limiting media freedom in democratic states

Citation for published version (APA):

de la Fuente, E. (2022). *Limiting media freedom in democratic states: How Governments Use Instruments to Curtail News Media Freedom*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Boekenplan. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220624ef>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2022

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20220624ef](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220624ef)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

ANNEX G. THESIS SUMMARY

One of the most important pillars of modern democracies is media freedom, which enables independent media outlets to freely investigate and report on government actions to the public. Democracy and news media freedom often have been assumed to have an intrinsic link, but by the mid-2010s, reports from international watchdog organizations pointed to a new reality: The existence of democratic countries with declining press freedom. This puzzling development was the main motivation for this research, with a particular focus on how media freedom is being limited in free democratic states.

The objective of this research was to understand how governments influence news media freedom in young democracies in the digital era. It also sought to identify the main categories of instruments used to curb media freedom, what the individual instruments used in each category were, and how governments have used those instruments to influence the editorial content of media outlets. To do so, this research conducted a case study analysis of Argentina and Chile, two neighboring young democracies with similar historical and political characteristics, and a distinct difference in their degrees of media freedom. This case study comparison helped determine how policy instruments could be used to limit media freedom in countries that were widely considered free democracies.

The dissertation begins with an examination of policy documents and reports from international organizations that monitor news media freedom. It then presents the results of a survey of journalists who worked in one or

Annex G | Thesis Summary

the other of the two case study countries during the period studied, which identified the main instruments and policy tools governments used and began to explore how they were applied. The research continues with a thorough review of the media-related legal and regulatory environment in each country, confirming that this was not a fundamental basis for restrictions on media freedom. Then, through expert interviews, it validates the main policy instruments identified in the survey of journalists. These efforts resulted in determining the main categories of instruments used to curb media freedom in democratic societies.

The empirical findings of this research led to a principal conclusion: Even in free democracies, and especially young ones, governments can and do use subtle, difficult-to-detect tools to curb media freedom to maintain power. Preferred instruments fell into two categories—economic pressure and threats and harassment. Economic pressure mechanisms were divided into two subcategories: (A) Use of state advertising to influence editorial content; and (B) Economic pressure on private sector companies to withdraw advertising from news media critical of the government, with subcategories consisting of several specific pressure instruments. Threats and harassment focused on the subcategory of nonphysical harassment of journalists, including both still-relevant traditional methods and newer ones developed for the digital era. All mechanisms, however, had one thing in common: They were subtle and difficult for the general population to perceive.

Employing subtle media control instruments can be an early sign of declining levels of media freedom in free democracies. If they are not

thwarted, they can erode press freedom, a key pillar of democracy. When considering how some formerly free democracies slid into the partly free category in recent years, a wider theoretical conclusion can be drawn: Governments that move from free to illiberal democracies are likely to curb media freedom during this process, as it can help them remain in power. Many likely will have sought to limit press freedom through subtle means until they reached a “visibility threshold.” At this point their media control efforts become apparent and these instruments are put aside in favor of more visible and overt tools as the country’s democracy slides from free to partly free.

Political leaders may then be able to act as if—or even publicly announce that—their governments are illiberal democracies. This is because they will have gained enough control over the media environment that they do not fear a media outcry or media-triggered public opposition. Before that threshold has been crossed, however, democratic governments are likely to use the subtle instruments found in this research; their subtlety enables governments to avoid outside threats as they work to consolidate and maintain power, even in free democracies.

Finally, this dissertation provides three practical policy recommendations that aim to protect news media freedom even in democratic governments seeking to limit it. First, international watchdog organizations should make identifying and counteracting the erosion of news media freedom a priority in its early stages. Second, development agencies should provide financial support to nascent digital-only news media outlets in democracies. And third, governments, parliaments and international bodies should support

Annex G | Thesis Summary

legislation requiring internet platforms (i.e., Google, Facebook) to compensate news media outlets for the use of their content.

Press freedom needs to be closely and constantly monitored as it can be at risk even in free democracies. Therefore, it is important to enact government policies, ensure effective oversight by civil society organizations, and raise awareness about press infringements to maintain a free and open media environment. These efforts will protect independent journalism, thus enabling democracy itself to thrive.