

# Acknowledging the journalists of the global south

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A dozen years ago, we asked the question, how much democracy does journalism need? (Josephi, 2013). Background to that question was the realisation that the absolute link of journalism and democracy, as it appeared in much of the scholarly literature of the time, made journalism the privilege of a small part of the world, leaving aside the majority of countries.

That majority, against hopeful expectations, has only grown. As charts show, the number of electoral democracies, electoral autocracies and closed autocracies risen have risen substantially, wiping out the advances of democracy made over the last 35 years. According to V-dem's *Democracy Report* (2023, p.6), 72% of the world's population lived in autocracies in 2022. Electoral democracies, electoral autocracies and closed autocracies make up three-quarters of the world's nations and carry ever more weight and influence on the global stage. The BRICS states, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, at their inception in 2009, kept a precarious equilibrium between free and restricted speech (Thussu & Nordenstreng, 2021). But when adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as new BRICS member states in 2024, the balance has decidedly shifted towards restrictions of freedom of speech.

These developments have resulted in calls to step back from "using the democratic vector as basic frame for cross-country comparison" (Gladkova & Budronova, 2023, p.2) and from the mantra of seeing nations 'transitioning to democracy' that dominated scholarly literature about the global south, and still continues to appear. According to Ambrosio (2014, p.476), "a bias towards seeing authoritarianism through those factors or forces which precipitate a change to democracy" led to a blind eye to those forces which kept authoritarianism stable.

That bias towards forces that might signal a move towards democracy applies especially to the work of journalists, where it is customary to locate seeds or manifestations of independent or critical thinking. Instead of asking, how much democracy does journalism need, should we have asked, how much democracy do journalists need? This short article is to give acknowledgement to the large proportion of journalists around the world whose work has been largely, and often deliberately, overlooked.

While in the global north much attention has been paid to differentiating between media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; 2012), few investigations have been done into the modes by which authoritarian states control their media, seemingly based on the assumption that all restrictions are the same. George's work (2020; 2007) is among the

scarce examples of analysing the ways in which the state in authoritarian countries applies its control. George groups these methods into two approaches, 'calibrated coercion' and 'differential censorship' (2020), pointing to the fact that similar differences and complexities exist among the nations of the global south as they do in the global north.

It is in these differing settings that the journalists of the global south, who ostensibly cannot claim to be the fourth estate or a pillar of democracy, attempt all the same to carry out their work. Not until their inclusion in global projects, such as *The Global Journalist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Weaver & Wilnat, 2012), *Worlds of Journalism* (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) or *Beyond Journalistic Norms* (Mellado, 2020) was there much acknowledgement, let alone recognition of the journalists in countries that were seen as non-democratic. Their ability to be professional journalists was doubted as they had little or no opportunity to be watchdogs of government and could not claim to be autonomous in their work. They thus fell far short of the normative expectations as they had been established in the global north.

These global surveys, however, have demonstrated that the non-democratic states' official ideology is a poor proxy for their journalists' professional norms (George, 2020). Undoubtedly, there is a gap between the journalists' normative beliefs professed in surveys and actual practice, as many of them find themselves out of necessity to propagate official news. But the survey results are nevertheless testimony to the aspirations and awareness of journalists working in restrictive environments of what journalism can be. They are an expression of what they wish for and that, on that wish list, freedom of speech and access to information ranks higher than democracy.

Studies of journalists in the global south, which by now can be seen in increasing numbers as books and in the journals of the global north, underpin this assessment. Repnikova's study of Chinese and Russian journalists (2018) explores the differences in journalistic reaction to their authoritarian environments and attempts to theorize "the modes of boundary-spanning contention under authoritarian rule" (p.41). Her study does not cover all journalists but those she calls "the contentious actors probing authoritarianism" (p.43). To Repnikova, the Russia – China comparison is valuable in that it permits her to contrast two differing modes of journalists pushing boundaries under authoritarian rule.

In China, Repnikova perceives a "fluid collaboration" (p.43), in which journalists partner with the state, "facilitating local-level accountability, channelling social grievances ... and conceiving solutions to problems" (p.46). China's multi-layered governmental structure offers spaces in which critical journalists, while not touching on central authorities, can highlight local problems, or cross boundaries into other provinces by reporting on their governance failures. A characteristic of this reporting is offering constructive or solutions- oriented coverage, while helping the central state in dissipating discontent and holding local officials accountable.

In Russia, on the other hand, Repnikova finds "oppositional contestation" (p.43). Also, Russia – not unlike China – had a history of intellectuals publishing in journals and newspapers (Vartanova, 2015) where, in Russia's and the Soviet Union's long history of censorship, they could find ways to write between the lines. Yet – unlike China – Russia had a period of *glasnost* in which independent media could briefly flourish and in which journalists could conceive an alternative political reality. In the subsequent years, openly critical voices tended to associate themselves with the opposition to

the state (Muratov, 2021). These voices have been silenced while Russia wages war, but not before having been recognised with the Peace Nobel Prize (Nobel Prize, 2021).

George (2020, p.544) has counted China as exercising “*hierarchically differentiated*” censorship to contain journalists’ exposés within politically manageable bounds”. His analysis of Singapore’s ‘calibrated coercion’ approach to achieve similarly manageable results, yet in a very different setting, illustrates the variances of restrictions journalists in the global south contend with. Singapore’s ruling party, which has been in power since 1959, manages its longevity with a minimum of overt repression. According to George, “[c]alibrated coercion provides journalists with periodic reminders of who is in charge, but also enough room to practise some professionally satisfying journalism” (2007, p.136). So-called OB (out of bounds) markers, a term taken from golf, designate areas where play is prohibited, although the position of these markers can easily shift. Journalists and editors know to stay within these OB markers which, on one hand gives them room, but on the other are not firmly fixed, resulting in caution and self-censorship.

Even from these few examples it is clear what varied forms journalistic work takes in the global south, and which different pathways journalists pursue to achieve a level of professional satisfaction. One such wide-spread form, occurring in very different settings and times, was and is that of being a bridge between citizens and government or bureaucracy. In Soviet times, as Roudakova (2017) writes, journalists were “tasked by the party to handle citizen’s grievances” (p.51) and “most journalists took this job as truth- and justice seekers on behalf of the citizens very seriously” (p.52). Similar accounts are given for Bulgaria in Communist times (Marinos, 2023) or reported in Central Asian states. But journalists undertook a very similar role in South Africa, where the tabloid press played a comparable function in the townships. Journalists were used as a preferred conduit to bring grievances to the attention of the government (Wasserman, 2010). This is just one scenario which needs further exploration.

While neither China nor Russia have left much room for journalists in the digital space, journalists in the Arab world, as just one example, have increasingly resorted to using open source data. This allows them to circumvent the restrictions placed on information by their governments, extend their journalistic goals and publish online with the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (AlAshry, 2024).

These examples are admittedly selective and few, leaving out whole continents, but they serve to point to the multitude of working conditions and restrictions met by journalists in the global south, and their chosen pathways in arriving at levels that satisfies their professional self. These journalists can be seen meeting the resilience of autocratic or restrictive states with their own resilience.

Yet their achievements infrequently match the normative expectations of the global north, where being a significant player in the civic construct of a nation makes up a large part of journalistic self-definition. Being a pillar of democracy may be a welcome power base for journalists, but it also rests on the economic strength of media houses and a pre-digital notion of authority when journalists had a monopoly on news. Part of this construct was demanding journalists to have autonomy, meaning being at arm’s length from government, and enabling a critical view of politicians and political decisions.

This concept of autonomy was ever only appropriate for a minority of countries. The majority of journalists works in electoral democracies, electoral autocracies and closed autocracies. Their possibilities to work at arm’s length from government, let

alone scrutinize and criticize government are limited. Instead they apply their agency, even if directed, elsewhere. Making agency rather than autonomy a cornerstone of journalistic work would lessen the divide between global south and north and allow for more appropriate recognition of journalists globally.

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