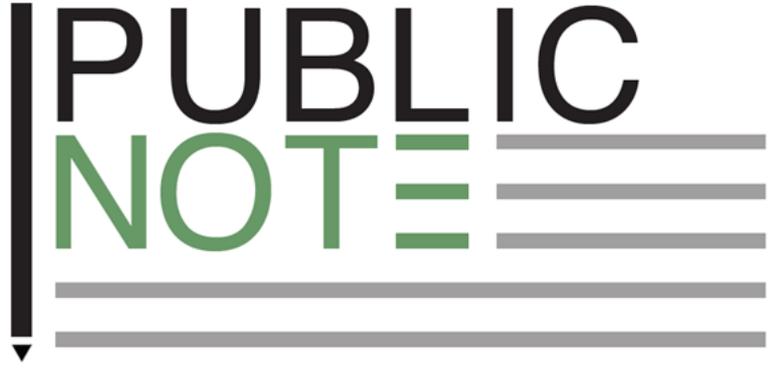


Press Repression Across the Regime Spectrum: Comparing the cases of Julian Assange and Jamal Khashoggi

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The cases of Julian Assange and Jamal Khashoggi illustrate examples across the Regime Spectrum of countries persecuting journalists to keep their secrets and malfeasance confidential. Existing literature on this topic focuses heavily on autocratic regimes, and this tends to make the repression of the press in democratic states negligible. Thus, it is important for citizens to be aware of the imminent threat of press repression and persecution throughout the world, especially within modern democracies. This paper seeks to answer the question: how does press repression and persecution differ between autocratic and democratic regimes? When the cases were analyzed, differences were found in tactics used by different regimes, as well as what factors lead to repression across regime types. This paper concludes that press repression and persecution is prevalent throughout the Regime Spectrum, and the undermining of the press' roles is of great danger to civil rights, democratic institutions, and global press freedom. democratic institutions and global press freedom. Thus, the insights of this paper seek to provide practical application by suggesting:

- Assessing conceptualizations of press freedom so that governments can be held accountable to their standards domestically and internationally.
- That policymakers may consider including the roles of the press in domestic policies based on the tactics used to repress.

Key words: global press freedom, policy making, civil rights

Introduction

Global press freedom has seen an unprecedented number of threats in past years. Since 2016, researchers have found that only 13 percent of the world's population enjoys free press (Abramowitz & Dunham, 2017). As such, the case of Jamal Khashoggi illustrates how an autocratic regime, Saudi Arabia, repressed, persecuted, and later assassinated Khashoggi to suppress his journalistic work (BBC News, 2020). However, there is a growing consensus amongst free press advocates that democratic countries, such as the United States, are similarly susceptible to engage in repression and persecution of the media (Abramowitz & Dunham, 2017; RSF, 2020a). Such repression and persecution shine a spotlight on the infringement of civil rights in democratic states because free press is seen as a core value for the state to uphold in order to be recognized as a democracy (Hague et al., 2019: 37). Thus, it is of societal importance for citizens to be aware of media repression in democratic states. In doing so, the populace is given the opportunity to hold their government accountable, prevent issues within democratic institutions potentially leading to autocratization, and put a halt to the global crackdown on press freedom (Abramowitz & Dunham, 2017; Bennet & Serrin, 2005; Norris, 2014).

Although previous research conducted by Alnajrani et al. (2018), Dutta and Roy (2016), and De Vliert (2011) has addressed the role autocratic states have had on repressing and persecuting the media and journalists, there is a lack of literature regarding the same in democratic states. This tends to make the repression and persecution of the press in democratic states negligible. Cases like that of Julian Assange illustrate an example of a democratic country, the United States, actively persecuting and repressing a prominent member of the press (Defend WikiLeaks, 2020; United States of America v. Julian Paul Assange, 2018). Due to such events, it is crucial to understand how democratic states repress and persecute the media as compared to autocratic states.

Taking the aforementioned into consideration, this paper seeks to answer the question of “how does press repression and persecution differ between autocratic and democratic regimes?” to examine steps taken to repress the media by states of different regime types. Furthermore, this paper seeks to add to the sparse literature on democratic states and their role in the repression of the press to expand academic knowledge on this topic. What follows is an overview of the theoretical framework of this paper, alongside the theoretical roles - Watchdog and Fourth Estate - that the press ought to have in contemporary governments (Bennet & Serrin, 2005; Norris, 2014). Next, the

analytical research works to understand how these roles are undermined by democracies, comparing this repression to that perpetrated by autocracies, done through a comparison of the cases of Assange and Khashoggi. Finally, the conclusion shows which factors and tactics each regime uses to repress, followed by a reflection on press repression and the undermining of the press' roles across democratic regimes, with the aim of contributing to the sparse literature of press repression within democracies.

Existing theories and concepts within press repression literature

In order to analyze the efficacy that different regime types have had in press repression, it is important to define concepts which help explain such phenomena. One such concept is that of “free press”, meaning an individual having access to news of a political, economic, or otherwise delicate nature, unobstructed by state intervention, whilst the safety of their journalists is guaranteed (Abramowitz & Dunham, 2017). This conceptualization is all-encompassing, taking the concept of “free press” as a core value of democracy, as well as accounting for potential abuses and violence against journalists (Hague et al., 2019, p. 37; RSF, 2020a). Press repression is conceptualized as any coercive actions, be they legal, political or forceful, by which governments, regardless of regime type, intend to curb or limit access of media representatives to proper vehicles of information (Arao et al., 2020; Respucci, 2019; RSF, 2020a).

Lastly, one crucial concept for this paper is the “Regime Spectrum”. This concept refers to a 3-level spectrum, in which countries sit at one of the following levels: (1) autocratic, (2) hybrid or (3) democratic. When referring to an autocratic regime on the Regime Spectrum, it is a state in which citizens are ruled by a central political elite, and usually characterized by having highly centralized political control and widespread human rights abuses (Hague et al., 2019, p. 61). In contrast, when referring to a democratic regime on the Regime Spectrum, it is a state in which citizens are indirectly represented in government, certain civil rights and freedoms (i.e. free press) are guaranteed, and cannot be infringed upon by the state (Hague et al., 2019, p. 44). The hybrid regime on the Regime Spectrum is a combination of the aforementioned regimes but will not be discussed further.

The academic literature around press repression and persecution carried out by democratic states remains sparse. This means that the literature tends to be focused on autocratic regimes, and their repression of the press. Theories around press repression carried out by autocratic regimes have taken into consideration various factors, such as underdevelopment and high levels of

domestic corruption (Dutta & Roy, 2016). Furthermore, other researchers focus their theories of autocratic regimes' press repression on social, cultural, psychological, and geographical factors (Alnajrani et al., 2018; De Vliert, 2011). Nevertheless, the existing literature on the repression of the press has an underlying assumption on theoretical roles which the media ought to fill within contemporary governments, and how said roles have been significantly hindered. However, it is important to outline that these roles are theoretical, and not codified in any way.

For the purpose of this paper, I draw on concepts from theoretical literature that look at the press and journalists as independent entities, serving ideal roles within contemporary governments. These concepts include the theoretical role of Watchdog Journalism, as well as the concept of the Fourth Estate, which are presumed here to be fundamental roles the press ought to have in a functioning democracy (Bennet & Serrin, 2005; Norris, 2014). The latter has been defined by Pippa Norris as an abstract fourth branch of government: an ideal independent guardian located in civil society and counterbalancing the power of the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches in government (Norris, 2014). Thus, this concept sees the press as the final check and balance on the executive, legislative and judicial branches to hold government accountable through electoral accountability, legal accountability, and - in liberal-capitalist democracies - managerial accountability (Norris, 2014, p. 2-3). In addition, the concept of Watchdog Journalism focuses on how the press and journalists are "watchdogs" (Bennet & Serrin, 2005). As such, they are meant to hold the government accountable through independent scrutinization and investigation, informing citizens of any malfeasance or suspicious activities (Bennet & Serrin, 2005).

By applying both concepts of Watchdog Journalism and the Fourth Estate, this paper seeks to build on the sparse literature of authors, such as Jane Kirtley (2019), whose research focuses on the implications of the persecution of Assange by the US, effectively undermining Assange's role as a Watchdog Journalist, and concluding that such a case could have major repercussions to the First Amendment of the US constitution. Thus, these concepts are relevant in helping outline the potential implications that press repression and persecution can have on democratic institutions, as well as the precedent such cases can set for global press freedom.

Methodology

Through literature review and process tracing this paper employs a comparative case study design looking at the cases of Assange and Khashoggi. Both are assessed to find similarities and differences in how their respective governments have repressed and persecuted them. As

previously defined, the concept of Regime Spectrum will be using Freedom House's Global Freedom Score (2020) - a 0 to 100 scale - to categorize regimes according to their freedom indices. Furthermore, press repression will use the Press Freedom Index to quantify the specific regime's level of press repression - the higher the index score, the more press repression the country exerts (RSF, 2020a). Primary sources used consist of newspaper articles, reports from NGOs advocating for freedom of the press, and any recent publications presenting further information on the case of Assange. Government documents, court documents, and any legal documentation are used where applicable.

As indicated, the cases of Assange and Khashoggi will be zoomed in on to further understand how press repression and persecution varies across the Regime Spectrum. These cases provide us with two extreme cases of press repression in autocratic and democratic regimes on the spectrum. Although there are multiple accounts of press repression within democracies (e.g. Pablo Hasel, Daphne Galizia), the scope of this research limits what cases are analyzed. Furthermore, cases in democratic regimes tend to be highly suppressed throughout mainstream media, or are at times forgotten due to the overwhelming number of cases that are reported in autocratic regimes (Braun, 2020; Safi, 2020; Snowden, 2020).

The Cases of Julian Assange and Jamal Khashoggi:

Press repression and persecution within a democratic regime

The United Nations Development Programme sees the right to freedom of the press and access to information as fundamental prerequisites for ensuring the voice and participation necessary for an open democratic society (UNDP, 2008, p. 21). Thus, modern-day democracies are adamant about upholding freedom of speech and press, either through civil rights protections under a constitution, or through codified mandates. For example, the United States stands as a shining beacon on the Regime Spectrum of a liberal democracy (94 - Freedom Score) with civil rights protections codified into the Bill of Rights (US Senate, n.d.; Freedom House, 2020). However, press repression and persecution within democratic regimes is a complex situation, due in part, as previously mentioned, to the sparse academic literature on such scenarios. Nevertheless, the subsequent paragraphs zoom in on the case of Assange to further analyze repression in democracies on the Regime Spectrum.

Julian Assange, founder of the non-profit news organization WikiLeaks, published in 2010-2011 leaks that exposed the reality of the human rights violations and war crimes committed by the United States government (United States of America vs. Julian Paul

Assange, 2018; Defend WikiLeaks, 2020). These documents included detailed accounts of war crimes, such as the collateral murder of civilians and journalists during the Iraq War (WikiLeaks, 2010). With the help of Chelsea Manning, then Bradley Manning, Assange wanted to ensure that the US government would face repercussions for such atrocities. Consequently, under the Obama administration, Assange was criminally investigated, yet the investigation was later suspended amidst fear that Assange's case would hurt the right to press freedom (Defend WikiLeaks, 2020).

Since then, Assange had lived under asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, fearing that the UK and US administrations would arrest him and extradite him for criminal prosecution in the United States. However, he was later arrested in early 2019 by the London Metropolitan Police for skipping bail and failing to surrender to the court (BBC News, 2019). It was then clear that the US could now persecute him for revealing their previous malfeasance and war crimes. Since then, Assange has been imprisoned in Belmarsh prison under poor conditions, awaiting potential extradition to the US. This prompted UN rapporteur Nils Melzer to advocate for his immediate release, alongside countless NGOs who deal with the protection of free press (Amnesty, 2021; Melzer, 2019a; RSF, 2020b).

Press repression and persecution within an autocratic regime

Researchers who have studied press repression in autocratic states find that religious concerns, pressure of social and cultural behaviors, as well as norms of a specific country are the main causal factors that lead to government crackdown on the press (Alnajrani et al., 2018, p. 9). Other researchers, such as De Vliert (2011) and Dutta and Roy (2016), put an emphasis on factors such as corruption, geography, and psychological factors as the main culprit of press repression throughout autocratic states on the Regime Spectrum. As such, the case of Jamal Khashoggi is one that is influenced by social and cultural factors, as well as the Saudi regime's undermining of Khashoggi's role as a Fourth Estate watchdog to uncover malfeasance and voice his opinions. As such, the autocratic state of Saudi Arabia is seen as extremely hostile towards the press on the Regime Spectrum (7 - Freedom Score), with an abuse score of 68 in the Press Freedom Index (Freedom House, 2020; RSF, 2020a).

Khashoggi was the target of state repression prior to his assassination in 2018. In 2003, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Information dismissed him from his editor-in-chief position due to his criticisms of a prominent Wahhabist-Islamic scholar (Blanford, 2003). Due to

Khashoggi's outspoken criticism and opinions on the Saudi government, as well as criticism of foreign leaders, he relocated to the United States under self-exile (Aziza, 2018; Osborne, 2016). Such instances of social, cultural, and political pressures put Khashoggi in the iron sights of the Saudi regime, and as such, he feared for his life (Khashoggi, 2017). A year later, Jamal Khashoggi was assassinated by members of the Saudi government at the Saudi Arabian embassy in Istanbul, Turkey, with the CIA concluding that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia had ordered the assassination (BBC News, 2020; Dawsey et al., 2018).

Even so, cases like that of Assange show how the US government can be hostile when cracking down on Watchdog

Comparing the repression and persecution of the press across the Regime Spectrum

Firstly, Saudi Arabia illustrates an example of an extremely hostile regime, on the Regime Spectrum, undermining the press' role as a Watchdog and Fourth Estate through social, cultural, and political factors (Alnajrani et al., 2018). Although the United States has taken less aggressive approaches with regards to the case of Assange, the US government under President Trump has seen a rise in press repression through Trump's rhetoric of "fake news" and constant attacks on the free press since his election in 2016 (Dobuzinskis & O'Brien, 2018). Furthermore, the US has seen a shift on the Regime Spectrum and has found itself going up in the Press Freedom Index, signaling a rise in press repression, with the undermining of the role of the press as a Fourth Estate, and journalists fearing for their safety (Norris, 2014; RSF, 2020a; RSF, 2020c).

Press repression throughout the United States, however, is more covert when compared to the Saudi government. A minor instance, for example, has been when the Trump administration has taken approaches to limit the ability for journalists to ask questions at press briefings (RSF, 2020c). And although Trump makes hostile remarks towards the press by demonizing them and depicting them as the enemy, there is no central government crackdown on the press (Prange, 2020). Or at least none widely reported. In contrast, the Saudi Arabian government does not allow for any independent media, cracks down on critics of the Saudi regime (i.e. Khashoggi), and have been known to detain and torture journalists who do not align with the Saudi government's narrative (RSF, 2020d; Specia, 2019). This could be due to social, cultural, and religious factors, as pointed out by Alnajrani et al. (2018), yet it is evident that the Saudi government remains more apprehensive of the free press. In addition, any recent violent acts committed against the press in the US are not carried out directly by the government, but rather by right-wing groups or Trump supporters who believe that the media is part of

an anti-Trump movement (Prange, 2020; Shammas, 2021).

Even so, cases like that of Assange show how the US government can be hostile when cracking down on Watchdog Journalists. With UN rapporteur Melzer stating that Assange's health has been deteriorating since being admitted into Belmarsh prison, and a medical team concluding that Assange could have been psychologically tortured by the US and the UK whilst imprisoned (Melzer, 2019b). Thus, Melzer states that the US and UK have been directly violating the UN Convention against Torture, the right to freedom of the press, and Assange's human rights (Melzer, 2019b).

The undermining of the press' roles within the Regime Spectrum

Through the examples previously explained we can see that there has been an undermining of the theoretical roles of the press within both autocratic and democratic regimes on the Regime Spectrum. Due to the lack of electoral and legal accountability in the Saudi government, there is little to no protection for members of the press in Saudi Arabia, and as such, the press cannot fulfill its role as the Fourth Estate in the Saudi regime (Norris, 2014; RSF, 2020d). However, as illustrated by the case of Khashoggi, and the numerous journalists currently detained, there exists no independent guardian within Saudi Arabian society to counterbalance the overwhelming power of the Crown Prince and the autocratic Saudi regime (Norris, 2014). As such, it would be fair to assume that the Fourth Estate does not exist on autocratic regimes (i.e. Saudi Arabia) on the Regime Spectrum.

When zooming into the case of Assange, we can see that his role as a Watchdog has been severely undermined by the US. The Trump administration charged him with 17 counts in violation of the Espionage Act of 1917 in early 2019, has made sure that he remains imprisoned and in solitary confinement within Belmarsh, and seems to have been psychologically tortured for exposing US war crimes and malfeasance (Department of Justice, 2019; Melzer, 2019b; RSF, 2020b; SMH, 2019). Furthermore, the case of Assange is discussed mostly by NGOs or advocates for free press, and as such, there exists sparse academic literature on his case.

Nevertheless, some academics, such as Noam Chomsky and Jane Kirtley, have emphasized how the case of Assange can have major repercussions for Watchdog Journalists, as well as leave a damaging precedent, both legally and constitutionally, in the US (Kirtley, 2019). As stated by Edward Snowden, "there is no way to prosecute him [Assange] for publishing information without the same theory being applied to journalists [for carrying out journalistic work]" (Snowden, 2020). Professor Chomsky believes that the case of Assange can

have "a very dangerous precedent, not only the case and the magistrate's awful decision, but also the cowardice of the media in not rising to his defense" (N. Chomsky, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Thus, it is evident that any indictment on Assange would create a precedent for members of the Fourth Estate who would find themselves unable to hold the US, or any other regime, legally or electorally accountable (Norris, 2014).

Conclusion and Reflection:

To conclude, the aim of this paper was to analyze, through a comparative case study, how the press is repressed and persecuted by different regimes on the Regime Spectrum. As analyzed, the tactics taken by autocratic regimes tend to be more aggressive by openly repressing, detaining, persecuting, and assassinating journalists, in effect undermining their Watchdog role. Democratic regimes tend to use more covert and less transparent tactics, in comparison to autocratic regimes (N. Chomsky, personal communication, January 12, 2021). Nevertheless, it is evident that press repression and persecution happens across the Regime Spectrum, regardless of whether the regime is deemed democratic or autocratic. Both regime types also make sure to undermine members of the Fourth Estate and Watchdog Journalists due to how powerful these theoretical roles can be within civil society and civil discourse. Thus, it is of paramount importance that citizens in these regimes are aware of such repression and violation of civil rights, to hold their government accountable, prevent the erosion of democratic institutions, and put a halt to the global crackdown on free press. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the US and Saudi Arabia differ in a multitude of ways. Regardless of differences in factors such as location, geopolitical power, regime type, civil rights, and so on, this paper provides a foundation on which to build further research, perhaps comparing many other cases systematically. Further research should focus on interviewing journalists who have been persecuted and repressed by democratic regimes to add to the sparse literature on press repression and persecution carried out by democratic regimes.

A notable limitation of this research is that hybrid regimes were not considered. Although future research on hybrid regimes is undoubtedly relevant to understanding press repression across the regime spectrum, it was, unfortunately, out of the scope of this research. Additionally, a significant limitation that should be noted once again is that of the sparse academic literature on the topic of press repression and persecution carried out by democratic regimes. I contemplated whether it was possible to try and reach out to journalists, such as Glenn Greenwald or Max Blumenthal, who have been persecuted by the United States and Brazil in the past, in order to get a first-hand

perspective on the matter (Emersberger, 2019; Safi, 2020; Snowden, 2020). However, time constraints rendered this impossible. Nevertheless, Professor Noam Chomsky was kind enough to email me his outlook on why press repression and persecution in democratic states tend to be overlooked within academia and mainstream media. He states “it is much easier to focus on other fellow’s abuses [autocratic regimes] than on one’s own. Lastly, Professor Chomsky expands on the challenges in researching and analyzing cases like that of Assange since “...abuses in more democratic societies are less transparent...” (N. Chomsky, personal communication, January 12, 2021).

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Jamal Khashoggi –



Portrait of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Source: A Memorial for Jamal Khashoggi | The New Yorker

Julian Assange –



Assange inside the UK's police van after being arrested.

Source: WikiLeaks founder Assange faces new accusations of trying to recruit hackers at conferences (nbcnews.com)

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Sebastián Bendiner is a second-year student currently enrolled in the Bachelors of Political Science, with specialization in International Relations, at the University of Amsterdam. Sebastián was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Growing up he had the opportunity to live in different countries which helped him to develop a deep understanding of different cultures throughout North and South America. As such, he is fluently bilingual in Spanish and English.

Whilst having the opportunity to intern at Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy's office in Florida, USA, Sebastián became passionate with topics focused around human rights, freedom of the press, global inequality, anti-imperialism and neocolonialism. He hopes his future research at the University of Amsterdam will continue to focus on these topics.