

EXPLORING MEDIA POLICY FRAMEWORK AND MEDIA FREEDOM IN SAARC COUNTRIES

Dr. Om Shankar Gupta ¹  , Dr. Yogendra Kumar Pandey ²  , Dr. Umesh Kumar ³  , Dr. Diwakar Awasthi ⁴  , Dr. Hariom Kumar ⁵  , Dr. Ramshankar ⁶  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

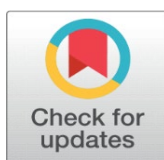
² Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

³ Associate Professor, Department of Mass Communication and New Media, Central University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

⁵ Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

⁶ Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, IIMT college of Management, Greater Noida, India



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Corresponding Author

Dr. Om Shankar Gupta,
omshankargupta@csjmu.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the media policy frameworks and the status of media freedom in SAARC countries, namely India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. The study seeks to analyse how constitutional provisions, statutory media laws, and regulatory institutions shape the operational environment of print, electronic, and digital media across the South Asian region. The central objective of the paper is to critically align national media policies with the actual conditions of media freedom, as reflected in internationally recognised indicators. The study is based entirely on secondary data, drawing primarily from government policy documents, constitutional provisions, media regulatory laws, and global press freedom assessments published by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Using a comparative and thematic analytical approach, the paper evaluates the extent to which media regulations uphold or undermine freedom of expression, editorial independence, a

The findings reveal a significant gap between constitutional guarantees and regulatory practice in most SAARC countries. While freedom of expression is formally recognised in constitutional texts, media policies particularly in the domains of broadcasting and digital media often empower executive authorities with extensive discretionary control. The study further observes that restrictive cyber laws, licensing regimes, and national security narratives have contributed to declining media freedom scores in several countries.

Keywords: Media Policy Framework, Media Freedom, SAARC Countries, Press Freedom, Media Regulation, Freedom House Index, Constitutional Provisions



1. INTRODUCTION

Media plays a central role in democratic societies by acting as a watchdog, facilitating public discourse, and ensuring accountability of state institutions. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are therefore widely regarded as foundational elements of democratic governance. In South Asia, a region characterised by political diversity, historical complexity, and varying democratic trajectories, media freedom remains a contested and evolving domain. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, presents a unique regional context in which media systems operate under contrasting constitutional frameworks and regulatory regimes.

Most SAARC countries constitutionally recognise freedom of speech and expression, often including explicit or implicit protection for press freedom. However, the practical realisation of these freedoms is shaped not only by constitutional provisions but also by statutory media laws, regulatory institutions, and executive practices. Media policy frameworks in the region encompass a wide range of instruments, including press council laws, broadcasting regulations, cyber and information technology acts, and emergency or security-related legislation. In recent years, concerns regarding declining media freedom in South Asia have intensified. International monitoring organisations such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have documented increasing restrictions on journalists, growing political and economic pressures on media organisations, and the expanded use of digital regulations to control online speech.

This research paper seeks to explore media policy frameworks in SAARC countries and analyse their alignment with media freedom as assessed by Freedom House and RSF. By situating policy analysis within a constitutional and comparative perspective, the study aims to move beyond index-based evaluations and examine the structural and legal determinants of media freedom. The focus on secondary data allows for a comprehensive review of official policy documents and internationally recognised assessments, facilitating a region-wide comparative understanding.

The study is particularly relevant in the contemporary context where democratic institutions in South Asia face multiple pressures, including political polarisation, digital surveillance, and the growing convergence of media ownership with economic and political power. Understanding how media policies shape freedom of expression is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for informing policy reform, strengthening democratic accountability, and promoting regional dialogue on media governance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that draws upon normative theories of the press, constitutional theory of freedom of expression, political economy of media, and public sphere theory in order to examine media policy frameworks and media freedom in SAARC countries. The adoption of a multi-theoretical approach is necessitated by the complex and heterogeneous media environments of South Asia, where constitutional commitments to press freedom coexist with strong regulatory controls and political intervention. This framework enables a systematic analysis of how legal norms, institutional structures, and power relations collectively influence media freedom across the region.

Normative theories of the press provide the foundational perspective for understanding the expected role of media in democratic societies. Classical normative models such as the libertarian, social responsibility, and authoritarian theories offer useful analytical categories for interpreting media regulation in SAARC countries. Constitutional theory constitutes a central component of the analytical framework, particularly doctrines relating to freedom of speech and expression, reasonable restrictions, and proportionality. Almost all SAARC constitutions guarantee freedom of expression while simultaneously permitting restrictions in the interests of national security, public order, morality, or sovereignty. By applying constitutional theory, this study critically assesses whether media policy frameworks in SAARC countries operate within constitutional boundaries or enable excessive executive discretion that undermines the substantive enjoyment of media freedom.

The political economy of media further strengthens the theoretical framework by foregrounding the role of power, ownership, and state–market relations in shaping media systems. In the SAARC region, media organisations often operate within political and economic environments marked by concentrated ownership, dependence on state advertising, and vulnerability to licensing and regulatory sanctions. This approach facilitates an understanding of how

economic pressures and political alignments constrain editorial autonomy, even in contexts where legal guarantees of press freedom formally exist.

Public sphere theory, particularly as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, provides an additional normative dimension to the study by conceptualising media as a critical arena for rational public debate and democratic participation. Media policies that restrict dissenting voices, regulate content excessively, or prioritise state narratives weaken the democratic public sphere. The study utilises Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) media freedom indices as analytical tools rather than definitive measures. These indices are interpreted in conjunction with constitutional and normative theories to assess the legal, political, and safety dimensions of media freedom in SAARC countries. By aligning index-based assessments with policy and constitutional analysis, the study moves beyond descriptive rankings and situates media freedom outcomes within a broader theoretical and institutional context.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the dominant media policy frameworks governing print, electronic, and digital media in SAARC countries?
- How do constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression align with existing media regulatory policies in SAARC nations?
- To what extent do media policies in SAARC countries facilitate or restrict media freedom, as reflected in Freedom House and RSF indicators?
- How do differences in regulatory structures and enforcement mechanisms impact the level of media freedom across SAARC countries?
- What common regional patterns and challenges emerge in balancing state regulation and media freedom in South Asia?

4. METHODOLOGY

This research paper adopts a qualitative, comparative, and descriptive research design based entirely on secondary data. The study systematically analyses media policy frameworks and media freedom across SAARC countries through a structured review of legal, institutional, and evaluative sources.

Sources of Data

The primary sources of secondary data include:

- Constitutional provisions related to freedom of speech and press in SAARC countries
- Government media policy documents, statutes, and regulatory frameworks governing print, electronic, and digital media
- Official documents and notifications issued by media regulatory authorities
- Annual Freedom House Freedom of the Press / Freedom in the World reports
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index reports
- Scholarly articles, policy papers, and reports from international organisations

Method of Analysis

A comparative and thematic analysis is employed to:

- Examine the nature of media regulation across different media sectors
- Compare constitutional promises with actual regulatory practices
- Align national media policies with international media freedom indicators
- Identify patterns of restriction, control, and regulatory independence

The analysis does not rely on numerical ranking alone but interprets Freedom House and RSF indicators thematically to assess legal, political, and safety dimensions of media freedom.

5. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study focuses exclusively on SAARC member countries.
- It examines print, electronic, and digital media policy frameworks.
- The analysis aligns domestic policies with Freedom House and RSF media freedom
- The study emphasises legal and institutional dimensions of media freedom.
- The research is based solely on secondary data; no primary surveys or interviews are conducted.
- Media freedom indices are interpretive tools and may not capture all local nuances.
- Rapid policy changes, especially in digital media regulation, may affect the currency of findings.
- The study does not engage in country-specific ethnographic or newsroom-level.

6. ANALYSIS OF THE FINDING

6.1. MEDIA POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND MEDIA FREEDOM IN SAARC COUNTRIES

The table presents a comparative overview of media policy frameworks, regulatory control mechanisms, levels of media freedom, and key democratic concerns across SAARC countries. A clear pattern emerges in which the degree of executive control over media regulation is inversely related to the level of media freedom. Countries where media regulation is dominated by executive authorities or security institutions tend to exhibit severely restricted or declining media freedom, whereas those with relatively autonomous or mixed regulatory models demonstrate comparatively higher, though still constrained, levels of freedom.

Afghanistan represents the most extreme case of regulatory control and democratic regression. The effective suspension of the Mass Media Law and the imposition of Taliban directives have resulted in direct executive control over media operations. The regulatory environment is characterised by systematic censorship, the exclusion of women from journalistic roles, and the closure of independent outlets. In this context, media regulation functions primarily as an instrument of political and ideological control rather than as a mechanism for ensuring ethical or professional standards.

Bangladesh illustrates a model where formal democratic structures coexist with increasingly restrictive media laws. While the presence of statutory bodies such as the Press Council suggests institutional oversight, the dominance of cyber laws with vague and punitive provisions has significantly constrained digital and investigative journalism. Arrests for online expression and widespread self-censorship indicate that regulatory control extends beyond ethical governance and directly affects freedom of expression, positioning Bangladesh within the “partly free but constrained” category.

Bhutan presents a comparatively moderate regulatory environment. The Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act establishes a statutory regulator, BICMA, which exercises licensing and oversight powers. Although media freedom is generally maintained, executive influence and discretionary provisions related to “national harmony” create latent risks for press autonomy. Bhutan’s case highlights how regulatory restraint and limited enforcement can preserve relative freedom even within a controlled framework, though such freedom remains institutionally fragile.

India’s media regulatory system is marked by institutional fragmentation and a hybrid regulatory model combining statutory bodies, self-regulation, and executive oversight. While constitutional protections and judicial safeguards support a relatively free press, increasing political pressure, ownership concentration, and expanded regulation of digital media have narrowed the operational space for independent journalism. The classification of India as “partly free” reflects the growing divergence between constitutional ideals and regulatory practices, particularly in the online media sector.

The Maldives exemplifies democratic backsliding in media governance. Recent amendments to media and broadcasting laws have strengthened executive control, enabling license suspensions and financial penalties. These measures have significantly reduced the space for dissent and investigative journalism. The declining media freedom in the Maldives underscores how legal reforms, when driven by executive dominance, can rapidly erode democratic safeguards.

Nepal’s regulatory framework reflects an ongoing tension between democratic commitments and regulatory centralisation. While the existing legal structure supports a pluralistic press, proposed reforms such as the Media Council

Bill signal a shift toward greater executive control through heavy fines and political appointments. The categorisation of Nepal as “partly free” indicates that media freedom remains viable but vulnerable to legislative overreach and intimidation.

Pakistan’s media environment is characterised by strong statutory regulation with a pronounced security orientation. PEMRA’s extensive powers, combined with the influence of military and security institutions, have resulted in channel bans, intimidation of journalists, and uneven enforcement of media laws. Despite constitutional recognition of press freedom, regulatory practice places Pakistan firmly within the “restricted” category, highlighting the dominance of security considerations over democratic expression.

Sri Lanka occupies a transitional and fragile position. While constitutional protections for freedom of expression exist, the reactivation of statutory bodies and the introduction of the Online Safety Act have expanded executive authority over media content, particularly online. Emergency regulations and legal harassment further exacerbate vulnerabilities, making media freedom contingent on political stability and governance context.

Overall, the table demonstrates that media freedom in SAARC countries is shaped less by constitutional guarantees and more by the structure and orientation of media regulatory regimes. Executive dominance, vague legal provisions, and security-centric approaches emerge as common democratic concerns. The analysis underscores the need for independent regulation, precise legal standards, and constitutional conformity to strengthen media freedom across the SAARC region.

6.2. COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF MEDIA POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND MEDIA FREEDOM IN SAARC COUNTRIES

Table 1

SAARC Country	Primary Media Policy / Legal Framework	Nature of Regulatory Control	Level of Media Freedom	Key Democratic Concerns
Afghanistan	Mass Media Law (2009, largely suspended); Taliban Directives (post-2021)	Direct executive control via Ministry of Information & Culture	Severely Restricted	Censorship, bans on women journalists, closure of independent outlets
Bangladesh	Press Council Act; Digital Security Act (2018); Cyber Security Act (2023)	Government-dominated statutory regulation	Partly Free / Constrained	Arrests for digital content, self-censorship, vague cyber laws
Bhutan	Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act (2006)	Statutory regulator (BICMA) with executive influence	Generally Free but Regulated	Discretionary licensing, broad “national harmony” clauses
India	Press Council Act (1978); Cable TV Networks Act; IT Rules (2021)	Mixed model (statutory + self-regulation + executive oversight)	Partly Free	Political pressure, ownership concentration, online content regulation
Maldives	Maldives Media & Broadcasting Regulation Act (amended 2024–25)	Strong executive-controlled statutory regulator	Declining / Restricted	License suspensions, fines, shrinking space for dissent
Nepal	National Broadcasting Act (1993); Media Council Bill (proposed)	Government-centric licensing and regulation	Partly Free	Proposed heavy fines, executive appointments, intimidation
Pakistan	PEMRA Ordinance (2002); Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act	Powerful statutory regulator with security focus	Restricted	Channel bans, journalist threats, military influence
Sri Lanka	Press Council Law; Online Safety Act (2023)	Statutory bodies with executive appointments	Partly Free but Vulnerable	Online censorship, emergency regulations, legal harassment

6.3. COUNTRY-WISE THEMATIC COMPARISON

The thematic comparison of print, electronic, and digital media across SAARC countries reveals a sector-specific pattern of regulation, where digital media is consistently the most restricted, followed by electronic media, while print media—though historically central to democratic discourse—faces increasing legal and economic vulnerabilities. This differentiation reflects changing state priorities, with governments focusing regulatory power on broadcast and digital platforms due to their wider reach, immediacy, and political influence.

In Afghanistan, all three media sectors are subjected to severe restrictions, with digital and electronic media experiencing the harshest controls. Print media survives only in a limited and censored form, while broadcast media is fully state-controlled. Digital platforms are heavily restricted through bans and surveillance, effectively eliminating independent online journalism. Bangladesh presents a differentiated yet converging regulatory trend. Print media remains relatively plural, benefiting from historical press traditions, but is increasingly vulnerable to legal action under restrictive laws. Electronic media operates under government-regulated licensing, which allows indirect editorial influence. Digital media is the most constrained sector, with cyber laws enabling arrests, content removal, and self-censorship. In Bhutan, the media environment appears comparatively stable but institutionally bounded. Print media is limited in scale yet relatively free, reflecting a controlled but tolerant regulatory culture. Electronic media is governed by statutory oversight through BICMA, ensuring order but allowing executive discretion. Digital media faces content filtering and surveillance, indicating a precautionary regulatory approach grounded in national harmony rather than overt repression.

India demonstrates a complex and evolving thematic pattern. Print media retains a strong professional tradition and benefits from ethical self-regulation, although economic pressures and political alignments affect independence. Electronic media is governed by licensing systems and programme codes that allow content oversight. Digital media represents the most contested space, with the IT Rules enabling executive takedowns and intermediary obligations.

The Maldives exhibits a clear decline across all media sectors, with particularly strong executive intervention in electronic media. Print media lacks robust institutional protection, making it vulnerable to political pressure. Broadcast regulation has become increasingly punitive, while digital media faces growing criminalisation. This thematic trend signals democratic backsliding, where regulatory mechanisms are used to discipline dissent rather than uphold media standards.

In Nepal, a vibrant print media culture continues to play a significant democratic role, though it faces increasing regulatory uncertainty. Electronic media remains subject to government licensing authority, creating potential for political influence. Digital media is emerging as the most vulnerable sector, especially in light of proposed heavy penalties under new regulatory bills. The thematic comparison suggests a transitional phase, where regulatory reforms could either strengthen accountability or undermine media freedom.

Pakistan presents a dualistic thematic structure. Print media remains influential but operates under constant pressure through legal and informal constraints. Electronic media is the most tightly controlled sector, with PEMRA exercising strong regulatory and punitive powers. Digital media faces content blocking, surveillance, and arrests under cybercrime laws. The dominance of security considerations across electronic and digital platforms reflects a governance model prioritising control over pluralism.

In Sri Lanka, print media benefits from constitutional protection, providing a relatively strong normative foundation. However, electronic media is vulnerable to emergency-based controls, particularly during periods of political instability. Digital media is increasingly regulated through the Online Safety Commission, expanding state oversight of online expression. The thematic analysis indicates that while legal safeguards exist, their effectiveness fluctuates with political conditions.

Overall, the table highlights a regional trend toward intensified regulation of electronic and digital media, driven by concerns over political stability, national security, and information control. Print media, though relatively resilient, is no longer insulated from regulatory and economic pressures. The thematic comparison underscores the urgent need for sector-specific regulatory reforms that balance technological change with constitutional commitments to freedom of expression and democratic accountability across SAARC countries.

6.4. THEMATIC COMPARISON OF MEDIA SECTORS IN SAARC COUNTRIES

Table 2

Country	Print Media	Electronic Media	Digital Media
Afghanistan	Severely censored; limited print survival	State-controlled broadcast	Highly restricted; platform bans
Bangladesh	Relatively plural but legally vulnerable	Government-regulated licensing	Heavily constrained by cyber laws
Bhutan	Limited but relatively free	Statutory regulation via BICMA	Content filtering and surveillance
India	Strong tradition; ethical oversight	Licensing & programme codes	IT Rules allow executive takedowns

Maldives	Weak institutional protection	Strong executive intervention	Increasing criminalisation
Nepal	Active press culture	Government licensing authority	Proposed heavy penalties
Pakistan	Influential but pressured	PEMRA exercises strong control	Content blocking & arrests
Sri Lanka	Constitutionally protected	Emergency-based controls	Online Safety Commission powers

6.5. CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES AND REGULATORY REALITIES: MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM IN SAARC COUNTRIES

The table provides a constitutional mapping of media freedom across SAARC countries, highlighting the relationship between formal constitutional guarantees and the practical regulatory environment governing the media. A comparative reading reveals a persistent and widening gap between constitutional ideals and regulatory practices, with executive authority, security concerns, and vague legal standards frequently overriding constitutionally protected freedoms.

In Afghanistan, Article 34 of the 2004 Constitution offered a robust guarantee of freedom of expression and the press, subject to restrictions related to Islam and public interest. However, the suspension of the Constitution following the 2021 regime change has rendered these protections effectively non-operational. Bangladesh constitutionally protects freedom of thought, conscience, speech, and the press under Article 39. While permissible restrictions are narrowly framed around state security, public order, and morality, the proliferation of cyber and digital laws has substantially expanded state control over expression. In Bhutan, Article 7(2) provides a comprehensive guarantee of freedom of speech, opinion, and the press, balanced against concerns of sovereignty, security, and national harmony. In practice, however, regulatory discretion exercised by BICMA allows broad interpretative authority, particularly in licensing and content oversight.

India presents one of the most elaborated constitutional frameworks for free expression under Article 19(1)(a), supplemented by clearly enumerated restrictions under Article 19(2). Despite strong judicial interpretation favouring press freedom, recent executive-made rules—especially in the digital media domain—have expanded regulatory oversight beyond traditional constitutional limits. In the Maldives, Article 27 guarantees freedom of expression and the press, subject to law-based limitations. While this framework allows reasonable regulation, recent amendments to media laws have increasingly narrowed the space for independent journalism.

Nepal's Constitution provides explicit protection for freedom of expression and press freedom under Articles 17 and 19, allowing only reasonable restrictions. However, proposed regulatory reforms—particularly those introducing heavy fines and executive appointments—risk diluting these safeguards. The practical gap in Nepal is anticipatory rather than fully realised, indicating a potential erosion of constitutional protections through future legislation.

In Pakistan, Article 19 recognises freedom of speech and the press but subjects it to extensive restrictions related to Islam, national integrity, and security.

Sri Lanka constitutionally protects freedom of speech and publication under Article 14(1)(a), while permitting restrictions in the interest of national security and public order. However, the frequent invocation of emergency regulations and the introduction of online safety laws have weakened constitutional safeguards.

Overall, the table demonstrates that constitutional recognition of media freedom is a necessary but insufficient condition for its realisation in SAARC countries. Broad restriction clauses, executive-dominated regulation, and security-centric governance models consistently undermine constitutional commitments. The analysis underscores the need for constitutional doctrine-based regulatory reform, judicial oversight, and narrowly tailored restrictions to bridge the gap between constitutional guarantees and democratic media practice in South Asia.

6.6. CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICLE MAPPING: MEDIA FREEDOM IN SAARC COUNTRIES

Table 3

Country	Constitutional Provision	Scope of Protection	Permissible Restrictions	Practical Gap (Regulation vs Constitution)
Afghanistan	Art. 34 (2004 Constitution – now suspended)	Freedom of expression and press	Contrary to Islam, public interest	Constitution largely non-operational post-2021
Bangladesh	Art. 39	Freedom of thought, conscience, speech & press	Security of state, public order, morality	Cyber laws override constitutional spirit

Bhutan	Art. 7(2)	Freedom of speech, opinion & press	Sovereignty, security, harmony	Broad discretionary regulation via BICMA
India	Art. 19(1)(a)	Freedom of speech and expression	Art. 19(2): security, order, morality, etc.	Executive rules expand restrictions, esp. digital
Maldives	Art. 27	Freedom of expression and press	Law-based limitations	Media laws increasingly restrictive
Nepal	Art. 17 & 19	Freedom of expression; press freedom	Reasonable restrictions	Proposed laws dilute safeguards
Pakistan	Art. 19	Freedom of speech and press	Islam, integrity, security	National security overrides routinely
Sri Lanka	Art. 14(1)(a)	Freedom of speech & publication	National security, public order	Emergency & online laws weaken protection

6.7. ALIGNMENT OF SAARC MEDIA FREEDOM WITH INTERNATIONAL INDICES: FREEDOM HOUSE AND RSF ASSESSMENT

The table presents a thematic alignment of media freedom in SAARC countries with Freedom House (FH) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) indicators, providing an integrated view of legal, political, economic, and safety dimensions of press freedom. This comparative assessment highlights the discrepancy between constitutional/legal guarantees and practical media freedom, showing how structural and political pressures affect the operational environment for journalists and media organisations.

In Afghanistan, the alignment underscores a total collapse of media freedom. Freedom House indicators show an absence of legal safeguards, total political control, and economic collapse, while RSF highlights extreme political pressure and severe risks to safety. This convergence reflects a media landscape entirely dominated by authoritarian control, where independent journalism is effectively non-existent, and constitutional guarantees are suspended.

Bangladesh exhibits partial alignment between restrictive laws and political pressure. FH indicators point to restrictive cyber legislation and government pressure on critics, while RSF underscores legal harassment and arrests. The overall characterisation of “Partly Free with High Risk” reflects a regulatory environment where constitutional and policy protections exist but are undermined by security-driven laws, resulting in self-censorship and constrained public discourse.

In Bhutan, the table indicates a relatively protective legal environment and low overt political pressure, as reflected in FH indicators, while RSF highlights limited pluralism. The overall media freedom is described as “Mostly Free but Controlled,” suggesting that while the media operates with relative autonomy, structural constraints and discretionary regulation prevent full expression, particularly in digital or politically sensitive content.

India demonstrates a mixed picture, where constitutional protections exist (FH legal alignment) but increasing political pressure and ownership concentration constrain operational freedom. RSF identifies legal intimidation and online controls, particularly under the IT Rules, reflecting growing regulatory reach into digital platforms. In the Maldives, legal safeguards are weakening, and executive dominance is evident across both FH and RSF indicators. Regulatory censorship, particularly in broadcast and digital media, has reduced pluralism and critical reporting, resulting in “Declining Freedom.” The alignment illustrates how concentrated regulatory authority can rapidly erode previously robust media freedoms.

Nepal displays formal legal protection for press freedom but faces political and legislative pressures, with RSF noting threats and intimidation.

Pakistan is marked by a high alignment between restrictive security-centric laws and RSF observations of enforced silence and safety risks. FH indicators highlight military influence in political control over media. The cumulative effect is a “Restricted” media environment where constitutional guarantees are routinely subordinated to national security considerations, resulting in constrained journalism and limited pluralism.

6.8. ALIGNMENT WITH FREEDOM HOUSE AND RSF INDICATORS (THEMATIC ALIGNMENT)

Table 4

Country	FH Indicator Alignment (<i>Legal, Political, Economic</i>)	RSF Indicator Alignment (<i>Political, Legal, Safety</i>)	Overall Media Freedom Characterisation
Afghanistan	Legal: Absent Political: Total control Economic: Collapse	Political: Extreme pressure Safety: Severe risk	Not Free / Authoritarian Control
Bangladesh	Legal: Restrictive cyber laws Political: Pressure on critics	Legal harassment; arrests	Partly Free with High Risk
Bhutan	Legal: Moderately protective Political: Low overt pressure	Limited pluralism	Mostly Free but Controlled
India	Legal: Constitutional protection Political: Increasing pressure Economic: Ownership concentration	Legal intimidation; online controls	Partly Free / Declining
Maldives	Legal: Weakening safeguards Political: Executive dominance	Regulatory censorship	Declining Freedom
Nepal	Legal: Formally protective Political: Legislative pressure	Threats & intimidation	Partly Free but Fragile
Pakistan	Legal: Security-centric laws Political: Military influence	Safety risks; enforced silence	Restricted
Sri Lanka	Legal: Emergency provisions Political: Crisis-driven controls	Online surveillance	Partly Free but Vulnerable

7. CONCLUSION

This research paper has examined the media policy frameworks and media freedom in SAARC countries, integrating constitutional provisions, statutory regulations, sectoral media analysis, and international indicators from Freedom House (FH) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The findings reveal a persistent disparity between constitutional guarantees and practical media freedom, shaped largely by executive dominance, security-centric regulations, and vague cyber laws. While constitutional protections exist in all member countries, the enforcement of these rights is inconsistent, particularly in electronic and digital media, where regulatory authorities wield expansive discretion.

Sectoral analysis indicates that print media remains relatively resilient due to historical pluralism and established ethical norms, yet it is increasingly affected by economic pressures and targeted legal interventions. Electronic media is subject to licensing and content oversight, which allows states to influence political narratives and restrict dissent. Digital media, however, faces the greatest regulatory vulnerability, with cyber laws, IT rules, and online safety regulations often exceeding constitutional limits and leading to self-censorship, content takedowns, and harassment of journalists.

The alignment with international media freedom indices confirms these patterns: Afghanistan and Pakistan represent extreme cases of restricted or authoritarian media control, while Bhutan, India, and Nepal maintain moderate freedom under legal and institutional constraints. Maldives, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka demonstrate declining or fragile freedom, reflecting the impact of executive interventions and restrictive legislation. Overall, the study underscores the complex interaction of constitutional doctrine, regulatory frameworks, political influence, and technological change in shaping media freedom in South Asia.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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