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### Statement on the escalating threats to media freedom

Mr Narendra Modi is perhaps the first Prime Minister of India to have not held a single press conference, four years at a stretch. This could not however have been unrelated to a series of events that raise fresh concerns about media freedom.

The concerted online hate campaign against journalist Ms Rana Ayyub, and the circulation of a fake pornographic video purportedly showing her, after a malicious tweet had been falsely attributed to her, prompted the intervention of UN human rights experts. Television anchor Mr Ravish Kumar was subjected to similar intimidation and cyber bullying, again for taking positions that evidently infuriated supporters of the ruling dispensation.

It's a commentary on the state of Indian democracy that the Government has reacted to neither of these attacks on the Fourth Estate. This silence is despite the cautionary precedent of Gauri Lankesh's murder and the gleeful reactions to it from trolls known to be issuing murder/rape threats and hate speech couched in the language of nationalism.

Meanwhile, the sting conducted by website cobrapost.com has exposed the vulnerability of editorial space to the apparent willingness of owners and managers of leading media organizations to promote the Hindutva agenda under the guise of advertisements and advertorials. If the Radia tapes scandal of 2010 was about the influence evidently wielded by a corporate lobbyist over senior journalists, the two tranches of videos released by Cobrapost have raised questions about the proclivity of media owners and managers to disregard journalistic ethics in deference to dominant political interests.

That a major media organization defended itself by claiming that, far from being stung, it had actually carried out a "reverse sting" has only served to reinforce the credibility of the undercover investigation conducted by Cobrapost. That, out of the 27 media organizations covered by the second tranche of videos, a couple of them flatly refused to participate in the proposed scheme of

fomenting communal polarization gives hope that there are still islands of journalistic integrity, against all odds.

The Foundation for Media Professionals calls upon the Government to respond with due earnestness to these telling media-related events coinciding with its fourth anniversary. They betray a wide gulf in the rhetoric and reality of its commitment to the freedom of expression. The Government and the ruling party cannot any longer shirk their responsibility of checking this alarming trend.

The Foundation demands:

- (1) That the Prime Minister should without any further delay call a press conference to uphold, if nothing else, the media's right to question any holder of that high office.
- (2) That exemplary action should be taken against trolls harassing journalists like Ms Rana Ayyub and Mr Ravish Kumar.
- (3) That the Prime Minister, his ministers and party leaders should stop following social media trolls and cyber bullies.
- (4) That the ongoing exercise of framing regulations for online media should ensure that the proposed watchdog is independent of not only the Government but also the market.
- (5) That as regards Cobrapost's revelations, civil society organizations, including political parties and media associations, should condemn those media owners and managers who have been caught on camera saying that they were already striving to promote sectarian ideologies or willing to fan communal hatred for a price.

Paranjay Guha Thakurta – President

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(Full disclosure: Cobrapost founder Aniruddha Bahal is one of the founding members of the Foundation for Media Professionals.)

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