

Strengthening International Protection and Human Rights of Journalists in the 21st Century

Lauren T. Major, Florida Gulf Coast University

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I. A Brief Introduction on the Safety of Journalists

Journalists in the 21st century face a myriad of dangers. Watchdog journalists who report on government officials, criminal gangs, heads of large corporations, and other powerful entities are vulnerable to censorship, harassment, verbal or physical attacks, imprisonment, and even death. Militants target conflict reporters as if they were military forces. Democracies face a volatile period as researchers sound the alarm on democratic backsliding (a gradual move away from democratic norms towards authoritarianism) in many nations (see [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#), [Hyde, 2020](#)). The free press is declining worldwide, with 85% of the world's population having faced a decline in "press freedom" over the past five years ([UNESCO, 2022](#)). While a variety of UN resources exist, the situation remains dire. With trends towards globalization and Internet-dominated networks creating a new global media, is a global solution necessary?

II. Threats to Journalists in the Modern World

In 2009, 32 journalists were killed in the Filipino Maguindanao Province with the killers not facing any punishment (see [Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#)). In 2013, Luis de Jesús Lima and four other media workers were killed in Guatemala (see [Carey and Gohdes, 2017](#)). These examples make it clear that journalists risk paying the ultimate price for their work. Some figures report that a journalist is killed every four days. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the period between 2016 and 2020 saw four

hundred journalists killed. While these numbers have had spiking and falling periods throughout the past two decades, these figures are alarming for the safety of the free press.

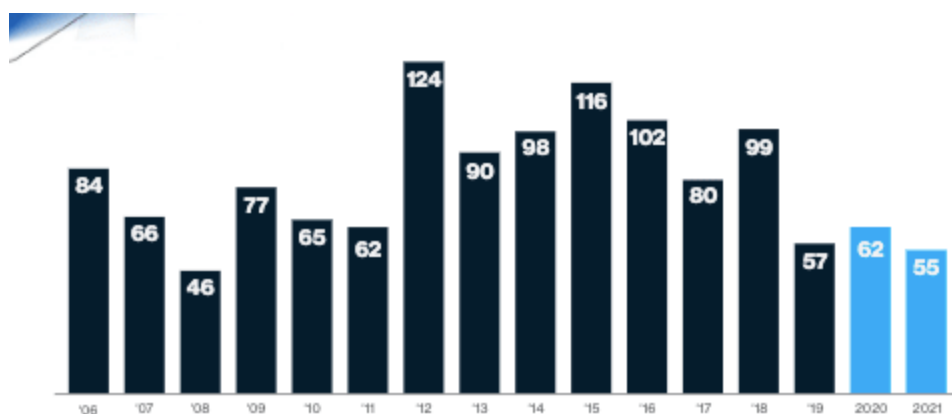


Figure 1. Journalists Killed Between the Years 2006 and 2021. Graphic developed by UNESCO and published online by [Rappler](#).

Very few victims of journalistic killings receive justice. Impunity levels have been at or near 90% for the past few decades, which means it is incredibly rare for perpetrators of journalistic killings to face legal action and prosecution (see [Carey and Gohdes, 2021](#), [Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#), [OHCHR, n.d.](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Despite a slight drop since 2018, impunity rates are still high enough to be a cause of alarm. Since many of the killings are committed, aided, or abetted by government actors who wish to silence the journalist, judicial systems may allow the state to kill without punishment.

Female journalists, already heavily underrepresented in the field, face both gender and profession-related threats. While only 11% of journalists killed in 2021 have been women due to their underrepresentation in the field, female journalists are disproportionately vulnerable to other threats (see [UNESCO 2022](#)). Woman journalists, especially those reporting in male-dominated spaces, are disproportionately victims of rape and sexual violence (see [Jamil, 2017](#), [Nassanga](#)

[and Walulya, 2020](#), [Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#)). Quatrina Hosain, one such journalist, was assaulted by a mob of thirty men while reporting on “an election rally” in Pakistan ([Orgeret, 2016](#)). Most victims do not report instances of sexual violence due to humiliation and stigma. Due to this, female journalists often avoid clothes, body language, and other behaviors that men may consider an invitation for sexual advances. Another harrowing trend is harassment against female journalists, especially online (see [Jamil, 2017](#), [Orgeret, 2016](#), [Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). In a UNESCO survey of over nine hundred female journalists worldwide, 73% reported having faced violence online. Online harassment against women journalists tends to be sexist in nature and can spill over into the real world. This has a chilling effect on other women hoping to engage in the media sphere.

Still more threats include imprisonment, government surveillance, targeting of family members, verbal and physical harassment, economic insecurity, exile, and mental distress. Imprisonment is a particularly major threat. While the number of journalists killed is on the decline, journalist imprisonment is on the rise as of 2021 ([UNESCO, 2022](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Authoritarian rulers rely on jailing journalists because they can use loopholes to imprison journalists without pushback from the international community. Authorities can simply accuse journalists they oppose of conducting “propagandist activities” to avoid outcry from international governments and IGOs hesitant to react ([Bjerregård, 2016](#)).

III. Who Targets Journalists and Why? Analysis of Journalists' Watchdog Function

Journalists who serve the function of ‘watchdog’ monitor influential individuals (e.g., government officials, police, extremist groups, criminal gangs, and wealthy businesspeople) for corruption and expose their activities to the public (see [Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2018](#), [Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#)). As a result, these powerful individuals target the journalist for

revealing behavior they would rather hide. This is a situation that investigative journalists in particular face. Ugandan journalist Solomon Serwanjja had to go into hiding until police put his wife up for ransom. Police targeted him for doing “an investigative story” on “big shots” selling medical drugs that were supposed to be free to patients in the government’s hospitals ([Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#)).

IV. Differences in the Situations of Journalists in Democratic vs. Autocratic States

Journalists face different threats in autocracies than they do in democracies. Autocratic regimes in particular present the threats of surveillance and imprisonment, owing to the lack of a strong free press. Due to these dangers, journalists working in autocratic regimes must take extra steps to stay safe. Dictators severely limit the media allowed in the countries where they operate. While democratic societies are often far from perfect in these regards, autocratic societies do not have the same level of checks and balances that help preserve freedom of the press. Therefore, autocratic governments can and do censor journalists and even close outlets that go against government interests. Even new media is not immune, with governments using Internet surveillance and blocking of websites and social media to censor the Internet (see [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). For example, the Syrian Assad government both controls traditional media and blocks websites and social platforms with anti-regime “messages” ([Al-Saqaf, 2016](#)). Additionally, governments in less democratic regimes institute laws limiting journalists’ freedom to operate (see [Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Journalists who report freely and violate these laws face legal troubles.

While democracies tend to have more protections for the free press, journalists still face threats, especially in more unstable and territorially uneven democracies. Democratic leaders depend on the support of the public to remain in power and to avoid “removal from office”

([Carey and Gohdes, 2021](#)). Since democratic regimes cannot just shut down the media, they have reason to silence a journalist who threatens the government's standing with the public.

Journalists covering elections are particularly threatened, as the party in power may target journalists who threaten their chances of reelection (see [Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2018](#), [Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#)). In Uganda's 2016 election, the incumbent candidate's supporters and the police assaulted, suppressed, dispersed, and denied information to journalists who covered an "opposing candidate" or criticized the incumbent ([Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#)).

Local authorities who may use authoritarian tactics under the radar may also oppose journalists. Proof of increasing danger for journalists in democracies is that among the most dangerous places for journalists is Mexico, an established (if territorially uneven) democracy (see [Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2018](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)).

However, we should note that none of these concerns are exclusively democratic or autocratic. Democratic leaders can censor media, while autocrats still have reason to control their public image to avoid revolts. Additionally, regimes that mix democratic and autocratic qualities may also share the dangers to journalists that come with both regime types.

V. *The Situation of Local, Domestic Reporters*

Research and reports on journalists' safety focus mostly on internationally operating war and combat reporters. Much of the world's journalism centers around war and conflict, and militaries and terrorist groups often view the journalists who report on it as "enemy combatants" ([Nohrstedt, 2016](#)). However, less emphasis has been placed on the dangers faced by local journalists covering domestic issues, even though they are targeted the most, with eighty-seven percent of journalists killed worldwide between 1992 and 2012 being locally-operating (see [Carey and Gohdes, 2021](#), [Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#), [Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#), [UNESCO,](#)

[2022](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Journalists outside urban centers and state capitals are most at risk. Local, rural journalists who cover domestic issues such as crime, human rights, political and economic corruption, environmental issues, and inequality (thus appealing to a more domestic audience) are more isolated than international journalists, whose murders receive “global attention” ([Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#)).

VI. Journalism in the Online Sphere

The Internet has brought novel changes to journalism. As well as Internet surveillance and online violence against journalists and citizens alike, the Internet has also brought economic troubles for traditional outlets, especially print media, causing small, local news outlets to close (see [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Additionally, tech giants such as “Meta and Google” have gained disproportionate power over news media and the free press ([UNESCO, 2022](#)). However, the Internet has also brought positive effects, such as an increased capacity for citizens to access information, even in authoritarian regimes where information control runs rampant. Citizens in such countries can now use “censorship circumvention tools” to access prohibited online media. ([Al-Saqaf, 2016](#)).

VII. *Self-Censorship and Threats to the Free Press*

Because of the precarious situation journalists in much of the world face, journalists engage in a phenomenon called self-censorship to stay safe (see [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#), [Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#), [Orgeret and Tayebwa, 2020](#)). Self-censorship involves giving non-objective information in reports, often corresponding to the interests of the government or other influential individuals. Threats and punishments for not bowing to authorities and rewards for acquiescing enforce this phenomenon. Authorities do not have to directly threaten journalists to cause self-

ensorship. In Bangladesh, telecoms and other large companies stopped advertising with *The Daily Star* because the government disapproved of its content, thus causing it significant financial struggles (see [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#)). Another method of threats is surveillance laws (see [Al-Saqaf, 2016](#), [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Surveillance practices involve the government monitoring citizens' activities in the online sphere. The threat of being watched is often enough to make a journalist comply with the government. Thus, journalists and their superiors avoid topics the government wants to keep hidden to stay economically stable and avoid threats to their bodies, wellbeing, and lives.

A particular method of self-censorship is embedding with political campaigns (see [Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#)). Embedded candidates report on a candidate's campaign, acting as part of the candidate's campaign machinery. This diminishes the objectivity of the news.

The censorship of ideas caused by threats to journalists' wellbeing has devastating effects on the state of the free press worldwide. The free press facilitates political competition in elections, helps citizens assess their leaders' performances, provides citizens information to be informed voters, exposes citizens to different viewpoints, and serves as a watchdog to hold politicians accountable (see [Carey and Gohdes, 2017](#), [Carey and Gohdes, 2021](#)). However, journalists need to be safe to perform these roles. When journalists are not, journalists censor content that citizens need to be properly informed. This in turn diminishes public support for the media and trust in journalism. Citizens of Bangladesh (one such state with a threatened free media) have little trust in journalists or domestic news sources (see [Hasan and Wadud, 2020](#)). Harsh environments cause skilled journalists to quit the profession, causing brain drain.



Figure 2. The State of World Press Freedom in 2023. Graphic developed by Reporters Without Borders and published online by [Statista](#).

There is also evidence that the killing of journalists by the state may lead to diminished respect for human rights conditions in the following years. An example of this occurred in Guatemala. The deaths of journalists Luis de Jesús Lima and Danilo López in 2013 and 2015, respectively, corresponded with an increase in instability, police brutality, and organized crime (see [Carey and Gohdes, 2017](#)). This is the case because killing a journalist reflects a state's willingness to use force to influence the media or to avoid accountability. The killing of a journalist by nongovernmental forces such as criminal gangs may also result in increasing repression because the threat of these groups may trigger a harsh response from government forces.

VIII. Efforts by the United Nations

The UN has long supported the safety, protection, and civil rights of journalists. The United Nations has adopted numerous declarations on the topic of media freedom. These include the Belgrade Declaration of 2004, the Medellin Declaration of 2007, 2017 Jakarta Declaration, the 2018 Accra Declaration, the 2019 Addis Ababa Declaration, the 2020 Hague Commitment, and the 2021 Windhoek+30 Declaration ([OHCHR, n.d.](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has played a particularly significant role in the UN's journalism-related efforts ([OHCHR, n.d.](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). Some of its many efforts over the past two decades include creating World Press Freedom Day and the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize to bring attention to the threats journalists face; publishing a biannual report on judicial killings and impunity with data from member states; working with Reporters without Borders to create a multilanguage, up-to-date safety guide for journalists in combat zones; and offering tools and trainings to journalists, governments, judiciaries, and security forces. Significantly, the UN adopted the *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity* in 2012 (see [Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#), [OHCHR, n.d.](#), [UNESCO, 2022](#)). The UN-wide plan proposed strategies to strengthen UN mechanisms, cooperate with member states, partner with other organizations and institutions, and foster safety initiatives.

IX. The Need for an Elevated Response

As the media becomes global in scale, researchers have noted a need for a global response. This will require the cooperation of UN member states. Actions on states' parts should combat a rise in disinformation while protecting citizens' freedom of expression ([UNESCO 2022](#)). Murders of journalists should receive attention at the "global level" whether the journalist

is a local or international reporter ([Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#)). The UN should continue to urge states where journalists are under threat to institute protections for journalists and the free press.

The international community should evoke the global responsibility to protect (R2P) principle to protect journalists (see [Nassanga and Walulya, 2020](#), [Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#)).

Governments and international bodies should hold other governments accountable when they imprison or kill a journalist. Finally, governments and civil society groups already in the business of monitoring journalists' safety to monitor threats accurately and actively should compile an "extensive collection" network on violations of all kinds against journalists ([Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#)).

Individual states can also implement methods of protecting journalists on the national level. One such solution is reforming journalistic education and safety programs, which are often subpar (see [Jamil, 2017](#), [OHCHR, n.d.](#), [Orgeret and Tayeebwa, 2020](#)). A survey done in Pakistan reported that 78% of journalists have not received "safety training" by their government, their university, their work, or their union ([Jamil, 2017](#)). Most existing programs do not adequately teach journalists how to respond in conflict situations or account for gender. Thus, it is important for governments to direct funding to institute new safety training programs and to reform existing ones. Another method, implemented by Mexico, Brazil, and Guatemala, is to improve systems for prosecuting crimes against journalists ([Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013](#)). States can do this through legislation to make killing a journalist a federal crime or instituting a specialized prosecution office for crimes against journalists. However, the crucial step at the national level is legislation and initiatives that protect living journalists and press freedom.

Conclusion

Journalists continue to face a multitude of threats. As even established democracies face threats to the democratic process and the free press from democratic backsliding, the situation is likely to get worse. Journalists worldwide face the difficult choice of sticking to their beliefs and committing to the role of watchdog or facing surveillance, imprisonment, forced disappearance, attacks, and loss of life by the government and related entities. Under this backdrop, proponents of the free press are wondering: what can we do?

Topics for Discussion

1. Delegates should review relevant UN treaties, reports, and resolutions to this topic, to consider what global efforts have already been put in place to protect journalists' safety and what further global efforts, if any, are needed.
2. Delegates should review the policies of their own countries regarding their protections (or lack thereof) for the free press, the presence or absence of journalists killed since the turn of the millennium, and relevant surveillance and censorship efforts.
3. Delegates should consider the specific threats faced by female journalists, local journalists, and conflict reporters, as well as the differences in the journalistic environment between democratic and autocratic societies.
4. Delegates should craft recommendations for the role of governments towards journalism safety and protecting the free press.
5. Delegates should consider the Internet's role in changing the overall global media landscape and how it has advantaged and disadvantaged journalists.

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