

Global Trends in Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists: Key findings



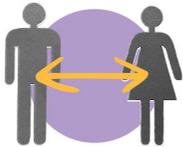
Press freedom continues its downward trend across the globe. Approximately 85 percent of the world’s population experienced a decline in press freedom in their country over the past five years, according to analysis based on data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. Measures responding to the COVID-19 pandemic were also frequently used to justify violations of press freedom.



New laws and policies restrict freedom of expression online. Dozens of laws have been adopted or amended since 2016 that contain overly vague language or disproportionate punishments that threaten online freedom of expression. Additionally, in the last five years, government requests for content removal on major internet platforms have doubled.



Audiences and revenue continue to move online, placing news media’s traditional business models in grave danger. The number of social media users worldwide leapt from 2.3 billion in 2016 to 4.2 billion in 2021, and advertising revenues have shifted rapidly towards internet companies and away from news outlets. Google and Meta¹ now receive approximately half of all global digital advertising spending, while global newspaper advertising revenue dropped by half in the last five years.



Progress in closing the gender gap in newsrooms, in bylines, and in the news itself has largely stagnated. Women continue to be underrepresented at leadership levels in news organizations and on “hard news” beats like politics, while both qualitative and quantitative studies suggest persistent biases in women’s representation in the news and the marginalization of women as expert sources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, only 27 percent of health specialists quoted in the media were women, despite the fact that women make up approximately half of health specialists worldwide.



A deluge of mis- and disinformation has contributed to years of declining trust in media worldwide. The growing challenge of false and misleading content was brought into sharp relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, so much so as to be dubbed a “disinfodemic.” At the same time, according to several reports, trust in media and information sources has continued to decline over the past five years.



Amid controversies, recent years have seen mounting calls to end the opacity of internet companies’ moderation and curation of content. Greater transparency about their operations would open these entities up to public scrutiny and greater accountability. Both independent reports and high-profile whistleblowers have flagged the need for greater transparency across the board, especially regarding the companies’ governance and accountability around data holdings and privacy, fact-checking, and community standards and implementation thereof, including moderation of hate speech and mis- and disinformation.

¹ In October 2021, the Facebook company rebranded as Meta. Throughout this Report, “Meta” refers to the company and its holdings, including WhatsApp and Instagram, while “Facebook” refers strictly to that platform.



Journalism remains a deadly profession—in nine times out of ten, the murder of a journalist is unresolved. From 2016 to the end of 2021, UNESCO recorded 455 journalists killed for their work or while on the job. Though this shows slight improvement compared to the previous five years, at the same time, just 13 percent of cases recorded by UNESCO since 2006 have been judicially resolved, threatening a continued cycle of violence.



Other threats against journalists, online and off-line, continue to grow. Journalist imprisonment is at record highs, while online violence and harassment spurs self-censorship and, in some cases, physical attacks. Those threats inordinately affect women journalists and those who represent minority groups: 73 percent of women journalists responding to a survey by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists had experienced online violence in the course of their work.



The burgeoning data ecosystem offers the chance to improve our understanding of and support for the media sector and freedom of expression. However, in the countries and communities where journalism is most at risk, the health of the news system on issues like ownership, pluralism, independence, and viability often remains a black box. Using data to inform policies and solutions must first overcome significant gaps in availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability.



In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, trustworthy, independent media proved itself to be a lifesaving public good. But it is under systemic economic threat and needs support. The impact of the pandemic worsened the already fragile viability of news outlets, which collectively constitute a pluralistic and independent media sector. New policies and measures are urgently needed to ensure that journalism can continue to function as a public good—these include public financing for trusted news outlets, enhanced support for genuine public service media, and a redoubling of donor aid and philanthropic investments in news production.



Actions to support press freedom and media development have converged to produce the Windhoek+30 Declaration, a roadmap for the future outlining principles that were endorsed by UNESCO Member States in 2021. The Declaration calls attention to the ongoing value to democracy and sustainable development of free, pluralistic, and independent media where journalists can work in safety. It further signals the urgent importance of securing economic viability for news, transparency of internet companies, and increasing media and information competencies amongst the public.