Journalist Safety (accepted version)

in Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Communication

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Citation

Book Info

Abstract

Journalist safety has serious implications not only for the process through which the media delivers news to citizens but also for the human rights violations the individual reporting the news suffers. To better understand the concept, this entry defines journalist safety, describes its implications for the media ecosystem, and discusses where journalists are most vulnerable and who typically targets them. Finally, it concludes with an overview of factors identified in academic literature that often affect journalist safety.

Flowing Text

Journalist safety is the absence of danger, risk, or injury to an individual involved in the creation of news content. Safety can pertain to an individual's physical integrity, the space in which they work (both at the desk and in the field), or the equipment used to create and release news stories.

Journalist safety is an important precondition for delivering the news to individuals as part of a functioning media ecosystem. Mass media itself serves several functions in society. First, it provides a public good that allows citizens to access vital information about governance and policies, as well as entertainment. In democratic countries, the media's role goes further, serving as a cheap, low-cost channel for citizens to receive information about elected officials, their policies, newsworthy events, opposition candidates running for office, and other information needed to make informed decisions when they vote during elections. Media also

serves as an essential channel in an open society for citizens to freely criticize, protest, or oppose the ruling government's policies and practices.

To provide these vital functions, media outlets rely on journalists and other media personnel to accurately investigate, gather, and present the news to a mass audience. Behind this effort, business administrative staff ensure that journalists have adequate resources to continue producing news content. Funding may come from the government, advertising revenues, audience subscriptions, or a combination of these sources. Journalists may create content on a freelance basis or publish independently using digital technology.

However, the channels by which media outlets supply information to their consumers can be disrupted to manipulate or prevent news content from being released. Compromising journalist safety, as it relates to their ability to report the news, is a potential fracture point that can disrupt the supply of news content. This can include actions that endanger journalists' personal safety or the safety of the physical spaces in which they work, threats of harm in the digital spaces in which they work and communicate with audiences (such as social media), and speech or actions that undermine the psychological well-being or livelihood of journalists.

When journalist safety is not secured, this can alter news content by inducing self-censorship. For example, to avoid harm, journalists may not fully report a news story or completely avoid sensitive topics known to generate backlash. Journalists may also lack the ability to gather or publish the news if the safety of their workspace or equipment is compromised. A lack of safety for journalists can be harmful to democracies and ultimately lead to a society's erosion of democratic norms and becoming more autocratic. Therefore, above and beyond physical harm to an individual journalist or the violation of their human rights, journalist safety is closely associated with press freedom and a wider concern for both democratic societies and non-democracies (Orgeret & Tayeebwa, 2020: 1).

How are journalists threatened?

Threats to journalist safety including those affecting their physical integrity, the physical and digital spaces in which they work, or their psychological well-being. Journalist safety can be compromised i) in the process of investigating or reporting the news, ii) as a consequence of reporting, or iii) as a result of their overall body of journalistic work. Journalists may work in physically dangerous arenas such as combat zones or unstable areas that experience armed conflict or political violence. In conflict zones, they may be directly targeted as journalists or indirectly targeted because of their mere presence in the environment (e.g., sustaining injury from a stray bullet, bearing the brunt of an attack from a combatant who does not realize they are attacking a journalist). Outside of battlefields and unstable environments, similar dangers can affect the safety of journalists in the aftermath of a news story that covers a powerful group or individual. While gathering information for a story, their reporting may draw the attention of

actors that wish to inflict physical harm to prevent a story from being reported or dissuade future coverage. In other instances, journalists can be victims of psychological harm, such as receiving threats at their place of work or beyond, such as at home or in public restaurants.

In digital spaces, attackers may compromise journalists' ability to report the news through computer hacks, cyber attacks, or online harassment, with women more likely to be harassed online than men (Chen et al., 2020: 879). Threats or attacks may prompt outlets to pull a critical story or induce a chilling effect that encourages other journalists to stay away from similar stories. Journalist safety can also be compromised if the physical or digital spaces in which they work are attacked. For example, burning down a news office has the practical effect of potentially disrupting the release of news while also serving as a threatening signal to psychologically intimidate journalists and staff that work there. In 2013, masked individuals broke into the Raajje TV office, a private television station in the Maldives that supported then-opposition leader Mohammed Nasheed, and burned down the building (Robinson, 2013). Equipment, such as cameras and broadcast gear, was damaged, diminishing the station's ability to report the news during a politically critical time. In this way, acts that do not involve physical injury can still serve to intimidate and harass and thus to deter and disrupt the news-to-citizen channel.

Who threatens journalist safety?

Several groups of actors threaten journalist safety. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) identifies criminal groups, government officials, political groups, military officials, paramilitary groups, local residents, and mobs as potential actors that can threaten journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.). Business interests can also target journalists. These groups may collude with each other to harass, attack, or even murder journalists reporting uncomfortable news. In 2005, Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho was arrested and tortured by the Puebla state police and charged with defamation after she reported on local businessmen and politicians involved in a child pornography ring. Then-governor Mario Marín and textile magnate José Kamel Nacif colluded to harass Cacho (Associated Press, 2021). She was eventually exonerated in 2006, and Marín was later arrested for his role in the episode in 2021 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021).

Journalist safety determinants

Research has identified several factors that contribute to compromising journalist safety, including both killings and physical attacks. Though many studies focus on a single country or region, they still provide valuable insight into determining when the safety of journalists is more likely to be compromised for their work. This entry describes major contributing factors identified in academic literature but is not exhaustive.

Journalists are most likely to be killed when a country is embroiled in an active conflict (Solis, 2021: 13–15). For example, since CPJ began keeping records of journalist killings in 1992, Yemen recorded 4 journalists killed before conflict began in 2014; that count has risen to 25 as of 2023. Of the 21 journalists killed in Yemen for their work since the conflict began, CPJ reported that 17 were killed due to crossfire/battlefield related deaths (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.). In a report analyzing transitional democracies in Sub-Saharan Africa, government attacks against the media (such as, but not limited to, interference with the news generating process; arrests of media personnel; harassing, threatening, or physically assaulting media personnel; or public rhetorical threats against the media) increase in the immediate period after conflict onset (VonDoepp & Young, 2013: 50).

Regime type is also a significant factor. Journalists are more likely to be killed for their work in democracies rather than in non-democracies (Asal et al., 2018). The 'press-safety paradox' holds that while scholars find a strong association between democracy and media freedom, democracies also see more journalists killed because they allow for greater freedom of journalists to investigate sensitive information, which has the potential to anger powerful actors who then kill. However, journalist killings in democracies significantly decrease once a country's democratic institution fully consolidates (Solis, 2021). For example, the Philippines has lingered as a non-consolidated democracy since at least 1992, the year the CPJ began recording journalist killings (Marshall et al., 2020). Though not embroiled in major, country-wide conflict during this time, the Philippines has one of the highest rates of journalists killed, with 96 killed for their work between 1992 and 2023 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024). This includes the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, when 32 journalists were abducted and murdered in a single day in the Southeast Asian country in relation to events surrounding a local election (BBC, 2019).

Government quality and institutions also matter: higher levels of corruption have been found to impact both journalist killings (Bjørnskov & Freytag, 2016) and harassment against the media (Solis & Antenangeli, 2017: 1126–27). Journalists working in remote areas of a country administered by powerful, elected officials are more likely to be killed for their work through state violence (Carey & Gohdes, 2021). Variation in subnational institutions produces variation in journalist safety as well. An analysis in Mexico—a country with a federal structure that offers valuable subnational institutional variation on the state level—finds that states with high levels of social violence, internal conflict, severe violations of human rights, low democratic development, and economic inequality see higher journalist killings (Brambila, 2017). Another study finds that similar factors lead to an increase in threats and harassment to journalists, including criminally insecure environments, local government and police corruption, and working in private media (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018). Lower levels of judicial independence—the ability of a country's judiciary to act independently of the executive—have also been found to increase harassment of the media (Kellam & Stein, 2016).

This and related research points to impunity, or the government's unwillingness to prosecute those that harass or kill journalists, as a key factor that threatens journalists. Impunity specifically is 'a policy of governance. . .used as a political tool by the state and state-sponsored actors to achieve journalistic self-censorship' (Harrison & Pukallus, 2021). In its 2022 Global Impunity Index, CPJ notes that nearly 80% of journalist murders from 2012 to 2022 went unsolved (Dunham, 2022). The publicization of negative messaging against media by politicians significantly increases physical attacks against journalists by non-state actors, with the effect being particularly strong in highly competitive electoral districts (Mazzaro, 2023).

Journalist safety: looking forward

While a variety of factors affect journalist safety, conflict, regime type, and the quality of government institutions disproportionately affect how safely journalists can gather and disseminate news. Journalists, both in traditional and digital media, often navigate the challenge of avoiding danger and delivering high-quality, actionable information that empowers the public to make informed decisions across various aspects of life.

Despite potential dangers, journalists can adopt proactive measures to enhance their safety and navigate unsafe environments more effectively. Safety courses like the Hostile Environment and Emergency First Aid Training (HEFAT) train journalists on how to avoid danger, administer first aid, and protect their digital lives. A 2016 survey of journalists from various regions found that about 66% of journalists who participated in the training used safety skills they learned from the training either occasionally or frequently thereafter (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Future research should leverage more granular, subnational data to achieve richer analysis. This shift in focus would require expanding data collection beyond journalist killings to encompass incidents of harassment as well. Including geospatial data, such as the location of journalist attacks and killings, would allow for more in-depth, causal analysis of journalist safety issues. Furthermore, researchers can utilize natural language processing (NLP) techniques to identify large-scale online harassment targeting journalists on social media platforms, pinpointing when and how often it occurs. Deepening our understanding of threats faced by journalists can not only mitigate some of those dangers but also equip policymakers with better information to allocate resources for the protection of journalists and media personnel.

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