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ANALYSES

2020 World Press Freedom Index: "Entering a decisive decade for journalism, exacerbated by coronavirus"



The 2020 World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), shows that the coming decade will be decisive for the future of journalism, with the Covid-19 pandemic highlighting and amplifying the many crises that threaten the right to freely reported, independent, diverse and reliable information.

This **2020 edition of the Index (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>)**, which evaluates the situation for journalists each year in 180 countries and territories, suggests that the next ten years will be pivotal for press freedom because of converging crises affecting the future of journalism: a geopolitical crisis (due to the aggressiveness of authoritarian regimes); a technological crisis (due to a lack of democratic guarantees); a democratic crisis (due to polarisation and repressive policies); a crisis of trust (due to suspicion and even hatred of the media); and an economic crisis (impoverishing quality journalism).

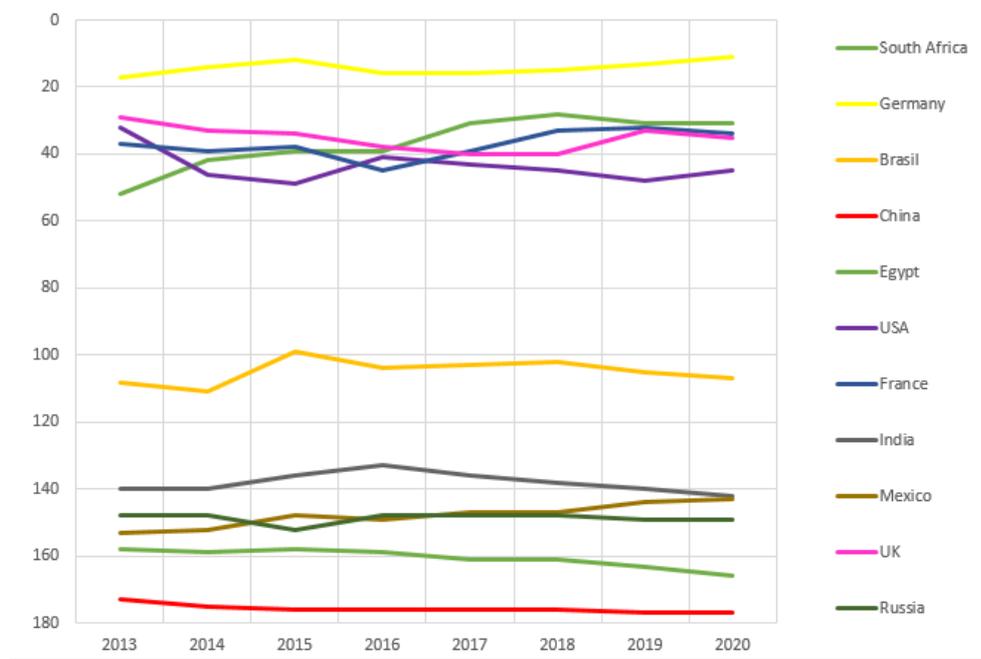
These five areas of crisis – the effects of which the Index’s methodology allows us to evaluate - are now compounded by a global public health crisis.

“We are entering a decisive decade for journalism linked to crises that affect its future,” RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. “The coronavirus pandemic illustrates the negative factors threatening the right to reliable information, and is itself an exacerbating factor. What will freedom of information, pluralism and reliability look like in 2030? The answer to that question is being determined today.”

There is a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country’s ranking in the Index. Both China (177th) and Iran (down 3 at 173rd) censored their major coronavirus outbreaks extensively. In Iraq (down 6 at 162nd), the authorities stripped Reuters of its licence for three months after it published a story questioning official coronavirus figures. Even in Europe, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary (down 2 at 89th), had a “coronavirus” law passed with penalties of up to five years in prison for false information, a completely disproportionate and coercive measure.

“The public health crisis provides authoritarian governments with an opportunity to implement the notorious “shock doctrine” – to take advantage of the fact that politics are on hold, the public is stunned and protests are out of the question, in order to impose measures that would be impossible in normal times,” Deloire added. “For this decisive decade to not be a disastrous one, people of goodwill, whoever they are,

must campaign for journalists to be able to fulfil their role as society’s trusted third parties, which means they must have the capacity to do so.”



Evolution of some countries ranked since 2013

The main findings of the 2020 Index

Norway tops the Index for the fourth year in a row in 2020, while Finland is again the runner-up. Denmark (up 2 at 3rd) is next as both Sweden (down 1 at 4th) and the Netherlands (down 1 at 5th) have fallen as a result of increases in cyber-harassment. The other end of the Index has seen little change. North Korea (down 1 at 180th) has taken the last position from Turkmenistan, while Eritrea (178th) continues to be Africa’s worst-ranked country.

Malaysia (101st) and the Maldives (79th) registered the biggest rises in the 2020 Index – 22nd and 19th, respectively – thanks to the beneficial effects of changes of government through the polls. The third biggest leap was by Sudan (159th), which rose 16 places after Omar al-Bashir’s removal. The list of biggest declines in the 2020 Index is topped by Haiti, where journalists have often been targeted during violent

nationwide protests for the past two years. After falling 21 places, it is now ranked 83rd. The other two biggest falls were in Africa – by Comoros (down 19 at 75th) and Benin (down 17 at 113th), both of which have seen a surge in press freedom violations.

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RSF’s “global indicator” – its measure of the level of media freedom worldwide – improved very slightly in the 2020 Index, by 0.9%. However, it has deteriorated by 12% since this measure was created in 2013. The proportion of countries that are coloured white on the press freedom map, meaning the press freedom situation is “good,” is unchanged at 8%, but the percentage of countries coloured black, meaning the situation is “very bad,” has increased by two points to 13%.

The Index region by region

Europe (<https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-europes-journalists-face-growing-dangers>) continues to be the most favourable continent for media freedom, despite oppressive policies in certain European Union and Balkan countries. It is followed by the Americas – **North (<https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-troubling-trends-persist-north-america-despite-regions-improvements>)**, **Central and South (<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2020-index-latin-americas-dark-horizon-press-freedom>)** – even if the regional heavyweights, the United States and Brazil, are becoming models of hostility towards the media. **Africa (<https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-future-african-journalism-under-threat-all-sides>)**, which is third, has also suffered major reversals, above all in the forms of prolonged arbitrary detention and online attacks.

It is the **Asia-Pacific (<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2020-index-asia-pacific-hyper-control-and-national-populist-excesses>)** region that saw the greatest rise in press freedom violations (up 1.7%).

Australia (down 5 at 26th) used to be the regional model but is now characterised by its threats to the confidentiality of sources and to investigative journalism. Two other countries also made significant contributions to the increase in the region's press freedom violation score. One was Singapore (158th), which fell seven places, in large part thanks to its Orwellian "fake news" law, and joined the countries coloured black on the press freedom map. The other was Hong Kong, which also fell seven places because of its treatment of journalists during pro-democracy demonstrations.

The **Eastern Europe/Central Asia** (<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2020-index-eastern-europe-and-central-asia-clampdown-continues>) region has unsurprisingly kept its second-to-last place in the regional ranking, the position it has held for years, while the **Middle East** (<https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-illusion-peace-middle-east>) and **North Africa** (<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-2020-index-environment-worsens-north-africas-journalists>) continues to be the world's most dangerous region for journalists. The recent detention of RSF's correspondent in Algeria (down 5 at 146th) showed how the authorities in some countries have taken advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to settle scores with independent journalists.

Regional rank (<https://infogram.com/d7c35580-4757-4755-b661-9782caea1bdf>)

Crises threatening journalism's future

GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS

One of the most salient crises is geopolitical, caused by leaders of dictatorial, authoritarian or populist regimes making every effort to suppress information and impose their visions of a world without pluralism and independent journalism. Authoritarian regimes have kept their poor rankings. China, which is trying to establish a "new world media order," maintains its system of information hyper-control,

of which the negative effects for the entire world have been seen during the coronavirus public health crisis. China, Saudi Arabia (up 2 at 170th) and Egypt (down 3 at 166th) are the world's biggest jailers of journalists. Russia (149th) is meanwhile deploying increasingly sophisticated resources to control information online, while India (down 2 at 142nd) has imposed the longest electronic curfew in history in Kashmir. In Egypt, accusations of "fake news" are used as grounds for blocking access to websites and webpages and for withdrawing accreditation.

TECHNOLOGICAL CRISIS

The absence of appropriate regulation in the era of digitalised and globalised communication has created information chaos. Propaganda, advertising, rumour and journalism are in direct competition. The growing confusion between commercial, political and editorial content has destabilised democratic guarantees of freedom of opinion and expression. This encourages the adoption of dangerous laws which, on the pretext of restricting the spread of fake news, facilitate tougher crackdowns on independent and critical journalism. Like Singapore, Benin has established a new law that is supposedly intended to combat disinformation and cyber-crime but is liable to be used to arbitrarily restrict the freedom to inform. The pandemic has amplified the spread of rumours and fake news as quickly as the virus itself. State troll armies in Russia, India, Philippines (down 2 at 136th) and Vietnam (175th) use the weapon of disinformation on social media.

DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

The previous two editions of the World Press Freedom Index reflected a crisis caused by growing hostility and even hatred towards journalists, and this crisis has now worsened. It has resulted in more serious and frequent acts of physical violence, and therefore an unprecedented level of fear in some countries. Leading politicians and those close to them continue to openly foment hatred of journalists. The democratically elected presidents of two countries, Donald Trump in the United States (up 3 at 45th) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (down 2 at 107th), continue to denigrate the media and encourage hatred of

journalists in their respective countries. The “hate cabinet” surrounding the Brazilian leader orchestrates large-scale online attacks on journalists who expose government secrets. President Bolsonaro has stepped up his attacks on the media since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, blaming them for “hysteria” and panic.

CRISIS OF TRUST

Mistrust of media outlets suspected of broadcasting or publishing news contaminated by unreliable information continues to grow. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, which studies the public’s trust in institutions, 57% of the people polled in its latest international survey thought the media they used were contaminated with untrustworthy information. Undermined by this crisis of trust, journalists become the targets of the public’s anger during big street protests taking place in many parts of the world, including Iraq, Lebanon (down 1 at 102nd), Chile (down 5 at 51st), Bolivia (down 1 at 114th) and Ecuador (down 1 at 98th), as well as in France (down 2 at 32nd), where journalists are also the victims of police violence. In another increasingly visible phenomenon, nationalist or far-right activist groups have openly targeted journalists in Spain (29th), Austria (down 2 at 18th), Italy (down 2 at 41st) and Greece (65th), while the Taliban in Afghanistan (down 1 at 122nd) and some Buddhist fundamentalists in Myanmar (down 1 and 139th) have no qualms about using violence to impose their world vision on the media.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The digital transformation has brought the media to their knees in many countries. Falling sales, the collapse in advertising revenue and the increase in production and distribution costs linked above all to increases in the price of raw materials have forced news organisations to restructure and lay off journalists. In the United States, for example, half of the media jobs have been lost over the past ten years. These economic problems have social consequences and an impact on the editorial freedom of media around the world. Newspapers that are in a much weaker economic situation are naturally less able to resist pressure.

The economic crisis has also accentuated the phenomena of ownership concentration and, even more, conflicts of interest, which threaten journalistic pluralism and independence. The acquisition of Central European Media Enterprises (CME) by the Czech Republic's wealthiest billionaire has alarmed several Eastern European countries where CME controls influential TV channels. The consequences of concentration are being felt in Argentina (down 7 at 64th) and in Asia. In Japan (up 1 at 66th), newsrooms are still heavily influenced by their bosses in the "keiretsu," the media-owning conglomerates that put business interests first. In Taiwan (down 1 at 43rd) and Tonga (down 5 at 50th), the now all-important profit motive has encouraged the media to become very polarised and sensationalist, helping to discredit them even more and accentuating the public trust crisis.

HOW THE INDEX IS COMPILED

Published annually by RSF since 2002, the World Press Freedom Index measures the level of media freedom in 180 countries and territories. It assesses the level of pluralism, media independence, the environment for the media and self-censorship, the legal framework, transparency, and the quality of infrastructure that supports the production of news and information. It does not evaluate government policy.

The global indicator and the regional indicators are calculated on the basis of the scores registered for each country. These country scores are calculated from responses to a questionnaire in 20 languages that is completed by experts throughout the world, supported by a qualitative analysis. The scores measure constraints and violations, so the higher the score, the worse the situation. Growing awareness of the Index has made it an extremely useful advocacy tool.