

The risky business of printing what someone else does not want printed

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Manuel Nunes Ramires Serrano and Oleguer Sarsanedas

Journalism has always been a risky endeavour. According to the World Press Freedom Index 2016, there has been a sharp decline in press freedom worldwide, especially in the Americas. [Português](#) [Español](#)



A journalist wearing a mask holds a banner that reads in Spanish: "Without freedom of speech, it smells like dictatorship", during a protest in Panama City. AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco

According to the recently released (April, 20) [World Press Freedom Index](#), published annually by [Reporters without Borders](#) (RWB), media freedom is declining globally. The index, which measures the level of freedom available to journalists in 180 countries using [criteria](#) such as pluralism, media independence, media environment, self-censorship, legislative environment, transparency, infrastructure and abuses, reflects a decline of [3.71%](#) in relation to 2014 and a [13.6%](#) decline since 2013.

Several factors are to blame for this downturn. From authoritarian governments to concentrated media ownership, the enemies of press freedom are many and [know no frontiers](#).

Religious ideologies, state propaganda machines, oligarchs and media tycoons are undermining one of the basic tenets of liberal democracy - freedom of expression and information - worldwide. Media are being used to push illiberal agendas on mass audiences and to put pressure on governments; broadcast equipment and the internet are blocked or suppressed in several countries; laws are passed to penalize journalists and create an environment of fear and self-censorship; and cold-blooded violence is used and tolerated to make the point.

Latin America sins

While media freedom is being attacked globally and every continent sees its score decline, the Americas exhibit one of the worst scenarios. According to the RWB Index, media freedom in the region has plummeted [20.5%](#).

There are numerous reasons for this decline, especially in Latin America: escalating political tension, economic recession, corruption, organised crime and media monopolies.

Institutional violence is the main factor in countries such as Venezuela and Ecuador. In Venezuela, president Nicolás Maduro has focussed on silencing independent media, while government sympathizers have acquired several media outlets - such as “El Universal” and “TV Globovisión”-, increasing the regime’s control over what is news in the country. Besides, a 2010 law limiting government criticism has led to arbitrary arrests of journalists and several defamation proceedings. In Ecuador, government control over the media has increased since Rafael Correa became president in 2006. Just like in Venezuela, legal conditions for operating private and independent media outlets have been hardened since 2013, effectively limiting what journalists can and cannot say, thus creating an unfavourable environment of fear and harassment.

Drug-related organized crime poses the main threat to press freedom in Colombia and Central America. In Colombia, journalists are often targeted by paramilitary-turned-drug-dealers. Criminal groups use violence as standard procedure to silence community media, and they normally get away with it due to their strong ties with local officials. In Honduras, President Juan Alvarado is known for his direct verbal attacks on the media, in an environment where independent journalists are regularly threatened with physical violence - thus making a bad situation worse. Something similar happens in El Salvador, one of the world’s most dangerous countries, where dozens of journalists are injured or killed every year. Not only are journalists often harassed by officials, but the country’s president Salvador Sánchez Cerén himself has gone down on record accusing the media of waging a “campaign of psychological terror”.

In Brazil, the attack on freedom of the press comes basically from corruption. Corruption fuels impunity and this, considering that the country lacks protection mechanisms for journalists, makes Brazil a highly dangerous place for journalists to work in. Besides, the close ties existing between politicians and media tycoons often blur the lines between information and propaganda. Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment is a good example of this.

The region’s best scorer, Costa Rica, has entered for the first time the world’s top ten in the RWB Index. Favourable media legislation, proper accreditation and protection for journalists, access to information, and lack of corruption are the Costa Rican best practices - a benchmark for all Latin American countries. Cuba, on the other hand, who ranks 171 in the Index, is the worst Latin American country regarding press freedom.

The land of cartels

Mexico’s place as the [world’s most dangerous country](#) for journalists and among the ones with the highest levels of unsolved crimes against the press, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ), deserves special analysis. 120 journalists have been murdered there in the last 25 years. In 2016 alone, [five journalists](#) have so far been killed: Moisés Dagdug Lutzow, Anabel Flores Salazar, Reinel Martínez Cerqueda, Marcos Hernández Bautista and [Francisco Pacheco Beltrán](#). According to Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission, the most dangerous state for journalists is [Veracruz](#): 15% of the recorded murders since 2000 happened there.

Criminal groups represent the biggest threat to Mexican journalists. When the press does not accept a local gang’s demands for favourable coverage, violence and executions usually follow. While the state’s lack of direct responsibility for the violence is debatable in some cases, its failure to investigate the overwhelming majority of cases, [which go unpunished](#), favour an environment of impunity and fear.

This tragedy should be acknowledged as a symptom that something is severely wrong with Mexican democracy. Violence against journalists indicates that corruption and impunity run free in this country and that the government is clearly failing to do something about it. The land of the drug cartels is thus a paradigmatic reminder of the fact that democracy stands for much more than just ballots and governments.

Macri and monopolies

There are, however, other, non-violent – or not openly violent - mechanisms at work which limit press freedom in Latin America. In Argentina, for example, the degree of market concentration in the media sector is very high (nearly 40% of broadcast television is controlled by two groups, according to [Professor Martín Becerra](#)) and the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion is far from being politically neutral. The Media Law, which was passed in 2009, intended to encourage pluralism and avoid media monopolies. On his very first days in office, however, Mauricio Macri rushed to repeal the law with an emergency decree.

Macri's use of such an extraordinary means to amend a law which was designed to foster freedom of expression and democratize the Argentine media ecosystem [is alarming](#): Macri's decree dissolves the media (AFSCA) and telecommunications watchdogs (AFTIC) and replaces them with a single entity controlled by the pro-government majority.

Macri's [chief of staff](#) declared that this move signalled the “end of war against journalism”. The opposite is clearly the case. Repealing the Media Law will lead to greater media concentration in a country where the Clarín Media Group's position is already one of the most dominant in the world. The Group's further expansion entails, of course, a serious threat to freedom of expression in Argentina.

This is indeed a different means than the one used in Mexico to the same end: to limit press freedom. It is non-violent in the sense that there are no cold-blooded executions and journalists risk their jobs rather than their lives. The results, however, are similar: induced fear and self-censorship, hindering public interest to the benefit of particular companies, individuals, politicians and parties.



Self-built newsstand on Lexington Avenue in New York, 1997. AP Photo/Rosario Esposito.

Defending journalism and democracy

After a decade of economic prosperity and social policy improvements, at a crucial moment for Latin American democracies, the need to strengthen press freedom in the region is particularly pressing if Latin America is to consolidate its democratic ways. In this sense, protecting journalists and ensuring peaceful, free and independent spaces for discussion and critical reflection is key to keep democracy moving forward. For what is democracy if not well-informed citizens, proper frameworks for open and free debate, and accountable governments?

In the preface to *Animal Farm*, George Orwell reflects on the nature of press freedom at the time of writing (1945), but his comments are surprisingly timely. “Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy”, he writes, “finds himself

silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals.” Intellectual cowardice, Orwell adds, is the journalists’ worst enemy.

Impairing press freedom obviously deteriorates the health of Latin American democracies. And most actors, from all sides of the political spectrum, conveniently fail to point this out. It is certainly not fashionable nowadays in Latin America to discuss the state of affairs regarding press freedom. Political preachers are busy discussing whether a cycle is coming to an end or not, and finding culprits to blame for the economic downfall of the region.

However, if Latin America is to avoid falling into low-quality democracy, or worse, journalists should be protected from both violent and non-violent harassment, from both government and private interests. Keeping in mind Orwell’s assertion that if “liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear”, and that the *raison d’être* of journalism is “printing what someone else does not want printed”, it is obvious that healthy and vigorous Latin American democracies should ensure that there is nothing journalists cannot talk about, nothing they cannot scrutinize, nothing they cannot say. Sadly, this is not the case – except, maybe, in Costa Rica.

For the time being, Latin American journalists, and through them the societies which they should be informing, are under attack.