

Freedom of the press in the digital era: old problems and new challenges

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, UN Secretary-General António Guterres alerted on the continuous growth of threats to media worker's freedom¹. Journalists are at the frontline of every major crisis (COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, corruption and human rights abuses...) providing thus accurate information to decision-makers and bringing global attention to important issues. However, the threats to their freedom are multiplying daily.

In this regard, the newly released *UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2021/2022*² analyses the state of media freedom, pluralism, independence, and safety of journalists over the past five years. From 2016 to the end of 2021, UNESCO recorded the **killings of 455 journalists**, who either died for their work or while on the job. At the same time, imprisonment of journalists has reached record highs. Media workers in war zones are particularly vulnerable as they are threatened not only by bombs and bullets but also by the eventuality of being attacked as the enemy, accused of espionage, detained, or killed, simply for doing their jobs.

Within this context, despite the fact that digital technology has democratized access to information, it has also created serious challenges.

The UN chief noted that many social media platforms make their money not through increasing access to fact-based reporting, but on boosting engagement, which in practice often means provoking outrage, and spreading fake news. Furthermore, digital technology is also making censorship easier for authoritarian governments and other actors wishing to suppress the truth. In addition, online attacks against journalists are rising, and women are disproportionately affected. According a 2021 survey³, 73 percent of women journalists had experienced some form of online violence and 20 percent had been attacked or abused offline in connection with the online violence they had experienced. Hacking and illegal surveillance also prevent journalists from doing their jobs.

1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117362>

2 <https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en>

3 <https://en.unesco.org/publications/thechilling>

António Guterres pointed out that the methods and tools may change but the perpetual goal of discrediting the media and covering up the truth unfortunately persists.

Taking these elements into consideration, the *World Press Freedom Day Global Conference 2022*⁴ that was held from 2 to 5 May in Uruguay was entitled “Journalism under digital siege”.

Ensuring that journalists can work freely, independently and safety is equivalent to ensuring democracy. As mentioned by António Guterres “without freedom of the press, there are no real democratic societies. Without freedom of the press, there is no freedom”.

Ten years ago, the UN established a *Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists*⁵, to protect media workers and end impunity for crimes committed against them, and the UN is continuing to fight to protect their rights.

4 <https://www.un.org/en/observances/press-freedom-day>

5 <https://en.unesco.org/un-plan-action-safety-journalists>