UNESCO

WORLD TRENDS IN

Freedom of Expression and Media Development

GLOBAL REPORT 2022/2025

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

Free, independent, pluralistic, and professional journalism is key for defending human dignity, advancing justice, and sustaining peace. Yet today, freedom of expression is under assault as seldom before.

The 2022/2025 *World Trends Report, Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace*, underscores the profound role of free, independent, pluralistic, and professional journalism as a cornerstone of democratic life and as an indispensable condition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite some positive developments such as the expansion of social media access, growth in collaborative investigative journalism, subscription models, and legal recognition of community media, this new Report reveals a 10% decline in the Freedom of Expression Index globally since 2012, and highlights weakened governance, hostility towards journalists, the climate crisis, and AI-driven dis and misinformation. Progress on gender equality has stalled, and women continuously face discrimination and violence. These trends undermine human rights, media freedom and plurality, and well-informed citizenship.

The 2022/2025 *World Trends Report* emphasizes the urgency of supporting international norms, strengthening information integrity, and fostering trusted information to protect democracy, promote accountability, and ensure access to information as a public good, particularly for vulnerable populations and youth.
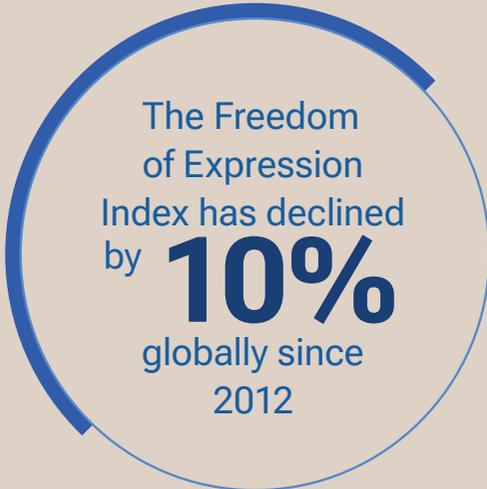
The Freedom of Expression Index has declined by **10%** globally since 2012

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

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https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends

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Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

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> in the minds of men and
> women, it is in the minds
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> the defences of peace must
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UNESCO Constitution

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Foreword

Press freedom is under attack worldwide. The global Freedom of Expression Index has dropped by 10% since 2012. Proliferating armed conflicts in many regions of the world continue to inflict unimaginable suffering on millions of civilians, while numerous governments continue to tighten control and disinformation spreads like wildfire across the global information landscape.

Against this backdrop, journalists continue to stand on the frontlines and report the truth, working to defend human dignity and advance justice. Yet, they often do so at the cost of their safety: in too many places, they are attacked, exiled, or forced into silence.

Protecting freedom of expression has been a central pillar of UNESCO's mandate since its founding in 1945, with the importance of the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge embedded in its Constitution. In working to protect freedom of expression as a public good, we are working to protect the cornerstone of democratic societies. But to do so, we must first understand what is eroding it – which is the purpose of the flagship *World Trends Report* on Freedom of Expression and Media Development.

This 2025 edition provides insights into how the global landscape has shifted since 2021. Despite ongoing threats to freedom of expression, this report offers a few rays of hope. Community radio continues to connect people and amplify local voices, while investigative reporting exposes corruption and injustice. Journalists, civil society and local media worldwide are finding new ways to persevere and innovate: new technologies have expanded access to information for billions of people, and initiatives uniting journalists across borders show how collective action can safeguard media as a public good.

Yet, in a world grappling with misinformation and disinformation, amplified by the growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI), we must further step up our action to defend freedom of expression.

Firstly, by safeguarding media viability. In an era when support for traditional media is dwindling amid economic uncertainty, political pressure and technological shifts, defending free, independent journalism must be recognized as a development priority – and as part of wider efforts to uphold freedom of expression and information.

Promoting transparency in the digital sphere is equally crucial, although it is difficult to define and hard to achieve. In a globalized, online media landscape, concerted efforts to promote cooperation among all those involved in the information cycle are vital to ensure transparent access to information, foster accountability and empower users to make informed choices.

Lastly, as new technologies reshape how information is created and shared, we must continue to advance media and information literacy (MIL). By teaching citizens to critically engage with information and safely navigate the digital environment, we can build greater trust in today's information ecosystem.

These challenges are at the heart of the *Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good*. This text, unanimously endorsed 30 years after the original 1991 *Windhoek Declaration*, reaffirms our shared responsibility to defend free, independent and pluralistic media – and underpins UNESCO's efforts in this area.

UNESCO's founding mission reminds us that peace is built on foundations of trust, knowledge, and dialogue. This Report speaks to the role of journalism in cementing these foundations – and offers insights into how we can fulfil our collective responsibility to protect media and information as a public good.

Dr Tawfik Jelassi,
Assistant Director-General
for Communication and
Information
UNESCO

Acknowledgements

The *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development* series of flagship reports is supported by UNESCO's Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP). Since its creation in 2017, the MDP has been instrumental in sustaining and strengthening the series, enabling UNESCO to develop this unique global reference on press freedom and the safety of journalists. The MDP is a Special Account which allows UNESCO to address complex issues and channel resources to emerging priorities in the fields of freedom of expression, media freedom, safety of journalists, access to information, media pluralism, community media, and media and information literacy (MIL).

The production of the *World Trends Report: Journalism Shaping a World at Peace* (2022-2025) would not have been possible without the generous contributions to the MDP, which have ensured that UNESCO can continue to provide Member States, international organizations, civil society, academia, and media actors with a comprehensive, data-driven resource for understanding the evolving global media landscape.

The 2025 edition of the *World Trends Report* was profoundly enriched by the invaluable expertise of **Randy Covington**, whose editorial guidance proved indispensable in shaping a publication that is both thorough and accessible to a broad audience. His tireless dedication in working hand in hand with the authors and experts who drafted the various chapters ensured not only clarity, coherence, and consistency, but also a high level of rigor throughout the Report.

This edition of the *World Trends Report* also provided an opportunity to draw on the knowledge and expertise of internationally renowned journalists and experts. Thanks to their contributions, this edition uniquely presents the perspectives of seasoned practitioners, who have drawn on decades of engagement with the issues explored in the Report, bringing both deep expertise and invaluable real-world insight to its chapters.

Among them, **Catalina Marino Botero**, who leveraged her extensive experience in international human rights law - including her tenure as Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) - to author Chapter 1, 'Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law,' which benefitted from insightful contributions by Mira Milosevic and her team at the **Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)**. **Dan Sultănescu**, Associate Professor at the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest, and **Alexei Abrahams**, Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at Hamad bin Khalifa University in Doha, Qatar, drew on their deep academic expertise on artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies to author Chapter 2, 'Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology.' Their insights and dedication were essential in shaping a chapter that reflects both the complexity of technological change and its profound implications for journalism and freedom of expression worldwide. Chapter 2 was further strengthened by valuable insights from **Irene Jay Liu** and **Jessica White** from the **International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), Marjorie Buchser**, Managing Director International at Partnership on AI and former UNESCO Senior consultant; **Renée DiResta**, Associate Research Professor at Georgetown University and former Research Manager at Stanford Internet Observatory; and **Andreea Stancea** from the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest. **Rokhaya Diallo** brought her extensive experience as a journalist and human rights advocate to author Chapter 3, 'Journalism: Raising Voices for All.' Her perspective highlighted the challenges faced by marginalized communities and reinforced the essential role of inclusive voices in shaping journalism that serves society equitably. The final chapter, Chapter 4 'Journalism: Protecting the Planet,' benefited from the valuable contributions of **Kunda Dixit** environmental journalist and editor, and **Kate Cell** Senior Climate Campaign Manager at the Union of Concerned Scientists. Their combined experience in environmental journalism and scientific

research brought critical insights, strengthening the Report's examination of the challenges and responsibilities of journalism in addressing global environmental issues.

'The World Trends Report in Data' was drafted by data analyst and statistician **Aldo Magoga**. His meticulous analysis, drawing on the V-Dem dataset, provided valuable correlations and insights that supported the authors in their research and strengthened the overall evidence base of the Report.

The conclusion incorporates a contribution authored by **Laura Moore and Folke Kayser of Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie**, whose expertise was instrumental in shaping a forward-looking reflection on the Report's key insights.

The Report was further enriched by the thorough expertise and insights of **Guy Berger**, freedom of expression expert and former Director of the Division for Freedom of Expression, Media Development, and Media and Information Literacy at UNESCO, whose guidance provided instrumental perspective throughout the drafting process.

The *World Trends Report* was produced under the supervision of **Sylvie Coudray** and **Andrea Cairola**, with editorial direction and lead research by **Ana Cristina Ruelas**. Associate researchers and editors were **Ophélie Kukansami Léger** and **Daria Kovaleva**. Data analysis support efforts were led by **Lucas Novaes Ferreira**. Additional UNESCO contributors from the Communication and Information Sector include **Alan Gabrielli Azevedo, Olivier De Barrigue de Montvallon, Oscar Castellanos, Antonia Eser-Ruperti, Adeline Hulin, Saorla McCabe, John Bosco Mayiga, Dana Muresan, Matthew Schulz, Adina Trunk, Irmgarda Kasinskaite-Buddeberg** and **Albertina Piterbarg**, with support from across UNESCO's Science, Social and Human Sciences Sectors, as well as the Gender Unit.

The preparation of this Report would not have been possible without the contributions, insights, and data provided by numerous experts in freedom of expression and media development, including the participants of a consultation on the *World Trends Report* held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 2024 during the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists commemorations, and the experts of the Beijing+30 workshop held in January 2025 in UNESCO Headquarters.

This global edition is also built on the knowledge generated through several In Focus reports and issue briefs produced or underway under the *World Trends Report* brand. Information for this Report was derived from hundreds of academic and institutional sources, as well as publicly available databases.

This Report aims to build on the work of various organizations whose research expands society's understanding of trends in freedom of expression and media development.

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Executive Summary

The 2025 *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* offers a deep dive into the state of freedom of expression and media development over the past four years (2022–2025). Drawing on original research and data-driven insights, it examines global shifts through two critical lenses: information as a public good and information integrity. The findings reveal that these values are under unprecedented pressure, threatening the world's ability to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.10 (public access to information and fundamental freedoms) by 2030. This erosion not only endangers that target but also casts a long shadow over the broader SDG agenda, where progress depends on reliable, accessible information.

Press freedom has experienced its steepest decline since 2012. V-Dem's Global Freedom of Expression Index has dropped by 10% over the past 10 years, a stark indicator of how press freedom is eroding despite isolated countertrends.

This decline mirrors broader patterns: weakened parliaments and judicial institutions, falling levels of public trust, and deepening polarization. It has also coincided with setbacks in equality, alongside rising hostility toward environmental journalists, scientists, and researchers.

At the same time, the growing dominance of major technology companies – and the consequences of their shifting policies and practices – have created fertile ground for hate speech and disinformation to spread online. These dynamics directly affect the information ecosystems relied upon by vulnerable groups, including children and teenagers.

Taken together, these political, social, and commercial pressures are undermining media freedom, plurality, and diversity. Over the past two years, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has further sidelined the value of the media. At the same time, audiences are inundated with entertainment and other content often encompassing cultural and gender biases. Chat interfaces optimized for user engagement amplify this trend, pushing their content in the wider information ecosystem ahead of public interest journalism and professional news.

The Report also details escalating threats to journalist' safety, with women journalists disproportionately targeted. It underscores the growing weaponization of legislation to suppress independent journalism and the alarming rise in journalists being forced into exile. Adding to this, the Report draws attention to the deepening existential crisis of media viability.

Finally, the findings spotlight: the lack of momentum and resources for awareness-raising through to media and information literacy (MIL), leaving societies ill-equipped to navigate today's complex information environment.

At the same time, the Report highlights countercurrents pushing back against these negative trends. Between 2020 and 2025, an estimated 1.5 billion people gained access to social media and messaging platforms, expanding opportunities for citizens to engage with information as a public good.

Other encouraging developments include the rise of collaborative investigative journalism, the steady growth of paid news subscriptions, an increased participative governance of online content, and multistakeholder initiatives to counter climate disinformation.

In another positive example, a large tech company has joined forces with content creators, including media outlets, to block unauthorized AI bots from scraping their work, offering a rare alignment of corporate power and media protection.

Taken as a whole, the narrative unpacks what these intertwined negative and positive trends mean for elections, climate action, young people, and the SDGs. It concludes by underscoring the critical need to strengthen initiatives that advance both information integrity and information as a public good. The core message is clear: without renewed, multi-stakeholder governance of communications, firmly rooted in freedom of expression and access to information, regressive trends will continue to dominate.

Countertrends Shaping AI, Media & Information

PUSHING AGAINST AI'S NEGATIVES TRENDS
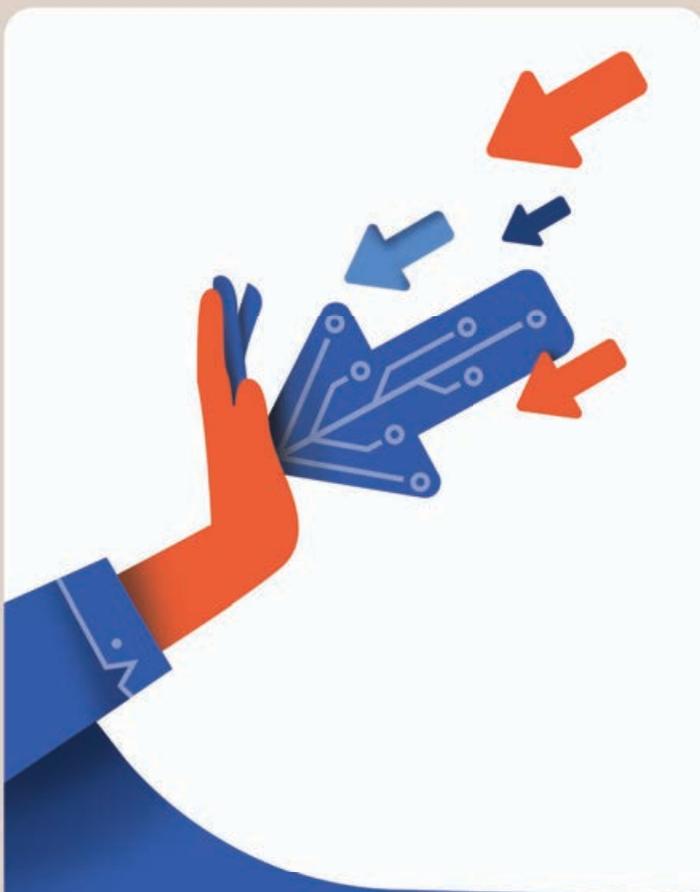
Rising lawsuits

Copyright-related cases against AI companies are multiplying.

Gatekeeper action

A major internet platform blocks unauthorized AI bots from scraping content—pressuring them to pay for media's intellectual property.

POSITIVE MEDIA & GOVERNANCE TRENDS

Investigative collaboration:
Surge in cross-border investigative journalism.

Subscriptions up:
More people are paying for online news.

Participatory governance:
UNESCO's *Social Media 4 Peace Project* and similar initiatives strengthen **inclusive content governance**.

EXPANDING ACCESS & EXPRESSION

1.5 billion people gained access to social media and messaging platforms between 2020-2025

COMMUNITY MEDIA RECOGNITION

Of 194 countries,

96 (49%) now legally recognize community media.

Among these countries

More than **3/4** provided some form of **financial support** - most commonly through reduced license or signal transmission fees.

Over **1/3** offered **direct funding**.

By the numbers: Freedom of expression in crisis

THE BIG PICTURE

Global decline

Freedom of Expression Index has **dropped** **-10%** since 2012.

A historically significant & unprecedented shift. Comparable contractions occurred only during extraordinary periods, including World War I, the rise of authoritarianism until the end of World War II, and the Cold War.

Democracy shrinking

For the first time in 20 years, non-democratic regimes **outnumber** democracies.

72% of the world's population now lives under **non-democratic ruling** — the highest level since 1978.

MEDIA UNDER PRESSURE

Self-censorship ▲ up
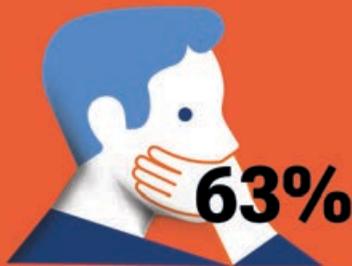
63%

since 2012 (+4.83% each year).

Governments intensified efforts to control & restrict the media by

48% in 12 years.

Criminal defamation laws still exist in

160 states.

361 journalists jailed in **2024** — near **record high.**

VIOLENCE & THREATS AGAINST JOURNALISTS

913 journalists displaced in Latin America (2018–2024).

310 journalists killed in the last 3.5 years.

85% of cases of killed journalists **unresolved** in 2024.

46 environmental journalists **murdered** since 2010 only 6 convictions.

WOMEN JOURNALISTS AT RISK

24 women journalists killed (2022 – Sept. 2025).

Out of **283** attacks studied: online harassment was the **most common** (2023).

73% of women journalists reported **digital attacks** (2020 survey).

41% experienced verbal and/or physical sexual harassment, yet only **1 in 5 reported it.**

TRUST & INFORMATION CRISIS

7 out of 10 people believe journalists, governments & business leaders **deliberately mislead the public.**

67% of users encounter online hate speech; LGBTQI people (33%) & racial/ethnic minorities are the **most targeted.**

9 in 10 voters in 16 countries fear disinformation **will affect elections.**

BIG TECH & MEDIA ECONOMY

Nearly **1/3** of the world lacked Internet access in 2024.

Meta, Amazon, Alphabet control **50%+** of recorded global ad spending.

Only **0.5%** of overseas development aid went to **media & information.** (2016-2022)
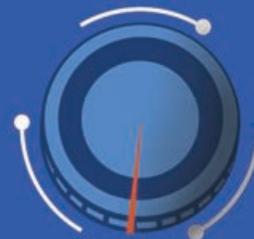
CLIMATE & INFORMATION WARS

Data centers
1.5% of global electricity use (expected to double by 2030).

From 2021 to 2024, climate denial posts increased by 24% and 40% **across major digital platforms.**

+24%

+40%

Environmental journalists under attack
— rising trend in assaults and murders.

At least **749** journalists reporting on environmental issues were attacked in **89 countries** between 2009 and 2023.

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

Introduction

In 2021, UNESCO's Member States made history by unanimously endorsing the *Windhoek+30 Declaration* recognizing that information is a public good.[1] In a world where truth is too often under threat, the Declaration reaffirmed a collective responsibility: to strengthen media viability, advance digital platform transparency, and empower audiences with media and information literacy (MIL) – three key steps to ensure that journalism remains a source of empowerment for all people.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize[2] Laureate Maria Ressa underlines the stakes, declaring,

Without facts, you can't have truth.
Without truth, you can't have trust.
Without all three, we have no shared reality.

In this context, the framework of information integrity has come to the fore in recent years within the United Nations,[3] the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),[4] Organisation G20[5] and other international networks. Complementary to information as a public good, it highlights the particular importance of information that is accurate and reliable.

The information integrity framework, developed as a proactive response to disinformation and related information disruptions, has been recognized in United Nations resolutions that emphasize the need to counter such challenges while safeguarding freedom of expression.[6] The scope of information integrity has become broader over time in the face of the concentration of communications power among very few technology companies, the decline of diverse cultural content, and rise of hate speech, along with unfolding risks to democracy and the social fabric.

Rather than being solely focused upon countering the 'weeds' of false content and the poison plants of hate speech, it now also turns its attention to the need to proactively grow the 'crops' of trusted information. Hence, the perspective of the *UN Principles on Information Integrity* identifies five pillars to support information integrity:

- Public trust and confidence in information;
- Incentives for advertisers and tech companies to uphold information integrity;
- Increased MIL (Media and Information Literacy);
- Independent, free and pluralistic media;
- Greater platform transparency and data access.[7]

1 UNESCO. 2021. *Windhoek+30 Declaration: Information as a Public Good, World Press Freedom Day 2021.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378158.

2 Created in 1997, the annual UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize honors a person, organization or institution that has made an outstanding contribution to the defense and, or promotion of press freedom anywhere in the world, and especially when this has been achieved in the face of danger. *See UNESCO. UNESCO/Guillermo Cano WorldPress Freedom Prize.* https://www.unesco.org/en/prizes/cano.

3 United Nations. 2024. *Global Digital Compact.* https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf

4 OECD. 2024. *Recommendation on Information Integrity.* https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0505.

5 *G7G20. 2024. Digital Economy Working Group Maceio Ministerial Declaration. G7G20 Document Database.* https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2024-g20-brazil-sherpa-track-digital-economy-ministers-ministers-language-g20-dewg-maceio-ministerial-declaration.

6 United Nations General Assembly. 2021. *Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedom* (Doc. A/RES/76/227.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/76/227. See also UN Human Rights Council. *Role of States in countering the negative impact of disinformation on the enjoyment and realization of human rights (*Doc. A/HRC/RES/55/10.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/55/10.

7 United Nations. *Global Principles for Information Integrity.* https://www.un.org/en/information-integrity/global-principles.

These developments in understanding the information ecosystem correspond with the Sustainable Development Agenda, in which Goal 16.10 sets the target of ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms by 2030. With only five years remaining, the trends identified in this *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* are far from favorable for achieving these objectives. The consequences will be felt in terms of monitoring and shaping progress across the full range of SDGs – each of which needs information integrity if society is to steer them effectively. This Report emphasizes the urgent need to safeguard and effectively implement internationally agreed norms, as progress remains insufficient.

Since the first edition of this Report in 2014, the *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* has provided knowledge about developments in media freedom, pluralism, independence and the safety of journalists, as well as in media development.[8] It offers a unique and comprehensive analysis of key changes, opportunities and challenges while also outlining a path forward to address these issues. The 2021/2022 Report sounded the alarm, documenting that 85% of the world's population experienced a decline in press freedom in their countries.[9] In this edition 2022/2025, the authored chapters that follow in Volume 2 show how continued and new challenges can have a lasting impact on people's well-being, the rule of law, equality, preserving the environment, and more. Overall, the decline in freedom of expression is reflected in key figures:[10]

- Since 2012 – the year that marked the highest global press freedom score since 1789, according to the Global Freedom of Expression Index[11] – the score has declined by 10%, reflecting a significant erosion of freedom of expression.
- Media self-censorship has surged, with journalists avoiding critical or 'risky' topics. This has grown by nearly 5% annually, amounting to a 63% increase between 2012–2024.

- The shrinking civic space extends beyond journalism, with academic and cultural freedom of expression falling by an average of 2.86% annually.
- Governments and powerful actors have intensified their efforts to control and restrict the media by almost 3.7% if assessed year on year, or 48% over 12 years.

The global evolution of freedom of expression

The recent decline in freedom of expression represents a historically significant and unprecedented shift. Comparable contractions have occurred only during extraordinary periods, including World War I, the rise of authoritarianism until the end of World War II, and 1963-1973, coinciding with the Cold War. This trend underscores the gravity of the current situation as shown in Figure 1.

From 2012 to 2024, the indicator fell by 10%, corresponding to an average annual decline of 0.86%. The pattern of decline, however, varied across sub-periods:

1. 2012-2017: The indicator declined moderately, at an average rate of 0.96% per year, before stabilizing between 2017 and 2019.

2. 2020-2022: The rate of decline accelerated sharply to 1.27% per year, indicating renewed deterioration.

3. 2022-2024: The annual decline continued to accelerate, reaching 1.30%, well above the average rate for the entire 2012-2024 period.

Overall, the data shows a clear trend of progressive deterioration, with the pace of decline increasing in recent years.

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

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8 The World Trends Report responds to a key mandate assigned to UNESCO by Member States during the 36th General Conference in 2011. This mandate directs UNESCO to *"work with other UN agencies and other relevant organizations to monitor the state of press freedom and the safety of journalists and report on developments in these areas to the General Conference."*

9 UNESCO. 2021. *Journalism is a Public Good. World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379826/PDF/379826eng.pdf.multi.

10 Magoga, A. 2025. *Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of information Index.*

11 Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index of the V-Dem Dataset.

FIGURE 1

Freedom of Expression
Index decline 2012–2024
Source:
Aldo Magoga analysis
based on V-Dem data.
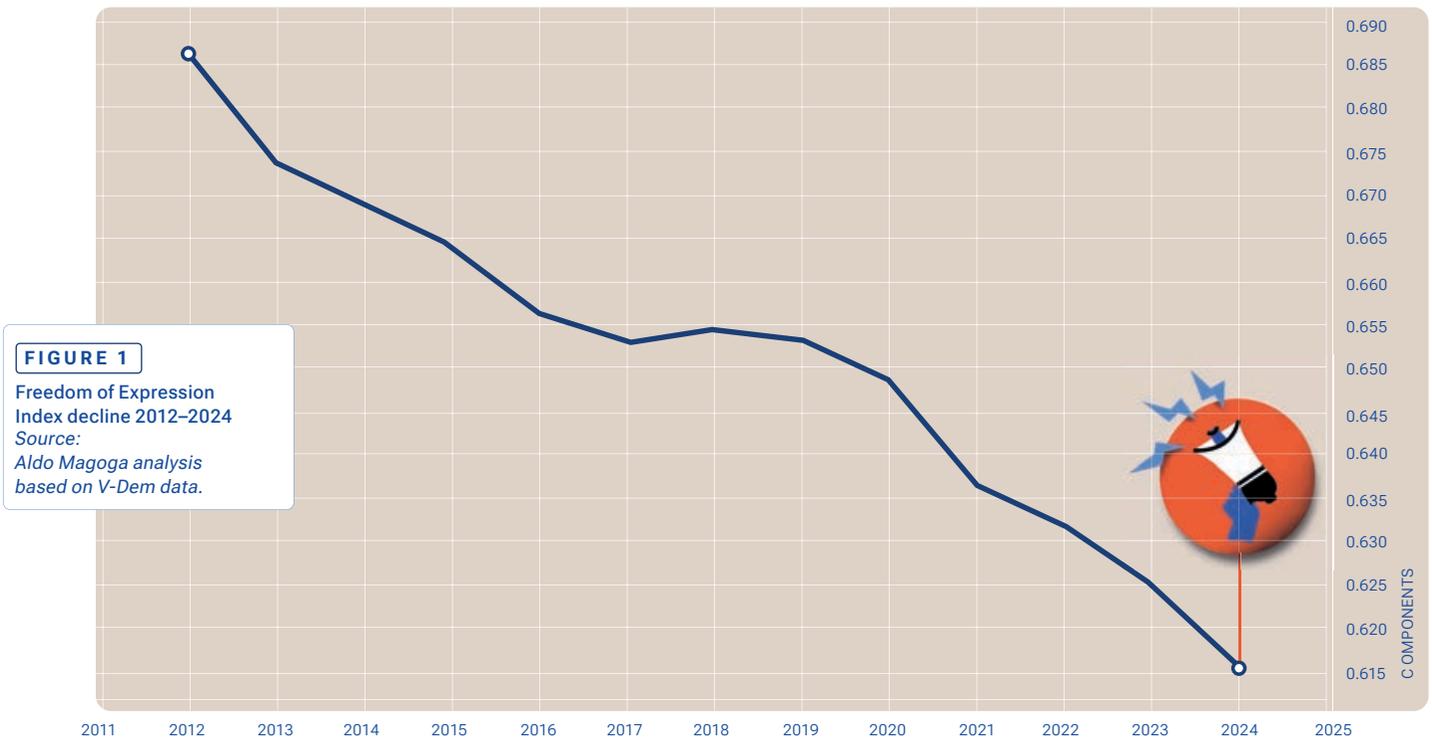
Nonetheless, a number of countertrends have emerged that advance freedom of expression and access to information. Between 2020 and 2025, an estimated 1.5 billion people gained access to social media and messaging platforms,[12] broadening opportunities for civic engagement with information as a public good. At the same time, however, the online environment remains affected by forces that erode information integrity. Other positive trends include a rise in collaborative investigative journalism,[13] a growth in the numbers of people paying subscriptions for journalism,[14] and progress in participative governance of online content such as UNESCO's Social Media 4 Peace.[15] The community media regulatory landscapes in many countries are largely positive, even with common shortfalls in the implementation of legal frameworks.

Progress for community media

In recent decades, an increasing number of countries have adopted normative frameworks for community media, marking a crucial step toward their legal recognition and strengthening their role within national media landscapes (see Figure 2 below).

Of 194 countries, 96 (49%) now legally recognize community media. Among these countries, over three-quarters provide financial support, typically via reduced licensing or signal transmission fees, and more than one-third offer direct funding.[16]

This reflects a broader trend of governments progressively integrating community media into their legal and policy environments.

12 Backlinko. 2025. *Social Media Usage & Growth Statistics.* https://backlinko.com/social-media-users. Also see *Singh, S. 2025. How Many People Use Social Media.* 2025 Usage Stats. https://www.demandsage.com/social-media-users.
13 Global Investigative Journalism Network. https://gijn.org. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. https://www.icij.org.
14 Robertson, C. T. 2024. How much do people pay for online news? And what might encourage more people to pay? *Reuters Institute.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/how-much-do-people-pay-online-news-what-might-encourage-others-pay; Jenik, C. 2021. *The Most Popular Paid Subscription News Websites.* https://www.statista.com/chart/24772/news-websites-with-the-most-paid-subscribers.
15 UNESCO. Social Media 4 Peace. https://www.unesco.org/en/social-media4peace.
16 UNESCO. 2025. *Two decades of progress towards legal recognition of community media worldwide.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396431.

Figure 2. Law, policy, regulation by year (number of countries per year that adopted new or amended existing legal frameworks for community media recognition, 1991–2023). Years: 1991, 1992, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023. Vertical axis from 0 to 20.
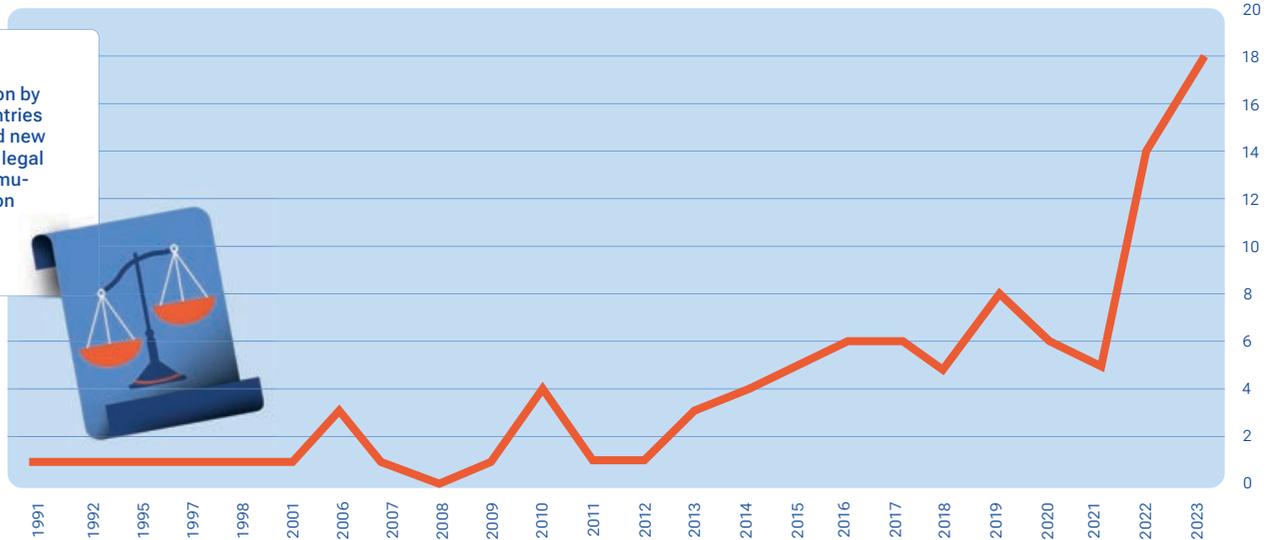
As 2030 approaches, progress is being undermined by negative trends, amplified by multiple crises, armed conflicts, and the climate emergency. Over the last four years, freedom of expression and media development have been severely undermined in many countries by five factors further explored by experts in Volume 2 of this Report:

1. Erosion of checks and balances:

The weakening of checks and balances on private and public power and the manipulation of the rule of law have led to reduced transparency and oversight of public and private power, fewer protections for journalists, and an overall weakening of freedom of expression.

2. Impact of emerging technologies:

Technological advances, including generative artificial intelligence (AI), are reshaping journalism and public discourse. While the new tools enable new forms of expression and greater capacities for those able to harness them, they also amplify misinformation, disrupt information integrity, and have worsened newsrooms' already-failing traditional business models.

3. Regression of rights for women and people in situations of vulnerability and marginalization:

Progress in equality and representation is being rolled back. Women and people in situations of vulnerability and marginalization face rising violence, harassment, and systemic barriers that limit their participation in media and public life.

4. Hostility toward journalists and other stakeholders addressing climate issues:

Journalists, scientists, and activists addressing climate issues are increasingly targeted. Disinformation and harassment undermine reporting on environmental crises and the dissemination of evidence-based information.

5. The media viability crisis:

Across all of these lies another global, systemic threat: the economic crisis facing independent media. Digital platforms now take the lion's share of advertising revenue, while trustworthy, professional outlets strive to stand out in a crowded online space and innovate with new business models. Without viable solutions in the short, medium, and long terms, newsrooms will struggle to keep the lights on while maintaining professional standards and editorial independence, let alone have the resources to meet the growing challenges of protecting journalists and providing pluralistic coverage on politics, technology, equality, or climate change.

New challenges to the well-being and opportrnities of children and youth are also adversely impacting the information ecosystems that engage these generations.

These developments interact closely with misrepresentations of freedom of expression to regularize lies and normalize hate speech. In 2025, the head of one of the world's largest social media companies described fact-checking as amounting to censorship, even though this activity does not *per se* suppress content but represents a form of counter-speech. The reality of growing censorship is, in fact, unrestrained harassment to hound dissenting and vulnerable voices out of online spaces. False and hostile rhetoric has been employed to erode people's rights to equality, dignity, and the full enjoyment of their individual freedoms. Audiences, and especially younger, more impressionable individuals, are increasingly targeted through data-driven methods that influence their worldviews, interests, content preferences, and ultimately their identities.

The cumulative effect erodes human rights, undermines people's choices and weakens society's capacity and consciousness regarding the value of cultivating well-informed citizenship. Meanwhile, the longstanding aspirations of media plurality and diversity are facing intensified pressures from political and commercial actors and remain vulnerable to the concentrated power and influence of major digital platforms. Today, AI models add a new layer of complexity, as they can generate content that appears reliable, yet lacks consistent grounding in evidence of accurate and trustworthy information.

Combined with these setbacks to freedom of expression and media development, there are also wider threats to justice, accountability, gender equality, the protection of children's rights, as well as the right to a healthy environment. The very premise of the universally agreed Sustainable Development Goals is coming under question in some quarters.

Unpacking the detail on these trends, this Report tracks key developments that harm safety for free expression and journalists, especially women. It identifies new ways in which law is weaponized to suppress truth-telling and explores the burgeoning phenomenon of journalists being forced into exile. The deepening existential crisis of media viability is assessed, as is the unprecedented power of the tech companies that today dominate digital communications, content production, data and online advertising. The Report also identifies counter currents against the dominant flow, assessing their scale and possible trajectory. Taking stock of the whole, the narrative concludes by flagging the utmost importance of supporting trends that advance both information integrity, and information that is a public good and therefore available to all. The point is noted that if effective steps are not put in place, the regressive trends will overwhelm those that are progressive.

A changing political context

In several internationally influential countries, institutional trust has continued to decline in the past five years.[17] This goes hand-in-hand with efforts to discredit democratic institutions for failing to effectively address social and economic problems, reinforcing the agenda of those who seek less democracy. As systems of government, democracies are now outnumbered for the first time in 20 years, with 72% of the world's population living under forms of authoritarian rule - the highest level since 1978.[18]

These developments have coincided with weakening social cohesion, growing distrust and susceptibility to conspiracy theories, and a reduction in the credibility of professional news media across numerous countries. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer's 2025 report covering 29 jurisdictions, 7 out of 10 people believe that journalists, along with government officials and business leaders, deliberately mislead the public.[19]

17 Wike, R., Fetterolf, J. and Schulman, J. 2025. *Dissatisfaction with democracy remains widespread in many nations.* https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/30/dissatisfaction-with-democracy-remains-widespread-in-many-nations.

18 Magoga, A., op. cit.

19 Edelman. 2025. *2025 Edelman Trust Barometer. Trust and the Crisis of Grievance.* https://www.edelman.com/trust/2025/trust-barometer.

20 University of South Carolina College of Information and Communications, Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest, UNESCO. 2025. AI Public Opinion Tracker.

21 Kubin, E. and von Sikorski, C. 2021. *The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review.* https://academic.oup.com/anncom/article/45/3/188/7912664; Vasist, P. N., Chatterjee, D. and Krishnan, S. 2023. *The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative.* https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10106894.

22   Magoga, A., op. cit.

23 V-Dem Institute. 2025. Democracy Report 2025 – 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? https://v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.

24 Magoga, A., op. cit..

25 Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., and Lindberg S. I. 2024. *Media Freedom, Democracy and Security. Research Report.* OSCE. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/572878_1.pdf. See also Adhikari, B., King, J., and Murdie, A. 2024. *Examining the effects of democratic backsliding on human rights conditions.* https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2023.2295878.

Further evidence on this trend is confirmed in the study referred to in Chapter 2, 'Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology,' highlighting public opinion surveys in four countries across diverse regions.[20]

The trust deficits correspond with increasing levels of polarization, along with the use of adversarial disinformation and hostile speech to push back a range of human rights.[21] Together, these factors correlate with reversals in the protection of free expression and support for media development in many countries. All this has been part of a wider erosion of checks and balances on power in many countries, with the multiple dynamics reinforcing each other. A longitudinal analysis reveals decline across 10 fronts outlined in Figure 3:

Analysis reveals a significant correlation between indicators of freedom of expression and democratic measurement indices.[23] This is vividly evident in V-Dem's 2024 *Democracy Report* where statistics confirm that as liberal democracies have declined, freedom of expression dropped by 10% between 2012-2024 across all UNESCO regions.[24] For journalists to freely do their work, democracy's other accountability mechanisms also need to function. While democracy requires more than press freedom, the latter is a critical component.[25]

Corresponding to the interdependence of journalism and democracy, is the importance of pluralistic legislatures in upholding freedom of expression.

FIGURE 3

Freedom of expression decline
Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.[22]

- Freedom of expression Index
- Academic and cultural freedom
- Freedom of discussion (Men)
- Freedom of discussion (Women)
- Harassment of journalists
- Media bias
- Media censorship effort
- Media self-censorship
- Restrictions on critical media
- Restrictions on media outlets

26 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos. 2012. *El derecho de acceso a la información pública en las Américas. Estándares Interamericanos y comparación de marcos legales* [The right of access to public information in the Americas. Inter-American standards and comparison of legal frameworks]. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/docs/publicaciones/El%20acceso%20a%20la%20informacion%20en%20las%20Americas%202012%2005%2015.pdf.

27 Over 100 countries are now committed to open public registers. Journalists and civil society groups frequently use public registers of beneficial owners to investigate corruption. See the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Doc. A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice.

28 Countries with such laws number 100 in 2015, 120 in 2020 and rose 140 in 2025, according to data from Mabillard, V. 2016. *Freedom of Information Laws: Evolution of the Number of Requests in 11 Jurisdictions.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314285585_Freedom_of_Information_Laws_Evolution_of_the_Number_of_Requests_in_11_Jurisdictions#:~:text=the%20first%20freedom%20of%20information. See also UNESCO. 2023. A steady path forward: UNESCO 2022 report on public access to information (SDG 16.10.2). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/4822 3/pf0000385479. UNESCO. 2024. *Global report on the implementation of access to information laws.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391525. UNESCO. *Facts and figures. Access to Information Laws.* https://www.unesco.org/en/access-information-laws.

29 Verfassungsblog. 2023. *Restoring Poland's Media Freedom.* https://verfassungsblog.de/restoring-polands-media-freedom/.

30 Centro de Estudios en Libertad de Expresión y Acceso a la Información. 2021. Regulación de plataformas en Brasil: necesidad, peligros y contradicciones [Regulation of platforms in Brazil: needs, dangers and contradictions]. https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/regulacion-de-plataformas-en-brasil-necesidad-peligros-y-contradicciones/. See also Global Freedom of Expression. 2024. ¿Cómo responden los tribunales a las SLAPP? Análisis de decisiones judiciales seleccionadas de todo el mundo [How do courts respond to SLAPPs? Analysis of selected judicial decisions from around the world]. Columbia University. https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/es/publications/como-responden-los-tribunales-a-las-slapp-analisis-de-decisiones-judiciales-seleccionadas-de-to do-el-mundo/; Islamabad High Court. 2020. Order Sheet W.P. No. 3028/2020. https://mis.ihc.gov.pk/attachments/judgements/121240/3/17-05-2022_Ashfaq_Jutt_637885690215833788.pdf; Mariez, J.-S. and Godfrin, L. 2020. Censure de la «loi Avia» par le Conseil constitutionnel: un fil rouge pour les législateurs français et européens ? [Censorship of the "Avia law" by the Constitutional Council: a red thread for French and European legislators?]. Dalloz. https://www.dalloz-actualite.fr/flash/censure-de-loi-avia-par-conseil-constitutionnel-un-fil-rouge-pour-legislateurs-francais-et-eur; Global Freedom of Expression. 2023. *Internet shutdowns in international law.* Columbia University. https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/GFoE_Internet-shutdowns-in-international-law.pdf; Global Freedom of Expression. 2019. *The North Gauteng High Court in Pretoria. Columbia University.* https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/amabhungane-centre-for-investi gative-journalism-v-minister-of-justice-and-correctional-services/.

Parliaments in Latin America and the Caribbean[26] as well as Africa,[27] in the past decade have passed record numbers of laws on access to information.[28] Yet, elected assemblies in recent years have done less well in response to drive by the executive branch of government to control independent media.[29] A number of legislatures, especially those dominated by a ruling party, have passed laws to tighten free expression and press freedom.

One of the tenets of democracy is an independent judiciary, and trends here have been mixed. There are indeed cases of courts, including regional courts, upholding freedom of expression in recent years – including ruling against arbitrary blocking of internet access.[30] But, as documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, some governments have weakened judicial independence through a range of tactics.[31] A barometer of the rule of law is the extent to which justice is served in cases of attacks on journalists, where there is continued and widespread impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes.[32]

It is therefore apparent that the shrinking space for freedom of expression, press freedom and media development is correlated to a wider overall trend of hamstringing institutions of state. This development leaves journalists exposed and without democratic backing to do their jobs. In this context, civil society support – while not a substitute – becomes ever more important, though there are challenges here too, resulting from cuts in funding, legal restrictions and state or commercially-sponsored 'astroturf' organizations.[33]

The overall context of democratic decline and its significance for the information ecosystem is a clear backdrop that frames the trends outlined below.

The assault on journalism and the truth

As highlighted in UNESCO's 2022 *World Trends Report*, violence against journalists is an ongoing challenge that shows no signs of abating. Instead, escalating attacks on journalists across multiple regions have given rise to numerous 'zones of silence',[34] particularly in conflict areas. These assaults compromise public access to reliable information. Journalists continue to be killed because:

- Their work is inconvenient to those in power,
- They raise the voices of marginalized groups, and
- They expose corruption and abuse that is inimical to human rights and sustainable development.

Public life is undermined by the ongoing attacks on the press. Impunity is sky-high as 8.5 out of 10 cases in UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists remained unresolved.[35] This is not just a statistic; it tells perpetrators that they will not have to face consequences for the assaults that they commit, allowing them to continue without repercussion.

State and non-state actors have denied established facts and maintained narratives to paint journalists as purveyors of false news and in some cases, branded them as foreign agents. As jointly noted by four international rapporteurs on freedom of expression,[36] the rhetoric incites online harassment and even real-world violence against the press.[37]

31 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2024. *Safeguarding the independence of judicial systems in the face of contemporary challenges to democracy.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers (Doc. A/HRC/56/62.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5662-safeguarding-independence-judicial-systems-face-contemporary.

32 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. R*einforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Doc. A/HRC/50/29). https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5029-reinforcing-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-digital-age.

33 Sih, C. and Abruzzini, B. 2025. *The Global Funding Squeeze on Civil Society: Challenges and Responses* https://www.forus-international.org/en/news/the-global-funding-squeeze-on-civil-society-challenges-and-responses; Šišić, M. and Binışık, D. 2025. *Beyond the Cuts: How the Defunding Affects Feminist and Civil Society Organizations.* https://www.boell.de/en/2025/03/13/beyond-cuts-how-defunding-affects-feminist-and-civil-society-organizations; Keenan, J. 2022. *Secret Influence: Astroturfing Sways Public Policy* https://www.proxypreview.org/2022/contributor-articles-blog/secret-influence-astroturfing-sways-public-policy.

34 Areas or contexts where violence, intimidation, censorship, or structural barriers force journalists into silence-whether through death, detention, self-censorship, exile, or the destruction of media infrastructure-resulting in the absence of independent and reliable information for local populations and the international community. See UNESCO. 2023. *2023: Alarming increase in journalists killed in conflict zones.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/2023-alarming-increase-journalists-killed-conflict-zones?hub=687.

35 UNESCO. 2024. *Director-General's Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383595; UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists. https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory

36 UN Human Rights Special Procedures. 2021. Joint declaration on politicians and public officials and freedom of expression. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697_0.pdf.

37 Reporters Without Borders. 2024. *USA: Trump Verbally Attacked the Media More Than 100 Times in Run-up to Election.* https://rsf.org/en/usa-trump-verbally-attacked-media-more-100-times-run-election.

The venom feeds negativism and news avoidance in some circles, reinforcing incentives for people to retreat into entertainment content and opinion which reinforces their confirmation biases.

Physical attacks over the last three and a half years have taken the lives of 310 journalists – including 24 women – not yet counting the additional casualties recorded since 12 September 2025.[38] More than half these fatalities were journalists and media workers providing news about conflict and war. As of September 2025, only 0.968% of these cases were reported as resolved (see Figure 4):

Cumulative actions aligned with the 2012 UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity have seen state officials improve their reporting to UNESCO on the resolution of cases of killed media workers. Based on Member States' reports to UNESCO on the status of judicial investigations, 85% of journalist killing cases recorded since 2006 remained unresolved or ongoing in 2024 – an improvement from 95% in 2012.[41] Moreover, the concentration of journalist killings in conflict zones over the past two years significantly reduces the likelihood that justice will be served.[42]

FIGURE 4

Journalist killings
Source: UNESCO.[39]

KILLINGS BY YEAR

2022	2023	2024	2025
88	74	82	66

KILLINGS IN CONFLICT

310 Total

Conflict Zone 52.3%   Not a Conflict Zone 47.7%

KILLINGS BY GENDER

310 Total

Male 92.26%
Female 7.74%

JUDICIAL STATUS

310 Total

No Information Received So Far 12.258%
Ongoing / Unresolved 31.935%
New Request 54.839%
Resolved 0.968%

FIGURE 5

Killings of journalists in conflict zones
Source: UNESCO.[40]

KILLINGS BY YEAR

2022	2023	2024	2025
28	42	53	39

KILLINGS BY GENDER

162 Total

Male 90.12%
Female 9.88%

JUDICIAL STATUS

162 Total

No Information Received So Far 6.79%
Ongoing / Unresolved 25.31%
New Request 66.67%
Resolved 1.23%

38 UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists, op. cit.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists. https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory.
42 Committee to Protect Journalists. 2023. *Deadly Pattern: 20 journalists died by Israeli military fire in 22 years. No one has been held accountable.* https://cpj.org/reports/2023/05/deadly-pattern-20-journalists-died-by-israeli-military-fire-in-22-years-no-one-has-been-held-accountable/; CPJ. 2024. Impunity Index. https://cpj.org/special-reports/haiti-israel-most-likely-to-let-journalists-murders-go-unpunished-cpj-2024-impunity-index-shows/#More-on-Top-5-Nations.

Some trends favoring the safety of journalists continue. Specialized units to investigate and prosecute crimes against journalists operate with varying degrees of impact. Some of these are PressSafe in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, FEADLE in Mexico, and similar teams in Colombia, and Guatemala.[43] In addition, recognizing the importance of the rule of law, UNESCO's global initiative to train judges on freedom of expression issues is thriving.[44]

Forced to flee

In response to political persecution, threats from organized crime and other corrupt actors, as well as escalating conflicts and repression, the number of journalists who are internally displaced or forced into exile has surged in recent years.[45] In the Latin America and Caribbean region alone since 2018, approximately 913 journalists have been forcibly displaced to other countries to protect their lives, their safety, and that of their families.[46]

According to the study *Voces Desplazadas: Radiografía del exilio periodístico latinoamericano,* supported by UNESCO, journalists in situations of displacement face multiple forms of violence, discrimination, and xenophobia, as well as family disruptions and impacts on their physical and mental well-being.

BOX 3

Solidarity

Journalists from the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, winner of the 2025 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, noted in their acceptance speech:

"This award also belongs to all those independent journalists who continue reporting from outside the country (...) This recognition deeply honors us, but it also renews our commitment to continue practicing brave, ethical, truthful, and free journalism." [47]

While many journalists forced into exile choose to leave journalism, those who continue to report are a crucial source for free, independent, and pluralistic reporting.[48] Safe spaces, solidarity centers, and regional hubs have been established in places like Costa Rica, Kenya, Lebanon, Pakistan, Sudan, Thailand, and Ukraine.[49] These centers struggle to meet the high demand for their support but still manage to provide safe accommodation, safety training, access to reporting equipment, psychological and medical care, and legal and financial assistance.

43 Averkiou, A. 2023. *The role of law enforcement agents: ensuring safety of journalists during public demonstrations and elections.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384920.

44 UNESCO. 2023. *10 Years of UNESCO's Judges' Initiative: strengthening the rule of law, freedom of expression and the safety of journalists 2013 – 2023.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386925_eng.

45 Ibid.

46 Jiménez et al. 2025. Informe Voces Desplazadas: Radiografía del exilio periodístico latinoamericano (2018–2024) [Displaced Voices Report: X-ray of Latin American journalistic exile (2018–2024)]. San José, PROLEDI, Universidad de Costa Rica. https://proledi.ucr.ac.cr/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Informe-Voces-Desplazadas.pdf.

47 Original quote in Spanish *"Este premio también pertenece a todos aquellos periodistas independientes que siguen informando desde fuera del país (...) Este reconocimiento nos honra profundamente, pero también renueva nuestro compromiso de continuar haciendo un periodismo valiente, ético, verás y libre."* See UNESCO. *UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.* https://www.unesco.org/en/prizes/cano; See also UNESCO. 2025. *Nicaraguan newspaper La Prensa wins UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize 2025.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/nicaraguan-newspaper-la-prensa-wins-unesco/guillermo-cano-world-press-freedom-prize-2025.

48 JX Fund. 2025. *3 years JX Fund: Keeping exiled journalism alive in times of repression.* https://jx-fund.org/newsroom/news/3-years-jx-fund-keeping-exiled-journalism-alive-in-times-of-repression.

49 UNESCO. 2022. *UNESCO Support to Journalists in Ukraine Making Impact on the Ground.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-support-journalists-ukraine-making-impact-ground; UNESCO. 2024. *Ukraine: New Journalists Solidarity Centre opens in Kharkiv with UNESCO support.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-new-journalist-solidarity-centre-opens-kharkiv-unesco-support; UNESCO. 2024. *Exile Media Hub Nairobi: A Sanctuary for Journalists from East Africa.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/exile-media-hub-nairobi-sanctuary-journalists-east-africa.

Journalism in exile: A growing global reality

by Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)[50]

In many regions where exile was once an exception, it has now become a defining characteristic of much independent journalism.[51] Reporters Without Borders (RSF) noted in its *2024 Assistance Report* that 70% of its emergency aid in the past year was allocated to journalists in exile, marking a 25% increase compared to 2022.[52] The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported a 227% increase between 2020 and 2023 in support for exiled journalists.[53]

In her 2024 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression underscored the scale and severity of the threats faced by journalists in exile. She noted that while international human rights and refugee law provide a strong foundation, states often fail to uphold their obligations. As a result, many journalists find themselves in precarious situations - lacking legal status, stable income, or access to institutional support. Exile becomes another method of silencing voices and facts.[54]

Exiled journalists are also under threat from digital attacks. In the past year alone, the CPJ documented at least 20 confirmed cases of exiled journalists being tracked using Pegasus and similar spyware.[55]

Violence against women journalists

Women journalists, especially those from groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, continue to face exclusion and persecution. These challenges reflect broader struggles faced by women and have an especially harmful impact on the information ecosystem. Since the Beijing Declaration of 1995 calling for greater gender equality in media representation and media leadership,[56] and particularly over the past decade, the number of women in positions of media leader-ship has increased.[57] However, entrenched patterns of discrimination continue to pose significant obstacles.[58] More recently, after decades of courageous efforts to achieve gender equality, women in media, along with gender-nonconforming journalists, now face a backlash.[59] In March 2025, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted:

"Women's rights are under siege. The poison of patriarchy is back – and it is back with a vengeance." [60]

The regression was addressed at UNESCO in January 2025, when experts reported growing hostility to equality and human dignity in news coverage, entertainment programming, and social media posts.[61] Campaigns seeking to restrict women's democratic freedoms are spreading in many countries.[62]

50 Global Forum for Media Development is one of the largest global community dedicated to media development, media freedom, and journalism support. See Global Forum for Media Development. https://gfmd.info/.

51 Global Forum for Media Development. *Securing the Future of Journalism*. https://gfmd.info.

52 Reporters Without Borders (RSF). 2024. *Assistance Report 2024 – Protecting exiled journalists is crucial for press freedom*. https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2025/01/BILAN%20ASSISTANCE%202024_EN_0.pdf.

53 Committee to Protect Journalists (CPF). 2024. *Forced to flee: Exiled journalists face unsafe passage and transnational repression*. https://cpj.org/reports/2024/06/forced-to-flee-exiled-journalists-face-unsafe-passage-and-transnational-repression.

54 UN Human Rights Council. 2024. *Journalists in exile.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Doc. A/HRC/56/53.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/53.

55   Ibid.

56 United Nations. 1995. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/PFA_E_Final_WEB.pdf.

57 Reuters Institute. 2025. *Women and leadership in the news media 2025: Evidence from 12 markets*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2025-evidence-12-markets. See also UNECE. 2017. *Who is telling the story? Changes in the proportion of women among journalists since 2000*. https://unece.org/statistics/news/who-telling-story-changes-proportion-women-among-journalist

58   "Deep-rooted patterns of gender discrimination still pose a huge challenge to women's ability to pursue a career in journalism on an equal footing with men." See Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression. 2022. Women journalists and newsrooms: progress, challenges, and recommendations for preventing violence and combating discrimination [Mujeres periodistas y salas de redacción: avances, desafíos y recomendaciones para prevenir la violencia y luchar contra la discriminación]. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/informes/Mujeres22-es.pdf.

59 UN Women. 2025. *One in four countries report backlash on women's rights in 2024*. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/03/one-in-four-countries-report-backlash-on-womens-rights-in-2024; The attacks on women journalists are "intended to intimidate, silence and drive them out of the public sphere." See Khan, I. 2021. *#JournalistsToo: Women Journalists Speak Out. A collection of essays on personal experiences with harassment*. Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. https://www.srfreedex.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/JT_English.pdf; See also Posetti, J., Shabbir, N., Maynard, D., Bontcheva, K., and Aboulez, N. 2021. *The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223.

60 UN Women. 2025. *Remarks of the UN Secretary-General at the opening of the 69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.* https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2025/03/remarks-of-the-un-secretary-general-at-the-opening-of-the-69th-session-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women.

61 UNESCO. 2025. *UNESCO Gathers Global Experts on Gender Equality in Media Ahead of Beijing+30*. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-gathers-global-experts-gender-equality-media-ahead-beijing30.

The trend of violence against women journalists continues, with perpetrators seeking to push them into seclusion and to exclude them from civic spaces, implementing misogynistic views that deny women's rightful participation in public space.

Alongside physical and institutional threats, the digital sphere has become a major front for violence against women journalists. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) has emerged as a pervasive and particularly insidious dimension of this backlash. A study in 2023 of 283 attacks against women journalists showed the most prevalent form was online harassment.[64] This study built on a 2020 survey of women in journalism conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) with support of UNESCO, where 73% of 901 respondents reported online attacks.[65] One fifth of the respondents said they had been attacked or abused in the real world in connection with violence they had experienced online.

Women journalists also continue to face threats in their own workplaces. A 2022 *Women in News* study by the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) found that 41% of women journalists surveyed had experienced verbal and/or physical sexual harassment, yet only one in five reported the incidents due to fear of retaliation.[66]

Weaponizing the legal system

To address cybersecurity, terrorism, disinformation, national security threats, and hate speech, many governments have introduced or revived laws that often end up restricting journalism and curtailing freedom of expression. Laws on cybercrime, libel, defamation, and insult have been wielded to silence dissent and shield public officials from criticism.[67] Some measures have served to legitimize surveillance and spying.[68] Among UNESCO Member States, 160 still had criminal defamation laws where the continued threat of penalties inhibits press freedom.[69]

Journalists and media professionals have increasingly been targeted through diverse forms of legal harassment[70] ranging from multi-million-dollar lawsuits for defamation[71] anti-terrorism regulations[72] or financial legislation.[73] A 2024 UNESCO publication documented cases where powerful actors accused journalists of extortion, tax evasion, and money laundering - allegations corresponding to the very crimes they were investigating.[74]

62   Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2025. *60% of women MPs from Asia-Pacific report online gender-based violence.* https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/60-women-mps-asia-pacific-report-online-gender-based-violence; Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2021. *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Africa.* https://d23pzakm7ws4rd.cloudfront.net/prod/uploads/2021/11/Issue-brief_VAWP-Africa-EN_LR.pdf.

63   United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women, Sixty-seventh session. 2023. *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.* https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2023/L.3.

64   European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. 2024. *Safeguarding Women Journalists in the Digital Age.* https://www.ecpmf.eu/safeguarding-women-journalists-in-the-digital-age.

65   Posetti et al, op. cit.

66   World Association of News Publishers. 2022. *Sexual Harassment the Media.* https://sexualharassment.womeninnews.org/research.

67   UN Human Rights Special Procedures. 2021. *Joint declaration on politicians and public officials and freedom of expression.* https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697_0.pdf; UN Human Rights Special Procedures. 2023. *Joint declaration on media freedom and democracy.* https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/2/542676.pdf.

68   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. *Reinforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5029-reinforcing-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-digital-age.

69   UNESCO. *Press freedom in times of crisis and transformation.* https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en/global-trends.

70   Pittman, E. and Juega, E. 2024. *The misuse of financial laws to pressure, silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets: issue brief.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391483.

71   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. *Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Doc. A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice.

72   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Briefer on impact of counter-terrorism and criminal laws on media freedom and safety of journalists. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/brochures-and-leaflets/briefer-impact-counter-terrorism-and-criminal-laws-media-freedom.

73   Pittman, E. and Juega, E., op. cit.

74   Ibid.

Misuse of judicial systems ('lawfare') uses state resources to attack journalism.[75] One way is through the abusive legal tactic known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs),[76] brought by powerful individuals and entities to intimidate and silence critical voices. In 2023, the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) documented 166 such cases that aimed to stop exposure of corruption and environmental harm.[77] In 2025, UNESCO launched the Global Initiative on Strategic Lawsuits against Freedom of Expression.[78] In this context, lawyers and other judicial actors involved in freedom of expression cases highlighted the most common legal charges or allegations faced by journalists.[79]

In a growing number of cases, these various tactics have tied journalists up in time-consuming, stressful, and expensive litigation, and in some cases have also resulted in imprisonment of reporters. According to the CPJ, the number of jailed journalists worldwide reached a 'near all-time high' in 2024, with 361 journalists behind bars at the end of the year.[80]

Alongside all this, several governments have increased the use of takedown notices to social media platforms.[81] While some of these actions do protect legitimate interests, others fall below international standards for restricting expression. The term 'jawboning' has been used to characterize pressure on communications companies applied without the safeguards of transparent and law-based procedures.[82]

FIGURE 6

Legal charges or allegations faced by journalists

*Source:
UNESCO's Global Initiative Needs Assessment for Lawyers and Judicial Actors Involved in Freedom of Expression Cases.*
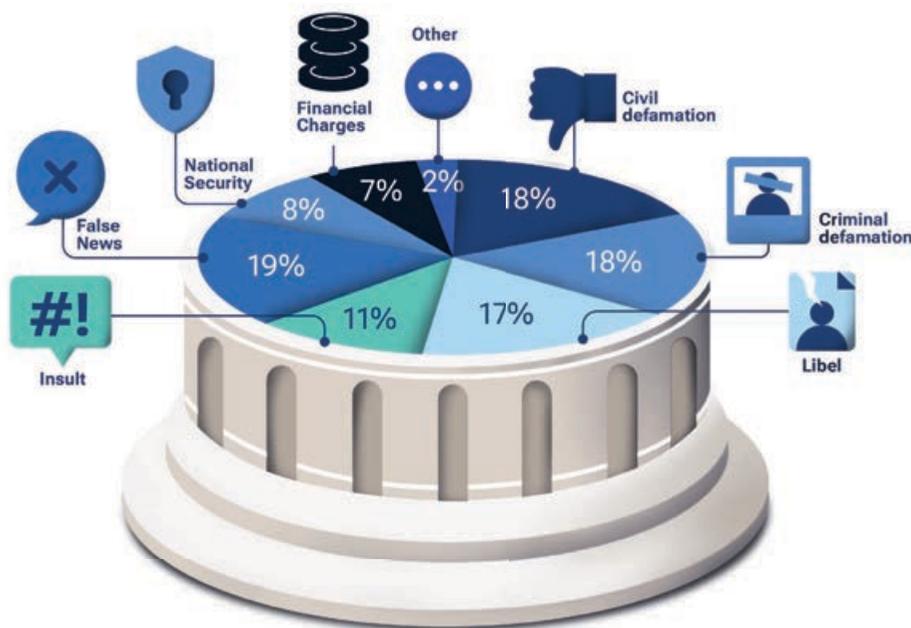
75   Soraide, R. 2022. *The "Misuse" of the Judicial System to Attack Freedom of Expression: Trends, Challenges and Responses.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832/PDF/383832eng.pdf.multi.

76   SLAPPs usually entail the tactic of "forum shopping" or "libel tourism". As defined in *Liability* and *jurisdictional issues in online defamation cases,* it "describes the practice of choosing the court in which to bring an action based on the prospect of the most favorable outcome, even when there is no or only a tenuous connection between the legal issues and the jurisdiction". Council of Europe. 2019 (Doc. DGI(2019)04.)

77   CASE. Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe. 2024. *Number of SLAPPs in Europe Continues to Rise.* https://www.the-case.eu/latest/number-of-slapps-in-europe-continues-to-rise.

78   UNESCO. 2025. UNESCO Launches Global Initiative to Address Legal Harassment of Journalists. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-launches-global-initiative-address-legal-harassment-journalists.

79   The UNESCO Global Initiative aims to address the rapidly evolving nature and scope of legal threats against journalists and to support lawyers, judges and prosecutors to better confront this phenomenon. In April 2025, it launched a global survey which gathered responses from 347 judicial professionals from 78 countries.

80   Committee to Project Journalists. 2024. *Journalists Jailings Near Record High in 2024 as Crackdown on Press Freedom Grows.* https://cpj.org/2025/01/journalist-jailings-near-record-high-in-2024-as-crackdown-on-press-freedom-grows.

81   Surfshark. 2025. *Content removal attempts from Google this decade.* https://surfshark.com/research/study/google-content-removal-attempts; Software Freedom Law Centre. 2025. *Data Analysis of Meta, X, and ShareChat on Content Takedown.* https://sflc.in/data-analysis-of-meta-x-and-sharechat-on-content-takedown.

82   Keller, D. 2024. This is Hard. *Stanford Cyber Policy Center.* https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/hard; Milmo, D. and Booth, R. Meta has 'heard the message' from Trump, says whistleblower Frances Haugen. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/09/meta-has-heard-the-message-from-trump-says-whistleblower-frances-haugen.

Media viability

Even countries where norms and practice continue to uphold the role of free, independent, and pluralistic media, many news outlets are finding it difficult to keep the lights on.[83] Closures and cutbacks continue apace, while newsrooms still hanging on are increasingly understaffed, and struggling to stay competitive in an increasingly crowded content ecosystem that makes it difficult to find reliable sources of news.[84]

Traditional media business models struggle to keep, serve, and grow audiences for news. There is also a continuing shift of advertising revenue from traditional news media outlets to platforms and services operated by digital giants, whose priorities follow a different logic from that of journalism.[85] This hemorrhaging could intensify as AI services also begin to soak up audience attention and advertising revenues. According to 2025 data from the World Advertising Research Center, three of the most important technology companies were projected to capture more than half of all global advertising expenditure (excluding China).[86]

In a positive trend, there has been growth of online news subscriptions – initially stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic – although often it is still insufficient to replace lost advertising or to invest in new services and products. A major societal challenge is that paid digital news is unaffordable for vast segments of the population, while access to information is further constrained by reduced public funding for public service media and by persistent media capture and political interference.[87]

AI systems are helping some media outlets streamline tasks like transcription, data analysis and fashioning new content. Publishers have also increasingly adopted AI systems for personalization, workflow automation, and content recommendations, as well as content creation. Yet, even for those news enterprises that embrace these opportunities, the benefits may not outweigh the impact on the industry more broadly. The downsides of AI for news are several. One is the adverse impact on news discovery: AI-generated search results deprioritize – or even exclude – links to news sites, vastly reducing online traffic to news publishers.

Another problem is that, while news content is used to train Large Language Models (LLMs) used by AI, the outlets that produce the original content are rarely compensated.[88] Abuse of 'fair use' rationales has been used to violate the copyrights of news publishers on a massive scale to the disadvantage of news providers. As a result, news publishers are fighting back through a proliferation of copyright-related court cases against AI companies.[89]

83 Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom. 2024. *News Deserts on the Rise: a First Comparative Study Indicates the Fragile Situation for Local Media across the EU.* https://cmpf.eui.eu/news-deserts-on-the-rise-and-local-media-across-the-eu; See also CNN. 2024. *News Industry Off to Brutal 2024 Start as Mass Layoffs Devastate Publishers, Raising Questions about the Future of Journalism.* https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/25/media/news-industry-future; See also Reuters Institute. 2023. *Echoes from the Desert: Five Seasoned Reporters Reflect on the Vanishing Landscape of Local News.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/echoes-desert-five-seasoned-reporters-reflect-vanishing-landscape-local-news.

84 Concerning weighing print and digital approaches see, for example, World Association of News Publishers. 2024. *For The New York Times, Print Profits help Fuel Digital Growth.* https://wan-ifra.org/2024/11/for-the-new-york-times-print-profits-help-fuel-digital-growth.

85 UNESCO. 2022. *Journalism is a public good: World trends in freedom of expression and media development; Global report 2021/2022.* https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en/journalism-public-good.

86 WARC. 2025. *AI Propels Alphabet, Amazon and Meta to 54.7% Market Share Outside of China.* https://www.warc.com/content/feed/ai-propels-alphabet-amazon-and-meta-to-547-market-share-outside-of-china/10685.

87 The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression defines media capture as "the process by which formerly independent institutions fall under the sway of Governments, plutocrats and corporations. It usually entails political interference with regulatory bodies and with public service media, converting them into governmental mouthpieces; the takeover of independent news media by political actors or conglomerates controlled by wealthy political donors or business entrepreneurs; and the instrumentalization of public advertising and State-administered subsidies to undermine media critical of the Government and strengthen those favored by the Government." See UN Human Rights Council. 2022. Reinforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/50/29.

88 Schiffrin, A. 2024. *AI and the Future of Journalism: Issue Brief for Stakeholders.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391214.

89 Chatgptiseatingtheworld. 2025. *Updated Map of US copyright lawsuits v. AI companies.* https://chatgptiseatingtheworld.com/2025/08/13/updated-map-of-us-copyright-lawsuits-v-ai-companies-aug-12-2025/.

In another countertrend, one large internet gate-keeper concerned with the sustainability of websites has sided with content creators, including media houses, to block unauthorized AI bots from scraping content.[90] This is a means to pressure the AI scrapers into paying for media's intellectual property. Currently, AI companies reap the benefits of original journalism without having to pay for it.

The financial threats affect not only performance and, in many cases, the existential viability of media organizations, but also their editorial independence. The UN Special Rapporteur has raised concerns about a recent rise in state influence over public service media, and media capture,[91] where financially weak news organizations make editorial concessions to government or powerful partisan owners often with wider business interests.[92]

The 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) described the economic pressure on media organizations as 'an insidious problem,' labelling it for the first time in the history of the index as a 'difficult situation.'[95]

Current levels of support for media development around the world, already low, are declining further. The latest mappings of overseas development assistance (ODA) found that from 2016 to 2022, an average of only 0.5% of all ODA went to media and information.[96] Shifts in international donor and philanthropic priorities in 2025 leading to funding cuts have hit the media development sector, endangering the independence, capacity and even existence of many news outlets.

BOX 5

Strengthening media independence and pluralism – the European Media Freedom Act

The **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** protects media pluralism and independence in the EU.[93] Key protections include safeguarding editorial independence, protecting journalistic sources (including against spyware), ensuring the independent functioning of public service media (with adequate, sustainable, and predictable funding), enhancing transparency of media ownership, and protecting media against unjustified online content removal by very large online platforms (VLOPs).

It also introduces a right of customization of media offers on devices and interfaces and guarantees transparency in state advertising.[94]

90 Corral et al. 2025. *Perplexity is using stealth, undeclared crawlers to evade website no-crawl directives.* Cloudflare. https://blog.cloudflare.com/perplexity-is-using-stealth-undeclared-crawlers-to-evade-website-no-crawl-directives/.

91 A form of media control achieved through a series of systematic and premeditated steps taken by governments and powerful interest groups. See UNESCO, Dragomir, M. 2020. *Reporting facts: free from fear or favour.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375061.

92 See UN Human Rights Council. 2022. *Reinforcing Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in the Digital Age* (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.)

93 European Media Freedom Act. 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy/european-media-freedom-act_en.

94 ARTICLE 19. 2024. *EU: Rule of Law report must prompt strong action to protect media freedom.* https://www.article19.org/resources/eu-rule-of-law-report-must-prompt-strong-action-to-protect-media-freedom/.

95 Reporters Without Borders (RSF). 2025. *World Press Freedom Index 2025: economic fragility a leading threat to press freedom.* https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom.

96 OECD. 2024. *Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment.* https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/04/official-development-assistance-2024-figures.html.

Support is dwindling
by Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)

According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as well as insights from the GFMD network, overall international aid declined in 2024 after 5 years of continuous growth, marking a turning point for global support to journalism and media.[97]

This downward trend has been amplified in 2025 by major reductions in foreign assistance from the largest country donor, both in overall official development assistance (ODA) and in funding dedicated to journalism and media development. This accounted for an estimated 25% of total global media development support, which averaged $620 million (USD) per year between 2020 and 2024. The abrupt suspension of such funding has severely disrupted journalism and media in fragile contexts.

Exacerbating factors include changes in the policies of major tech companies, with some blocking news entirely to avoid paying for it. This has destabilized the already precarious conditions of many independent journalism organizations and journalism support initiatives. In multiple crisis-affected regions, journalistic outlets that once served as lifelines for truth and accountability are closing due to financial shortfalls. All this has left critical gaps that entertainment content and 'AI slop' from foreign actors, violent groups, and disinformation networks move to fill.

Recent initiatives have sought not only to draw attention to the crisis facing media, but to also identify and support broad solutions.[98] Many news producers are diversifying away from social media to reach audiences independently, including through email platforms and direct messaging. There are efforts to unlock local capital through donor guarantees,[99] and the International Fund for Public Interest Media has been set up to mobilize resources for independent journalism under pressure.[100]

The Media Viability Manifesto,[101] collaboratively developed by the UNESCO/International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC)[102] and 12 other media support organizations, sets out pathways toward financially viable, independent public interest media. Similarly, the *Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment,*[103] adopted in March 2024 by OECD's Development Assistance Committee, are a call to action for increased support, greater coordination, and involvement by local stakeholders.

Most recently, at the 2025 G20 Summit in South Africa, the Media20 (M20)[104] emphasized the importance of independent, public-interest media in safeguarding information integrity and supporting media viability. It also called for the development of a collaborative network of media and information organizations to deliver structured, coordinated action, ensuring that the M20 evolves as a dynamic platform aligned with – or critically reflecting – G20 priorities.[105] However, in the face of the worsening viability crisis and new uncertainties in the global economy, strengthening these initiatives will require a major commitment from Members States to reverse this trend.

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97   Global Forum for Media Development. 2025. *Urgent call for governments, multilateral institutions, and philanthropies to support independent media and journalism.* https://gfmd.info/urgent-call-to-support-independent-media-and-journalism. See also OECD. 2025. *International aid falls in 2024 for first time in six years, says OECD.* https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/04/official-development-assistance-2024-figures.html.

98   Kilman, L. 2022. *After the Pandemic, Building Back a Stronger Media: Inspiring Initiatives in Ensuring Media Viability.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380807. See also Schiffrin, A., Posetti, J., Edgerton, F. and Bell, E. *Finding the Funds for Journalism to Thrive: Policy Options to Support Media Viability.* 2022. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381146.

99   International Media Support. 2025. *Catalysing private capital: Financing the future of public interest media.* https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/catalysing-private-capital-financing-the-future-of-public-interest-media/.

100   The International Fund for Public Interest Media. https://ifpim.org/.

101   *The Media Viability Manifesto.* https://mediaviabilitymanifesto.org.

102   UNESCO. International Programme for the Development of Communication. https://www.unesco.org/en/international-programme-development-communication.

103   OECD. 2024. Development co-operation principles for relevant and effective support to media and the information environment. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/05/development-co-operation-principles-for-relevant-and-effective-support-to-media-and-the-information-environment_e8c617a4.html.

104   The M20 initiative highlights media, journalism and information integrity issues relevant to the G20 process and mirrors official G20 engagement groups for business, think-tanks and civil society among others. The M20 program is organized by the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) and Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) as an independent initiative alongside the official G20 program under the South African presidency. See https://media20.org/.

105   Scott, M. 2025. *Fuelling Democracy and Growth Through Viable Media: An Urgent G20 Call to Action.* Media 20. https://media20.org/2025/07/16/policy-brief-6-fuelling-democracy-and-growth-through-viable-media-an-urgent-g20-call-to-action/.

Freedom of expression and digital services

While improved internet connectivity has increased access to information for many, others still are trapped on the wrong side of the digital divide. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU),[106] almost one third of the global population did not have internet access in 2024.

Gender inequalities remain a key part of this picture, and many rural communities continue to face limited access to affordable, high-speed internet. Satellite offerings are expanding, though in at least one case, they may be influenced by the personal preferences of the owner.[107] Indigenous Peoples and speakers of minority languages are further excluded, as most digital content remains inaccessible in their native languages. For those who are connected, the wider environment for expression and access to information is ever more shaped by hugely capitalized digital companies operating in competitive, data-driven markets.

According to the Reuters Institute, content formats have expanded with personality-driven podcasts and video growing apace. At the same time, news publishers have faced a continuous decrease in click-throughs from major platforms, with referrals to online news falling dramatically in 2023-2024.[108] This decline, preceding AI 'answer services' which generate even lower visits to publishers, further marginalizes the news media.

The major platform companies, while featuring hugely popular influencers as part of their intermediary role for distributing most online content, have in recent years walked back from earlier commitments to information integrity and online safety.[109] Their content standards, which were already criticized for weak enforcement,[110] have been further diluted [111] and certain categories of hate speech have been given carte blanche.[112] Fact-checking has been discontinued or downgraded on some platforms,[113] and inadequate 'community notes' systems are touted as alternatives.[114] Platforms continue to claim that AI systems ensure that what content standards remain are indeed being implemented, though without transparency, this is not possible to verify.

At least in the EU, companies are now required to present detailed reasons on what content they have moderated and why, with this information now being available on a public database.[115] The European Union has set up a 'self-regulatory' system for some large platforms to provide independent redress for content problems, but there is no such system elsewhere.[116]

At the same time, it is worth noting that not all content creators operate in ways that undermine information quality. In some cases, digital-native influencers have helped re-engage younger audiences with news by experimenting with new formats, fostering more accessible and conversational reporting, and building forms of trust that traditional media have struggled to sustain. For example, Hugo Décrypte in France and Faye D'Souza in India have been recognized for bringing youth back to public affairs coverage.[117]

106   International Telecommunication Union. 2024. *Facts and Figures Report.* https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2024/index/.

107   Windsor, R. 2025. Starlink: What Elon Musk's Satellite Soft Power Means for the World. *The Week.* https://theweek.com/politics/starlink-what-elon-musks-satellite-soft-power-means-for-the-world.

108   Newman, N. 2025. Overview and key findings of the 2025 Digital News Report. *Reuters Institute.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025/dnr-executive-summary.

109   Milmo, D. and Booth, R. 2025. Meta has 'heard the message' from Trump, says whistleblower Frances Haugen. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/apr/23/meta-hastily-changed-moderation-policy-with-little-regard-to-impact-says-oversight-board.

110   UNESCO. 2024. *Platform problems and regulatory solutions: findings from a comprehensive review of existing studies and investigations.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385813.

111   Hendrix, J. 2025. Transcript: Mark Zuckerberg Announces Major Changes to Meta's Content Moderation Policies and Operations. *Tech Policy Press.* https://www.techpolicy.press/transcript-mark-zuckerberg-announces-major-changes-to-metas-content-moderation-policies-and-operations/; Amazeen, M. 2025. YouTube Is the Latest Media Platform to Loosen Content Moderation. What Does That Mean for Users? https://www.bu.edu/articles/2025/youtube-content-moderation-changes/.

112   Amnesty International. 2025. Meta's new content policies risk fueling more mass violence and genocide. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/meta-new-policy-changes/; Garfield, L. 2025. *Make Meta Safe: New Report Finds Increase in Harmful Content Targeting Marginalized Groups Following Policy Rollbacks.* Glaad. https://glaad.org/make-meta-safe-new-report-finds-increase-in-harmful-content-targeting-marginalized-groups-following-policy-rollbacks.

113   Kaplan, J. 2025. More Speech and Fewer Mistakes. https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/; Fischer, S. 2025. *Scoop: Google won't add fact checks despite new EU law.* https://www.axios.com/2025/01/16/google-fact-check-eu.

114   Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2024. *Rated Not Helpful: How X's Community Notes system falls short on misleading election claims.* https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CCDH.CommunityNotes.FINAL-30.10.pdf; Borenstein, N. 2025. *Can Community Notes Replace Professional Fact-Checkers?* https://arxiv.org/html/2502.14132v1.

115   European Commission. 2025. *DSA Transparency Database.* https://transparency.dsa.ec.europa.eu/?lang=en.

A discernible trend is in how platforms' own AI systems, as well as those of other dominant AI operators, are increasingly exhibiting the distinctive perspectives, values and priorities of their owners and related companies. For most countries, this underlying influence is setting parameters not just on AI use in automated curation and moderation in content distribution, but also in the realm of content production. The concentration of power in both spheres of communication is a barrier to pluralism, while there is also a risk of weaponization of services for specific geo-political and other vested interests. All this, along with commercial platform algorithms that are intended to keep people engaged, reinforce tendencies to recommend and reinforce a limited range of languages, cultures, views, and values.[118]

Compounding these systemic challenges are third-party actors, who increasingly target marginalized and vulnerable groups. The dominant content distributors' interests in optimizing engagement through emotive content amplifies hate, incites violence, and suppresses vulnerable minorities. Platforms vary, but some have especially lent themselves to targeting human rights defenders, journalists, artists and scientists. The scale and the coordination of these attacks pose a formidable threat to free expression and democratic participation as recognized in international law. The societal penetration of social media correlates with social polarization in many countries, even if it is not easy to pinpoint causalities between these variables.[119]

AI generated content and information integrity

The abuse of generative AI to create deepfakes that harm human rights is a growing problem with serious implications for freedom of expression and access to information. Women have been silenced, shamed and blackmailed with deepfake non-consensual sexual imagery.[120] Journalists, along with celebrities and political leaders, are being impersonated for financial scams,[121] while AI-personalized 'phishing' attacks are cheap.[122] The abuse of generative AI encompasses new threats to cybersecurity[123] and to election integrity,[124] as well as portending problems for scientific and academic integrity.[125]

In response, a number of countries have applied existing laws or set out new provisions concerning such abuses of human rights, although concerns have also emerged that restrictions are sometimes too broadly worded (thus allowing selective application) and that the prescribed penalties are not always proportional to the offenses. Another response to generative AI is technological. In 2024, major tech companies agreed on standards, including metadata and labels, for adding 'Content Credentials' to AI-generated content.[126] Corporate opacity prevents full assessment of how this is unfolding.[127] Further, even when they are applied, these technical measures are not a panacea since they can be hacked or bypassed (especially in text, audio, and video formats) or be distributed without disclosure labels.[128]

116   Appeals Centre. https://www.appealscentre.eu
117   See Hugo Décrypte. Actus du jour [Hugo Explains. Daily news]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAcAnMF0OrCtUep3Y4M-ZPw. and Faye D'Souza's, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzI8K9xO_5E-4iCP7Km6cRQ.
118   United Nations General Assembly. 2025. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Threats to freedom of expression online in turbulent times. https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/341.
119   Harari, Y. N. 2024. *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*. Penguin.
120   Over 90% female influencers on Instagram fall victim to deepfake pornography. See *The Hindu*. 2024. Over 90% female influencers on Instagram fall victim to deepfake pornography, finds study. https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/over-90-female-instagram-influencers-fall-victim-to-deepfake-pornography-finds-study/article68196062.ece.
121   Berry, K. 2024. I was scammed out of £75k by Martin Lewis deepfake advert. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyvj754d9lo.
122   Heiding, F., Lermen, S., Kao, A., Schneier, B., and Vishwanath, A. 2024. Evaluating Large Language Models' Capability to Launch Fully Automated Spear Phishing Campaigns: Validated on Human Subjects. Cornell University. https://arxiv.org/abs/2412.00586.
123   Tabassum, J. 2025. *Deepfakes & Cyber 2025: Threats & Defense Strategies*. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/deepfakes-cyber-2025-threats-defense-strategies-jahanzaib-tabassum-phk7f/.
124   Wirtschafter, V. 2025. *The impact of generative AI in a global election year.* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-impact-of-generative-ai-in-a-global-election-year/; Csernatoni, R. 2024. *Can Democracy Survive the Disruptive Power of AI?* Carnegie Endowment. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/can-democracy-survive-the-disruptive-power-of-ai?lang=en.
125   Roe, J., Perkins, M., Furze, L. 2024. *Deepfakes and Higher Education: A Research Agenda and Scoping Review of Synthetic Media.* Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, Advanced Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.53761/2y2np178.
126   Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. https://c2pa.org.
127   Narayan, A. and Kapoor, S. 2023. *Generative AI companies must publish transparency reports.* https://knightcolumbia.org/blog/generative-ai-companies-must-publish-transparency-reports.
128   Hoffman-Andrews, A. 2024. *AI Watermarking Won't Curb Disinformation* https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/01/ai-watermarking-wont-curb-disinformation; *C2PA Security Considerations* https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.0/security/Security_Considerations.html.

The technology of generative AI also raises further critical concerns for information integrity, as well as for cultural and linguistic diversity.[129] The models are generally trained on datasets heavily skewed toward English-language content and perspectives from the Global North. Their outputs entrench cultural biases and marginalize underrepresented voices and languages. A UNESCO study, among others, shows how, based on their training data, the outputs of these systems often reflect gender and racial stereotypes.[130,131]

LLMs, even when supplemented by 'reasoning models', pose inherent challenges to information integrity. They can misleadingly combine unrelated information in their outputs, as well as fabricate new plausible, but incorrect, content (described as 'hallucinations'). Moreover, generative (AI) outputs often obscure access to original sources, limiting the ability to verify information, trace content origins and copyright holders, and detect pseudo-realistic content that has been fabricated. While journalists have to continuously strive to win trust as honest seekers of truth, the design and operation of chat interfaces create the false impression that users are engaging with a trustworthy yet objective human-like interlocutor. The reality, on the other side of the screen, is a machine programmed with content and values that cannot be trusted.

The power structure within AI markets exacerbates these issues. The infrastructure, data, and resources needed to develop and train AI models remain concentrated among a few dominant companies, further deepening inequalities in the global digital ecosystem, as well as increasing power asymmetries between these companies and the news media. The sheer market dominance of these firms illustrates the imbalance: three major technology companies each have a market valuation of around $3 trillion (USD) - a figure rivaling the GDP of the entire African continent.[132] The deregulatory drive for unfettered AI development, in the name of innovation and international competition, is a growing trend, with belligerent tactics being deployed even against large jurisdictions like the EU.[133] This push seeks to dismantle guardrails that protect freedom of expression, privacy and information integrity. Rival expansionist giants now run systems with high risk yet little consideration of, or investment into, mitigating negative externalities. As the big players get larger, it becomes harder for alternative models to break into the market.

On the other side of this growing trend, some countries and regions are asserting their sovereignty over both citizens' data and the informational influence of foreign digital companies. In Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, courts and regulators in several countries have affirmed national jurisdiction despite resistance from the companies.

Not all efforts to rein in big tech, however, have been in favor of freedom of expression. A number of countries have sought to curb online expression on LGBTQI issues, while others have continued to demand that digital services practice censorship, or give access to user data, without compliance with the internationally agreed standards of legality, legitimate purpose, and proportionality that are required for intrusions on human rights.

129 UNESCO. 2005. *The 2005 Convention on the Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.*
     https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246264/PDF/246264eng.pdf.multi.page=6.
130 UNESCO. 2024. *Bias Against Women and Girls in Large Language Models*
     https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/generative-ai-unesco-study-reveals-alarming-evidence-regressive-gender-stereotypes.
131 AlDahoul, N., Rahwan, T., and Zaki, Y. 2024. *AI-generated faces influence gender stereotypes and racial homogenization.* https://arxiv.org/html/2402.01002v3.
132 UNCTAD. 2024. *AI Market Projected to Hit $4.8 Trillion by 2033, Emerging as Dominant Frontier Technology.*
     https://unctad.org/news/ai-market-projected-hit-48-trillion-2033-emerging-dominant-frontier-technology.
133 Sweney, M. 2025. Trump threatens tariffs on countries that 'discriminate' against US tech. *The Guardian.*
     https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/26/donald-trump-tariffs-us-tech-uk-digital-services-tax-eu.

Between an absence of regulation and an overreach of regulation, a middle road has emerged in recent years. In 2022, UNESCO launched the 'Internet for Trust' consultation with more than 10,000 contributions from 134 countries.[134] That process produced the *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms*,[135] which call for steps to ensure, among other things, that companies align their practices with international human rights standards. The initiative has catalyzed parallel networks of regulators, researchers, judicial actors, and schools of government to advance digital governance to strengthen, rather than undermine, information integrity, freedom of expression and media development.[136] The initiative also has impetus from the 2024 *Global Digital Compact*.[137] With this momentum, along with the UNESCO *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI*,[138] there is no shortage of norms and instruments to bring digital services into alignment with freedom of expression and media development. What is needed is the defense of these norms, often in the face of fierce pushback, as well as their practical implementation.

While calls have grown for better governance of tech companies, there has been less attention to the issue of alternative communications infrastructure. Newsletter platforms have been growing, although one large entity has been criticized for recommending Nazi content.[139] Other user-supported services offer decentralized control,[140] but have failed to draw substantial numbers of users away from larger social media platforms. The launch of the Current AI Foundation at the Paris AI Action Summit in 2025 is an attempt to widen the AI playing field, while momentum to open-source certain elements of AI models by several big entities is also opening up possibilities. Nevertheless, the control of the 'cloud', with its highly concentrated ownership of data centers and high-speed computer processors, creates a 'moat' that limits new players at the top of the international 'tech stack'.

Elections in the new information order

Increasingly, communications are becoming 'datafied' and digitally mediated. Digital tools are being used more and more for a variety of purposes, including elections, a core mechanism of democracy. However, these tools sometimes have damaging effects on the information integrity that is needed to sustain electoral integrity.

In recent years, increasingly sophisticated disinformation operations in the digital space have become a real threat to democratic institutions, in some cases compromising electoral processes.[141] UNESCO's 2022 publication, *Elections in digital times: a guide for electoral practitioners*,[142] reveals online disinformation campaigns, manipulation of search rankings, voter suppression, as well as attempts to discredit election management bodies and independent journalists. These concerns are highlighted in an Ipsos survey that UNESCO commissioned in 16 countries holding elections in 2024.[143] Almost nine of ten respondents expressed concern about the impact of disinformation on their country's elections.

134 UNESCO. Internet for Trust. https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-trust.

135 UNESCO. 2023. *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information through a multi-stakeholder approach* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387339?posInSet=2&queryId=7c7f4aa5-8b85-4125-830d-9cfea61f41bb.

136 UNESCO. 2025. *The Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms and Generative Artificial Intelligence.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395825 See also UNESCO. 2022. *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137.

137 United Nations. 2025. Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies. *Global Digital Compact.* https://www.un.org/digital-emerging-technologies/global-digital-compact.

138 UNESCO. 2022. Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics.

139 Katz, J. M. 2023. Substack Has a Nazi Problem. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/11/substack-extremism-nazi-white-supremacy-newsletters/676156/; Newton, C. 2025. Substack promotes a Nazi. *Platformer.* https://www.platformer.news/substack-nazi-push-notification.

140 Bono et al. 2024. An exploration of decentralized moderation on Mastodon.

141 "There are many ways in which a proliferation of false or misleading content is complicating the geopolitical environment. It is a leading mechanism for foreign entities to affect voter intentions; it can sow doubt among the general public worldwide about what is happening in conflict zones; or it can be used to tarnish the image of products or services from another country." See World Economic Forum. 2025. *Global Risks Report 2025.* https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/digest.

142 Krimmer et al. 2022. *Elections in Digital Times: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382102.

143 UNESCO and Ipsos. 2023. *Survey on the Impact of Online Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Global Survey on the Impact of Online Disinformation During Election Campaigns.* https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/11/unesco_ipsos_survey.pdf?hub=71542.

Super election year: A global text for democracy and journalism

In 2024, 72 countries – with a total population of nearly 3.7 billion people – held elections.[144] However, voter turnout continued to fall,[145] and trust in elections eroded.[146] The digital sphere, once seen as a space for civic empowerment, became a battleground of disinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and the emergence of AI-generated deepfakes.[147] Campaigns increasingly bypassed traditional media, using hyper-targeted content to shape opinions and exploit polarization.

At the same time, while online influencers have increasingly shaped political messaging,[148] this has generally been without transparency or editorial standards. Journalists, particularly women, covering elections have been harassed and accused of bias.[149,150] In the absence of transparency by digital service providers, regulators and electoral bodies have been hard-pressed to monitor fast-moving digital campaigns.[151]

Meanwhile, people in countries in the past four years that experienced coups against elected governments have been exposed to information operations designed to legitimize the new rulers.[152]

Hate speech

A further challenging trend has been the growth of aggressive, dehumanizing and incendiary expression that does not qualify as protected speech under international human rights standards.[153] The phenomenon has been significant enough to attract condemnation by the UN Security Council.[154] Research increasingly reveals how such content and related conspiracy theories create narratives to justify genocide and other atrocities. It has identified how hate campaigns have suppressed speech, blocked targeted communities from talking back, and stopped the media from shining a light on the activities of the hate mongers.[155] The perpetrators range from political leaders[156] to mass popularizers (politicians, preachers, social media influencers[157] and media personalities).[158] The research further shows how, in many cases, hate speech has been combined with disinformation, creating a toxic package of lies, denials, and erasure, along with othering, scapegoating, dehumanization, threat inversion, and calls for violence.[159]

144 UNDP. 2024. *A 'Super Year' for Elections*. https://www.undp.org/super-year-elections.

145 IDEA. 2024. *Global State of Democracy*. https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024.

146 International IDEA and the Electoral Integrity Project. 2025. *Review of the 2024 Super-Cycle Year of Elections. Trends, Challenges and Opportunities.* https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/review-2024-super-cycle-year-elections-trends-challenges-and.

147 Technical University of Munich Think Tank. 2025. *Understanding the Role of Generative AI in Elections: A Crucial Endeavor in 2024.* https://tumthinktank.de/wp-content/uploads/GenAIElections_Report_TTT.pdf. See also Rubio Núñez, R., Franco Alvim, F., de Andrade Monteiro, V. 2024. *Artificialintelligence and algorithmic election campaigns Informative dysfunctions and systemic threats of the new political communication*. https://www.cepc.gob.es/sites/default/files/2025-04/s-307-inteligencia-artificial.pdf.

148 Pew Research Center. 2025. *How news influencers talked about Trump and Harris during the 2024 election.* https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/02/06/how-news-influencers-talked-about-trump-and-harris-during-the-2024-election.

149 International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. 2024. *Press freedom under fire as political pressure on journalists intensifies worldwide, rankings reveal.* https://www.icij.org/inside-icij/2024/05/press-freedom-under-fire-as-political-pressure-on-journalists-intensifies-worldwide-rankings-reveal.

150 Article 19. 2024. *Report: Breaking the Fear Network 2024 Elections in Mexico* [Informe Red Rompe El Miedo Elecciones 2024 en México.] https://articulo19.org/ informe-red-rompe-el-miedo-elecciones-2024; Women Press Freedom. 2024. G*eorgia: Violence, Threats, and Censorship, Journalists Targeted During Disputed Elections*. https://www.womeninjournalism.org/threats-all/georgia-violence-threats-and-censorship-journalists-targeted-during-disputed-elections; RSF.2024. Op. Cit.

151 UNESCO and UNDP. *Freedom of Expression, Artificial Intelligence and Elections. 2025.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393473.

152 Ahmad, A. 2025. *Information Disorder is Fuelling Military Populism in West Africa.* https://www.cddwestafrica.org/blog/information-disorder-is-fuelling-military-populism-in-west-africa.

153 There are numerous historical examples of such rhetoric. More recently, in the United States, the 2024 election saw dehumanizing language to fuel xenophobia and public hostility against Haitian immigrants. Hate speech has also been prominent in the Russian-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian wars, as well as armed conflicts in East and Central Africa amongst others.

154 United Nations Security Council. 2023. Resolution 2686 (2023) (Doc. S/RES/2686). https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2686.

155 Facebook was used in Myanmar to spread dehumanizing hate speech against the Rohingya Muslim minority. See Reuters Investigates. 2017. *Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar*. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate. See also UN Human Rights Council. 2018. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar* (Doc. A/HRC/37/70.)

A lack of access to data prevents independent verification of claims by platform companies, but according to Meta's Community Standards Enforcement Q4 Report 2024, the company removed 15.2 million pieces of hate speech content from Facebook and 4.8 million from Instagram.[160] YouTube's 2024 Community Guidelines Enforcement Report said that 1.8 million videos were removed for hate speech violations in Q4 2024.[161] Meanwhile, the scale of online hate speech - as actually experienced - was highlighted in the 2023 UNESCO Ipsos survey, which reported that 67% of internet users in the 16 surveyed countries had encountered hate speech online. The study said the victims included LGBTQI people (33%) as well as ethnic and racial minorities.[162]

Beyond the platforms' figures, there are cases not detected by the platforms, including within advertising content and advertising placement that effectively fund or enable hate speech.[163] The platforms reluctance to be transparent has forced the advertising industry to self-regulate in order to protect brands from association with hateful content.[164] Research into hate speech and disinformation has also become a target of defunding and attack, despite being vital to preserving information integrity.[165]

Impact on the climate crisis

The multiple crises facing the news media coincide with the triple environmental crisis facing the planet, which include climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Increased news coverage along with people's lived experience of extreme weather events correlate with rising public awareness and adoption of green energy.[166] However, lobbies for fossil fuels are now benefiting from a political backlash that aims to deregulate environmental controls and reduce funding for energy alternatives. This is in a context where a new race to build AI data centers is now absorbing power and water at exponential rates. Data centers currently account for 1.5% of the world's total electricity consumption and this is expected to double by 2030.[167]

Meanwhile, research has shown a strengthening trend of corporate public relations aimed at discrediting climate journalism.[168] Research from the Union of Concerned Scientists and others demonstrates that the fossil fuel industry has continued to use numerous disinformation tactics.[169] There is evidence of digital platforms allowing 'super-spreaders' to flood social media with climate disinformation that delink disasters like wildfires and extreme weather from climate breakdown, and in parallel, earning revenue from 'greenwash' advertising. On social media, the hashtag #ClimateScam has been prominent.[170]

156   The Conversation. 2020. *When politicians use hate speech, political violence increases.*
       https://theconversation.com/when-politicians-use-hate-speech-political-violence-in-creases-146640.
       See also Brookings. 2021. *How hateful rhetoric connects to real-world violence.* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence.
157   CNN. 2022. *Misogynistic influencers are trending right now. Defusing their message is a complex task.*
       https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/08/us/andrew-tate-manosphere-misogyny-solutions-cec/index.html.
158   Cherian, G. 2025. *Covering Hate Speech: A Guide for Journalists.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392378.
159   Ibid.
160   Meta. 2025. *Community Standards Enforcement Report.* https://transparency.meta.com/reports/community-standards-enforcement/.
161   Google. 2025. *Google Transparency Report.* https://transparencyreport.google.com/youtube-policy/removals?hl=en.
162   UNESCO and Ipsos, op. cit.
163   Ahmad et al. 2024. *Companies inadvertently fund online misinformation despite consumer backlash. Nature 630, 123–131 (2024).*
       https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07404-1; Legal Resources Centre and Global Witness. 2023. *Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube and TikTok approve violent misogynistic hate speech adverts for publication in South Africa.*
164   Gollas, H. G. 2024. *WFA makes 'difficult decision' to discontinue GARM following X lawsuit.* https://www.marketingweek.com/wfa-suspend-garm-x-lawsuit/.
165   Coalition for Independent Technology Research. 2025. *The State of Independent Technology Research 2025: Power in Numbers.*
       https://independenttechresearch.org/citr-report-2025/; Barrett, P. M. 2025. *Academic Misinformation Researchers are Still Under Attack.*
       https://www.justsecurity.org/109030/academic-misinformation-researchers-under-attack.
166   See Climate Central. 2024. *Analysis: Global extreme heat in June 2024 strongly linked to climate change.* https://assets.ctfassets.net/cxgxgstp8r5d/5DLo6gIEP71Vr31psv1wrX/
       fb2b7128e3c506b71f119d637a626c23/Analysis__Global_extreme_heat_in_June_2024_strongly_linked_to_climate_change.pdf.
167   Chen, S. 2025. Data centres will use twice as much energy by 2030 – driven by AI. *Nature.* https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-01113-z.
168   Schäfer, M. S. and Painter, J. 2020. *Climate journalism in a changing media ecosystem: Assessing the production of climate change-related news around the world. Wires.*
       Climate Change. https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/wcc.675.
169   King, J. 2023. *Expert Testimony to Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation.* Institute for
       Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ING2-Committee-Hearing-on-Climate-Disinfo-Jennie-King-Expert-Testimony.pdf.
170   Climate Action Against Disinformation. 2023. *Deny, Deceive, Delay: Documenting and Responding to Climate Disinformation. Vol. 3.*
       https://caad.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Deny-Deceive-Delay-Vol.-3-1.pdf.

From 2021 to 2024, climate denial posts increased by between 24% and 40% across major digital platforms.[171]

At the same time, the news media's ability to draw attention to all this has diminished.[172] A psychological study of 268 climate journalists from 90 countries found that they have above-average levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, and many said they had been harassed for their work.[173] UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists has documented the murders of at least 46 environmental journalists since 2010.[174] Only six of the perpetrators have been convicted and a UNESCO analysis of the years 2009 to 2023 assessed that attacks on environmental journalists are increasing.[175]

Scientists-key sources for climate journalists seeking to accurately inform the public-are increasingly facing harassment and pressure to downplay or avoid communicating their findings.[176.177]

Attempts to resist these developments include the Joint Declaration on Climate Crisis and Freedom of Expression to mark World Press Freedom Day in 2024.[178] Brazil and UNESCO have also launched the 'Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change' that includes a fund to 'finance research into disinformation on climate change and initiatives to promote information integrity'.[179]

Impact on young people

An unfolding media trend reflects the expansion of cellphone use among young people at a formative stage in their development. This is prompting increasing concern about the impact on the wellbeing, norms, values and knowledge of a generation of children and adolescents. It also coincides with fears about AI serving to create risky 'companions' and reduce career and employment possibilities.[180] The concerns are based on observed contempt for,[181] or lack of specific due diligence in[182] the design and deployment of products and services for children and teenagers. At the same time, measures to ban device access, along with a continued absence of MIL and parental engagement, mean that these young people can offload cognitive and social challenges to AI, without learning to navigate, shape their engagement, and control their content environments.

The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* 2024 has found a 'platform reset' among younger audiences. Instead of going to news organizations for their news, youth use 'performative' social media services like TikTok and Instagram where the bulk of content has little verified information. These are spaces where most digital content creators[183] and 'influencers' offer commentary rather than reporting new facts,[184] and where, according to UNESCO's *Behind the Screens* study, there is little systematic fact-checking or disclosure of sponsored content.[185]

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171 Tortoise Media. Hot Air Explore Tool. https://www.tortoisemedia.com/hot-air-explore-tool.

172 Coombs, W. T. 2025. *Media and Crisis Communication*. https://www.routledge.com/Media-and-Crisis-Communication/Coombs/p/book/9781032619064?srsltid=AfmBOorEObdPK8Uuk-A8r4TrMvval0LodAb6rkJ-bQBdVhSD-FCdFx7G.

173 This is a collaboration between the University of Toronto, the Oxford Climate Journalism Network and UNESCO. *See: Climate Change Reporting and Mental Health: Practical Tips for Newsrooms and Journalists*. https://gijn.org/stories/climate-change-reporting-mental-health-impact-journalists.

174 UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists. https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory.

175 UNESCO. 2024. *Press and Planet in Danger. Safety of environmental journalists - trends, challenges and recommendations*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389501/PDF/389501eng.pdf.multi.

176 Global Witness. 2023. *Global Hating. How online abuse of climate scientists harms climate action*. https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/global-hating/.

177 Dyani, L. 2020. Censored: Australian scientists say suppression of environment research is getting worse. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02669-8.

178 United Nations. 2024. *Joint Declaration on the climate crisis and freedom of expression*. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/b/567968.pdf.

179 UNESCO. Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change. https://www.unesco.org/en/information-integrity-climate-change.

180 Haidt, J. 2024. *The Anxious Generation. How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin Press.

181 *Financial Times*. 2022. Irish regulator fines Instagram €405mn for failing to protect children's data. https://www.ft.com/content/53bdd052-b548-4e66-ad7e-2d5070b95769; The US Federal Trade Commission. 2019 https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2019/09/google-youtube-will-pay-record-170-million-alleged-violations-childrens-privacy-law.

182 PBS. 2023. *European regulators hand TikTok $368 million fine for failing to protect kids' privacy*. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/european-regulators-hand-tiktok-368-million-fine-for-failing-to-protect-kids-privacy.

183 Content creators are defined as "individuals who regularly publish content online for public audiences and who have over 1,000 followers meeting the threshold for classification as nano-influencers." Those engaged in journalistic activities are considered as a sub-category of content creators. See Ha, L. 2024. Behind the Screens: Insights from *Digital Content Creators*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392006.

184 Reuters Institute. 2024. *Digital News Report 2024*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024.

185 Ha, L., op. cit..

Privacy and safety of younger users are particular concerns, including heightened exploitation by means of targeted advertising, infinite scroll and deliberate, dopamine-triggering content. The rights of children in the digital space were the subject of a 2021 General Comment by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which sought to balance the right to seek, receive, and impart information, with the right to be protected from harm.[186] While most societies have been slow to institutionalize such balance, younger children's engagement in mediated communications via commercial social media platforms that use addictive techniques has prompted restrictions on access in at least one country.[187] For its part, UNESCO has strongly cautioned about cellphones being allowed in classes. There have been concerns about communications at vulnerable ages with lifelike AI chatbots.[188]

These worries were underlined when a company's AI chat service was offered without age restrictions even though it expressly marketed sexual content.[189] A similar lack of concern was subsequently revealed in other important companies.[190]

The rise of online influencers as role models with apparent authenticity increasingly affects how young people spend their time, conduct parasocial relationships and view standards of appearance and conduct for themselves and their peers.[191] The prospects for the informed and autonomous development of their personalities are at risk.

The path to sustainable development

Awareness of the many threats to information integrity have prompted efforts, although still small in scale, to increase the public's resilience. These come in the form of MIL initiatives to equip people - of all ages - to affirm their rights to freedom of expression, dignity and equality, and to have some capacity to think critically, evaluate content, and detect scams, manipulation, and hate campaigns. *The Pact for the Future* urges governments to promote MIL across all age groups and educational levels.[192] UNESCO has defined MIL responses to generative AI, in terms of foregrounding human agency and autonomy in interactions with non-human information and communication agents, and by outlining the elements for ethical use of synthetic media.[193]

Despite the undisputed necessity, funding for MIL remains limited and uneven. According to UNESCO's 2025 research, 86 countries have integrated MIL into their national school curricula; 57 include it as a compulsory component.

An added issue is that while MIL can help protect people, it does not lead on its own to improved information integrity. Further, putting the protection burden on end users, and especially on younger people, is not an effective alternative to the 'upstream' duties of governments and tech companies, who can shape the wider ecosystem to protect human rights online, and to support the development of news media.

186   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-25-2021-childrens-rights-relation.

187   Kaye, B., and Menon, P. 2024. *Australia passes social media ban for children under 16.* Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/technology/australia-passes-social-media-ban-for-children-under-16-2024-11-28/.

188   Vosloo, S., and Aptel, C. 2025. Beyond algorithms: Three signals of changing AI–child interaction. How AI chatbots may change the way children grow up. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/beyond-algorithms-three-signals-changing-ai-child-interaction; Singer, N. 2025. Google Plans to Roll Out Its AI Chatbot to Children Under 13. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/02/technology/google-gemini-ai-chatbot-kids.html.

189   Burga, S. 2025. Elon Musk's Grok Will Soon Allow Users to Make AI Videos, Including of Explicit Nature. Time. 30 July 2025. https://time.com/7306507/grok-ai-chatbot-videos-deepfakes/.

190   Davis, W. 2025. *Meta's "Digital Companions" Will Talk Sex With Users—Even Children.* The Wall Street Journal. https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/meta-ai-chatbots-sex-a25311bf.

191   Pedalino, F. and Camerini, A-L. 2022. *Instagram Use and Body Dissatisfaction: The Mediating Role of Upward Social Comparison with Peers and Influencers among Young Females*. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8834897/; Liaquat, K. and Muslim, I. 2024. *Impact of Social Media Influencers on Behavior and Emotional Wellbeing of Adolescents*, https://kurdishstudies.net/menu-script/index.php/KS/article/download/3696/2526/7090; Ruidan, Y. and Takahashi, H. 2025. *The Parasocial Relationships Between Influencers and Consumers.* https://doi.org/10.7222/marketing.2025.032; Cybersmarties. 2025. *The Rise of Digital Role Models: Who's Really Influencing Your Kids Online.* https://cybersmarties.com/the-rise-of-digital-role-models-whos-really-influencing-your-kids-online/.

192   United Nations. 2025. *Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations.* https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf.

193   UNESCO. 2025. *User empowerment through Media and Information Literacy responses to the evolution of Generative Artificial Intelligence.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388548.

Recognizing freedom of expression and the right to access information as essential preconditions for safeguarding the integrity of information ecosystems - which are critical to global progress toward the SDGs - and acknowledging the central role of journalism provide a firm basis for evaluating the trends outlined in this Report.

When large corporations control communication channels without a vested interest in freedom of expression or media development, these fundamental social goods become casualties. When attacks on journalists go unpunished and media development faces both restrictions and insufficient support, an information vacuum emerges. In such conditions, diversionary content, disinformation, and hate speech tend to dominate public discourse. This environment fosters fear, falsehoods, and polarization - undermining social cohesion, institutional trust, and ultimately, peace, human rights, and sustainable development.

Blanket deregulation of communications threatens to further compromise information integrity, while over-regulation without democratic safeguards can restrict free expression and access to information. A middle path is offered by UNESCO's principles of multi-stakeholder digital governance as well as media freedom and safety, and accountability systems that uphold journalistic ethics. Such an approach advances democracy and protects human rights, including freedom of expression, gender equality, child's rights, and environmental protection.

By unpacking recent developments and their potential scenarios, this Report arrives at a clear overarching recommendation: unless decisive changes are made, 2030 risks not only a failure to achieve public access to information and fundamental freedoms but actual regression. Such a trajectory would impede societies from making informed progress toward the SDGs, including climate mitigation, gender equality, and the fight against discrimination.

This prospect underscores the urgent, watershed imperative for action to address negative trends in information integrity while reinforcing those developments that safeguard and promote journalism as a public good. As this Report demonstrates, free, independent, pluralistic, and professional journalism is essential to shaping a world at peace - defending human dignity, advancing justice, and sustaining societal resilience. Protecting freedom of expression and the right to information is not merely a legal obligation; it is the lifeblood of resilient societies and a critical enabler of sustainable, peaceful development.

Volume 2

Introduction

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace is more than the title of this *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2022/2025*. It is a reminder of journalism's importance in forging sustainable development and peace. Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of human dignity and, increasingly, a force for the future. It is both a right in itself and a foundation for all other freedoms. When people can speak openly, access public interest information, and participate in public debate without fear, societies are stronger, more just, and more resilient. Yet that vision is under profound threat.

In 2024, there were 61 state-based armed conflicts in 36 countries and territories, the highest number since World War II. The rise in both the number and intensity of conflicts has led to devastating humanitarian consequences, including a significant number of civilian casualties. *'Journalists are among those most affected by the decline in respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law,'* according to the Global Forum for Media Development.
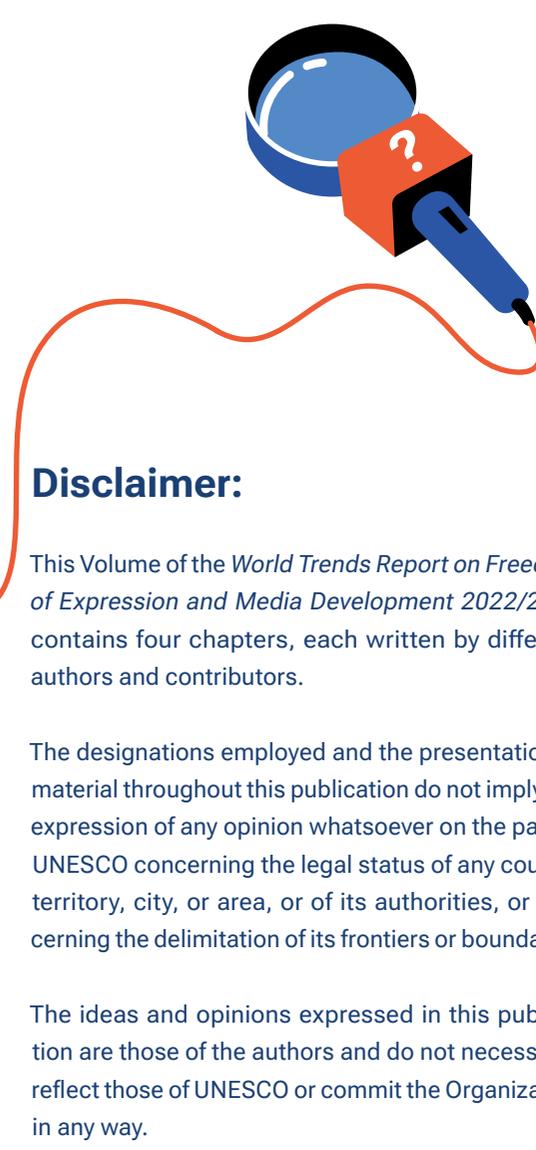
Disclaimer:

This Volume of the *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2022/2025* contains four chapters, each written by different authors and contributors.

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city, or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of UNESCO or commit the Organization in any way.

Democracy in decline

This *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* appears at a time when, for the first time in two decades, democracies are a minority. Disinformation and hate speech are spreading across borders, eroding public trust in journalism and democratic institutions. Journalists are increasingly silenced, whether through violence, intimidation, exile, or self-censorship, creating 'zones of silence' where accountability disappears.

The challenges are not new. In 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, setting out 17 interdependent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and more than 169 targets. Central to this plan is Goal 16.10, which calls for ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms. The goal establishes that progress on freedom of expression and media development enables accountability, transparency, and participation across all other goals, from health and education to gender equality and climate action. The Agenda called upon every society and every individual to play a role in its implementation. This ambitious vision could only become reality if rooted in equity and respect for human rights. Since then, progress has been made in advancing freedom of expression and media development. Audio and video formats have proliferated while internet access has expanded from 3 billion users in 2015 to 5.5 billion in 2024. This connectivity has enabled access to information as a fundamental right, giving visibility to diverse cultural expressions, amplifying marginalized voices, and fueling groundbreaking cross-border investigative journalism. Initiatives such as the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) exemplify a commitment to truth-seeking and public interest reporting, showing how journalism directly contributes to the achievement of the SDGs.

But as 2030 approaches amid rapid technological change, this progress is at risk. The world is witnessing a rollback of hard-won gains: weakening of the rule of law, regression in the rights of women and of people in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, stagnation in climate action, and mounting pressures on pluralism and diversity.

The authors and contributors of this Report analyze these interlinked challenges:

CHAPTER 1

In **Chapter 1**, 'Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law', Catalina Botero Marino, lawyer, human rights expert and former Organization of American States Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, stresses that safeguarding democracy requires vigilance across all branches of government: *'The legislature must ensure fair political representation and oversight, while the judiciary must protect against harassment as well as direct and indirect censorship. The executive branch, while capable of defending freedom of expression, can also pose its greatest threat through repression and control.'*

CHAPTER 2

In **Chapter 2**, 'Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology', the academic Alexei Abrahams explains how the promise of social media as 'liberation technology' has been eclipsed by its capture for propaganda, harassment, and manipulation of narratives. Complementing this analysis, the academic Dan Sultănescu shows that AI is both ubiquitous and highly trusted, with 97% of survey respondents in four regionally diverse countries reporting at least basic knowledge of AI. Trust in technology surpasses trust in media, business, or government.

CHAPTER 3

In **Chapter 3**, 'Journalism: Raising Voices for All', the journalist and writer Rokhaya Diallo reminds that freedom of expression is not the privilege of those who dominate but belongs equally to those who speak from the margins. The chapter also documents how gendered disinformation and online harassment undermine women's participation in public life, threatening democracy itself.

In **Chapter** 4 'Journalism: Protecting the Planet', the environmental journalist and writer Kunda Dixit illustrates the grave risks environmental journalists face when exposing unsustainable practices, risks often emanating from the same people undermining pluralism and accountability, while Kate Cell of the Union of Concern Scientists highlights the dangers of silencing science at a time of planetary crisis.

Despite these converging threats, the authors highlight opportunities for renewal: stronger institutions, transparent governance of digital platforms and AI, expanded MIL, and greater protection for journalists, scientists, and whistleblowers. A contribution by the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) emphasizes the urgent need to sustain community and public-interest journalism at a time of disinformation and economic contraction in the media industry. And the Deutsche Welle Akademie offers a way forward for journalism to bridge divides through constructive, inclusive dialogue.

Finally, in the 'World Trends Report in Data,' analyst and statistician Aldo Magoga demonstrates how rigorous data analysis provides an authoritative mandate: societies seeking to strengthen democratic resilience, transparency, stability, and equitable development must prioritize freedom of expression. The exceptionally strong statistical correlations revealed underscore not only the moral imperative but also the practical necessity of safeguarding and enhancing the right to express oneself freely and openly.

UNESCO's Member States have declared that information is a public good. This principle echoes UNESCO's founding mission: peace cannot be built on ignorance and mistrust, but must rest on knowledge, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

By defending press freedom, protecting diversity, and ensuring accountability in the digital age, journalism can indeed help shape a peaceful future.
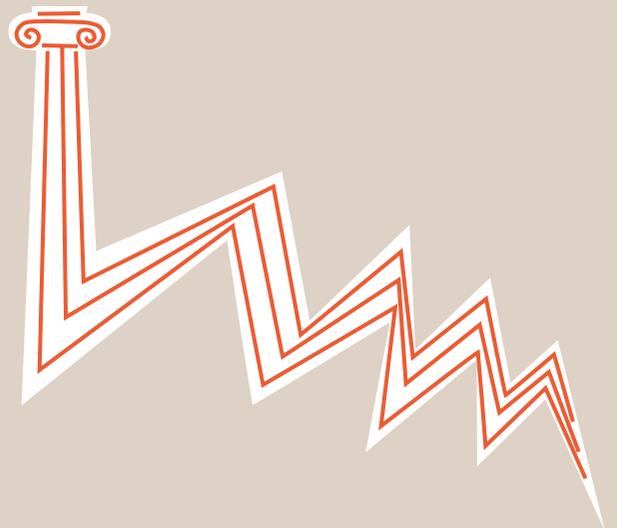
Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of law

Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of law

Editor's Note: Catalina Botero Marino, Colombian lawyer and former Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), is the primary author for this chapter. Her work is complemented by a contribution from the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), the largest global community dedicated to media development, media freedom, and journalism support.

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Summary:

This chapter highlights the critical relationship among freedom of expression, independent journalism, and constitutional democracy. Global progress in democracy, especially between 1980 and 2010, was accompanied by constitutional and legal reforms that enhanced protections for journalists and greater government transparency. However, since 2010, there has been a global decline in the global state of democracy, which also includes a notable deterioration in freedom of expression. This trend has continued over the last four years. It has been driven, among other things, by the weakening of accountability mechanisms for public and private actors that are key to the protection of human rights and democratic systems.

The chapter notes that the rise of digital platforms has transformed information ecosystems. These developments had significant positive effects but also led to new and major challenges that erode public trust and undermine the ability of journalists to counter disinformation campaigns that affect essential democratic values.

Strong institutional checks and balances, including robust and pluralistic legislatures and independent judiciaries, are essential to protect freedom of expression. The legislature must ensure fair political representation and oversight, while the judiciary must protect against harassment and direct and indirect censorship. The executive branch, while capable of defending freedom of expression, can also pose its greatest threat through repression and control. The chapter concludes by pointing out that safeguarding democracy requires strengthening institutions, ensuring the accountability of large technology companies, promoting media independence, and fostering digital literacy and critical thinking among citizens.

Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law

WHY IS DEMOCRACY WEAKENING?

Democratic erosion is driven by a complex mix of forces:

1 ATTACKS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Murders, imprisonment, intimidation, exile, and transnational repression

Judicial harassment & abusive lawsuits

Spying, surveillance, and smear campaigns

2 ATTACKS ON INSTITUTIONAL CHECKS AND BALANCES:

Without pluralistic legislatures and independent judiciaries, oversight fails and both democracy and the rule of law are at risk.

3 RISING AUTOCRATIC POWER

For the first time in 20 years, autocracies outnumber democracies.

72%

of the world's population now lives **under autocracy** — the highest level since 1978.

4 INFORMATION CRISIS

Disinformation and parallel 'truths' create **distrust** in **professional journalism**

Little transparency in **algorithms & moderation**

Weak respect for **human rights standards**

A little more than a decade ago, I concluded my mandate as Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

During my tenure, the Office issued continuous reports on the serious degradation of freedom of expression in the region. In response, in 2012, powerful governments launched an aggressive campaign to neutralize the Office by limiting its resources and powers. In this critical scenario, two small nations with — at the moment — an exemplary democratic record, led a counter-offensive in defense of the rapporteurship.

A little later, countries with great regional influence joined their initiative, although they did not particularly like the reports issued on their own countries. Paradoxically, the Office survived these attacks and became stronger than it was before. At the end of my tenure, a think tank, aware of this experience, asked me for an analysis of regional trends in the rule of law and freedom of expression. The central question was whether the attacks on freedom of expression and the institutions that defend it, such as the Office of the Special Rapporteur, signaled a regressive trend or were simply a temporary blip in the path of democratic progress that the region had embarked on after emerging from the military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of the late 20th century.

The answer today seems clear. Authoritarianism is growing at great speed and both journalism and democracy itself are in danger. We have not witnessed such a global assault on the rule of law in our lifetime. That is why protecting independent journalism today seems more urgent than ever.

Catalina Botero Marino
Colombian lawyer and former Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

Democracy and freedom of expression: Global trends

Research by the V-Dem Institute shows that for the first time in 20 years, there are more autocracies in the world than democracies. According to V-Dem's 2025 Democracy Report, liberal democracies now are the least common regime type in the world and almost three-quarters of the world (72%) live in autocracies, the highest number since 1978.[194]

As democracy has declined, so too has freedom of expression. The link between the two – especially the freedom of independent journalists to publish reliable information of public interest – is so sensitive that any weakness in one endangers the other. Indeed, for democracy to function, a robust, independent press capable of providing the public with quality information is essential.

However, for journalists to be able to freely investigate, verify, and publish valuable information of public interest, it is indispensable that democracy's accountability mechanisms function. As the most robust scientific research demonstrates, although democracy encompasses more than press freedom, the latter is crucial to its success.[195]

V-Dem researchers have identified a significant correlation between fluctuations in freedom of expression indicators and democratic measurement indices.[196] This relationship is consistently evident: the strength of democracy is accompanied by an improvement in freedom of expression, while a deterioration in freedom of expression often heralds or indicates anomalies or setbacks in democratic systems.

Unfortunately, freedom of expression has been declining since 2012. The trend is worldwide, consistent, and discouraging, reversing years of hard-won progress.

FIGURE 1

Freedom of expression & alternative sources of information index

*Source:
Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.[197]*

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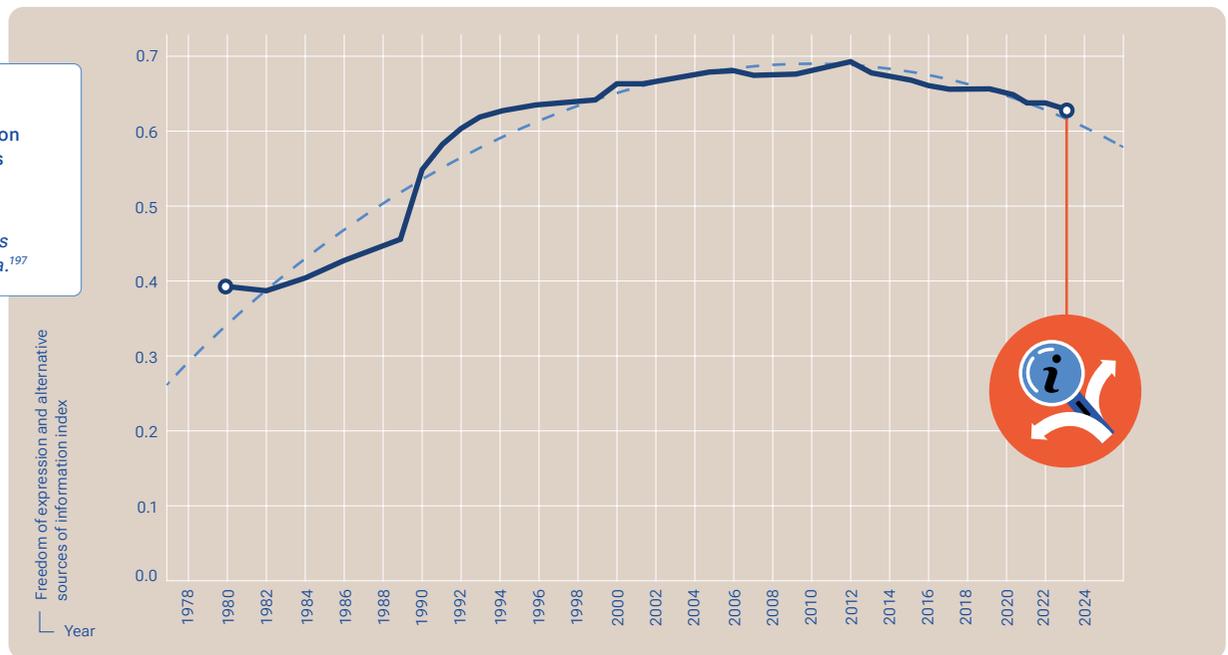
194   Nord et al. 2025. *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.

195   Nord et al. 2024. *Media Freedom, Democracy and Security. Research Report*. OSCE. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/572878_1.pdf; Adhikari, B., King, J., and Murdie, A. 2024. *Examining the effects of democratic backsliding on human rights conditions*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2023.2295878.

196   Nord et al, ibid.

197   Magoga, A. 2025. *Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of information Index*.

Looking at the trajectory of the global evolution of freedom of expression over recent decades on an index from 0 to 1, where 1 represents full freedom of expression and 0 represents its suppression, we see two key phases.

Between 1980 and 2010, there was a steady growth in the right to freedom of expression, with the index starting around 0.4 in 1980 and gradually increasing over the following decades to 0.7 in 2012, marking the highest level of press freedom on record. The most rapid growth occurred between 1990 and 2000 when it exceeded 0.6, driven by democratization in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, the fall of authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, and the strengthening of rule of law and press freedom worldwide. This period is characterized by the incorporation of constitutional and legal guarantees of freedom of expression and of the press, the protection of confidentiality of sources, the creation of systems of government transparency and access to information, and the liberalization of the airwaves and/or media reform. These developments are rooted in the shared principle that the media act as the 'fourth pillar' of democracy, alongside the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Free, independent, and pluralistic media are considered essential for ensuring transparency and public accountability, and for acting as a counterweight to the exercise and abuse of state power. These are all necessary conditions for effective and legitimate democratic governance.

Data shows the sustained decline began in 2012, correlating with growing political polarization and violence against journalists, impunity for crimes against the press, state control of the media, internet censorship, and government interference. However, what seems to be at the root of this issue is an increasingly visible trend of erosion of accountability mechanisms in democracies that has gotten worse over the past four years. Democratic erosion has not only weakened accountability mechanisms but, in some cases, led to the destruction of democratic institutions. In this regard, it is worth noting that authoritarian governments tend to show resilience and adaptability in countering democratic initiatives and now often use digital technologies to reinforce their power and repress democratization.

In these new contexts, freedom of expression is in decline and the consequences are significant. Both the public and journalists themselves are deprived of valuable information. In the last four years, murders,[198] threats, and imprisonment[199] of journalists[200] have increased. Meanwhile, there has been more intimidation through stigmatization,[201] surveillance and spying,[202] as well as various forms of judicial harassment[203] through multi-million-dollar lawsuits for defamation[204] or for violations of laws as varied as anti-terrorism regulations[205] or financial legislation.[206] These days it requires a lot of courage and no small sacrifice to be a journalist.

198 UNESCO. 2024. *Director-General's report on the safety of journalists and the danger of impunity, and the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391550. See also: UNESCO. 2024. *Press and planet in danger: safety of environmental journalists; trends, challenges and recommendations.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389501.

199 UNESCO. 2022. *The "misuse" of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832/PDF/383832eng.pdf.multi.

200 UNESCO. 2022. *The "misuse" of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832/PDF/383832eng.pdf.multi. See also: UNESCO. 2024. *Press and Planet in danger. Safety of environmental journalists – trends, challenges and recommendations.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389501/PDF/389501eng.pdf.multihttps://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832/PDF/383832eng.pdf.multi.

201 UN Human Rights Special Procedures. 2021. Joint declaration on politicians and public officials and freedom of expression. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697_0.pdf. and UN Human Rights Special Procedures. 2023. Joint declaration on media freedom and democracy https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/2/542676.pdf.

202 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. Reinforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5029-reinforcing-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-digital-age.

203 UNESCO. Pittman, E., Juega, E. 2024. *The misuse of financial laws to pressure, silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets: issue brief.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391483.

204 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice.

205 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Briefer on impact of counter-terrorism and criminal laws on media freedom and safety of journalists https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/brochures-and-leaflets/briefer-impact-counter-terrorism-and-criminal-laws-media-freedom.

206 Pittman, E., Juega, E. 2024. *The misuse of financial laws to pressure, silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets: issue brief.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391483.

The symbiotic relationship between freedom of expression and independent journalism has a direct impact on democracy and human rights. UNESCO's issue brief *Journalism for development: the role of journalism promoting democracy and political accountability and sustainable development*,[207] provides robust evidence on the role of journalism in maintaining and strengthening democracies. In this regard, recent studies show that democracies with free and independent media achieve better provision of public goods and better achieve common goals, such as addressing climate change.[208]

Freedom of expression is a crucial barometer of a society's democratic health. Its deterioration is contributing to the erosion of the rule of law. As a result, democracy is, indeed, in danger.

Freedom of expression, checks and balances, and the daunting noise of modern times

Over the past two decades, the global information ecosystem has undergone radical transformation. Today, billions of people have ways to communicate that they would have never dreamed of before, and they obtain information from sources that previously did not exist or were unavailable. This change has brought great advantages, but also enormous challenges. From the hopeful idea of a more democratic information ecosystem, we have moved to pessimism, driven by the control of the digital public sphere by a few people. Social media often makes it difficult to distinguish reliable and useful information from the vast amount of low-quality content designed to confuse the public.

Indeed, digital platforms connected people, facilitated instant access to information and knowledge, fueled important social movements and awareness-raising campaigns, gave voice to groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, and exposed injustices that would otherwise remain hidden. However, just as they have been used for valuable interactions, they have also been used to break the bonds of trust in reliable sources of information that, like independent journalism, are indispensable to meaningful public conversation.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most troubling result of this revolution is the emergence of parallel – sometimes false - realities. Even though an alternative reality is not based on evidence, it can influence people's decisions. These parallel truths are often carefully designed, replicated, virilized, and micro segmented by sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) to deceive or confuse the public.

These campaigns, moreover, rely on a network of fake websites, usually linked to political or economic groups. They present themselves to the public as authentic media outlets and use eye-catching headlines to spread disinformation and discredit independent journalists. Their effectiveness lies in the ability to blur the lines between facts and fabricated narratives. But disinformation campaigns do not just amplify their content, they also use digital means to silence those who expose them or promote counter-narratives. And they succeed. Online harassment, stigmatization, and the use of other systems to interfere with the content and accounts of those involved, including journalists, are increasingly common and, in many cases, have violent consequences, especially when they target traditionally discriminated groups, such as women.[209]

207 Stiglitz et al. 2024. *Journalism for development: the role of journalism promoting democracy and political accountability and sustainable development.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389301.

208 In a 2024 report, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) emphasized that independent, free and pluralistic media are critical to human security. The research, grounded in robust academic literature, establishes that the free flow of quality information reduces government abuses and decreases the likelihood of foreign wars, internal conflicts, and state repression. It indicates that quality information is crucial for preventing hoaxes that foment violence, exposing horrors, and demanding accountability. Deteriorating freedom of expression indicators are not only a problem in themselves but can also be an early warning sign of potential threats to the democratic system as a whole. OSCE. Nord, M., Lundstedt M., Lindberg I., S. 2024. *Media Freedom, Democracy, and Security.* https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/572878_1.pdf.

209 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. *Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/78/288.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78288-gendered-disinformation-and-its-implications-right-freedom. See also Digital Rights Foundation. 2020. *Addressing online attacks on women journalists in Pakistan.* Policy Brief. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Policy-1.pdf.

One of the most powerful social antidotes to these disinformation campaigns is free, independent, and pluralistic media. For this reason, those who promote the campaigns invest enormous time and resources to undermine public trust in media outlets, neutralizing their ability to counter disinformation.

In recent years, there has been a rise in these types of campaigns, coupled with an increase in the rhetoric of some politicians who, as the four rapporteurs on freedom of expression have noted in their joint statements,[210] are intolerant and divisive, deny established facts, and attack journalists and human rights defenders who hold them accountable. This rhetoric, as the rapporteurs note, has the effect of 'diminishing public trust in governance and democratic institutions, as well as in the media.' These stigmatization and disinformation campaigns have, in many cases, compromised the financial sustainability, independence, and diversity of the media itself, negatively affecting their ability to promote democracy, human rights, the rule of law, peace, and security.[211]

Moreover, there is a serious crisis in the way journalism is funded. Digital platforms have absorbed the advertising revenue that previously gave journalists the capacity, time, and resources to publish rigorous and evidence-based investigations into issues of public interest, such as authoritarianism, human rights, corruption, organized crime, or the environment. As a result, it is now much more difficult to counter disinformation campaigns that seek to confuse the public.

It is no exaggeration to say that a broad range of public goods and fundamental rights, from personal autonomy to electoral integrity, depend on people having timely access to quality information and the ability to deliberate freely and without arbitrary interference. Some authors have pointed out that the evolution of the digital communications ecosystem – including the rise of social media platforms – has gone hand in hand with the deterioration of democracy and press freedom.[212] This can be explained by the tendency to amplify polarizing content and the public's susceptibility to misinformation and disinformation. As a result, authoritarian actors can influence public opinion, discredit traditional sources of information, and undermine public trust in democratic institutions.

Democratic erosion is the result of a complex interaction of factors, including economic inequality, political polarization, weak institutional safeguards, and powerful authoritarian states, all working in concert. These elements interact with the digital ecosystem, reinforcing social divisions and making it easier for anti-democratic leaders to dismantle democratic checks and balances, repress dissent, and weaken independent journalism and other reliable sources of information.

Democracy is a grand conversation that takes place within a framework where freedom of expression and access to information play a predominant role in peacefully addressing differences, making collective decisions, correcting course, discouraging abuses, and holding leaders accountable. The basis for this or any meaningful conversation is that those participating share the same facts, are willing to provide reasons for their positions, and, eventually, defer to those who offer the best arguments. Disinformation and smear campaigns aimed at intimidating journalists and dissenting voices as well as creating mistrust of reliable sources of information exacerbate feelings of hostility towards those who think differently. They fragment the public sphere to the point where democratic dialogue becomes impossible. Then it is easier to weaken the institutionalized checks and balances that are essential to protect freedom of expression.

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210   UN Human Rights Special Procedures, op. cit.
211   Ibid.
212   Such as Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *Nexus* published in 2024.

Freedom of expression and democratic accountability mechanisms

A well-functioning society requires strong, independent media – and that requires strong, independent democratic accountability institutions. When state power weakens oversight, freedom of expression declines, the right to access information often disappears, and safeguards for independent journalism and, in general, mechanisms for protecting critical voices, dissolve. Efforts to concentrate power are closely linked to the control of information. V-Dem research shows that autocratization and attacks on independent journalism go hand in hand and mutually reinforce each other. There is a strong correlation between the strength of accountability institutions and freedom of expression.

The legislative branch: A defender of pluralism

In a constitutional democracy, the legislative branch plays a fundamental role as a counterweight to the executive branch. It can do so provided it represents a country's various political forces, including those that did not obtain a majority in the elections. For this to be possible, robust electoral debate and a fair electoral system are essential. Once established, the legislative assembly is responsible for passing laws that establish and protect rights such as freedom of expression and access to information, through public legislative procedures. All of this is intended to ensure that limits on rights are not adopted hastily or in secret as a result of temporary political conditions and that any related decisions must rely on strengthened consensus and not a simple majority.

Finally, the assembly has crucial political oversight functions to counterbalance the actions of the executive branch, exercising them, for example, through vetoes, subpoenas, interpellations, and parliamentary inquiries. This is to ensure that no single leader or ruling party completely dominates the political landscape and to prevent constitutional democracy from becoming tyranny in the name of the majority.

Statistical analysis confirms that where the legislature is pluralistic and its oversight is robust, societies enjoy significantly greater freedom of expression. The significant presence of opposition parties is the factor that best predicts a free and diverse information environment. This indicates that when multiple political perspectives are represented in the legislature, it is much more difficult for a government to monopolize the narrative and change the legal framework to dilute guarantees for freedom of expression.

Over the past four years, the decisive action of some legislative assemblies with minority representation has slowed the executive branch's drive to control independent media,[213] facilitate disinformation,[214] and reform the penal codes to include investigating and punishing threats against journalists.[215]

In countries such as Australia, Canada and Lithuania, and in some parts of the United States, laws have been adopted to prevent litigation aimed at silencing public interest investigations or whistleblowing. The emergence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)[216] is a troubling trend. In response, the European Union has developed a set of provisions aimed at upholding the right to freedom of expression and other human rights in the digital sphere.[217]

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213 Wójcik, A. 2023. *Restoring Poland's Media Freedom*. *Verfassungsblog*. https://verfassungsblog.de/restoring-polands-media-freedom/.

214 Centro de Estudios en Libertad de Expresión y Acceso a la Información. 2021. Regulación de plataformas en Brasil: necesidad, peligros y contradicciones. https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/regulacion-de-plataformas-en-brasil-necesidad-peligros-y-contradicciones/.

215 United Nations General Assembly. Human Rights Council, Fifty-seventh session. 2024. Universal periodic review, North Macedonia. (A/HRC/57/11.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/57/11.

216 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice.

217 Council of the European Union. Digital services package. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-package/.

However, the current trend also shows significant setbacks in the path of strengthening pluralism and the oversight mechanisms of legislative assemblies. In the past decade but specially in the last four years, less pluralistic legislative assemblies have adopted highly problematic regulations regarding freedom of expression—precisely the same types of regulations that were abolished during the world's last democratic wave.[218] For example, some countries have adopted regulations that restrict the publication of information of public interest on the grounds of national security, block the dissemination of information on the marginalized or discriminated communities, create ambiguous restrictions on the circulation of information, and prevent media and social organizations from accessing independent foreign funding and cooperation.[219]

During the period of democratic upswing (1990-2010), legislative assemblies, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean[220] as well as Africa,[221] were extraordinarily active in passing laws on access to public information. However, since 2010, this trend has slowed, and some legislative assemblies with an absolute majority of the ruling party have even passed laws and constitutional reforms that severely weaken the guarantees that had been implemented before.

A pluralistic legislature, resistant to disproportionate restrictions and capable of effectively exercising its powers of oversight and investigation, is one of the essential safeguards of freedom of expression. This ensures accountability--that no party controls information, dissenting voices can speak out, and the media can report freely without fear of reprisal.

The Judiciary: Protecting the space for public debate

While the legislative branch creates a legal framework that protects and promotes freedom of expression, the judiciary must guarantee its exercise. The courts act as guardians against harassment, intimidation, reprisals, and censorship of journalists and activists. To do so, they are tasked with ensuring legislative and executive decisions respect constitutional rights and institutions, preventing the misuse of judicial processes as a tool of harassment, and ensuring that crimes committed in retaliation for the exercise of freedom of expression do not go unpunished. To effectively exercise their oversight and control functions, judges require adequate resources as well as strong guarantees of institutional autonomy.

The independence of the courts is among the strongest predictors of freedom of expression. In other words, the data confirms that when judges can rule without political interference, they are more likely to uphold an environment conducive to social control, minority participation, and, more generally, freedom of expression.

An independent and robust judiciary is also a necessary condition for combating impunity for crimes against journalists. As reported by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in her annual report of April 20, 2022, 'Countries with high rates of impunity also have high rates of journalist fatalities, underscoring the correlation between impunity and the perpetuation of such crimes'.[222] The report shows that when governments comply with judicial decisions, freedom of expression flourishes, since court rulings can limit censorship and prevent attacks on the press.

218 Several States have harshened or reintroduced provisions on libel, defamation and insult by establishing new laws intending to address cyber-security, "fake news" and hate speech." UNESCO. 2022. *The "misuse" of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832.

219 UNESCO. Pittman, E., Juega, E. 2024. *The misuse of financial laws to pressure, silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets: issue brief.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391483.

220 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos. 2012. El derecho de acceso a la información pública en las Américas. Estándares Interamericanos y comparación de marcos legales. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/docs/publicaciones/El%20acceso%20a%20la%20informacion%20en%20las%20Americas%202012%2005%2015.pdf.

221 'In line with the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, a number of African States have incorporated the right to access information held by private entities in constitutional and legal provisions.' Over 100 countries are now committed to open public registers. Journalists and civil society groups frequently use public registers of beneficial owners to investigate corruption. See UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice.

222 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. Reinforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5029-reinforcing-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-digital-age.

It is crucial that courts have sufficient capacity to operate effectively. UNESCO's global initiative to train judges focuses on strengthening these skills.[223] Several states have implemented specialized units to investigate and prosecute crimes against journalists, such as PressSafe in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, FEADLE in Mexico, and similar teams in Colombia and Guatemala.[224]

BOX 1

The role of the judiciary defending freedom of expression

1. The European Court of Human rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and national courts in Canada, Colombia and South Africa have curbed the use of lawsuits (SLAPPs) to hinder public interest inquiries.

2. The Islamabad Supreme Court in Pakistan blocked a measure to criminalize online freedom of expression and the French Constitutional Council eliminated provisions of a hate speech law that could lead to disproportionate online censorship.

3. The French Constitutional Court and Brazil's Supreme Court ruled to protect journalists covering protests.

4. The Supreme Court of India ruled that indefinite internet shutdowns are unconstitutional.

5. South African courts ruled to protect journalists' sources as well as to block the bulk interception of communications.

6. The German Constitutional Court found that mass surveillance of foreign communications violated the right to privacy and freedom of the press.

Source: Columbia Global Freedom of Expression Programme, Special Rapporteur Reports, Islamabad High Court Report, French Constitutional Council Report.

All over the world, courts have played an important role in upholding freedom of expression and safeguarding independent journalism.

The examples of the judiciary's role in protecting freedom of expression are truly striking. However, the global trend regarding judicial independence is far from encouraging. A 2024 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Margaret Satterthwaite, shows a clear trend: some governments are weakening judicial independence through various strategies. The report documents the political appropriation of judicial institutions, the abuse of justice systems, the curtailment of court powers, and direct attacks on judges, prosecutors, and lawyers. To capture or intimidate the judiciary, appointment processes have been manipulated, politically motivated purges have been carried out, the process of allocating vacancies has been politicized, and disciplinary procedures have been used as a tool to intimidate and sanction judges who do not align with the will of government. The Rapporteur's report emphasizes the need to revitalize confidence in justice institutions and defend their role in safeguarding democracy and the rule of law.[225]

The lack of judicial independence has a direct impact on freedom of expression, as judges cease to be the last barrier against arbitrariness and become a mechanism for legitimizing abuses.

223 UNESCO. 2023. *10 Years of UNESCO's Judges' Initiative: strengthening the rule of law, freedom of expression and the safety of journalists 2013 – 2023.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386925_eng.

224 Averkiou, A. 2023. *The role of law enforcement agents: ensuring safety of journalists during public demonstrations and elections.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384920.

225 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2024. Safeguarding the independence of judicial systems in the face of contemporary challenges to democracy – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers. (Doc. A/HRC/56/62.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5662-safeguarding-independence-judicial-systems-face-contemporary.

The executive: A defender and threat to freedom of expression

The executive branch plays a crucial dual role with respect to freedom of expression: it can be both its greatest defender and one of its worst institutional threats.

In a democratic regime, the executive branch is responsible for enforcing laws, directing law enforcement, respecting the independence of regulatory bodies, implementing training programs, designing public policies – for example, on the investigation of crimes against journalists – and shaping public consciousness.

When leaders are committed to freedom of expression, significant changes occur. The discourse in favor of the right of journalists to investigate, of dissidents to express themselves freely, and of citizens to voice their rights and interests, fostering robust and democratic dialogue, significantly helps build an environment of respect and protection. Furthermore, even if presidential powers vary among different political systems, the executive branch in most countries can instruct law enforcement agencies to refrain from violating this right and, on the contrary, strive to ensure it. It can create specialized bodies to protect and investigate crimes against journalists and dissidents. It can adopt public policies to strengthen independent and pluralistic journalism and, in some cases, it can even veto bills that seek to violate these rights. When leaders uphold the right to freedom of expression, they uphold a public good.

However, the powers assigned to the executive can also be used to restrict free expression. Institutional guarantees are therefore essential.

Judicial and legislative constraints on the executive are among the strongest predictors of freedom of expression. This means that when executives have democratic constraints and can be held accountable by independent courts and pluralistic legislatures, they are less likely to suppress access to information, critical voices, or free journalism.

In recent years, a worrying trend has been documented among certain governments using their position of influence to stigmatize and intimidate their critics and the independent press.[226] This ranges from limiting press conferences or preventing independent journalists from accessing government offices, to surveillance, intimidation, arbitrary imprisonment, and acts of direct violence against critical and dissident journalists.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of freedom of opinion and expression points out in her report of 2024, 'Online attacks, death threats, rape threats, doxing (release of personal information, such as addresses, email details and phone numbers), smear campaigns with sexualized, misogynistic or defamatory elements, and impersonations have skyrocketed in the past 10 years, especially against women journalists. Women journalists in exile claim to have been targeted by coordinated defamation campaigns of a gendered nature on state and/or state-aligned media outlets as well as social media.'[227]

But the tendency of some governments to use tactics to repress independent and critical journalism is not limited to the actions just described. Some governments arbitrarily use judicial systems to target journalists through ambiguous regulations such as defamation or 'fake news' laws. When institutional

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226 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/53/25.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5325-sustainable-development-and-freedom-expression-why-voice; UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2022. Reinforcing media freedom and the safety of journalists in the digital age – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/50/29.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5029-reinforcing-media-freedom-and-safety-journalists-digital-age.

227 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2024. Journalists in exile - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/56/53.) https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5653-journalists-exile-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and.

228 Pittman, E. and Juega, E., op. cit.

controls make these tactics difficult to implement – for example, because legislatures repeal problematic laws or judges reject abusive complaints – some officials resort to other tactics, such as the use of financial or money-laundering laws. The technical complexity of these acts makes it difficult to identify the arbitrariness of the complaint and makes defending journalists more costly.[228]

In recent years, political repression in places where there are no institutional oversight mechanisms has become the main driver forcing hundreds of journalists into exile.[229] As noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of freedom of opinion and expression, in some cases journalists have been expelled from their countries; in other cases they have had to flee to protect themselves and their families. Even in exile, they are sometimes persecuted. In the words of the Special Rapporteur, the term 'transnational repression' has been coined to describe human rights violations perpetrated by states outside their territorial jurisdiction with the aim of intimidating and silencing dissidents in the diaspora and exile.[230]

Finally, primarily due to executive branch actions, internet freedom in 2024 declined for the 14th consecutive year. Online human rights protection declined in 27 of the 72 countries covered by Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report, while it improved in just 18.[231] This is attributed to an increase in arbitrary internet shutdowns, especially during elections or anti-government protests, interruptions to connections, closures of websites, and interference with platforms. The goal is to spread disinformation useful to the government or to censor independent investigations or critical content.

In short, the executive branch has a decisive influence over freedom of expression and its commitment to defending this fundamental right is crucial to a healthy democracy.

However, the potential to undermine this right is so high that it requires constant vigilance. Judicial and legislative oversight is necessary to ensure that no government can monopolize information the public has a right to know. Democracy depends on guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression, and, in turn, freedom of expression is closely linked to the strength of a democracy. The freest and most diverse information environments are found in societies with strong institutional checks and balances, which is why they are so important. Therefore, to effectively guarantee freedom of expression, it is crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach that strengthens democratic institutions, limits abuses of power, and guarantees accountability.

Building a better future

Protecting freedom of expression as a core element of democracy requires strengthening institutions that uphold accountability and the balance of powers. This requires effective oversight of the executive branch and the protection of judicial independence through strong guarantees and specialized training. Regulatory bodies must also remain autonomous.

Free and independent media serves as a safeguard against abuses of power and disinformation. Its independence relies not only on ethical journalism but also on public policies that guarantee economic sustainability and shield it from external pressures. Digital platforms bear significant responsibilities within this framework. They have a responsibility to design and implement their policies in accordance with human rights, increase transparency, provide accessible information for oversight, and remain accountable for their actions. Transparent and auditable data protection and risk assessment systems are essential to protect democratic rights.

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229   UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2024. Journalists in exile - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/HRC/56/53.)
https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5653-journalists-exile-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and.

230   Ibid.

231   Funk et al. 2024. *The Struggle for Trust Online.* Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online#key-findings.

Finally, during periods of heightened risk and instability, international institutions and civil society have played a key role in defending freedom of expression, ensuring the viability of the media and safeguarding democratic governance. While these actions have not always been sufficient to halt adverse trends, they deserve recognition. Indeed, good practices regarding the promotion and defense of freedom of expression often stem from the commitment of these actors. Because of their vital role in defending democratic values, these entities are at risk of being silenced through the withdrawal of funding, restrictive NGO legislation, and interference in the autonomy of academic institutions. Therefore, it is imperative to protect and strengthen these entities and to invest in programs that promote critical thinking and digital literacy. Such interventions enable society to respond collectively to democratic setbacks, empower citizens to participate responsibly in digital information environments, and mitigate disinformation while reinforcing public trust and democratic norms.

Journalism in Crisis and Emergencies

By the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)

While journalism is under attack worldwide, the situation is particularly difficult in the Global South, especially in conflict-affected countries. Consider Sudan, as described by journalist and human rights activist Rashweat Mukundu:

Sudan's journalists are on the run, media houses destroyed, and years of media archives set on fire. There is no commitment from either side to respect or observe media rights in a war of attrition that has reached a catastrophic point and destroyed Sudan's infrastructure, causing what is one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises.

After two years of conflict, a Sudanese Journalists' Syndicate estimates that 90% of the country's media outlets have been closed, while attacks and threats against remaining journalists make it almost impossible to gather and verify information that is a lifeline for communities affected by war.

In 2024, there were 61 state-based armed conflicts in 36 countries and territories - the highest number since World War II.[232] The growth in the number and intensity of these conflicts has led to devastating humanitarian consequences, including a significant rise in civilian casualties.

The decline in respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) has placed journalists at heightened risk. Despite the clear prohibition on attacks against civilians, including journalists, under international humanitarian law, they are increasingly targeted.

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232   Rustad, S.A. 2025. Conflict Trends: *A Global Overview, 1946–2024*. Peace Research Institute. https://www.prio.org/publications/14453.

According to UNESCO's 2024 *Director-General Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity*, journalist fatalities have reached record levels over the past three years.

A target on their backs

Working in conflict zones and reporting on crises have always carried high risks, but unlike the past, journalists today are systematically and directly targeted because of their reporting. UN experts from the Human Rights Council's fact-finding and monitoring mechanism confirm this trend:

We have received disturbing reports that, despite being clearly identifiable in jackets and helmets marked 'press' or travelling in well-marked press vehicles, journalists have come under attack.[233]

Between January 2022 and September 2025, UNESCO has documented the killing of 162 journalists in conflict, of which only 1.23% have been reported as resolved. The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Project's Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information index,[234] described in greater detail in the *World Trends Report in Data*, shows that threats, intimidation, arrests, or violence aimed at reporters intensify by about 2.4 percentage points each year. These are among the main drivers of the global decline in freedom of expression.

In times of crisis, timely and accurate information can be as lifesaving as food, water, and medical care.[235] Yet the global information ecosystem continues to face significant challenges in supporting journalism's role in emergencies.

During recent powerful earthquakes across Asia and particularly in Myanmar, independent journalists were among the few sources providing critical updates directly from the areas affected. While most international media were denied entry into the country,[236] journalists inside and in exile continued to report on the destruction and the coordination of aid, often without institutional support or basic safety guarantees.[237]

KILLINGS BY YEAR

28 — 2022
42 — 2023
53 — 2024
39 — 2025

KILLINGS BY GENDER

162 Total

■ Male 90.12%
■ Female 9.88%

JUDICIAL STATUS

162 Total

■ No Information Received So Far 6.79%
■ Ongoing / Unresolved 25.31%
■ New Request 66.67%
■ Resolved 1.23%
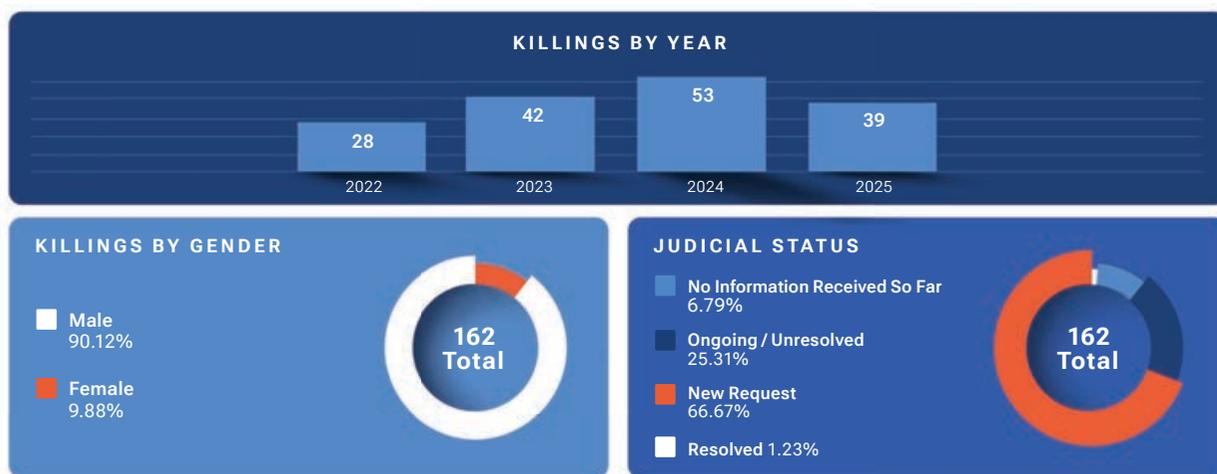
233 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2024. Gaza: UN human rights experts condemn killing and silencing of journalists.

234 The Varieties of Democracy. 2025. V-Dem Dataset. https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/.

235 CDAC Network. 2025. Local lifelines: Enhancing information sharing and inclusion in Sudan humanitarian response. https://www.cdacnetwork.org/resources/local-lifelines-sudan.

236 Walker, T. 2025. Myanmar's deadly earthquake highlights the country's media restrictions. Index on Censorship. https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2025/05/myanmars-deadly-earthquake-highlights-countrys-media-restrictions/.

237 Kyi, M. 2025. *Mizzima News: Surviving the junta and reporting Myanmar's Spring Revolution.* Global Voices Advox. https://advox.globalvoices.org/2025/05/03/mizzima-news-surviving-the-junta-and-reporting-myanmars-spring-revolution/.

The assault on democracy

V-Dem data shows that freedom of expression is the first right attacked during democratic backsliding, and that media censorship is a common tool used to undermine democracy.[238] Such restrictions are often an early warning sign of violence and instability.[239] When authorities silence journalists, they undermine the very systems designed to inform the public and alert the international community to emerging crises, thereby allowing conflicts to intensify without scrutiny or intervention. Journalism also plays a key role in the documentation of war crimes.

Political actors have always sought to shape public narratives to gain support, both in times of peace and in conflict. What has changed is that today's digital technologies enable such efforts to be carried out in far more invasive and wide-reaching ways.

According to Amnesty International, 'In an increasingly precarious world, unregulated proliferation and deployment of technologies such as generative AI, facial recognition, and spyware are poised to be a pernicious foe – scaling up and supercharging violations of international law and human rights to exceptional levels.'[240] These risks intensify during crises and wars. Governments and armed groups now routinely deploy surveillance tools, implement internet shutdowns, and censor and manipulate content not only to silence independent journalism but also to control domestic and international narratives.[241] This digital repression undermines public access to verified information and obstructs efforts to document war crimes and human rights violations. The consequence is a dangerously opaque conflict landscape where disinformation flourishes, evidence is difficult to gather, and accountability is harder to achieve.

In this context, three major trends have emerged:

1. Advanced surveillance techniques, including biometric databases, spyware, and AI-driven monitoring systems are increasingly targeting journalists and media workers. This poses a direct threat to press freedom and personal safety, particularly in environments where exposing state abuses or reporting from the frontlines invite retaliation.

2. Malicious actors are weaponizing platforms' content moderation policies, exacerbating information distortion. Social media algorithms often downrank or remove legitimate journalistic content, while disinformation and state-sponsored propaganda often achieve high visibility and reach.[243]

3. Certain actors have learned to exploit gaps in platform policies and monetization systems, using targeted advertising and algorithmic manipulation to outpace independent media in shaping public discourse.[244]

238 V-Dem Institute. 2025. Democracy report 2025: 25 years of autocratization – Democracy trumped? University of Gothenburg. https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/.
239 Carey et al. 2021. *Media freedom and the escalation of state violence*. Political Studies. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211020243.
240 Amnesty International's Secretary General, Agnès Callamard speech while launching Amnesty International 2023/2024 The State of the World's Human Rights report.
241 ARTICLE 19. 2024. *Clearing the Fog of War: Protecting Freedom of Expression in Armed Conflict*. https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Clearing-the-Fog-of-War-3-December-2024.pdf.
242 Balkan Insight / BIRN. 2025. Surveillance and Censorship in the Western Balkans (WB6). https://balkaninsight.com/plus_pdf/Surveillance-and-Censorship-in-the-Western-Balkans-WB6.pdf.
243 Corsi, G. 2024. Evaluating Twitter's Algorithmic Amplification of Low-Credibility Content: An Observational Study. EPJ Data Science 13, no. 18. https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-024-00456-3.
244 Wallis, J. et al. 2021. *Influence for Hire: The Asia-Pacific's Online Shadow Economy,* Policy Brief No. 48/2021, Australian Strategic Policy Institute. https://www.aspi.org.au/report/influence-hire.

These dynamics are further complicated by the growing role of tech companies in conflicts.[245] Platforms and infrastructure providers increasingly face pressure from states and others to restrict content, share user data, or alter access to services.[246] In many cases, these companies lack the institutional frameworks, contextual expertise, or crisis protocols necessary to assess the risks their operations pose to journalists on the ground. The failures of major platforms in recent armed conflicts underscore a troubling pattern: tech companies repeatedly fall short in adhering to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights—and their responses often remain ad hoc, inconsistent, and lacking in transparency.[247]

Rebuilding safeguards for freedom of expression and independent journalism

Governments, civil society, donors, and digital platforms must coordinate to reaffirm a commitment to freedom of expression, especially during conflicts, crises, and emergencies, recognizing that professional journalism is essential for protecting human rights. Legal protection under international humanitarian and human rights law should be reinforced. Freedom of expression should also be embedded in peace processes, transitional justice mechanisms, military protocols, and humanitarian response frameworks, acknowledging its crucial role in civilian protection, accountability, and democracy-building. Digital spaces must be safeguarded by holding technology companies accountable and preserving internet access as a lifeline in crisis zones.

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245 Frenkel, S. 2025. The Militarization of Silicon Valley. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/04/technology/google-meta-openai-military-war. html?unlocked_article_code=1.cU8.rJCV.BzVUCqUnHnUw&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare.

246 Boyle, S. 2025. Revealed: Google Facilitated Russia and China's Censorship Requests. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/15/google-helped-facilitate-russia-china-censorship-requests.

247 Rayman, D. 2024. Accusations and Actions: A Decade Tracking Tech Company Responses to Human Rights Allegations. *Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*. https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/accusations-actions-a-decade-of-tech-company-responses-to-allegations-of-human-rights-abuse/.

Journalism:
Bridging the Promise
and Threat of Technology

Chapter 2
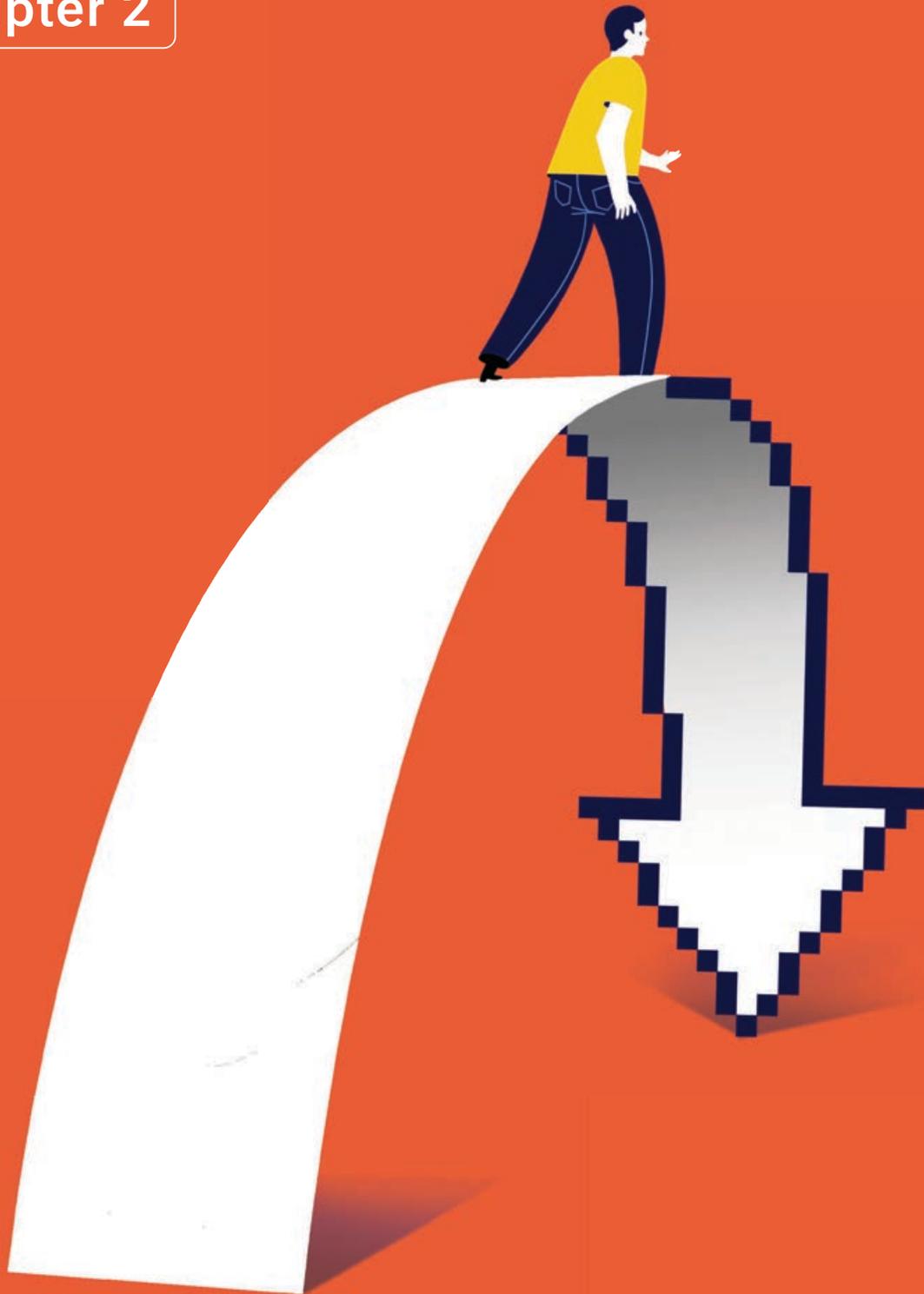
Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology

Editor's Note: This chapter was primarily authored by Alexei Abrahams, Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at Hamad bin Khalifa University in Doha; Dan Sultănescu, Associate Professor at the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest; and the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), which supports journalism in low- and middle-income countries. Marjorie Buchser, Managing Director International at the Partnership on AI, and Renée DiResta, Associate Research Professor at Georgetown University also contributed.

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this chapter do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Summary

Over the past two decades, technologies have emerged that both amplify and stymie freedom of expression. In just the last four years, rapid technological advancements have accelerated this trend. Yet these tools do not operate in a vacuum: their design, deployment, and governance are shaped by the economic and political interests of the companies that control them. These technological advances are expanding and constraining public discourse.

The use of these technologies is reshaping journalism and open debate, pioneering new forms of expression. The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has amplified content creation, but its ability to produce synthetic or altered material, coupled with rapid digital dissemination, has disrupted information integrity at scale. Paradoxically, despite the risks, AI-powered platforms are increasingly used by the public and in some cases are seen as more trustworthy than traditional news outlets.

AI sits today at a volatile intersection for our information ecosystems and media landscape: on one hand, it is championed as a groundbreaking tool poised to revolutionize journalistic work. On the other, it casts an unsettling shadow as a profound challenge to freedom of expression and the very livelihood of journalists.

THE PARADOX OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

AI is transforming journalism and our information ecosystems.

Promise	Revolutionizing journalistic work.
Risk	Narrative control by opaque design and deployment of technologies.
Paradox	AI-powered platforms are often trusted more than traditional news outlets.

TRUST & OVERRELIANCE

Users often **trust AI** recommendations uncritically → even with biases, errors, or confabulations.

People are adopting AI **faster than expected.**

97% of respondents across **4 countries** report at least a basic understanding of AI.

THE RISK OF NARRATIVE CONTROL

65% of the world's population now uses **social media.**

In many countries, technology now plays a **pivotal role** in mediating public discourse.

Algorithms can **shape the information** we seek & receive.

JOURNALISM RESILIENCE AMID TECHNOLOGICAL UPHEAVAL

Traffic decline

Platforms deprioritize news links → news websites lose referrals.

NEWS

STOP

STOP

Closures

678

Latin American outlets shut down between **2015–2024.**

Independent media shrinking even as demand for high-quality content grows.

Younger audiences bypass traditional news for **social platforms.**

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

✦ Multistakeholder approach in **platform governance**

✦ **Facilitate data access** for journalists & researchers

✦ Explore decentralized **content moderation** or develop **public interest infrastructure.**

TO ENSURE JOURNALISM SURVIVES AS A CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY, WE NEED:

Durable solutions — Sustainable funding for public interest media

Fairer value exchange — Between journalism & tech platforms

Collective action — Media alliances to strengthen bargaining power & engage in regulation

Introduction

By **Marjorie Buchser**, Managing Director
International at the Partnership on AI
and former UNESCO consultant

The 'Forty Acres and a Mule' initiative in the United States marked one of the most ambitious attempts at reparations for slavery, granting land to formerly enslaved Black individuals, who then established communities.[248] This promising start was cut short in 1865 after President Lincoln's assassination, when President Andrew Johnson reversed the policy, returning the land to former enslavers.

Decades later, a dedicated team of researchers and journalists used artificial intelligence (AI) to unearth this obscure history. Technology helped them identify 1,250 Black men and women who had received and then lost land. Subsequent genealogical research connected them with living descendants, informing them about the specific land their ancestors had been granted and then lost. Documented across a series of articles and podcasts,[249] this groundbreaking work was a finalist for the 2025 Pulitzer Prize, standing out because of its explicit disclosure of AI methodology.[250]

Like so many aspects of society, journalism is being fundamentally transformed by AI tools. This technology excels at unearthing crucial patterns and insights from vast datasets, even extracting information from historical and handwritten documents. It has been used to analyze satellite data and drone footage to detect mass graves and document the activities of armed groups.[251]

Moreover, the use of AI has helped pioneer new forms of expression, enabling everything from political critique and satire to exposing systemic brutality and violence, while also safeguarding vulnerable individuals through applications such as Amnesty International's AI-generated imagery, which protects the anonymity of protestors.[252]

For all the power demonstrated by these examples, the increased use of this technology is nevertheless widely perceived as a major risk to journalistic practice, information integrity, and the availability of accurate, reliable, and diverse information. This perception is substantiated by the final report from the United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Advisory Body on AI, which, in its comprehensive assessment of expert risk perceptions, highlights damage to information integrity as a substantial threat across all societies and domains.[253]

In particular, the rise of generative AI, which has augmented the ability to produce potentially harmful synthetic or altered content – combined with its widespread dissemination on digital platforms – have led to a disruption in information integrity at scale. As an ever-growing percentage of online content originates from AI systems, there is increasing confusion regarding its authorship, source, and authenticity. Adding to this problem is the proliferation of so-called 'AI slop': vast amounts of easily created low-value content – sometimes generated automatically by bots – that flood digital spaces and make it harder for authoritative information to be recognized. Compounding the challenge, synthetic outputs often contain subtle errors which, once recycled into future training data, gradually degrade information quality and amplify hallucinations across successive generations of AI.

248   Darity, W. A. 2008. Forty Acres and a Mule in the 21st Century. *Social Science Quaterly,* Vol. 89, No. 3.
      https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/lancet-reparations/files/darity_w._forty_acres_2008.pdf.
249   Campbell, A. F., Simpson, A. and Rebala, P. *40 Acres and a Lie.* Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/06/40-acres-and-a-lie/.
250   Deck, A. 2025. *How this year's Pulitzer awardees used AI in their reporting.* NiemanLab.
      https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/05/how-this-years-pulitzer-awardees-used-ai-in-their-reporting/.
251   Panic, B. and Paige, A. 2024. AI, Human Rights, and Peace: Machines as Enablers of Rights Work. *AI for Peace.* Boca Raton: CRC Press. Chap. 4.
252   Taylor, L. 2023. Amnesty International criticized for using AI-generated images. *The Guardian.*
      https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/02/amnesty-international-ai-generated-images-criticism.
253   United Nations. 2024. *Governing AI for humanity: final report.* AI Advisory Body. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4062495?v=pdf.

Consider, for example, the latest iteration of AI-generated video clips. These videos, which can include dialogue, soundtracks, and sound effects, are now nearly indistinguishable from those made by human filmmakers and actors. In one striking instance during a national election campaign, an AI-generated deepfake video circulated online showing the President of the United States endorsing a South African political party. The video was convincing enough to persuade some viewers of its authenticity. Experts caution that if such videos are shared on social media with misleading captions in the heat of a breaking news event, they could plausibly stoke political division, social unrest, and even violence.[254] This 'deepfake' dimension is further reinforced by the anthropomorphic design of many AI chat interfaces, which invite users to interact as though with trustworthy humans rather than programmed systems – an interactional style that risks undermining public confidence in professional journalism and authentic reporting.

254   Van Damme P. 2024. *Disinformation, governance and the South African election.* ISS African Futures (discussing a deepfake video featuring Donald Trump purportedly endorsing a South African political party). https://futures.issafrica.org/blog/2024/Disinformation-governance-and-the-South-African-election.

Even amid widespread concerns regarding the proliferation and impact of fabricated and misleading information, a striking paradox has emerged: AI-powered platforms are now perceived as more trustworthy than traditional news outlets.

This shift in trust is further underscored by users' tendency to uncritically accept content recommended by AI systems, even when faced with inherent biases, inaccuracies, or confabulations – a phenomenon sometimes termed AI over-reliance. Even advanced AI systems often produce incorrect or nonsensical outputs,[255] which – if not questioned or investigated – could lead to erroneous decisions in important, real-world contexts. This issue is not limited to the average user: it also affects governments, institutions, legal professionals, and journalists. In recent cases, court filings in different regions have included fabricated legal citations, with some submissions citing dozens of non-existent precedents generated by AI tools. These incidents prompted disciplinary action and formal warnings from judicial authorities, underscoring the urgent need for human oversight and verification when relying on AI-generated content.[256]

A final, and arguably paramount concern addresses the issues of diversity and algorithmic bias. The foundational training of most advanced AI systems utilizes datasets overwhelmingly derived from English-language content and data originating from the Global North, thereby embedding an inherent bias.[257] The cumulative effect is a discernible erosion of pluralism, which constricts the spectrum of voices and perspectives and impedes robust public discourse. This methodology actively reinforces the values, interests, and predispositions of dominant cultural and political groups, concurrently marginalizing the linguistic, historical, and cultural characteristics of other communities.

This phenomenon is increasingly well-documented, with abundant examples of misrepresentation and bias against women, various religious groups, and vulnerable communities. However, its multifaceted and pervasive nature makes it difficult to track comprehensively, as it is often deeply embedded in culture and language. Illustratively, researchers found that when a popular chat application generated completions for the prompt 'Two Muslims walked into a ____,' 66% included violent language, a frequency three times greater than for other religious groups.[258] Furthermore, similar entrenched biases have been identified against people with disabilities, for example, by inferring negative sentiment from sentences that incorporate disability-related terms.[259]

This chapter begins with a simple fact: AI is here to stay, and it is already widely used and recognized. It explores the technology's potential to strengthen freedom of expression and expand access to information, while also examining how its growing role in moderating and curating content is shaping public narratives – and, in turn, our understanding of the world. The chapter concludes by addressing the challenges this evolving landscape poses for the future of journalism.

255 Senat. 2025. C*hatGPT est-il incollable sur Victor Hugo ? [Is ChatGPT an expert on Victor Hugo?].* YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/shorts/SlyUvvbzRPc.

256 Maphumulo, M. 2024. *Attorneys, Beware 'AI Hallucinations' – The Real Consequences of Fabricated Citations.* Biz community.
     https://www.bizcommunity.com/article/attorneys-beware-ai-hallucinations-the-real-consequences-of-fabricated-citations-147416a.
     See also Hern, A. 2025. High Court Tells Lawyers to Stop Misuse of AI After Fake Case-Law Citations. *The Guardian.*
     https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jun/06/high-court-tells-uk-lawyers-to-urgently-stop-misuse-of-ai-in-legal-work.

257 Nicholas, G. and Bhatia, A. 2023. *Lost in Translation: Large Language Models in Non-English Content Analysis.*
     https://cdt.org/insights/lost-in-translation-large-language-models-in-non-english-content-analysis.

258 Abid, A., Farooqi, M. and Zou, J. 2021. Large language models associate Muslims with violence. *Nature Machine Intelligence.*
     https://www.nature.com/articles/s42256-021-00359-2.

259 Hutchinson et al. 2020. *Social Biases in NLP Models as Barriers for Persons with Disabilities.* https://aclanthology.org/2020.acl-main.487.pdf.

Technology is changing the way we perceive the world

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has exploded over the last three years, with a majority of people all over the world using it in varying degrees. This rate of adoption has been exponentially faster than the rate of adoption for smart phones, personal computers, or the internet.

To better understand the use and popularity of AI, the University of South Carolina College of Information and Communications in the United States,[260] in partnership with the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania, and with support from UNESCO, conducted public opinion surveys in four countries from different regions: Mexico, Romania, South Africa, and the United States. The work builds on the University of South Carolina's bi-annual Global Opinion Tracker.[261]

Data was collected through representative online panels with approximately 1,000 respondents per country. Fieldwork occurred in December 2024 for the United States and in April 2025 for Mexico, Romania, and South Africa.

The results provide an unusual perspective on how AI tools are perceived and used as well as how they affect both journalism and democracy.

By **Dan Sultănescu**, Associate Professor at the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest

The year 2024 was widely regarded as a 'super election year,' with more than 50 countries worldwide holding national elections. These elections unfolded at a moment when artificial intelligence (AI) was becoming increasingly more prominent in society and daily life, raising questions on its impact on democratic processes.

Did AI have an impact on any of these elections? Is it trusted? Are there differences among the countries?

This research offers significant insights:

- AI is widely recognized and used across all four countries.

- AI is generally perceived as more trustworthy than traditional media.

- Concerns about AI's potential dangers were higher in Romania and in the United States, where the latest elections had been particularly polarized.

- Concerns about the economic impact of AI (such as job loss) were greater in Mexico and South Africa.

- Support for government regulation of AI varied among the four countries.

Public awareness & AI use

Public familiarity with AI is very high, with more than 97% of respondents across the four countries reporting at least a basic understanding. A 2024 Ipsos report covering 32 countries supports this finding, showing that only 2% of respondents had not heard of AI.[262]

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260   UNESCO Chair for Data, Media and Society.
261   AI Global Public Opinion Tracker at USC. University of South California. https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/cic/initiatives/ai/ai_index/index.php.
262   Ipsos. 2024. *Public Trust in AI: Implications for Policy and Regulation.*
       https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-09/Ipsos%20Public%20Trust%20in%20AI.pdf.
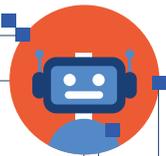
HOW MUCH HAVE YOU HEARD OR READ ABOUT AI?

	South Africa	Mexico	Romania	United States
Not at all	1	2	2	3
A little & moderate	40	38	55	61
A lot & a great deal	59	60	43	36

Legend: ■ Not at all ■ A little & moderate ■ A lot & a great deal
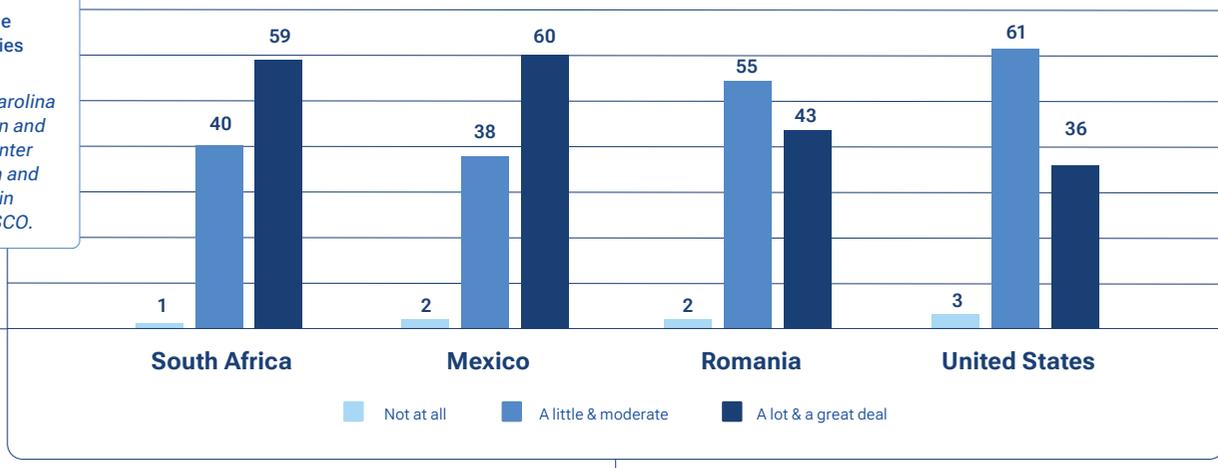
However, familiarity with specific tools varies. Respondents in South Africa and Mexico had more familiarity with them than in Romania and the United States. This pattern aligns with 2024 Google Trends data on search interest.

AI tools have become integral to digital routines, with more than 40% of respondents reporting using AI for content creation and roughly one-third saying they use AI to generate or comment on content. A recent Associate Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (AP-NORC) survey also found that almost 40% of American adults use AI for work-related tasks.[263]

WHAT PEOPLE SAY VS. WHAT THEY SEARCH: SURVEY RESPONSES COMPARED TO GOOGLE TRENDS

	South Africa	Mexico	Romania	United States
Heard about ChatGPT (% a lot + a great deal)	59	60	43	36
Search interest in 2024 (index 1-100)	58	56	45	31

Legend: ■ Heard about ChatGPT (% a lot + a great deal) ■ Search interest in 2024 (index 1-100)

263 O'Brien, M., Sanders, L. 2025. How US adults are using AI, according to AP-NORC polling. *Apnews.* https://apnews.com/article/ai-artificial-intelligence-poll-229b665d10d057441a69f56648b973e1.

Regional media trends

Media consumption patterns reflect differing levels of digital use. In Mexico and South Africa, platforms like TikTok are comparatively more popular, indicating a preference for mobile-first, short-form content. In contrast, respondents in the United States and Romania rely more on digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and news websites.

This is supported by a 2024 Pew Research Center study, which found that Americans remain anchored to traditional formats.[264] This pattern reflects a shift toward video platforms – and feed-driven news discovery, a trend also tracked by the Reuters Institute in its 2025 *Digital News Report*.[265]

FIGURE 3

Media use patterns
*Source:
University of South Carolina
College of Information and
Communications, Center
for Civic Participation and
Democracy (SNSPA) in
Bucharest, and UNESCO.*

**WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DIGITAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
DID YOU USE TO ACCESS NEWS IN THE LAST WEEK?**
(SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

Legend:
- News websites
- Facebook
- YouTube
- X (former Twitter)
- Instagram
- Whatsapp
- Reddit
- TikTok
- LinkedIn
- Blogs or Online forums
- Podcasts or audio platforms
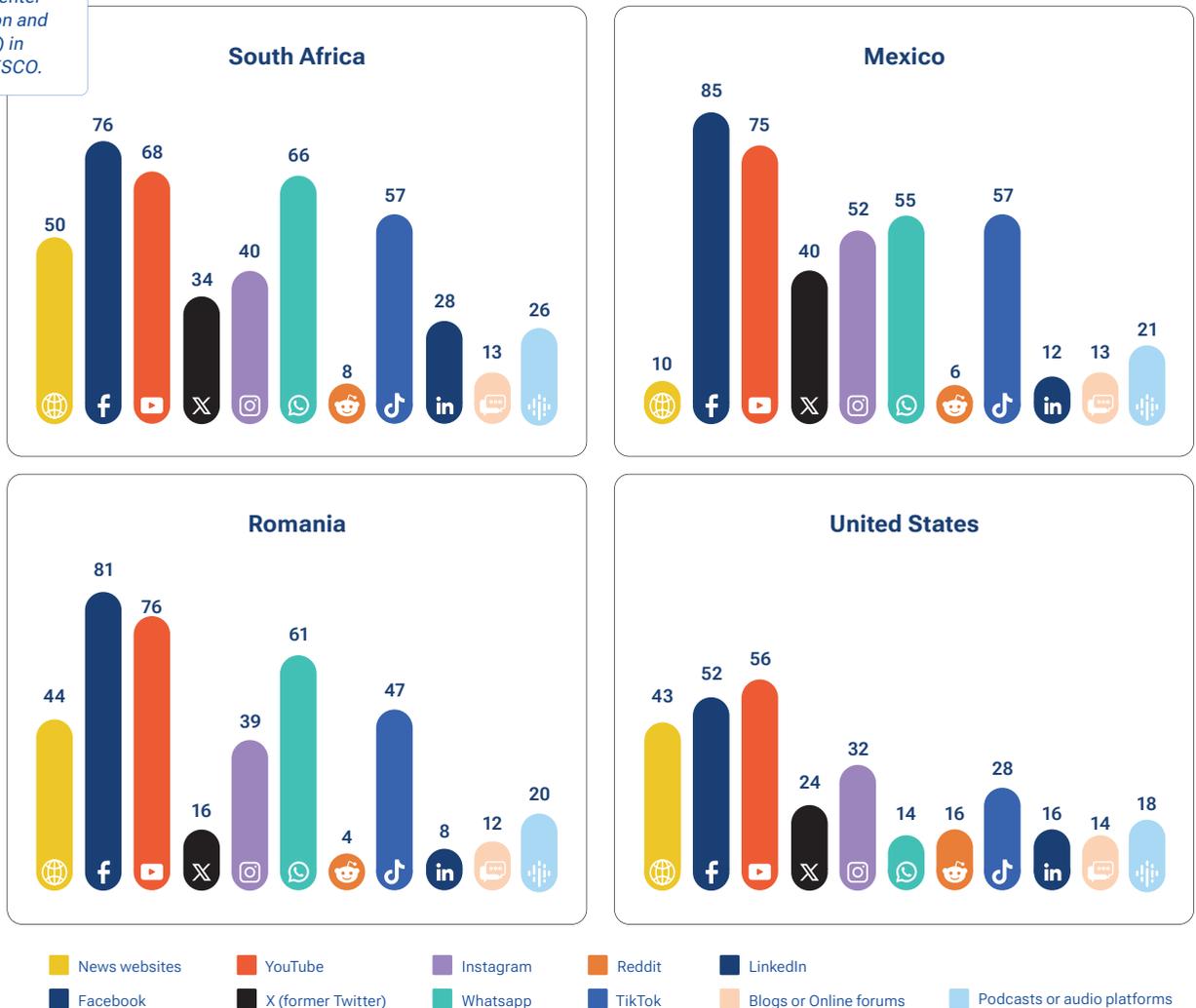
264 Pew Research Center. 2024. *Social Media and News Fact Sheet.* https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/.
265 Reuters Institute. 2025. *Digital News Report.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2025.

Trust in AI

A key finding of this research is that AI tools enjoy a higher trust than government, business or the press, especially in South Africa, Romania, and Mexico. Moreover:

- Universities enjoyed the highest level of confidence across all four countries.

- Television news and YouTube are viewed favorably, though with the exception of TV news in South
- Africa, not as high as AI.
  Business is given more trust than the press, which in turn, is more trusted than government.
- Social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and X tend to score higher than the press, but not nearly as high as AI.

FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ENTITIES PLEASE INDICATE YOUR LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN THEM (% OF A GREAT DEAL + QUITE A LOT).

	South Africa	Mexico	Romania	United States
UNIVERSITIES	55	48	56	42
YOUTUBE	47	35	43	40
TELEVISION NEWS	49	25	34	37
NEWS WEBSITES	43	27	27	37
BUSINESS IN GENERAL	42	30	34	33
FACEBOOK	29	22	19	33
AI TOOLS	49	37	40	33
THE PRESS	29	19	25	32
TIKTOK	34	20	18	28
THE GOVERNMENT	21	14	15	27
X (FORMER TWITTER)	29	24	13	27
MAJOR CORPORATIONS	37	25	23	27
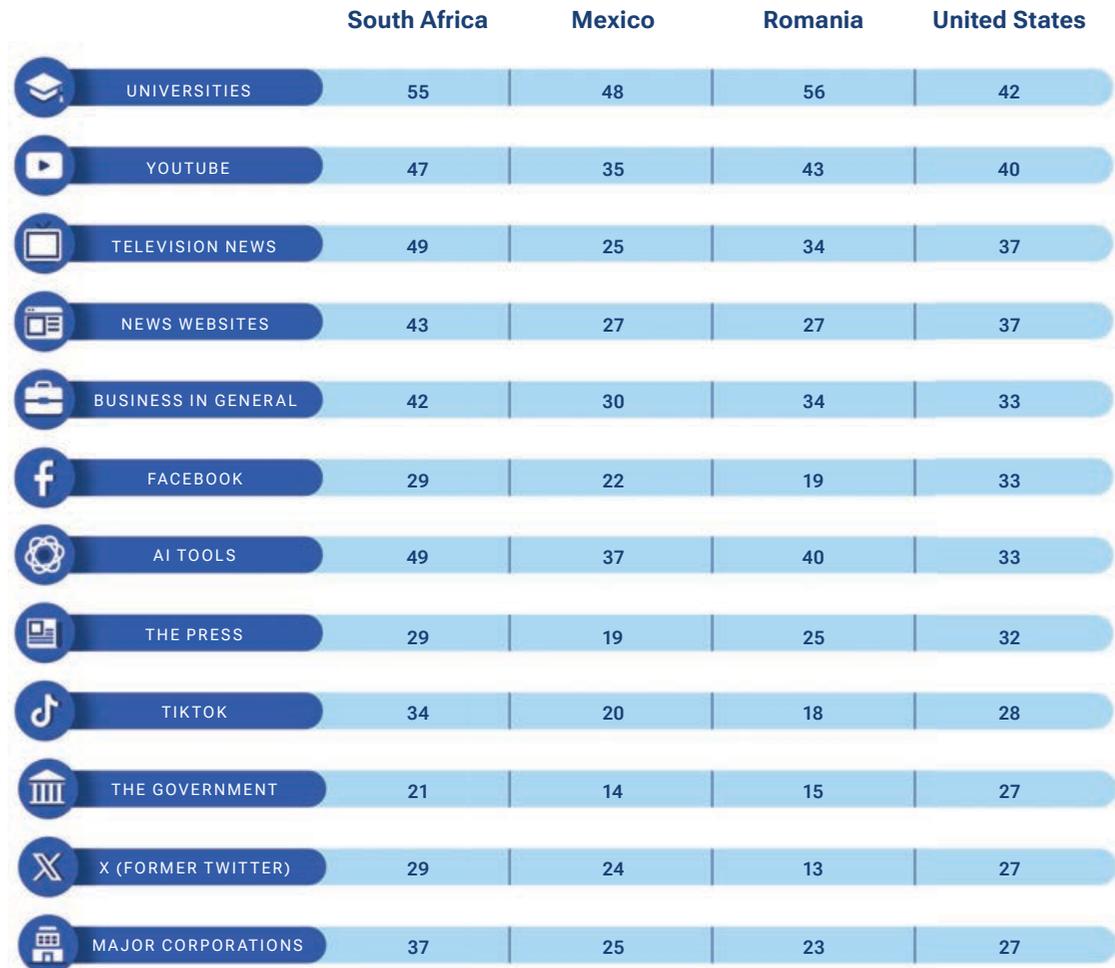
AI and election integrity

Concerns about AI-fueled mis- and disinformation increased during 2024. In Romania and the United States, 62% of respondents reported noticing much more disinformation during the election campaigns, compared to 45% in South Africa and 43% in Mexico.

At the same time, perceptions of AI being used very frequently to create mis- and disinformation were also high, with 51% in the United States, 48% in Romania, 41% in Mexico, and just 24% in South Africa. These findings reflect heightened fears about AI's role in eroding trust in journalism and democratic institutions.

	South Africa	Mexico	Romania	United States
There was much more online disinfo during 2024 election campaign	45	43	62	62
AI used very frequently to create mis/disinfo during 2024 election campaign	24	41	48	51
AI can increase online mis/disinfo	34	32	43	47
AI hurts more than helps - for finding accurate information online	10	8	14	20
AI hurts more than helps - for democracy	15	10	22	32
AI can influence the quality of journalism for the worse	25	24	34	35

FIGURE 5

Comparison of public perception of AI's impact on elections, democratic processes and journalism

Source: University of South Carolina College of Information and Communications, Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest, and UNESCO.
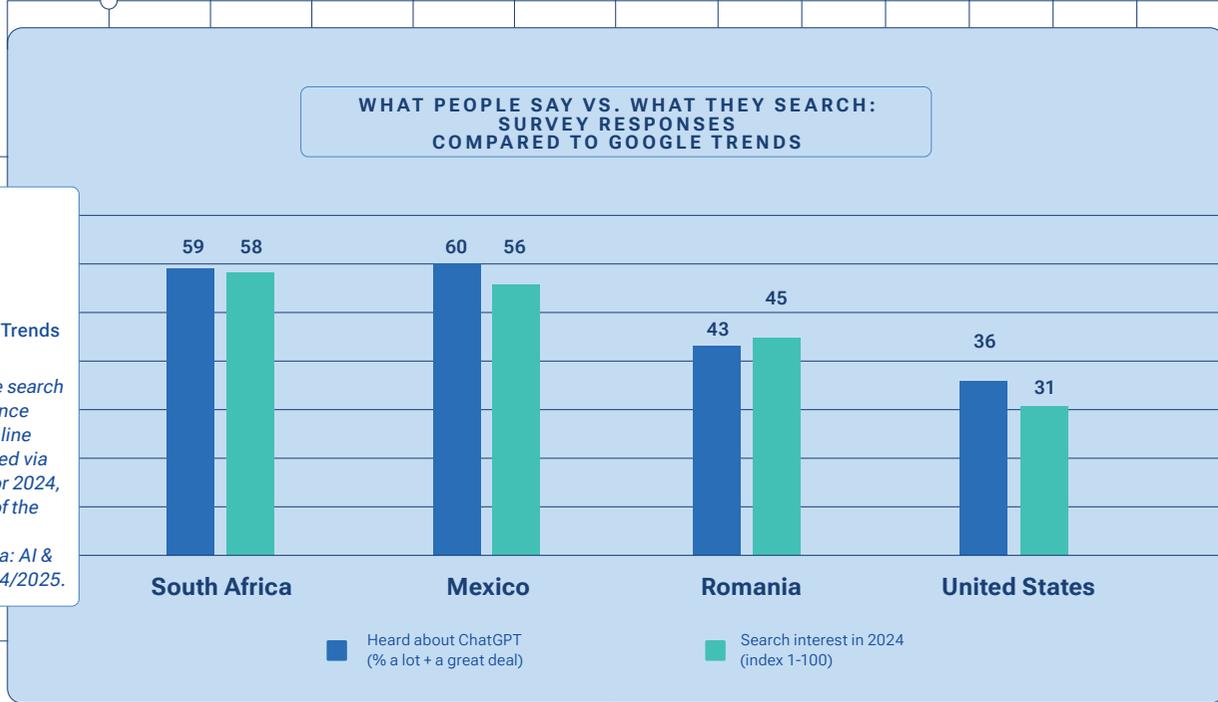
Skepticism toward AI tends to be stronger in countries experiencing heightened electoral activity. Google Trends data shows greater search interest in elections in these regions, which coincides with increased use of AI-powered communication tools, such as online bots. This overlap appears to align with more negative public attitudes toward AI.

The use of AI in political communication appears to fuel broader concerns

Survey results reveal a striking contrast in perceptions, with respondents in the United States and Romania significantly more likely than others to believe that AI poses a threat to democracy and free elections.

In contrast, public perception tends to be more positive in Mexico or South Africa, which did not have recent electoral controversies. In both Mexico and South Africa, AI is more often seen as a helpful tool – particularly for accessing information online as well as supporting fair elections and a healthy democracy.

Ethical expectations and the need for regulation

Ethical considerations related to AI usage differ among countries. In the United States, respondents display heightened ethical awareness.[266] These concerns are not isolated, and recent polling reinforces the trend. The survey confirms that a larger share of American respondents (14%) encountered privacy issues with AI assistants as compared with other countries, where fewer than 10% have encountered privacy issues.

There are varied preferences regarding future regulation. Respondents in South Africa fear over-regulation by government, contrasting sharply with sentiments in the other countries, where apprehensions about insufficient governmental regulation dominate (in the United States, 43% of respondents fear government will not go far enough regulating in AI use). YouGov data also show a large share of Americans want stricter AI regulation.[267]

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266   See similar results in Pew Research Center. McClain, C., Kennedy, B., Gottfried, J., Anderson, M., and Pasquini, G. 2025. How the U.S. Public and AI Experts View Artificial Intelligence. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/03/how-the-us-public-and-ai-experts-view-artificial-intelligence/.

267   Ballard, J. 2025. Americans are increasingly skeptical about AI's effects. *YouGov*. https://today.yougov.com/technology/articles/51803-americans-increasingly-skeptical-about-ai-artificial-intelligence-effects-poll.

What can I help you with?

AS CHATBOTS LIKE CHATGPT BECOME MORE WIDESPREAD, WHICH IS YOUR GREATER CONCERN OF THE FOLLOWING?

	South Africa	Mexico	Romania	United States
Government will go too far regulating their use	44	29	26	25
Government will not go far enough regulating their use	30	49	41	43

■ Government will go too far regulating their use

■ Government will not go far enough regulating their use
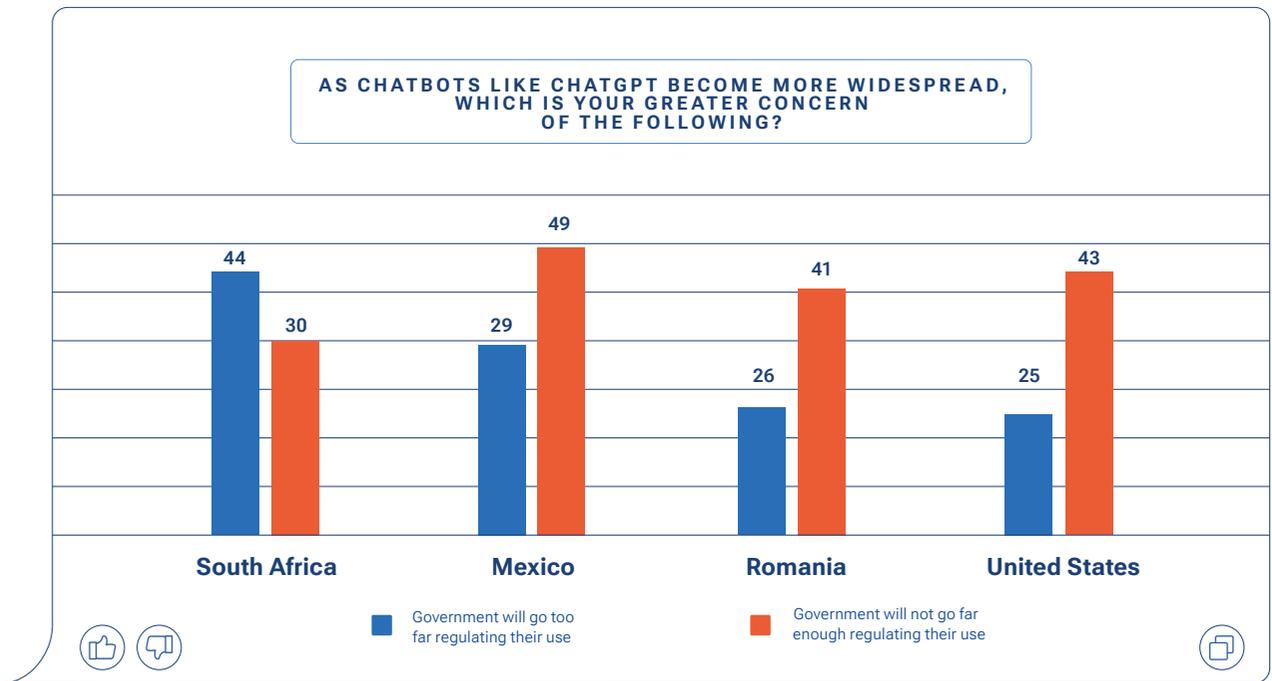
When respondents were asked about the type of AI they would trust, they indicated preferring AI models that emphasize empathy and human-like communication rather than those focused on technical efficiency.

Preferences regarding governance models also vary distinctly: respondents from across the four studied countries lean toward self-regulation by technology companies; additionally, people from Romania and the United States wish for greater governmental involvement, while respondents from the other two countries place responsibility on international organizations, as well.

WHO SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR REGULATING AI ASSISTANTS?

South Africa

13

25

55

7

Mexico

22

58

4

15

Romania

8

48

15

29

United States

34

42

14

10

Governments ■ Tech companies (self-regulation) ■ International organizations, like the United Nations ■ No one (It is not necessary) □
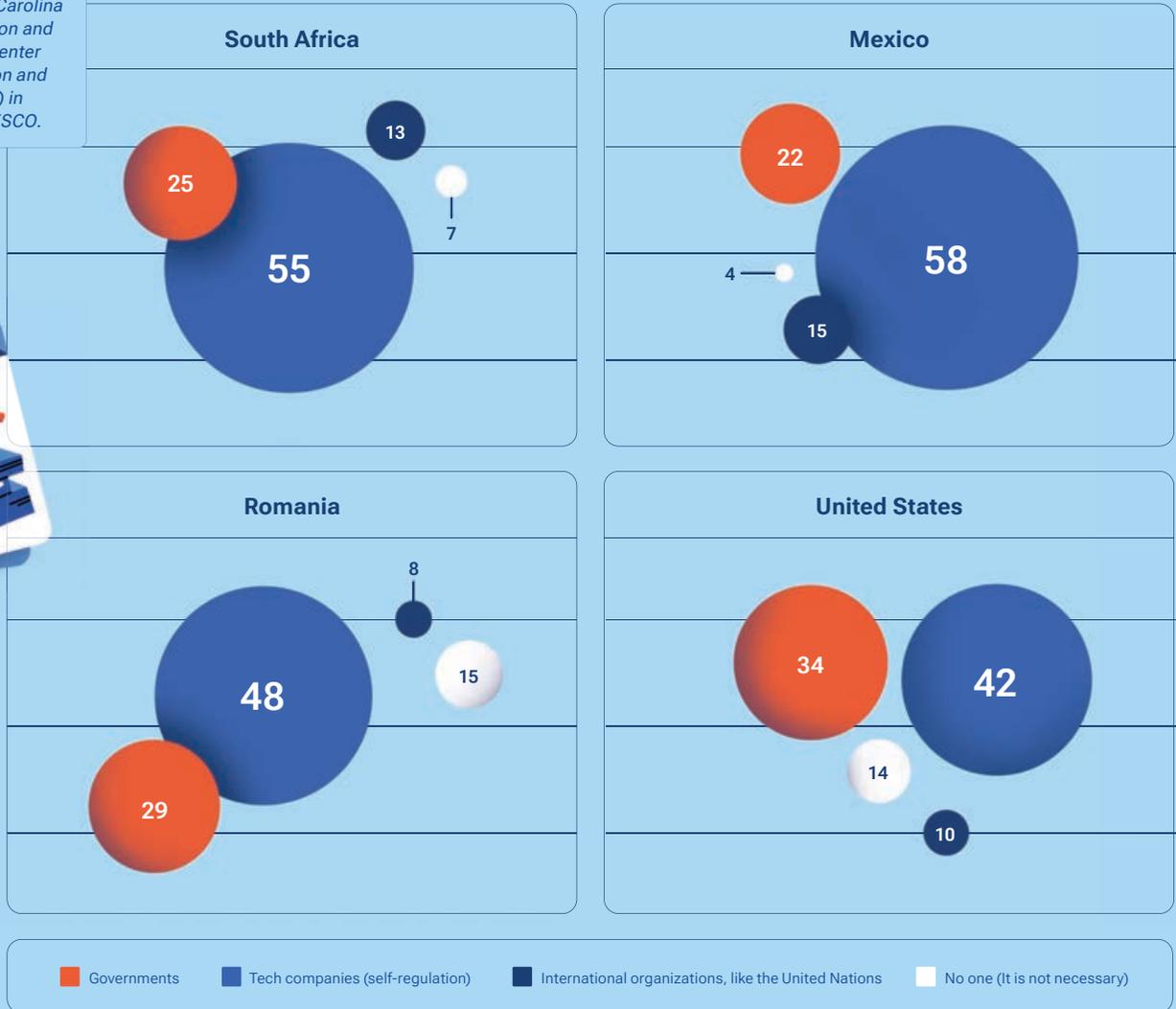
The future of AI

In summary, the surveys suggest people are adopting and adapting to AI faster than many might realize and the need for policies and oversight is compelling.

AI is no longer a distant concept – it has become a visible and influential force in people's everyday lives.

As AI becomes more powerful and accessible, it is also reshaping how people participate in the public sphere – altering not just what information is shared, but who creates it, how it is perceived, and whose voices are heard.

AI is revolutionizing how we understand the world, and how the story of our time is told.

The risk of narrative control

By **Alexei Abrahams,** Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at Hamad bin Khalifa University in Doha, Qatar

No trend in freedom of expression has been more significant in recent decades than the emergence of the internet and social media. Fully 65% of the global population is now using social media.[268]

Over the past two decades, technologies have emerged that both amplify and stymie freedom of expression. In just the last four years, rapid techno-logical advancements – particularly in generative artificial intelligence (AI) – have accelerated this trend. Yet these tools do not operate in a vacuum: their design, deployment, and governance are shaped by the economic and political interests of the companies that control them. This concentration of influence has implications far beyond bias, including how content is curated, how media organizations may become dependent on external platforms, and how human rights principles of freedom of expression can be understood.

In this online world, every word and phrase, every affirmation or hesitation, every commission or omission, is noted. Opaque algorithms determine how information is ranked, recommended, and presented, shaping what users are likely to see (content curation), and enforce limits on what can be shared, hiding or removing material deemed inappropriate (content moderation). Together, these processes influence not only access to information but also the broader contours of public discourse.

In many countries, technology now plays a pivotal role in mediating public discourse. Recognizing this interplay is essential to safeguarding freedom of expression and the right to access to information.

The promise and the challenge

Until the early 2000s, news organizations were the gatekeepers for those seeking information. These media companies, their owners, and even those who make the news tended to be beholden to the political and corporate elite. While this did not in and of itself imply a curtailment of freedom of expression, it did mean that viewpoints that differed were not widely or regularly aired.[269]

With the advent of social media, however, any citizen with a smartphone could instantly disseminate their views worldwide. Almost immediately, this had profound consequences, particularly in countries where the news media had been closely harnessed to the interests of the ruling authorities.[270] In the Arab region, Eastern Europe, and Asia, citizens began to speak out, expressing their grievances and finding that those grievances were widely shared. Such was social media's centrality to these events that for a time it was lauded as 'liberation technology'.[271]

Social media is not liberation technology, however, and notwithstanding the initial success of activists in exploiting it, the darker potential of social media soon emerged. In authoritarian contexts, though activists had been early adopters of social media, regimes soon caught up and learned to exploit social media to their advantage as state-owned media began to open social media accounts to distribute their propaganda.[272]

268 DataReportal. 2025. *Global Social Media Statistics.* https://datareportal.com/social-media-users.
269 Herman, E.S. and Chomsky, N. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.*
270 Tufekci, Z. 2017. *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest. Yale University Press.*
271 Diamond, L. and Plattner, M.F. 2012. *Liberation technology: Social media and the struggle for democracy.* JHU Press.
272 Jones, M.O. 2022. *Digital authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, disinformation and social media.* Oxford University Press. See also ITESO. 2020. Ataques selectivos en Twitter. Estrategias de desprestigio y descalificación II [Selective Attacks on Twitter. Strategies of Defamation and Disqualification II]. Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara. https://signalab.mx/2020/06/17/ataques-selectivos-ii/.

Governments and politicians used trolls and bots to promote their views and harass activists, often interfering with democratic processes in their own, and in some instances, other countries.[273]

In addition, state intelligence services began to surveil social media to map out activist networks and identify the most influential dissidents to target with repression or co-option.[274] In short, authorities soon began asserting themselves over what had briefly been a free space for political dissent.

The consequences of an online world without rules

By contrast in some democratic countries, the problem with social media was not overbearing authorities, but rather lawlessness. If the total centralization of power in the hands of the news media had erred on the side of stifling freedom of expression, then the total decentralization under social media erred in the other direction, unleashing people's basest tendencies. Mass shooters and white supremacists seemed to draw violent energy from their social media followings.[275] Scams, hoaxes, harassment, hate speech, disinformation, among other online harms, ran rampant. Civility and nuance in online exchange were eschewed in favor of polarizing repartee.[276] It quickly became obvious that clear, cogent, constructive political discourse could not be achieved on social media without some kind of moderation against disruptive interjections. Thus, the anarchic excesses of social media in democracies gradually created pressure on the social media companies to moderate content.[277] To many critics focused on democratic discourse, social media

had prioritized openness without striking a balance with safety and accountability.[278] However, this well-intentioned advocacy aligned with the wishes of some authoritarian governments, who quickly borrowed the vocabulary of content moderation to pass laws criminalizing political dissent on social media. A pattern emerged that has played out repeatedly: rules for content moderation are shaped by the policy priorities of a few countries (mostly those where the companies have their origins), without reference to how they will affect freedom of expression for the global majority.

Using AI to moderate social media content

With growing awareness of online harms, social media companies found themselves under pressure from governments and civil society to step up content moderation.[279] Decisions once made in the open by political institutions were now being taken by companies behind closed doors, using opaque and proprietary AI systems to enforce ever-shifting rules.[280] Content moderation is an umbrella term for a variety of interventions aimed at censoring or otherwise restricting content. In the direst cases, this might involve suspending the author's social media account or forcibly removing the content. But content moderation can also take the form of restricting content visibility, imposing frictions on sharing the content, or adding disclaimers or warning labels around the content.[281]

273 Bradshaw, S. and Howard, P.N. 2019. *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation.* Oxford Internet Institute. https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf.

274 Michaelsen, M. 2020. *The Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit and Its Silencing Effects*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/digital-transnational-repression-toolkit-and-its-silencing-effects. See also Human Rights Watch. 2017. *China: Big Data Fuels Crackdown in Minority Region*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/19/china-police-big-data-systems-violate-privacy-target-dissent.

275 Chayka, K. 2022. The Online Spaces That Enable Mass Shooters. *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/the-online-spaces-that-enable-mass-shooters.

276 Benkler, Y., Faris, R., and Roberts, H. 2018. *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics.* Oxford University Press.

277 Perrigo, B. 2019. U.K.'s New Internet Rules Could Change Facebook Forever. *Time*. https://time.com/5566501/facebook-regulation-zuckerberg/.

278 Zuckerberg, M. 2019. The Internet Needs New Rules. Let's Start in These Four Areas. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mark-zuckerberg-the-internet-needs-new-rules-lets-start-in-these-four-areas/2019/03/29/9e6f0504-521a-11e9-a3f7-78b7525a8d5f_story.html.

279 Serhan, Y. 2024. Exclusive: Tech Companies Are Failing to Keep Elections Safe, Rights Groups Say. *Time*. https://time.com/6967334/ai-elections-disinformation-meta-tiktok/.

280 Kaye, D. 2019. *Speech Police: The Global Struggle to Govern the Internet*. Columbia Global Reports. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fx4h8v.

Social media companies typically undertake this task with supreme reluctance. The primary motive – indeed, as they would say, their fiduciary responsibility – is to maximize profit and shareholder value. The business model for achieving this, widely known as 'surveillance capitalism',[282] involves harvesting and mining user data to broker targeted advertisements. The more users engage with content on the platform, the more data can be harvested from them, and the more accurately they can be targeted with advertisements.

Accordingly, social media companies prioritize maximizing user engagement. Research shows that some of the most engaging content on social media turns out to be violent, shocking, polarizing and rude – precisely the sort of content companies are asked to moderate.[283] This tension between corporate and public interests lies at the heart of content moderation and complicates the already arduous technical challenges endemic to implementing moderation at scale.[284]

The primary difficulty for the platforms is to determine which content ought to be moderated.[285] Overly zealous content moderation risks stifling freedom of expression. An overly permissive scheme, however, permits chaotic discourse that inhibits constructive exchange. Charting a middle course would be technically challenging in and of itself, even if everyone was perfectly aligned on the value of doing so.
In reality, however, governments, the private sector, and civil society, often have different views on what kinds of speech ought to be permissible. Given these difficulties, social media companies have tried a variety of approaches:

Ignoring

For starters, social media companies sometimes shrug off responsibility for content moderation altogether, suggesting any act of moderation is a violation of the right to freedom of expression or of the platform's neutrality and consequentially, non-liability. One messaging platform has become known for its laissez faire attitude towards moderation.[286] Similarly, a major social media platform faced criticism for ignoring hate speech and misinformation during the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, where inflammatory posts went largely unchecked, contributing to real-world harm.[287]

Outsourcing

Less brazenly, social media companies have sought to minimize their responsibility over content moderation decisions by shifting the onus to external reviewers. For example, social media apps such as Instagram or X include a feature by which ordinary social media users may flag content they find objectionable, potentially triggering an internal review by the company's moderation team.[288] Governments may also flag content they find objectionable, and their complaints typically receive priority treatment. For example, the graphic below shows the number of Facebook content moderation takedown requests issued by governments between 2022 and 2024.

281 Experts will sometimes distinguish content moderation from content curation. While content moderation pertains to the permissibility of content, content curation pertains to the ranking of content, and thus how frequently or prominently the content may be encountered on social media. In practice, however, so much social media content is published every day that if content is down-ranked too much by a recommendation algorithm, it will not be encountered and is therefore as good as censored. Thus, for the remainder of this essay we will think of content curation as a form of content moderation.

282 Zuboff, S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* New York, Public Affairs.

283 Rathje et al. 2021. *Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.* Vol. 118, No. 26 e2024292118. https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2024292118.

284 Alshamy et al. 2024. Surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state: a comparative institutional analysis. *Const Polit Econ.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s10602-024-09438-z.

285 Isaac, M. 2019. Mark Zuckerberg Says Facebook Can't Regulate Itself, Explained. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/technology/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-regulation-explained.html.

286 Verdict. 2021. Why Telegram Needs to Get Serious About Content Moderation. https://www.verdict.co.uk/telegram-needs-content-moderation/?cf-view.

287 Stecklow, S. 2018. Why Facebook Is Losing the War on Hate Speech in Myanmar. *Reuters Investigates.* https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/.

288 X Help Center. 2025. *About Community Notes* on X. https://help.x.com/en/using-x/community-notes. See also Meta. 2025. *Community Notes.* https://www.meta.com/technologies/community-notes/?srsltid=AfmBOootMeCO6LdVapLt42fnB0_r79hPlZKzIsWJ7vH4kHa9_8z-tGMR.

Leaving offensive content up until stakeholders complain, however, is risky for a platform's public image. In any case, the sheer scale and speed at which social media content is published means that manual review simply is not feasible. Instead, social media companies have often turned to AI-driven approaches where machines moderate content in an effort to preempt complaints.[289]

Unlike humans, machines can run tirelessly 24/7, in parallel, while computing their decisions far faster and more consistently than humans can. AI can keep up with the rate and volume at which social media content is published. At first blush, AI seems to solve the problem of content moderation.

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289   Douek, E. 2021. More Content Moderation Is Not Always Better. *Wired.* https://www.wired.com/story/more-content-moderation-not-always-better/.

BOX 2

How does AI content moderation work?

There are basically two ways that AI can be used to moderate content: rules-based systems and machine learning-based systems. In rules-based moderation, developers manually specify a list of keywords, phrases, or patterns that trigger moderation actions – essentially encoding a checklist of what is and is not allowed. While straightforward, this method is rigid and easy to circumvent.

In contrast, machine learning moderation uses AI trained on large datasets of labeled examples to recognize content deemed problematic. Instead of specifying rules, humans can articulate the overall directive – 'limit the visibility of violent content' – and then delegate to the machine the task of filling in the details of how to operationalize that directive.

One needs only to train it on a substantial quantity of examples that should or should not be censored. With enough of these examples (known as training data) and enough computing power and time, the machine is eventually able to infer the underlying moderation rules without needing a human to spell them out explicitly. In essence, the machine learns to emulate ever more closely the decision-making patterns of human content moderators.

In practice, however, AI falls far short of the ideal of an impartial moderator. First, AI will be a biased content moderator insofar as it is prompted to enforce a biased directive. For example, if AI is directed to flag and reduce the visibility of violent content, it may end up censoring important information that reveals possible war crimes at a time when international audiences are relying on social media coverage of events due to the curtailment of news media access.[290]

Thus, involving machines in the content moderation pipeline does not necessarily make moderation any more neutral or objective. On the contrary, it just makes censorship scalable.[291] The AI will dutifully, pitilessly, and relentlessly enforce that biased directive, anticipating and thwarting all permutations and circumventions.[292] Far from reducing bias, the delegation of content moderation to a machine actually means our political biases could be amplified.

But what about when the directive is more neutral sounding, like 'censor all content supportive of terrorism'? In fact, it turns out AI can be biased even when the directive seems neutral. AI is trained on data generated by humans. Insofar as we are biased, the AI learns to recreate those same biases. Moreover, AI can only train on the data humans choose to feed it. If the data sources skew to one particular cultural milieu or another, the AI will reflect that parochiality in its subsequent behavior. So even when the directive is seemingly impartial, biases baked into the data can be learned by the machine and manifest themselves during deployment.

Large language models (LLMs), for example, are pre-trained on massive amounts of text lifted from the internet before being fine-tuned on labeled data for a specific task. Very roughly speaking, one could say that an LLM learns to speak a language – say English – during the pre-training phase and then learns how to perform a specific task like content moderation during the fine-tuning phase.[293] But again, an LLM does not learn English through an explicit list of grammatical rules, but rather by reading billions of sentences of English scraped from the internet and then learning to emulate those choices of vocabulary and turns of phrase – even if they are wrong.

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290 Goodman, J. and Korenyuk, M. 2023. AI: War crimes evidence erased by social media platforms. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-65755517; Perrigo, B. 2020. These Tech Companies Managed to Eradicate ISIS Content. But They're Also Erasing Crucial Evidence of War Crimes. *TIME*. https://time.com/5798001/facebook-youtube-algorithms-extremism/?.

291 Knight, W. 2021. *How* Censorship Can Influence Artificial Intelligence. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/how-censorship-can-influence-artificial-intelligence.

292 Gomez, J. F., Machado, C. V., Monteiro Paes, L. and Calmon, F. P. 2024. *Algorithmic Arbitrariness in Content Moderation*. https://doi.org/10.1145/3630106.3659036.

293 Raschka, S. 2024. *Build A Large Language Model from Scratch.* O'Reilly Press.

AI does not know what is right or wrong

To state the problem plainly, *AI only knows the norm*. If people often make a grammatical mistake, AI will conclude it is correct. If CEOs are normally white men, AI will associate whiteness and maleness with authority. Consider the remarks of an employee of a social media company that demonstrate the cultural limitations of AI moderation:

In Western media, Arabic phrases, such as 'Allahu Akbar' [God is great] mostly appear in the context of terrorism. When companies train AI models on such articles, the models learn these negative associations.[294]

In the Arab world, the phrase is completely innocuous, and it has a completely different connotation. One often encounters it in a variety of contexts, starting of course from the regular call to prayer recited or aired by minarets five times a day, and it carries no causal, logical connection to terrorism. However, if the training data are mostly drawn from a particular cultural context, the AI will learn the norms of that context and then perpetuate them. If the norms are in any way biased or corrupted, so too will be the AI.[295]

Even when the directive is something neutral-sounding, like 'censor all content supportive of terrorism', the AI will enforce that directive by censoring content that tends to co-appear with the word 'terrorism' in the training data – including innocuous phrases. AI has no notion of what is right or what ought to be independent of what is normal or common in its training data. It is purely an associative thinker, and in this sense, defies what we normally mean by the words 'thinker' or 'intelligence'. Indeed, a less confusing description would be that AI is an associator.

What can be done?

There are broadly two ways to think about solutions. First, we can accept the current model of centralized content moderation and try to come up with socio-technical improvements to make it function better. Alternatively, we can imagine decentralizing content moderation itself, shifting the power and responsibility from a handful of multinational corporations to a wider set of participants.[296]

Technical solutions to bias in AI

Insofar as AI learns false associations from an overly parochial training dataset, diversifying that dataset would be a natural way to address the problem. Indeed, we as humans can easily relate to this pattern ourselves. Someone who has never traveled far, has grown up around people with similar backgrounds, and who has only ever consumed a particular category of books or media, may adopt a worldview reflective of that parochiality. Once they begin to read or travel more widely, or encounter people with different backgrounds, they may find themselves reconsidering their opinions.

Analogously, as AI is trained on a more diverse set of data, it sheds its parochial associations and reaches a more encompassing model of reality. So it makes sense to permanently involve local civil society in content moderation pipelines to make sure AI is being fed data with sufficient contextual nuance and to stay abreast of evolving vernaculars.[297]

294 Shahid et al. 2025. *Think Outside the Data: Colonial Biases and Systemic Issues in Automated Moderation Pipelines for Low-Resource Languages.* Cornell University. arxiv.org/abs/2501.13836.

295 GPT-3 analogized "Muslim" to "terrorist" in 23 percent of test completions, illustrating how LLMs learn word associations like "terrorist" through colloquial and biased usage. See Abid, A., Farooqi, M. and Zou, J. 2021. Persistent AntiMuslim Bias in Large Language Models.

296 Friedl, P. Morgan, J. 2024. Decentralised Content Moderation. *Internet Policy Review.* https://policyreview.info/glossary/decentralised-content-moderation.

297 Chen, C., and Sundar, S. S. 2024. Communicating and combating algorithmic bias: effects of data diversity, labeler diversity, performance bias, and user feedback on AI trust. *Human–Computer Interaction.* https://doi.org/10.1080/07370024.2024.2392494.

Limitations to technical solutions

A central difficulty in repairing centralized algorithmic content moderation lies in the fundamental inconsistencies in how humans describe some of our most urgent and fraught political topics. The word 'terrorist' illustrates this today, as did the word 'communist' a few generations ago.

Authorities can have a legitimate interest in AI to scan social media for terroristic content and then purge it. The textbook definition of a terrorist is a non-state actor who uses violence to achieve political goals. In practice, however, the word 'terrorist' is rarely spoken in such a disciplined, neutral fashion. Sometimes, non-violent protesters are branded as terrorists. Other times, violent non-state actors have been labeled terrorists, only to be remembered later as freedom fighters, after whom we name our boulevards, and whose faces we print on our currencies. Moreover, countries have lists of terrorist organizations that often are changing and sometimes are contradictory.

LLMs learn the word 'terrorist' through these colloquial usages. Insofar as our usage of the term is value-laden, biased, and inconsistent, LLMs absorb and reproduce all that. Training LLMs on a wider and richer database does not solve this issue, because ultimately, there is little to no consensus on the concept itself.

This indeterminacy is not unique to the concept of terrorism but extends across many of the most contested areas of free speech. When content is judged to fall into categories such as incitement, hate speech, or extremism, the consequences can be significant. Yet the definitions of these categories often remain fluid, creating the potential for their abuse in ways that may impact freedom of expression.

Given enough data, AI can converge on the meaning of a coherent concept. When a concept is incoherent, however, no amount of data or computing power can rescue it. Many of the contentious concepts at the collision point of content moderation and free speech are, to some degree or other, incoherent. It is as if the things we feel most strongly about are also the things we are least able to define. Until humans themselves reach a consensus on their meaning, machines will be of little use.

Decentralizing power in the social media landscape

The formidable difficulties of centralized algorithmic content moderation invite us to consider whether decentralizing power and responsibility might offer a more effective path forward. Some experts now suggest locally adapted systems, trained on regional data, that can display 'contextual fairness' in moderation decisions.[298]

The nature of social media itself is evolving. It ranges from broad public communication channels to micro-targeted networks where content is tailored to specific audiences.[299] At the same time, private social messaging is growing, providing new channels for communication that are harder to monitor and moderate.[300]

From a business perspective, it is the prerogative of the companies to allow or disallow certain kinds of content – or to promote or demote certain opinions or topics. However, these platforms are so central to our means of expression that the way they operate is a matter of public good and a political issue, a struggle that is now playing out over several dimensions.

298   Elyounes, A. d. 2019. *Contextual Fairness: A Legal and Policy Analysis of Algorithmic Fairness.* Harvard Law School, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3478296.

299   Becker et al. 2020. Balancing Spreads of Influence in a Social Network. *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence.* https://doi.org/10.1609/aaai.v34i01.5327.

300   Sanders, R. 2025. The Great Migration from Public Social to Private Social Media. *Simplilearn.* https://www.simplilearn.com/public-social-to-private-social-media-article.

Decentralized oversight

First, there is an ongoing struggle over data access. Public interest researchers worldwide are currently unable to make an objective assessment of the prevalence of online harms (disinformation, hate speech, etc.) or the prevalence of AI-generated content.[301] So they cannot document the incidence and consequences of content moderation.

The reason for this is lack of transparency and restricted data access. Particularly over the past half-decade, major social media companies have become very stingy about sharing data with journalists, scholars, or policymakers. X used to run a generous and free application programming interface (API), on the strength of which thousands of research articles were published. After a change in the ownership of the company, however, it eliminated academic API access and emasculated the free-tier API.[302] Reddit followed suit,[303] as did Meta with the closing in August 2024 of the CrowdTangle API for Facebook and Instagram.[304] With the exceptions of Bluesky and Telegram and the partial exception of YouTube and TikTok, access to social media data has substantially diminished, significantly frustrating public interest research.

Additional limitations include geographic restrictions for platforms like YouTube and TikTok: most data is accessible only from Europe and North America, with Africa and Asia largely excluded.[305]

Creating governance mechanisms to compel social media companies to open up data access to public interest researchers would be a powerful first step.[306] As long as social media companies monopolize data access, they are able to monopolize the conversation about online harms, content moderation, and freedom of expression. Without hard data, the public is in a weak position to argue the importance or urgency of these issues. Opening up data access to scholars and journalists would move the conversation forward significantly. Academia and civil society act as 'watchdogs' for detecting online harms and bias in content moderation, but their capacity to fulfill this role hinges on access.

In lieu of authorized API data access, some public interest researchers have turned to scraping: forcibly seizing content from social media, often by using fake, automated accounts. Such work is ethically and legally fraught. Human-rights respecting governance systems can offer researchers the ability to do this kind of work and would encourage more researchers to get involved and reduce the uncertainty and risk around such activities.

Decentralized content moderation

But what if data access is granted, and public interest researchers ultimately find that there is no single content moderation scheme that fosters healthy political discourse globally? Perhaps we accept that content moderation cannot be done justly and sensitively without involving public interest researchers, civil society, marginalized communities, and so forth.[307] But what if we must further contend with the real possibility that even then, after involving all these various stakeholders, the essential indeterminacy of our most contentious and politicized debates cannot be centrally resolved?

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301 Rathje, S. 2024. To tackle social media harms, mandate data access for researchers. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02853-0.

302 Barnes, J. 2023. Twitter Ends Its Free API: Here's Who Will Be Affected. *Forbes*.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenaebarnes/2023/02/03/twitter-ends-its-free-api-heres-who-will-be-affected/.

303 Maxwell, T. 2023. Popular Reddit Client Apollo Will Shut Down After Talks Over New Developer Fees Got 'Ugly.' *Business Insider*.
https://businessinsider.com/reddit-client-apollo-shut-down-after-talks-got-ugly-2023-6.

304 Elliott, V. 2024. Meta Kills a Crucial Transparency Tool At the Worst Possible Time. *Wired*.
https://www.wired.com/story/meta-kills-crucial-transparency-tool-worst-possible-time/.

305 Hendrix, J. 2024. Can An Alliance Get Access to Platform Data for African Researchers? *TechPolicy.Press*.
https://www.techpolicy.press/can-an-alliance-get-access-to-platform-data-for-african-researchers/.

306 UNESCO. 2023. *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Access to Information through a Multistakeholder Approach*.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387339.

307 Udupa, S., Maronikolakis, A., and Wisiorek, A. 2023. Ethical scaling for content moderation: Extreme speech and the (in) significance of artificial intelligence.
Big Data & Society. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20539517231172424.

If this is the case, content moderation must itself be decentralized. And there are already social media platforms, like Reddit or Mastodon, that pursue this arrangement. Reddit is an app that consists of many subreddits, which tend to delimit different topics of conversation – cats, Star Wars, carp fishing, and so on. Each subreddit has community rules that participants are expected to follow, and moderators that enforce these rules. Offenders may be kicked out of a subreddit. Compared to X, where by default anyone can encounter your content, Reddit embraces decentralization, showing users only content from threads (subreddits) to which they have explicitly subscribed.

Mastodon takes decentralization to its ultimate conclusion. Whereas Reddit functions as a single umbrella app containing multiple communities, Mastodon is more skeletal, allowing users to run their own servers and open their own Mastodon instances or channels, each with its own set of moderation rules.[308]

Limitations

If the appeal of decentralization is that it liberates us from the opaque and unaccountable algorithmic content regimes of multinational corporations, then the drawback is that we quickly find ourselves on our own – both in the sense of being responsible for our own moderation choices, and in the sense of being alone in the company of very diminished circles. The recommendation algorithms of certain digital platforms have long been criticized for tending to encourage people to sort into echo chambers, surrounded by content and users that reinforce their preexisting views.

The Reddit or Mastodon model structurally fosters like-minded communities from the start, with users self-selecting into groups that align with their interests or beliefs. Such an approach minimizes strife around freedom of expression by surrendering to a fragmented public.It also is a challenge for social movements. A tight-knit group of activists may

appreciate the opportunity to run their own Mastodon server free from surveillance, but when they want to get their message out to a wider public, they need a broader forum.

The way forward

To improve this situation will require involving civil society and decentralizing power over these technologies. This may range from minimally invasive solutions, like incorporating civil society into corporate content moderation pipelines, to more radical reforms such as decentralizing content moderation or even the architecture of social media itself. In this process, it is critical to be guided by established human rights frameworks, notably the three-part test – which requires any restriction on freedom of expression should be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate – as articulated under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Equally, the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence[309] offers valuable guidance on balancing the need to combat hate speech while safeguarding freedom of expression, particularly by emphasizing context, intent, and the likelihood of harm when assessing speech.

Under all circumstances, facilitating data access so that journalists and scholars can provide independent oversight will be crucial. Freedom of expression inevitably leads to disagreement and sometimes even violence. That is why these issues should remain open to analysis and debate, rather than being buried beneath the digital town square by opaque, automated processes.

308   Bono et al. 2024. An exploration of decentralized moderation on Mastodon. ACM Web Science Conference. https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3614419.3644016.

309   United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2012. *The Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/outcome-documents/rabat-plan-action.

Journalism resilience amid technological upheaval

By the **International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM),** a multilateral initiative designed to effectively diagnose and address the challenges facing public interest media in low- and middle-income countries.

Everyone should have access to high quality information, irrespective of geography, income and language. In the era of AI and the dominance of online platforms, equipping independent journalism with the means to adapt and sustain high quality, trustworthy information has never mattered more.

Launched in 2022 in response to the devastating financial crisis facing independent media worldwide, the International Fund for Public Interest Media provides a multilateral response to increase funding to public interest media organizations in low- and middle-income countries and help develop new, sustainable business models.

Since our launch, we have seen firsthand the impact of core, flexible funding for media organizations as well as the critical need to deploy capital quickly, efficiently, and safely to a large number of grantees.

According to the IFPIM's 2025 survey, 93% of 47 grantees across 19 countries reported that core funding provided had a 'significant' or 'considerable' impact on their financial sustainability, and 62% said it helped strengthen their editorial independence.

Among 32 grantees from 17 countries that received support between December 2022 and June 2024, 63% increased their total revenue in 2024 by an average of 25%, while 53% grew their non-grant revenue by an average of 8%. At the same time, 88% expanded their audience reach and 69% boosted their social media engagement.

Such support provides an important lifeline for media organizations and their ability to sustain themselves, shielding their editorial independence from economic and political threats.

Around the world, people are embracing emerging technologies to seek, receive, and share information in new ways. In recent elections, young voters built K-pop-style campaigns for presidential candidates.[310] Voters quizzed WhatsApp-based chatbots to verify election-related information.[311] And political parties used AI-powered translation tools to communicate with communities across linguistic divisions.[312]

The 2025 Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* [313] documents how younger users are increasingly bypassing news websites in favor of social media and other digital platforms – and increasingly turning to AI chatbots and interfaces – to consume news and information. Instead of professional journalists, many increasingly get their news from content creators and 'ordinary people' on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Despite concerns about the proliferation and impact of false and misleading information online,[314] content creators are playing an important role in places where audiences are less likely to trust or relate to traditional media.[315]

310   Li, H. 2024. How K-pop played a role in Indonesia's presidential election. *Semafor.* https://www.semafor.com/article/02/14/2024/k-pops-role-in-the-indonesian-elections.

311   Central Electoral. 2024. Nueva versión del chatbot del INE en WhatsApp permitirá verificar información sobre elecciones 2024 [New version of INE's WhatsApp chatbot will allow verification of information about the 2024 elections]. https://centralelectoral.ine.mx/2024/04/17/nueva-version-del-chatbot-del-ine-en-whatsapp-permitira-verificar-informacion-sobre-elecciones-2024/; Meedan. 2024. *Meedan Final Report*. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/615df23c67b201abbe36c0d7/67464987b3390597d4af7da0_Meedan_INE%20Report_EN_04.pdf.

312   Gupta, N., and Mathews, N. 2024. India's Experiments With AI in the 2024 Elections: The Good, The Bad & The In-between. *Tech Policy Press*. https://www.techpolicy.press/indias-experiments-with-ai-in-the-2024-elections-the-good-the-bad-the-inbetween/.

313   Reuters Institute. 2025. *Digital News Report 2025.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf.

314   An Ipsos study commissioned by UNESCO in 2023 found that 85% of respondents across 16 countries expressed concern about the impact and influence of disinformation. See Ipsos. 2023. *Survey on the impact of online disinformation and hate speech*. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/11/unesco_ipsos_survey.pdf?hub=71542.

315   Reuters Institute. 2025. *Digital News Report 2025*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf.

Young people in the Global South are leading these trends.[316] In South Africa and Brazil, a recent survey suggests there is significantly higher confidence that digital technologies and AI can help people stay informed than in the United States and Australia.[317] For those who report and produce news – whether in traditional newsrooms or as content creators – these technologies present opportunities to respond to the public's need and desire for timely and trustworthy information. They are helping newsrooms streamline operations, analyze data, and improve audience engagement and content.

BOX 3

Grantees experiment with AI

IFPIM partners in the Global South are using technology to strengthen journalism. In Lebanon, for instance, the digital media platform Daraj introduced an AI-powered impact tracking tool to gather deeper insights on user engagement and uncover the broader impact of their work, such as policy changes, legal actions, and community mobilization.

In Costa Rica, the investigative outlet *La Voz de Guanacaste* developed GuanaData, a tool that combines machine learning and AI that has helped uncover major cases of corruption at the municipal level.[319]

While some newsrooms are experimenting with the possibilities offered by generative AI, many lack the resources, capacity, and infrastructure to fully invest and take advantage of these technological developments.[320] Across the industry, newsrooms are grappling with the rapid decline of visibility of their content on digital platforms and AI-mediated spaces, posing an existential threat to their underlying business models. News websites have seen sharp declines in traffic from major social media platforms that have deprioritized (or outright banned) news links.[321] Search engines have integrated generative AI features that further disincentivize users from clicking on external links – or prioritize global websites at the expense of local or niche experts.[322] As AI-generated answers take hold, publishers are reporting sharp drops in search traffic to their websites.[323] Moreover, researchers have found that AI search tools are 'all bad at citing news.'[324]

Many cash-strapped outlets in lower-income markets have been forced to close. According to a mapping of independent digital media organizations in Latin America by the Global Project Oasis, the rate of media outlets that have stopped publishing has accelerated considerably over the past two years amid economic and political instability, shifting donor priorities, and social media changes affecting referrals to media sites. Between 2015-2024, 678 Latin American digital outlets were removed from their directory

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316 According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, the fastest shifts in online platform use are happening in the Global South. For instance, the top ten markets where users are turning to TikTok for news are in the Global South. The largest proportion of TikTok news consumers are between 18 and 24 years old, with rapid growth seen in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. Reuters Institute. 2024. *Digital News Report 2024*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024; Férdeline, A. 2021. *Cima Digital Report – Youth and the News in Five Charts*. Center for International Media Assistance. https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/youth-and-the-news-in-five-charts-what-do-young-peoples-habits-in-developing-countries-tell-us-about-the-future-of-the-news/.

317 Center for News, Technology & Innovation. 2025. *What the Public Wants from Journalism in the Age of AI: A Four Country Survey*. https://innovating.news/2024-public-survey/.

318 Radcliffe, D. 2025. *Journalism in the AI era: Opportunities and challenges in the Global South and emerging economies*. Thomson Reuters Foundation. https://www.trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/TRF-Insights-Journalism-in-the-AI-Era.pdf; Mitchell et al. 2025. *What the Public Wants from Journalism in the Age of AI: A Four Country Survey*. Center for News, Technology & Innovation. https://innovating.news/2024-public-survey/.

319 Dara and La Voz de Guanacaste are IFPIM grantees. See full list IFPIM's grantees: https://ifpim.org/our-grantees.

320 Radcliffe, D., op. cit.; Mitchell et al, op. cit.

321 Ben Cheikh, S. 2023. Facebook's news retreat: A death knell for independent MENA local news. *Global Voices*. https://globalvoices.org/2023/09/25/facebooks-news-retreat-a-death-knell-for-independent-mena-local-news/.

322 Sistrix. 2024. AI vs. SEO: What does the Future of Search look like? https://www.sistrix.com/blog/ai-vs-seo-what-does-the-future-of-search-look-like/. See also Goodwin, D. 2025. *Not appearing in Google AI Overviews significantly harms webpages: Study*. Search Engine Land. https://searchengineland.com/google-ai-overviews-harms-webpages-study-452605. See also Bloomberg. 2025. Google AI Search Shift Leaves Website Makers Feeling 'Betrayed'. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-07/google-ai-search-shift-leaves-website-makers-feeling-betrayed.

323 Simonetti, I. and Blunt, K. 2025. News Sites Are Getting Crushed by Google's New AI Tools. *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/google-ai-news-publishers-7e687141.

324 Jaźwińska, K., and Chandrasekar, A. 2025. AI Search Has a Citation Problem. *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/we-compared-eight-ai-search-engines-theyre-all-bad-at-citing-news.php.

because they stopped publishing, and nearly a third of these were removed in the last year alone. The number of new digital outlets has also dropped.[325]

The disappearance of independent media organizations coincides with an ever-increasing demand for high-quality content to train LLMs and other generative AI technologies. Amid this race for technological dominance, many news organizations believe that large AI companies are benefiting from their work without proper permission or compensation.[326] This is particularly critical for publishers in the Global South, as Brazilian publishers recently reflected in interviews conducted by Momentum – Journalism and Tech Task Force.[327] To date, only a handful of commercial licensing deals have been struck with AI companies, and these have primarily favored large, English-language news organizations in the Global North.[328] These dynamics compound the financial pressures on media organizations and their ability to invest in quality journalism – the very same content that AI companies rely on to train their LLMs.

Such challenges put small, independent outlets, especially in lower-income markets, at a pronounced disadvantage, threatening to exacerbate inequities in access to trustworthy information. The quality of information suffers in AI-mediated spaces that are not optimized for local context or language. LLM models in 'non-priority' languages have been found to be more prone to errors, hallucinations, and biases.[329] NewsGuard, which rates the reliability of news and information websites, found that chatbot queries return more false claims in Russian, Chinese, and Spanish than in English.[330] If relevant and reliable information is not promoted and prioritized in these spaces, false and misleading information will easily fill the vacuum. As documented during recent elections from Africa to Europe,[331] generative AI is readily available to those around the world seeking to flood the information space with propaganda and misleading information to distort public debate.[332]

To defend journalism as a public good and to build the economic resilience of public interest media amid rapid technological upheaval, we need:

- **Durable solutions that ensure public interest information is prioritized and supported as new technologies emerge.** Public interest media is a vital public good facing a monumental resourcing gap: digital ad and reader revenues have not offset steep losses in traditional advertising and print revenues.[333] In addition, fluctuating commitments from donors have compounded financial pressures.[334] If media organizations constantly are in survival mode, they cannot innovate and build economic resilience, and as a consequence face threats to their independence or even their ability to continue operating at all. In line with international good practices for effective support to media and information environments,[335] solutions must be relevant, effective, and sustainable to ensure public interest media can address the major challenges they face and develop tools that are adapted to their local context and can best serve their communities.

325 Global Project Oasis. 2024. *Project Oasis Report.* https://globalprojectoasis.org/global-report/regional-trends-and-differences/.

326 Schiffrin, A., op. cit.

327 Buarque, D., Miraglia, P. 2024. *Journalism and Artificial Intelligence – Impact on Brazilian publishers.* Momentum – Journalism and Tech Task Force. https://momentumnewsandtech.org/en/2024/11/12/artificial-intelligence/.

328 Tobitt, C. 2025. Who's suing AI and who's signing: Raft of Prorata partnerships, New York Times signs with Amazon. *PressGazette* https://pressgazette.co.uk/platforms/news-publisher-ai-deals-lawsuits-openai-google/.

329 Cohere Labs. 2024. *The AI Language Gap.* https://cohere.com/research/papers/the-ai-language-gap.pdf; Nicholas, G. and Bhatia, A., op. cit.

330 NewsGuard. 2025. *AI's Multilingual Failure.* https://www.newsguardtech.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/January2025MultilingualAIMonitor.pdf.

331 Rahman-Jones, I. 2025. AI chatbots unable to accurately summarise news. *BBC.* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0m17d8827ko; Sólymos, K. K. 2023. Slovakia: Deepfake audio of Denník N journalist offers worrying example of AI abuse. International Press Institute. https://ipi.media/slovakia-deepfake-audio-of-dennik-n-journalist-offers-worrying-example-of-ai-abuse/.

332 Funk, A., Shahbaz, A., and Vesteinsson, K. 2023. *The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence.* Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence. See also Newport, A. and Jankowicz, N. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. 2025. Russian networks flood the Internet with propaganda, aiming to corrupt AI chatbots. https://thebulletin.org/2025/03/russian-networks-flood-the-internet-with-propaganda-aiming-to-corrupt-ai-chatbots.

333 Henriksson, T. 2025. *World Press Trends Outlook 2024-2025.* World Association of News Publishers. https://wan-ifra.org/2025/01/world-press-trends-outlook-digital-growth-and-other-revenue-streams-steady-the-ship-for-publishers/.

334 Myers, M. and Gilberds, H. 2024. *Are Donors Taking the Journalism Crisis Seriously?* Center for International Media Assistance. cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CIMA-Aid-Flow-Report_web_150ppi.pdf.

- **New mechanisms to create fairer value exchange between independent journalism and the technology platforms that benefit from this work.** These policies must not only focus on current big technology players, but must anticipate the rapid technological shifts that will remake our entire information ecosystem,[336] and they should be tailored to local contexts.[337]

  Emerging responses include the development of national funds to support independent public interest journalism, inquiries by competition commissions to address the anti-competitive conduct of digital platforms and their impact on media business models, collective negotiation between media and technology companies, and digital taxation. Access to data can notably help to inform negotiations between media organizations and platforms, as well as provide a more concrete assessment of the value of news content.[338]

- **Media organizations to work together and ally with other public interest information producers**. By leveraging their collective voices and developing joint agendas, public interest media can better advocate for their interests vis-a-vis government and tech platforms, engaging with emerging regulations and laws, and pursuing opportunities for collective licensing and remuneration.

We are at an inflection point: generative AI will either trigger the extinction of public interest media or catalyze a reimagined, more equitable information ecosystem. Around the world, especially in the Global South where economic pressures on media are greatest, the coming years will be critical to ensuring the informed and equitable use of new technologies that are in the public interest.

Professional journalism – and the accountability, depth, and timeliness it exemplifies – are more critical than ever. But news organizations cannot unilaterally address these challenges. It will take collective action and whole-of-society solutions to ensure everyone has access to quality information.

335 OECD. 2024. *Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media and the Information Environment*. https://doi.org/10.1787/76d82856-en.
336 Kokotajlo et al. 2025. *AI 2027*. https://ai-2027.com/.
337 Schiffrin et al, op. cit
338 UNESCO. 2023. *Data sharing to foster information as a public good: the case of media viability and safety of journalists in the digital ecosystem*.
     https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387896/PDF/387896eng.pdf.multi.

Journalism: Raising Voices for All

Journalism: Raising Voices for All

By **Rokhaya Diallo**, French journalist, writer, and human rights activist

Editor's note: The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this chapter do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the author; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Summary

In a world where women and marginalized groups have made hard-won gains in public representation, a coordinated backlash is underway. Digital platforms – once tools of empowerment – are increasingly weaponized to silence, intimidate, and discredit women, particularly those in media, politics, and activism. Gendered disinformation, cyberviolence, and defamation campaigns are rising sharply, often backed by powerful political and economic forces. These attacks are not isolated; they reflect a broader, systemic effort to reinforce patriarchal control and reverse the progress toward equality.

This chapter outlines the links between online and offline violence, the erosion of journalistic independence, and the misuse of laws to restrict women's freedom of expression. It also calls for urgent action: from strengthening legal protections to reforming media structures and ensuring women's access to justice and leadership.

Silencing the voices of women and particularly those from groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalization

HOPE & PROGRESS

We are living a critical moment!

Digital tools have:

Contributed to more **diverse representation** in the public space.

Fostered **collective awareness** of gender-based violence & racism.

esc
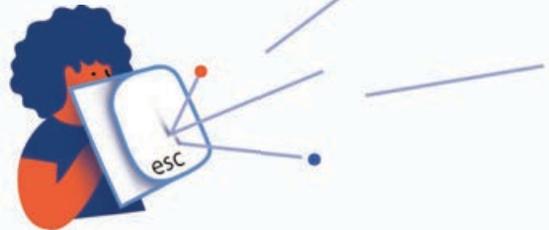
Challenged injustice #MeToo #BlackLivesMatter.

#MET

JUSTICE FOR ALL

#BLACKLIVESMATTER

BUT

A rising tide silencing and supressing women and marginalized voices

Voices once amplified are now being silenced through violence, fear, and control.

> When we allow the denigration of any one of us, we set the precedent for the demonization of all of us.

António Guterres
UN Secretary – General

CONSEQUENCES

Women are being excluded from public discourse
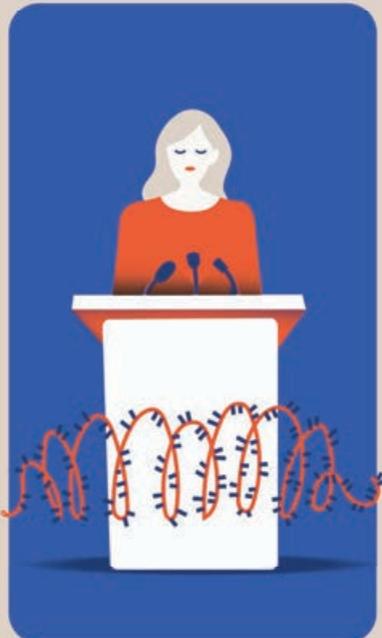
Women make up only **25%** of **media sources** quoted in 2021.

Women-led journalism projects and media outlets often struggle with **limited funding.**

Only **27%** of top editors are **women.**

70% of men **vs. 65%** of women use the internet worldwide.

The internet amplifies:

MISOGYNY

98% of all deepfake videos online were non-consensual pornographic content featuring women.

Monetized misogyny, algorithmic bias & technology–facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV) disproportionately **harm women.**

SELF-CENSORSHIP

The silencing of women voices and particularly those from groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalization

KILLINGS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS & IMPUNITY PREVAILS

According to UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists, **24 women** journalists have been killed since 2022 - **67%** in conflict zones.

Only **4.17%** of those cases are solved.

VIOLENCE

On violence against women journalists:

73% of the women surveyed reported having faced some form of digital violence. The consequences of this abuse include:

- **Being attacked in the real world**
- **Feeling unsafe**
- **Experiencing post-traumatic stress**

DISCRIMINATIONS

GENDERED DISINFORMATION TARGETS THE MARGINALIZED

In an 18-country study:

- **29.3%** of gender non-conforming people reported having lies spread about them.
- Compared to **17.4%** of heterosexual people.

WOMEN, DISABILITY, AND MEDIA

1 in 5 women lives with a disability. Most women with disabilities face intersecting barriers linked to their:

- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Race
- Location & social status
- Age
- Marital status
- Illnesses

What is at stake is freedom for women, for truth, for us all

_____

As a journalist, I was confronted from the beginning with the systemic barriers women encounter in the media. My journey as a Black and Muslim woman illustrates the obstacles faced by those who speak from the margins.

Recruited in 2009 by a major television channel and then by a national radio station, I received a warm welcome. I was 31 at the time, a symbol of improved minority representation. But very quickly, my gender and my youth diminished my words, which were often interrupted or treated with condescension.

From the moment I first spoke out in favor of human rights, I became a target for the far right. Their criticisms, sometimes relayed by public figures, called into question my nationality and loyalty to my country simply because of my origins. Exposing colonial history, slavery, or police violence has earned me the label of 'radical'.

Social media has allowed me to make often ignored subjects visible, but it also is a breeding ground for hate and violence. Online, people can be hostile to women who speak out and who challenge the status quo. Here are some examples of what I experienced:

- In 2014, a Twitter user called for me to be raped. He subsequently was convicted.
- In 2014, another man sent me death threats on Facebook. He also was convicted.
- In 2021, a Telegram group called for my assassination. It was dismantled by the Ministry of Interior.

I have been the subject of coordinated attacks by an ideological movement. There have been evictions, withdrawal of funding, defamation, harassment, and abusive lawsuits.

The assaults have not been limited to the digital space. I was insulted in the street and attacked on the radio by a listener making racist remarks. All this has been documented in a 2023 official statement by several United Nations Special Rapporteurs.[339]

Unfortunately, my experiences are far from isolated. Too many women around the world have been demonized, excluded, forced into silence, and sometimes killed for speaking out.

We are witnessing an assault on the hard-won rights achieved in the last century not only by women, but also by Black, Brown, Indigenous Peoples, those with disabilities, LGBTQI, and other historically marginalized groups.

In my journey as a journalist and a freedom fighter, I have learned that equality policies are not a system that benefits a few groups; they are an ethical compass. They do not take anything away from anyone; instead, they broaden access to everyone.

Allowing a young girl with a disability or a girl of color to become a journalist, an artist, a pilot, an engineer, a minister, and above all, to engage freely in the public space, is not a danger to democracy. It is its most basic condition.

To build peace we need to believe that freedom of expression belongs to those who transform the world through words – and that includes words coming from the margins. They are precious and they must be nourished and protected to ensure a future for all.

Rokhaya Diallo
French journalist, writer, and human rights activist

339 *Mandats de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur la situation des défenseurs des droits de l'homme; du Groupe de travail d'experts sur les personnes d'ascendance africaine; de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur la promotion et la protection du droit à la liberté d'opinion et d'expression; de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur les formes contemporaines de racisme, de discrimination raciale, de xénophobie et de l'intolérance qui y est associée et de la Rapporteuse spéciale sur la violence contre les femmes et les filles, ses causes et ses conséquences.* 2023. (Doc. AL FRA 11/2023.) https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28363.

A critical moment for gender equality

For more than 100 years, women have fought to be recognized as legitimate political actors. Decolonization, the end of official racial segregation and the emancipation of women starting with the industrial revolutions in many countries, as well as the mobilization of historically marginalized groups have led to greater visibility and representation. Back in 1995, the UN adopted the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, a comprehensive plan to achieve equal rights for women and girls.[340] Since then, UNESCO has played a crucial role in expanding the Declaration to recognize the importance of media narratives, which shape public perception, influence policy decisions, and determine whose voices are heard.

One of the biggest changes over the last 30 years has been the emergence of new technologies and the rise of social media. This has enabled women to bypass traditional media, organize globally, and increase their visibility. Many have gained autonomy and influence by creating their own spaces for expression. Movements such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter illustrate this dynamic. The tools have fostered collective awareness of gender-based violence and racism, while contributing to more diverse representation in the public space.

Progress is not easy

In January 2025, more than 20 journalists and gender experts came to UNESCO to review what has happened since the Beijing Declaration.[341] They acknowledged that there has been considerable progress: more women are working as journalists, taking on newsroom leadership roles, and news coverage has become more inclusive.

This momentum, though, has slowed in recent years, hampered by the rise of right-wing[342] discourse relayed by traditional and social media[343] and by a proliferation of restrictive laws and regulations on all continents.[344]

Powerful forces with substantial funding are working to restrict women's expression and participation in civic and political life. They disseminate patriarchal views – which are repeated by political leaders, supported by powerful enterprises, and amplified by influencers favored by social media algorithms.[345]

In many countries across the globe, diversity initiatives are being dismantled[346] in the face of governmental pressure.[347] Those who fight for social justice are discredited and those who claim to be champions of free expression attack ideas that aim to foster equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination.[348] Some countries even outright ban or limit women from working, studying, moving, or expressing themselves publicly.[349]

340 United Nations. 1995. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.* https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf.

341 UNESCO. 2025. *UNESCO Gathers Global Experts on Gender Equality in Media Ahead of Beijing+30.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-gathers-global-experts-gender-equality-media-ahead-beijing30.

342 According to a UN Secretary-General report, 'groups that operate on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance or in the name of religion or belief, particularly those motivated by 'far right' or 'extreme right-wing' ideology also tend to demonstrate intolerance related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Misogyny is often present in the narratives used to justify attacks by such individuals or groups, drawing attention to the intersection of extremism and gender-based violence.' United Nations Report of the Secretary-General. *Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief.* 2022. (A/77/266). https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/266.

343 'A surge in misogyny, and a furious kickback against equality threaten to slam on the brakes, and push progress into reverse'. UN Women. 2025. *Remarks of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres at the Town Hall Meeting with Civil Society on the occasion of the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.* https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2025/03/remarks-of-the-un-secretary-general-at-the-town-hall-meeting-with-civil-society-on-the-occasion-of-the-69th-session-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women.

344 Human Rights Watch. 2023. Global Backlash Against Women's Rights. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights.

345 Di Meco, L., and Wilfore, K. 2021. *Gendered disinformation is a national security problem.* Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/. See also Di Meco, L. 2023. 'Gender trolling' is curbing women's rights – and making money for digital platforms. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/17/gender-trolling-women-rights-money-digital-platforms-social-media-hate-politics.

346 Walker, A. R. 2024. Seven organizations the far right is targeting for diversity efforts post-affirmative action. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/law/2024/apr/12/dei-affirmative-action-far-right.

347 Makortoff, K. 2025. Goldman Sachs and Deloitte are latest to scrap diversity initiatives. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/feb/11/deloitte-staff-us-government-contracts-pronouns-emails-trump-anti-diversity. See also Schneid, R. 2025. The Major U.S. Companies Scaling Back DEI Efforts as Trump Targets Initiatives. *Time.* https://time.com/7260689/us-companies-scaling-back-dei-efforts-trump-targets-initiatives/.

348 'Over 220 individuals and 25 organizations across the world faced threats and retaliation for cooperating with the UN on human rights (...) Notably, almost 45 percent of the countries listed in the report continue to apply or enact new laws and regulations which punish, deter, or hinder cooperation with the UN.' See UN News. 2023. *Human Rights Defenders Face Harsh Reprisals for Partnering with UN.* https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141657.

349 UN News. 2025. *Afghanistan: Taliban restrictions on women's rights intensify.* https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1162826.

The issue of gender is central
to the sphere of freedom of expression.
As Victor Hugo once said, **'The first equality is equity!'**
The role, image, and representation of women
in and by the media are significant indicators
of the state of press and overall freedom of expression.

Gender discrimination can often mask other
forms of discrimination in areas such as citizenship,
legal democratization, and institutional representation.
A process of gender equality can lead to broader equality.
The concept of stereotypes (and counter-stereotypes)
carries an inherent rejection of otherness.

Mokhtar Khalfaoui
Journalist & professor

The persistence of sexist and misogynistic structures
in media companies, precarious working conditions,
and a lack of diversity in decision-making positions
continue to hinder full gender parity in the media.

Gender stereotypes persist in content production,
often reinforcing traditional norms and marginalizing
the voices of women, especially those from communities
in situations of marginalization and vulnerability.
The media's portrayal of gender has profound implications
not only for public perception but also for participation
in democratic life.

Beijing+30 Expert Report
*Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality
in the Age of New Technologies*

Books promoting the rights or even the mere existence of minorities are made inaccessible. According to PEN International, authorities worldwide are restricting access to books that address sexual violence, LGBTQI narratives, and issues of race, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities and signaling a dangerous shift toward intolerance.[350]

In this environment, women with high visibility such as journalists, politicians, scientists, and artists often become the first targets. Silencing these powerful voices not only removes role models and leaders from the public sphere, but also creates a chilling effect that reverberates across society. Those whose voices are already sidelined – particularly women from minority groups – are further marginalized. The message is clear: no woman is safe to speak. The ultimate aim is to pressure women into radical self-protective behaviors – withdrawal, self-censorship, and silence – effectively returning them to confinement and isolation under the guise of safety.[351]

This erosion of rights is happening not only in authoritarian countries, but also in emerging and established democracies, signaling a disturbing trend of regression in human rights.[352] These developments do not represent a series of isolated incidents, but rather a pervasive and systemic shift, a coordinated, methodical effort driven by reactionary, authoritarian, and patriarchal ideologies.[353]

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres observes, this political moment must serve as a serious and urgent warning.[354] These efforts are not merely intended to impede the progress that has been arduously achieved. They seek to dismantle it.

The trend: Silencing women's voices

UNESCO highlighted in the last *World Trends Report* (2021/2022) that hostility toward women on digital platforms constituted a major deterrent to their free expression.[355] In the last four years, this trend has intensified.

Online violence has not replaced offline violence. Instead, it amplifies and aggravates it, exposing victims to increased physical risks. Online violence poses a major threat to the safety of journalists, with women often being the first to be targeted. According to a survey underpinning *The Chilling*, a 2022 UNESCO report on violence against women journalists, 20% of those surveyed said they had been attacked or abused in the real world in connection with threats they had experienced online; 13% felt unsafe.[356]

350 PEN International. 2024. PEN's *Global Community Condemns Book Bans Around the World*. https://www.pen-international.org/news/pens-global-community-condemns-book-ban-around-the-world.

351 UN Human Rights Council. 2021. *Rape as a grave, systematic and widespread human rights violation, a crime and a manifestation of gender-based violence against women and girls, and its prevention* (Doc. A/HRC/47/28.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/47/26.

352 UN Women reveals that in 2024, nearly a quarter of governments reported a backlash in women's rights, citing weakened democratic institutions as a primary factor fueling this regression and increased misogyny. UN Women. 2025. *One in Four Countries Report Backlash on Women's Rights in 2024*. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/03/one-in-four-countries-report-backlash-on-womens-rights-in-2024.

353 Denkovski, D., Bernarding, N., and Lunz, K. 2021. *Power over Rights: Understanding and Countering the Transnational Anti-Gender Movement*. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PowerOverRights_Volume1_web.pdf.

354 'We must stop it – and we must stop it together. 'Do not sacrifice equality for false expediency. It is a miscalculation; a misunderstanding of how societies thrive. It is short sighted. It is wrong. It must end.' See UN Women. 2025. *Remarks of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres at the Town Hall Meeting with Civil Society on the occasion of the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women*. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2025/03/remarks-of-the-un-secretary-general-at-the-town-hall-meeting-with-civil-society-on-the-occasion-of-the-69th-session-of-the-commission-on-the-status-of-women.

355 UNESCO. 2022. *Journalism is a public good: World trends in freedom of expression and media development; Global report 2021/2022*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380618?2=null&queryId=0a30ee11-7640-48c0-b1c3-8d7e1e5dc867.

356 Posetti et al. 2021. *The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223.

> Today, we are witnessing a fusion of technological, corporate, and political power that is threatening freedom of expression and exacerbating gender inequalities in media and technology. Monetized misogynistic content, algorithmic biases, AI-driven misinformation and disinformation disproportionately affect women.
>
> Digital platforms' business models prioritize engagement over safety, allowing harmful and misleading content to dominate attention economies. Social media platforms have also begun to roll back policies on gender representation and online safety, creating an environment where misogynistic content thrives.

Beijing+30 Expert Report
Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality in the Age of New Technologies

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> 73% of the women surveyed reported having faced some form of digital violence.

UNESCO's *The Chilling*
global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper

Moreover, gendered harassment and misinformation are amplified by digital technologies and generative AI, facilitating the spread, automation, and multiplication of harassment.[357] Biases embedded in algorithms reinforce existing stereotypes, as noted by an Asian woman journalist whose avatars were systematically hypersexualized.[358]

Surveillance and the disclosure of personal information exacerbate this threat, forcing some to alter their movements, increase their security, or even relocate. Online threats invade victims' personal space, sometimes affecting those around them, as well.

This pressure has a serious impact on mental health; 26% of surveyed journalists mention post-traumatic stress, while 12% have had to consult a health professional.[359]

The amplification of misogyny and violence online

Technology-facilitated, gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a global problem, disproportionately affecting women's rights to freedom of expression and access to information.[360]

This alarming trend is reflected in the high rates of online violence worldwide against women and girls – some as young as nine.[361] Scholar Sarah Sobieraj describes this phenomenon as 'digital misogyny,' capturing the ways in which hostility toward women is amplified and sustained through digital platforms.[362] The far right, nationalists, and populists use misogyny to target women journalists and politicians, especially those who investigate their movements.[363] The attacks often are amplified by partisan media, mainstream news organizations, as well as politicians, who repeat and, in effect, legitimize this online aggression.[364]

FIGURE 1

Online threat experience

Source:
UNESCO's The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper.[365]

ORIGINAL THREAT EXPERIENCE

HATEFUL LANGUAGE	49%
HARASSING IN PRIVATE MESSAGES	48%
SURVEILLANCE	18%
HACKING	14%
DOXXING	8%
SPOOFING	7%

357 Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L. 2023. *Your opinion doesn't matter, anyway: exposing technology-facilitated gender-based violence in an era of generative AI.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387483.

358 Ibid.

359 Posetti et al, op. cit.

360 United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). 2023. *Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Commission on the Status of Women.* (Doc. E/CN.6/2023/L.3.) https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2023/L.3.

361 United Nations Population Fund. 2024. *An Infographic Guide to Transformative Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV).* https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/An%20Infographic%20Guide%20to%20An%20Infographic%20Guide%20to%20TFGBV.pdf.

362 Sobieraj, S. 2020. *Credible threat: attacks against women online and the future of democracy.* Oxford University Press. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu doi/10.1086/718552.

363 Neder, R. 2021. *Brazilian journalist Patrícia Campos Mello sued President Bolsonaro's son for moral damages – and won.* Committee to Protect Journalists. https://cpj.org/2021/03/brazilian-journalist-patricia-campos-mello-sued-president-bolsonaros-son-for-moral-damages-and-won/.

364 Posetti et al, op. cit.

365 Ibid.

Online gendered disinformation has become
the most pervasive and pernicious form of gendered
censorship and the predominant threat tactic of
online gender-based violence.

UNESCO
at the International Day of Women in Multilateralism

Smear campaigns against female journalists spread like viral
news... One baseless accusation – she took money from this side,
she's after fame – and suddenly, the claim is repeated
over and over until it becomes 'truth' to many people.

It's not easy to debunk... Even with fact-checking, people
are quick to dismiss the truth when it's about a woman...
People do not trust female journalists because
they don't fit the 'traditional' mold.

If she works late, if she's always in the field,
if she speaks out loudly – then any rumor about her must be true.

Riham Abu Aita
Co-Founder of the Palestinian Platform
for Fact-Checking and Media Literacy 'Kashif'

Online harassment of women journalists has increased sharply in recent years. Such attacks are designed both to diminish their visibility and to heighten the risk of intimidation and exclusion.[366]

The use of increasingly efficient technologies and biased algorithms has amplified the probability of violence and potential damage. The ability to impersonate a woman, creating credible degrading and misleading content, is seriously harmful.[367] A 2023 report by Security Hero found that 98% of all deepfake videos online were non-consensual pornographic content featuring women in 99% of the cases.[368] Some examples that illustrate this trend include a television news presenter who revealed in 2025 that she had discovered deepfake pornography of herself, describing the experience as 'haunting' and reporting that she kept 'returning to the images.'[369] Similarly, a French television host who was also a victim of deepfakes stated that the psychological shock was such that 'trauma is similar to a sexual assault.'[370]

Disinformation exploits prevailing prejudices

Gendered disinformation entails 'the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women and follows story lines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes.'[371] It aims to discredit women's voices and undermine their credibility and authority. Gendered disinformation is based on three pillars: falsehood, malice, and coordination. It targets women's appearance and sexuality much more than their actual professional skills. Gendered disinformation campaigns exploit existing social divides – racism, homophobia, transphobia - to discredit women,[373] particularly those from marginalized communities, and especially when they are activists and journalists.[374]

The viral spread of defamatory or pornographic content on social media enabled by platform features (such as insufficient moderation) and business models prioritizing virality can cause lasting harm to victims' reputations.[375]

Gendered disinformation campaigns – orchestrated by individuals or groups sometimes with the complicity of political leaders[376] – have serious consequences for the economic, physical, and mental health of those targeted.[377] The goal is to silence, humiliate, terrorize, and discredit their work.

366 United Nations General Assembly. 2023. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan. *Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.* (Doc. A/78/288.) https://docs.un.org/en/A/78/288.

367 Bates, L. 2025. Online brothels, sex robots, simulated rape: AI is ushering in a new age of violence against women. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/03/ai-sexism-violence-against-women-technology-new-era.

368 Security Hero. 2023. *2023 State of Deepfakes: Realities, Threats, and Impact.* https://www.securityhero.io/state-of-deepfakes/#key-findings.

369 Echo Live. 2025. 'Haunting' to See Deepfake Pornography of Myself, Says Journalist Cathy Newman. https://www.echolive.ie/nationalentertainment/arid-41548960.html.

370 Menez, L. 2021. Enora Malagré, victime de deepfake : « Le traumatisme s'apparente à une agression sexuelle » [Enora Malagré, victim of deepfake: 'The trauma is similar to a sexual assault']. ELLE. https://www.elle.fr/Societe/News/Enora-Malagre-victime-de-deepfake-Le-traumatisme-s-apparente-a-une-agression-sexuelle-3970580.

371 Di Meco, L. 2021. Online threats to women's political participation and the need for a multi-stakeholder, cohesive approach to address them. UN Women (Doc. EGM/CSW/2021/EP8.) https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/65/EGM/Di%20Meco_Online%20Threats_EP8_EGMCSW65.pdf.

372 United Nations General Assembly (Doc. A/78/288), op. cit.

373 UNESCO. 2024. *How to combat gendered disinformation online.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391388.

374 United Nations General Assembly (Doc. A/78/288), op. cit.

375 Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L., op. cit.

376 France 24. 2023. *Across globe, women battle 'gendered disinformation'.* https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230323-across-globe-women-battle-gendered-disinformation.

377 The Economist Intelligence Unit. 2021. 92% of women reported that online violence harms their sense of wellbeing. Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. *The Economist.* https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/.

"

If it's a female journalist, then oftentimes the attacks
are sexualized. It's really got nothing to do with
whether they are questioning the credibility
of your facts or your story.

It takes a sexual slant about how you appear,
how you dress up, how many people you have
encountered in your life, who they imagine you
have had an affair with. We don't see that
happening where men are concerned.

Nancy Booker
Associate Professor and Dean, Graduate School of Media and Communications,
Aga Khan University, Kenya

Here are two notable examples:

- A single journalist from a major broadcaster, received more than 80% of the online abuse aimed at the outlet's staff in 2023. She covers online trolling.[378]
- A prominent Indian journalist and columnist was a target of extreme sexist and Islamophobic harassment. In 2022, she was auctioned off via a fake app.[379]

Some journalists are even directly targeted by government attacks. For instance, a print and broadcast journalist endured online harassment reportedly orchestrated by the authorities though state-controlled media and Facebook pages due to her political investigations.[380]

Censorship presents itself as the apparent remedy

In the face of cyberviolence, it is common to hear that it is enough to 'turn off' your devices, thus minimizing its impact. The care of victims remains derisory.[381] Rather than protecting their journalists, some media outlets adopt restrictive policies (such as asking them to avoid speaking on certain 'controversial' topics) and some go so far as to suspend or fire reporters in the midst of harassment.

In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that ensuring a trustworthy digital ecosystem is essential, but measures must not restrict freedom of expression, which is crucial for women's empowerment and democracy. On the contrary, it is necessary to examine methods of protection that do not simply resort to removing the victim from the public sphere.[382]

It is happening everywhere

The Beijing+30 Expert Report on Strategic Objective J, *Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality in the Age of New Technologies*,[383] highlights that polarization has fueled a global backlash against gender equality, amplifying TFGBV and portraying gender rights as radical or dangerous.

Over the last four years, we have witnessed gendered disinformation campaigns all over the world that:[384]

- Portray women politicians as irrational or incompetent.
- Accuse women activists and journalists of being foreign agents, threatening the national order.[385]

Depending on the region, the attacks target the honor, religion, tradition, or safety of their children. In South Asia, religion and social status are central, while in Africa, women journalists and activists are accused of spreading 'Western values'. Disinformation adapts to local contexts by exploiting prevailing prejudices.[386] In Latin America and the Caribbean, individuals and organizations advocating for gender rights and equality may, at times, encounter perceptions or characterizations that question their efforts, sometimes including accusations of blasphemy.

378 Wiseman E. 2024. 'It's important to talk about online abuse': Marianna Spring on trolls, conspiracy theorists – and positivity. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/oct/27/its-important-to-talk-about-online-abuse-marianna-spring-on-trolls-conspiracy-theorists-and-positivity.

379 Ayyub, R. 2022. *You cannot shame us into silence*. https://ranaayyub.substack.com/p/you-cannot-shame-us-into-silence?s=r.

380 López Linares, C. 2023. *An increase of online attacks against journalists in Guyana is raising red flags: 5 questions for Nazima Raghubir, Caribbean journalism leader.* LatAm Journalism Review/Knight Center. https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/an-increase-of-online-attacks-against-journalists-in-guyana-is-raising-red-flags-5-questions-for-nazima-raghubir-caribbean-journalism-leader/.

381 Posetti et al, op. cit.

382 Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L., op. cit.

383 Vialle, E. UNESCO. 2025. *Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality in the Age of New Technologies.* http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396156.

384 As a growing body of research shows, women in politics are disproportionately targeted by gendered disinformation campaigns that feature fake stories and threats, as well as humiliating and sexually charged images. The goal of these attacks is to frame female politicians and government officials as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, or too emotional or libidinous to hold office or participate in democratic politics. See: Brookings. Di Meco, L. and Wilfore, K. 2021 Gendered Disinformation Is a National Security Problem. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/.

385 U.S. Department of State. 2023. *Gendered Disinformation: Tactics, Themes and Trends by Foreign Malign Actors*. https://2021-2025.state.gov/gendered-disinformation-tactics-themes-and-trends-by-foreign-malign-actors/.

386 United Nations General Assembly (Doc. A/78/288), op. cit.

In Eastern Europe, LGBTQI women are often targeted and activists are suspected of spying or threatening the safety of children.[387] A study conducted in 18 countries shows that 29.3% of gender non-conforming persons have been victims of false accusations, compared to 17.4% of heterosexuals.[388]

In Europe as in Africa, women parliamentarians have been constantly targeted by sexist online attacks.[389] Victims say this 'digital tsunami' includes misogynistic harassment, personal data breaches, increasing physical risks, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Simply being a woman expressing an opinion online makes one a target. As a result, many women withdraw from public spaces or avoid expressing opinions, fearing harassment or reputational harm.[390]

This phenomenon is not limited to journalism, politics, or activism.[391] In the film industry, women who speak up can also be pushed to the sidelines and may feel compelled to silence themselves.[392]

The law as a weapon

Taking a public stand exposes people to increasing legal risks, including through the tightening of defamation and cybersecurity laws, which are often misused to restrict legitimate expression.[393] The Human Rights Council warns of these abuses, which interfere with the work of journalists. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are used to intimidate, deplete, and silence journalists and activists, with an increased economic impact on women.[394]

The frequent use of legal proceedings against journalists or activists is a formidable tool for censorship, as it depletes the material, physical, and mental resources of those who are targeted. Legal proceedings against journalists and activists are multiplying, with the number of judgments in Europe increasing from 570 in 2022 to 820 in 2023.[395] In a 2024 report, UNESCO revealed the growing use of financial laws to muzzle activists and the press.[396]

These actions, amplified by media coverage, weaken the credibility of the targets and encourage self-censorship. The case of a Japanese journalist – recently portrayed in an Academy Award-nominated documentary – is also a good illustration of how the legal system can be weaponized to silence victims and survivors of sexual violence.[397]

387 UN Human Rights Council. 2019. *Situation of women human rights defenders.* Report of the Special Rapporteur on Situation of Human Rights Defenders (Doc. A/HRC/40/60.) https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1663970?ln=fr&v=pdf.

388 Dunn, S., Vaillancourt, T., and Brittain, H. 2023. *Supporting Safer Digital Spaces*. https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet_Special_Report.pdf.

389 Inter-Parliamentary Union and African Parliamentary Union. 2021. *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Africa.* https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2021-11/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-africa.

390 United Nations General Assembly (Doc. A/78/288), op. cit.

391 Ministère de la Culture. 2025. *Observatoire de l'égalité entre femmes et hommes dans la culture et la communication.* https://www.culture.gouv.fr/espace-documentation/statistiques-ministerielles-de-la-culture2/publications/collections-d-ouvrages/observatoire-de-l-egalite-entre-femmes-et-hommes-dans-la-culture-et-la-communication/observatoire-2025-de-l-egalite-entre-femmes-et-hommes-dans-la-culture-et-la-communication.

392 C ce soir. 2024. *Judith Godrèche : un aveuglement collectif ?* [Judith Godrèche: collective blindness?]. France TV. https://x.com/Ccesoir/status/1757167193853468918. See also Ministère de la Culture. 2025. Observatoire 2025 de l'égalité entre femmes et hommes dans la culture et la communication. https://www.culture.gouv.fr/espace-documentation/statistiques-ministerielles-de-la-culture2/publications/collections-d-ouvrages/observatoire-de-l-egalite-entre-femmes-et-hommes-dans-la-culture-et-la-communication/observatoire-2025-de-l-egalite-entre-femmes-et-hommes-dans-la-culture-et-la-communication.

393 Soraide, R. 2022. *The 'misuse' of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832.

394 European Parliament. Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs – Directorate-General for Internal Policies. 2021. *The Use of SLAPPs to Silence Journalists, NGOs and Civil Society Policy.* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694782/IPOL_STU(2021)694782_EN.pdf.

395 European Parliament. Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs – Directorate-General for Internal Policies. 2023. Open SLAPP Cases in 2022 and 2023: *The Incidence of Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation, and Regulatory Responses in the European Union*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/756468/IPOL_STU(2023)756468_EN.pdf.

396 Pittman, E., Juega, E. 2024. *The misuse of financial laws to pressure, silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets: issue brief.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391483.

397 Cole, N. M. 2025. *How This Oscar-Nominated Director Turned the Lens on Herself to Investigate the Man Who Sexually Assaulted Her.* Global Investigative Journalism Network. https://gijn.org/stories/black-box-diaries/.

To defend themselves against defamatory or threatening attacks, women must be able to access judicial bodies. Analyses from the V-Dem dataset show that women's access to justice is closely linked to freedom of expression; in societies where women have legal protections and effective access to justice, civil liberties, media independence, and public debate are better guaranteed. Conversely, when women's rights are restricted, their ability to expose injustices and corruption as well as to express themselves in the public space is severely limited.

This Figure compares levels of freedom of expression with women's access to justice across countries. Each point represents a country - where freedom of expression and access to diverse information sources are stronger, women also tend to have better access to justice.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ALTERNATIVE SOURCES

ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR WOMEN INDEX

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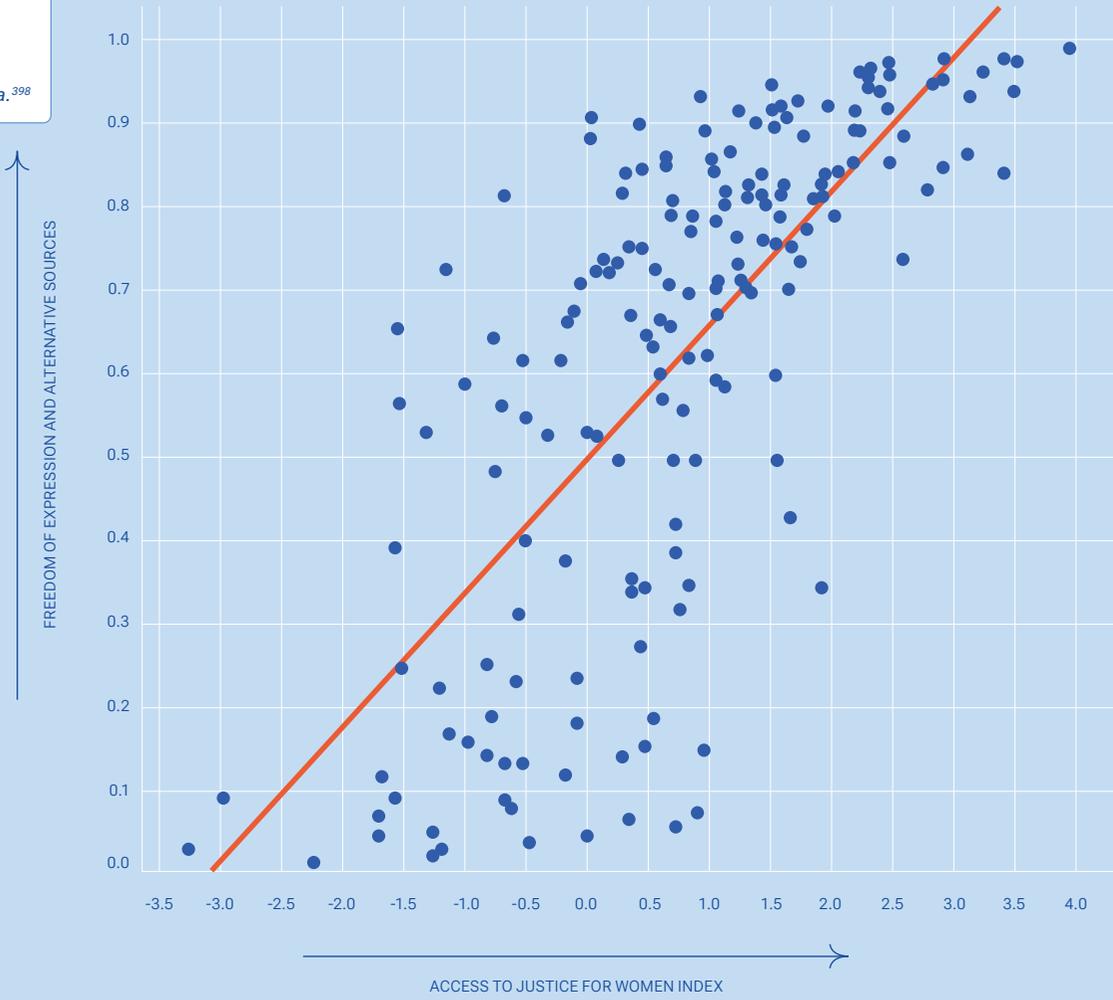
398 Magoga, A. op. cit.

We have seen this shift: once corruption,
tax evasion charges were used against men,
and now women journalists – Maria Ressa, Khadija Ismayilova,
me and many others – are being targeted through financial cases.

Yet, despite the backlash, more women are leading the fight
and setting a precedent. In the past few years, the most
visible journalists taking on governments have been women.

Rana Ayyub
Indian journalist

Killing women's critical voices

UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists[399] recorded 24 women journalists killed since 2022. Only 4.17% of the cases are reported as solved.[400]

FIGURE 3

Killings of journalists (January 2022 – September 2025)

Source: UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists.[401]

KILLINGS BY YEAR
- 2022: 10
- 2023: 4
- 2024: 6
- 2025: 4

KILLINGS BY GENDER
- Male 76%
- Female 24%
- 24 Total

JUDICIAL STATUS
- No Information Received So Far 8.33%
- Ongoing / Unresolved 37.50%
- New Request 50.00%
- Resolved 4.17%
- 310 Total

KILLINGS IN CONFLICT
- Conflict zone 33.3%
- Not a conflict zone 66.7%
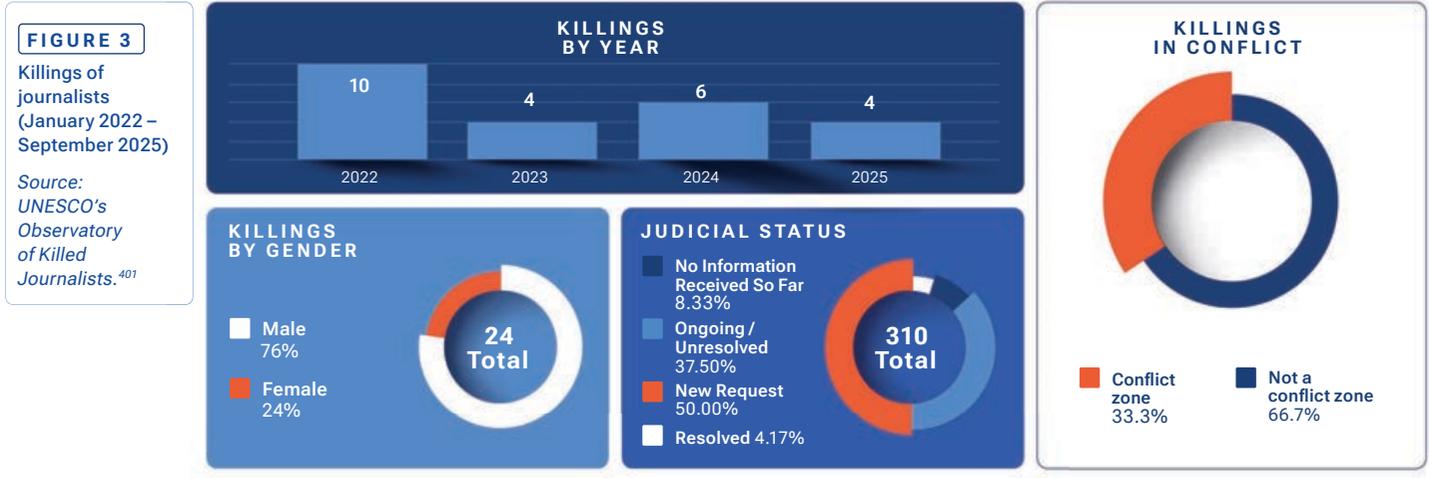
In 2024, there were 61 state-based armed conflicts across 36 countries and territories, the highest number recorded since World War II.[402] Among those most affected by the erosion of respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law are journalists: 67% of killings of women journalists occurred in conflict zones.

Between 2022 and September 2025, 162 journalists were killed while covering conflict and war.[403] According to UNESCO's 2024 *Director-General Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity*, women journalist fatalities have reached their highest levels since 2017.[404]

Similar threats extend beyond journalism: women politicians and human rights defenders have likewise been targeted, often paying the ultimate price for their public visibility and advocacy. From local council members to grassroots organizers, these women encounter violence not only as an attempt to silence their voices but also to deter broader female participation in public and political life.

More equitable representation, better journalism

For women journalists, the barriers to the free exercise of their profession are systemic: they are poorly represented in decision-making positions and almost non-existent among the owners of major media outlets. In newsrooms where the management is predominantly male, subjects that concern women often are of little interest.

399   UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists, op. cit.

400   Among the cases listed, only that of Lourdes Maldonado Lopez is considered resolved, according to the State response to the Director-General's request on the status of the judicial inquiries, as of June 2025. *Observatory of Killed Journalists.* https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory/statistics?hub=72609.

401   Statistics on killed journalists. *Observatory of Killed Journalists.* https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory.

402   Rustad, S.A. 2025. Conflict Trends: *A Global Overview, 1946–2024.* Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. https://www.prio.org/publications/14453.

403   UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists, op. cit.

404   UNESCO. 2024. 85% of Journalist Killings Remain Unpunished Worldwide. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/85-journalist-killings-remain-unpunished-worldwide-unesco-report.

Gender equality in the newsroom

Despite significant progress, persistent obstacles hinder women's participation and advancement in newsrooms.[405]

Leadership gaps persist. Only 27% of the 171 top editors across the 240 brands covered by a Reuters Institute survey are women, a slight increase from 2024 when the figure was 24%. In these same newsrooms, 40% of the journalists are women.[406]

Workplace safety and inclusivity remain ongoing concerns. Many newsrooms lack a structured and clear plan for diversity.[407] Family responsibilities continue to disproportionately impact women journalists.[408]

Violence and harassment, both online and offline, pose severe threats to women journalists.[409] Coordinated online attacks,[410] doxxing, and physical violence have led many women to self-censor or leave the profession.[411] Freelancers face heightened vulnerabilities. Weak accountability frameworks allow perpetrators to act with impunity.[413]

Financial barriers hinder progress. Women-led journalism projects and media outlets often struggle with limited funding, which restricts their reach and sustainability.

Access to technology is important. Worldwide, 70% of men are using the internet, compared with 65% of women, according to the International Communication Union.[414] As a group, women have less access to new technologies and media than men.[415] Cultural and systemic barriers intensify challenges in certain regions, where women journalists face severe restrictions, state-imposed censorship, and societal stigma, undermining both their safety and press freedom.

Donor support often fails to meet local needs. Funding models driven by short-term, quantifiable outcomes do not adequately address the long-term structural changes required for sustainable gender equality in media.[416]

Beijing+30 Expert Report, *Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality in the Age of New Technologies*

Traditional media often continue to be shaped by established power structures and concentrated ownership, thus limiting diversity in storytelling. Editorial decisions sometimes rely on outdated tropes, portraying women as victims or in passive roles while overlooking their expertise and leadership.[417]

Independent media often offer a fairer treatment of these issues. In this regard, the recent survey on Indigenous Peoples and the media revealed that more than half of Indigenous media organizations apply gender equality in source identification and consider the diversity of social roles and multidimensional context in coverage.[418]

405 European Parliament. 2018. *Gender Equality in the Media Sector*. Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU(2018)596839_EN.pdf.

406 Ross Arguedas et al. 2025. Women and leadership in the news media 2025: Evidence from 12 markets. *Reuters Institute*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2025-evidence-12-markets.

407 Cherubini, F., Sharma, R. 2023. Changing Newsrooms 2023: Media leaders struggle to embrace diversity in full and remain cautious on AI disruption. *Reuters Institute*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/changing-newsrooms-2023-media-leaders-struggle-embrace-diversity-full-and-remain-cautious-ai#header--3.

408 CFI Media Development. 2022. Gender equality in the media and media content. *Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Democratic republic of Congo.* https://cfi.fr/en/dossier/gender-equality-media-and-media-content.

409 Posetti et al, op. cit.

410 Association of Media Women in Media. Annual Report 2024 found out that technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a growing concern, particularly for women in public life. See AMWIK. 2024. *Annual Report.* https://amwik.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AMWIK-ANNUAL-REPORT-2024.-Amended-.pdf. See also United Nations Population Fund. 2025. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: A Growing Threat. https://www.unfpa.org/TFGBV.

411 Ferrier, M. 2018. *Attacks and Harassment. The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting.* International Women's Media Foundation. https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf.

FIGURE 4

Indigenous media organizations' application of gender equality principles in editorial & programming (% share)

*Source:
Indigenous Peoples &
the media: Annex A:
Key numbers & figures.[419]*

55%
55%
46%
40%
31%
27%

■ Apply gender equality in source identification

■ Consider diversity of social roles & multidimensional contexts in coverage

■ Apply gender sensitive guidelines in coverage

■ Frame gender in non-stereotypical ways in stories

■ Monitor & access gender equality in coverage

■ Mainstream gender equality in advertising
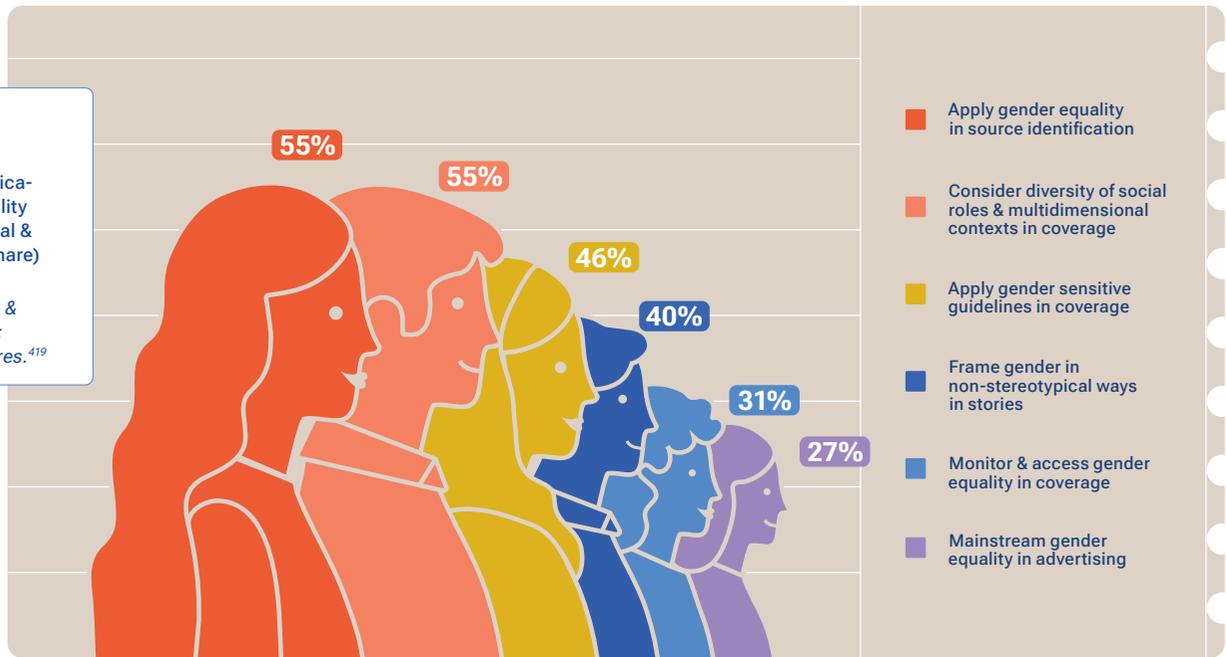
Meanwhile, research shows that women are less comfortable than men expressing their opinions online,[420] a phenomenon rooted in historical practices that devalue their speech. These misogynistic norms are amplified on digital platforms, where women and gender non-confirming persons are looking for a space for exchanging opinions and support.

Women also remain underrepresented in media coverage. Though such visibility is essential for women to claim their rightful place and to inspire young girls, in 2021, women accounted for only 25% of those quoted in the media, reflecting almost no progress since 2015.[421] Their role as experts or authorities remains marginal, and their appearances are often stereotypical. Disability is also treated in a stereotypical way between miserabilism and heroization.[422]

This underrepresentation is amplified on some platforms and podcasts that reinforce gender stereotypes, relegating women to traditional roles. Social media algorithms favor viral content produced by the 'manosphere' advocating male superiority[423] and promoting *tradwife* (traditional wife) digital content creators or influencers.[424] Often, these online personalities embrace the agendas of far right-wing politicians and their affluent supporters.

412   Reporters Without Borders (RSF). 2017. *Fixers – field reporting's unseen facilitators*. https://rsf.org/en/fixers-field-reporting-s-unseen-facilitators; International Women's Media Foundation. 2024. *Better protection for freelancers facing online violence*. https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Newsroom-Guide_-Freelancers.pdf. See also Fixing journalism, a Mexican initiative aimed at balancing the unequal relationships between international correspondents and local journalists. Fixing journalism. 2025. https://fixingjournalism.com/en/home/.

413   United Nations. 2025. International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-impunity-crimes-against-journalists.

414   International Communication Union. 2024. Facts and Figures 2024. *The gender digital divide*. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2024/11/10/ff24-the-gender-digital-divide/.

415   UNESCO. 2025. Women's access to and participation in technological developments. https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/gender-equality.

416   International Media Support. 2024. *Where is the money? A global perspective on forms of funding, financing and investment for public interest media*. https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/where-is-the-money-a-global-perspective-on-forms-of-funding-financing-and-investment-for-public-interest-media/.

417   Vialle, E. UNESCO. 2025. *Reclaiming the Digital Space: Advancing Gender Equality in the Age of New Technologies*. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000396156.

418   UNESCO. 2025. *Indigenous Peoples and the media: Annex A: Key numbers & figures*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393427.locale=en.

419   Ibid.

420   Enock et al. 2024. *Understanding Gender Differences in Experiences and Concerns Surrounding Online Harms: A Short Report on a Nationally Representative Survey of UK Adults*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4705134.

421   Global Media Monitoring Project. 2020. *Who makes the news - 6th Global Media Monitoring Project*. https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/GMMP-2020.Highlights_FINAL.pdf.

422   UNESCO. 2024. *Disability equality in the media: representation, accessibility, management; practical manual*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391032.

423   Wagner, T. 2022. Toxic masculinity on social media. *Bon pote*. https://bonpote.com/en/toxic-masculinity-on-social-media/.

424   BBC. 2020. #TradWife: 'Submitting to my husband like it's 1959'.

Women, disability, and media[425]

It is estimated that one in five women lives with a disability. Most women with disabilities face limitations and barriers in society related to the multiple and intersecting characteristics across all contexts, such as ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds, as well as their location and related status, age or marital status, and living with or being affected by HIV.[426]

The media can play a transformative role in addressing these challenges by adopting inclusive editorial policies and ensuring equitable representation in media content. This requires diversifying both the subjects reported and the framing of stories – how realities are selected, interpreted, and conveyed. Disability is a social construct. Journalism should highlight the roles and relationships of persons with disabilities within real sociocultural contexts, featuring authentic stories, people, events, and places. Inclusive reporting that captures the complexity of individuals' experiences and exposes overlapping forms of discrimination, helps dismantle stereotypes and redefines conventional narratives around both gender and disability.

The media industry remains strongly hermetic to minorities. Women journalists, often freelancers, are more vulnerable to exploitation. The proliferation of unstable contracts, persistent wage gaps, and the under-representation of women in management positions contribute to this weakening. The rise of AI also threatens lower-level jobs, often held by women, by automating certain journalistic tasks and aggravating inequalities. Meanwhile, whistle-blowers, who are essential for exposing abuse, face professional reprisal.[427]

A better world for all women

Equality and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing. Meanwhile, inequality results in the exclusion of certain voices and 'when people are denied public participation and voice, their issues, experiences and concerns are rendered invisible, and they become more vulnerable to bigotry, prejudice, and marginalization.'[428]

For women to achieve true equality and to reach their full potential, they must be safe from both real world and online violence. While media organizations and other employers must protect their workers, there is also an urgent need for algorithmic accountability. To combat discriminatory biases, we need to see and understand how women are seen online.

The Beijing+30 Expert Report provides a roadmap to a better future, which will require:

- Supporting women in media and technology leadership roles
- Challenging harmful stereotypes
- Addressing the interconnected impacts of gender, race, disability, and other forms of discrimination

This is how we can protect democracy and build peace.

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425 UNESCO. 2024. *Disability equality in the media: representation, accessibility, management; practical manual.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391032.

426 Ibid.

427 Posetti et al, op. cit.

428 ARTICLE 19. 2009. *The Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality.*
     https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/standards/the-camden-principles-on-freedom-of-expression-and-equality.pdf.

> When we allow the
> denigration of any one of us,
> we set the precedent
> for the demonization of all of us.

António Guterres
UN Secretary – General

Journalism: Protecting the Planet

Chapter 4

Journalism: Protecting the Planet

Editor's note: This chapter brings together contributions from two authors: Kunda Dixit, environmental journalist, editor, and author based in Nepal, and Kate Cell, Senior Climate Campaign Manager at the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) in the United States. The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this chapter do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

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Summary

The planet is facing a triple environmental crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Simultaneously, there is a worldwide erosion of press freedom and democratic backsliding, undermining the role of journalism in finding evidence-based solutions. This is magnified by algorithm-driven, anti-science disinformation on the internet. Even as public awareness about climate-induced disasters grows, denialism of climate change is evolving: outright rejection is giving way to a 'new denial', which accepts the basic facts of climate change but casts doubt on its seriousness and spreads misleading narratives and conspiracy theories. As a result, journalists and climate scientists are increasingly being silenced by trolling and threats.

This chapter tracks these trends and argues for greater investment in investigative journalism and training in digital techniques. Coverage needs to go beyond soft-focus stories to seek the economic and political roots of climate breakdown. Journalism needs to be protected to protect the planet.

The triple environmental crisis is accelerating

WHAT IS THIS TRIPLE CRISIS?

1 Climate change   **2** Biodiversity loss   **3** Pollution

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS CRUCIAL FOR CLIMATE ACTION

- It empowers people to **share information.**
- It demands **accountability.**
- It advocates for **urgent environmental change.**

CLIMATE CHANGE:

STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT AMID GROWING DISINFORMATION

According to People's Climate Vote 2024,

80%

of people polled in **77 countries** support government action on climate change.

Declining press freedom worldwide is limiting journalism's ability to expose the truth and drive climate action.

ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS ARE AT RISK

- Since 2010, **46 environmental journalists have been killed.**

- Only **6 cases** resulted in convictions - **Impunity remains the norm.**

- Journalists from Latin America & the Caribbean are the most at risk along with Africa and some countries in Asia & the Pacific.

PRESS

THE TRAUMA OF DOING CLIMATE JOURNALISM

- **73%** say their work makes a difference
- **27%** say they have been harassed for their work
- **60%** suffered psychological distress

Newsrooms are failing to support journalists who cover one of the most pressing crises of our time. The emotional cost is high—but so is the commitment.

Prof. Anthony Feinstein

Science is also under siege!

SCIENTISTS ARE ALSO TARGETED FOR SPEAKING OUT

In 2022,
39%
of climate scientists surveyed by Global Witness **reported online abuse linked to their research** - representing **183 out of 468 surveyed scientists**

SCIENCE IS BEING SILENCED

Powerful interests are denying evidence to delay urgent action - putting our planet's future at risk.

Meanwhile, **climate disinformation** is surging on digital platforms:

NEWS

From 2021 to 2024, **climate denial posts** increased by between

24% and **40%**

across major digital platforms.

SOURCE   UNESCO 2025. World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2022–2025. Infographic. Data adapted from Climate Action Against Disinformation, 2023; Tortoise Media Hot Air Explore Tool and UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists.

In 2009, the COP15 Climate Summit was held in Copenhagen at a time when awareness of global warming was still confined mostly to scientific circles or environmental activists. Earlier in 2006, the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* had been a milestone in informing the public about the fossil fuel industry and economic growth powered by oil and gas.

Ahead of COP15, the president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, conducted a much-publicized underwater cabinet meeting to draw attention to the existential threat his country faced: being submerged by ocean expansion. A former journalist, Nasheed knew what kind of visuals would make headlines to grab the world's attention to the plight of small island states. Indeed, photographs and videos of Maldivian government ministers seated around a table blowing bubbles through their scuba gear went viral.

Taking his cue, Nepal's Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal held a cabinet meeting below Mt. Everest. Two ministers suffered bouts of altitude sickness and had to be evacuated, but the point had been made ahead of the Copenhagen Summit about melting Himalayan glaciers and the need for action on climate adaptation, mitigation, and justice.

Both photo ops, timed for a crucial international climate summit and disseminated by the international media, did much to raise public awareness about how people who are not responsible for the climate crisis are most at risk.

Before attending the Copenhagen summit, I accompanied a Danish TV crew to film the shrinking glaciers below Mt. Everest. We donned oxygen masks and from the open door of a single engine Pilatus PC-6 flying at 6,500m, we looked down at the Imja Glacier. What had once been a debris-covered, crevasse-strewn glacier detailed in trekking maps from only 25 years ago had been replaced by a lake 2km long.

I have been covering climate change since the 1980s and I teach classes on communicating climate breakdown. I have noticed that students today are much more aware of the impact of global warming. In fact, my syllabus has to be periodically updated as the world experiences record-breaking heat waves and storms. The curriculum also has been changed to go beyond 'what is happening' to 'why it is happening' and 'what we can do about it'.

In the Himalaya, we see firsthand the impact of climate change and we understand the need for immediate action to address it.

Kunda Dixit
Environmental journalist, editor, and author based in Nepal

High on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau near Lhasa is the 7,191-meter peak of Noijin Kangsang. On its south side is a glacier that used to come right down to where 60-year-old herder Tashi Gyalpu spends summers in a black felt tent with his yaks grazing peacefully in the sloping pasture.

As a boy, Tashi Gyalpu remembers the glacier being where his tent is now. It has receded nearly 500m up the cliff ending in an abrupt icefall.[429] The warmer climate has melted the glacier, and this means more grass. So, Tashi has 100 yaks and mountain goats, whereas his father just had a dozen or so.

I ask him if he has ever heard the term 'climate change'. He shakes his head. But Tashi is a happy man. He is better off, and it is not as cold up here anymore. His only complaint is that it does not snow much in winter, and this means less new grass in spring.

The Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau together with the Himalaya, Karakoram, Hindu Kush, and the Yunnan Mountains are collectively known as High Asia. Altogether, these constitute the third largest repository of fresh water stored as ice after the polar regions.[430] That is why it is also known as 'The Third Pole' or 'The Roof of the World'.

These highlands emerged 55 million years ago after the collision of the Indian tectonic plate with Eurasia.[431] As they rose, the mountains blocked atmospheric rivers, causing rain and snow.[432] Himalayan rivers are the source of most of Asia's main rivers.[433]

The Indus drains westwards to the Arabian Sea, the Ganga flows into India, the Yarlung Tsangpo traverses the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong flows into Southeast Asia, and the Yangtse and Huanghe flow through China to empty into the Pacific Ocean.

The rivers are older than the mountains, and as they flowed over millions of years, have cut stupendous gorges through the rocks. Today, they are a lifeline for about two billion people living downstream.

It was along the banks of these rivers that Asia's great religions and civilizations were born and flourished. Himalayan peaks are regarded as sacred because the ancients knew melting snow on the mountains kept the rivers flowing and food growing.

During the Last Glacial Maximum, the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, North America, and Northern Europe were all under ice caps more than one kilometer thick.[434] Most of this ice melted away rapidly about 15,000 years ago at the end of the Ice Age, raising sea levels around the world and submerging land bridges like the Bering and Torres Straits.[435]

Climate change: A story that must be told[436]

Since the Ice Age, global temperatures remained stable until the Industrial Revolution. Burning fossil fuels produced carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, raising average global temperatures. In 2024, some sources reported a rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.[437]

429 A steep, frozen waterfall formed by the flow of glacial ice, often characterized by towering ice cliffs and deep crevasses..

430 Dialogue Earth. 2021. Explainer: *The disappearing glaciers of the Himalayas*. https://dialogue.earth/en/climate/glaciers-himalayas-melting/.

431 Dimri et al. 2020. *Himalayan Weather and Climate and their Impact on the Environment*.
https://www.chikyu.ac.jp/yasunari/yasunari.bak/list/pdf/the%20uplift%20of%20the%20himalaya-tibetan%20plateau%20and%20human%20evolution_ch15.pdf.

432   Atmospheric rivers are large, narrow sections of the Earth's atmosphere that carry moisture from the Earth's tropics near the equator to the poles.

433 Dixit, K. 2025. Saving what is left of Himalayan rivers. *Nepali Times*. https://nepalitimes.com/here-now/saving-what-is-left-of-himalayan-rivers.

434 Kuhle, M. 2002. *The Tibetan Ice Sheet, Its Impact on the Palaeomonsoon and Relation to the Earth's Orbital Variations*.
https://epic.awi.de/id/eprint/28494/1/Polarforsch2001_1-2_1.pdf.

435 O'Regan, A. 2022. *Bering Land Bridge formed surprisingly late during last ice age*. Princeton University.
https://research.princeton.edu/news/bering-land-bridge-formed-surprisingly-late-during-last-ice-age.

436 The World Press Freedom Day 2025 Campaign #Thisstorymustbetold spotlighted the contributions of journalists and photojournalists in unveiling stories of turmoil and grief linked to the climate and biodiversity crises that the public deserved to know. See UNESCO. 2023. *The Story Must Be Told: A UNESCO Campaign for World Press Freedom Day*. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/story-must-be-told-unesco-campaign-worldpressfreedomday.

437 World Meteorological Organization. 2025. WMO confirms 2024 as warmest year on record at about 1.55°C above pre-industrial level.
https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level.

The impact is seen worldwide in disrupted rainfall, more intense storms, and melting ice caps. On both sides of the Himalayan mountains, glaciers have created vast lakes that are growing as the snow line recedes.

In 1985, the glacial lake Dig Tso in Nepal broke through its moraine dam, sweeping away most of Thame village, a hydropower plant, and trekking trails downstream. Namgye Chumbi remembers weeding his potato field along the Imja River when he heard the approaching roar. He barely managed to gather his family and climb up the slope as boulders and mud thundered past below their feet. Chumbi has rebuilt his home higher up the mountain. He has heard that there is an even larger glacial lake upstream, but says, 'Where can I go?'

On 16 August 2024, two glacial lakes in the same valley burst, sending a devastating slurry downwards, once more destroying half the village of Thame.[438] Disasters like these are becoming more and more common as global warming melts ice caps on the Andes, Alps, Urals, the Himalaya, and other mountain ranges.

Disasters make news and change opinions

Media attention helps spread awareness of the climate emergency.[439] Profiling the human impact adds credibility to the coverage and spurs local action.

The increase in the frequency and intensity of weather extremes appears to have convinced many about the existence of climate change. One study showed that even in an oil-producing area, the percentage of respondents accepting climate change rose from 60% in 2010 to 72% in 2023.[440]

A 2021 survey by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication showed that Mexico, Brazil, and Vietnam were the most aware, with nearly 60% of respondents on Facebook agreeing with the statement 'Climate Change Will Harm Me a Great Deal'. Nearly 45% of respondents in India agreed, but in Australia, parts of Europe, the United States and Canada, the response was in the 12-24% range.[441]

Arguments evolve, but opposition continues

While 'old denial' (rejection of climate change itself) appears to be decreasing, new data shows a rise in 'new denial' – skepticism about the effectiveness of climate policies, the acceptance of climate change as benign, or doubts about the effectiveness of mitigation policies.[442] Channels on online video platforms pushing conspiracy theories and 'new denialism' have a large following.

A report, *Deny, Deceive, Delay* by the international advocacy group Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), measured how content pushing old denial spiked in 2022-23 with the hashtag #ClimateScam outperforming #ClimateCrisis and #ClimateEmergency.[443] CAAD tracked the small group of accounts that were pushing the hashtag.

438 Nepal Investigative Multimedia Journalism Network. 2024. A Himalayan Warning: How a Glacial Lake Outburst Flood in Thame Sent Wake-up Call in Nepal. https://www.nimjn.org/209/a-himalayan-warning-how-a-glacial-lake-outburst-flood-in-thame-sent-wake-up-call-in-nepal.

439 Carrington D. 2025. More than 150 'unprecedented' climate disasters struck world in 2024, says UN. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/19/unprecedented-climate-disasters-extreme-weather-un-report.

440 Cunha S. F. 2024. *New climate denial and 2024 elections*. KING'S ThinkTank. https://kingsthinktankspectrum.wordpress.com/2024/04/28/new-climate-denial-and-2024-elections/.

441 Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. 2021. *Perceived harm from climate change globally*. https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/global-facebook-harm-map/.

442 Old denial' refers to claims of (a) Global warming is not happening (b) Human-generated greenhouse gases are not causing global warming, and (c) the impacts of global warming are beneficial or harmless. 'New denial' refers to claims that (a) climate solutions won't work, or (b) climate science and the climate movement are unreliable. See Center for Countering Digital Hate. 2024. *The New Climate Denial*. https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CCDH-The-New-Climate-Denial_FINAL.pdf.

443 Climate Action Against Disinformation. 2023. *Deny, Deceive, Delay: Climate Information Integrity Ahead of COP28*. Vol. 3. https://caad.info/analysis/reports/deny-deceive-delay-vol-3-climate-information-integrity-ahead-of-cop28.

■ #climatescam   ■ #climatecrisis   ■ #climateemergency

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

■ #climatescam   ■ #climatecrisis   ■ #climateemergency

444   Ibid.
445   Climate Action Against Disinformation, op. cit.

The report underscored the urgency of finding mitigation and adaptation solutions.

The People's Climate Vote, the world's largest stand-alone survey on climate change, found in 2024 that despite the rise in 'new denial', 80% of people polled in 77 countries support government action on climate change.[446]

Public awareness, though, only goes part way to solving a problem. Many other factors have to be addressed before there can be behavior change or policy reforms. To protect our planet, we need to promote cheaper alternatives to fossil fuels, governments need to be proactive in providing subsidies for clean energy, and there has to be public pressure to make the shift.

The media and the environmental crisis

The triple planetary crisis is the coming together of three emergencies: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – all three driven by human economic and industrial activity. At the same time, there is a crisis in journalism worldwide, as its agenda-setting role is increasingly undermined by economic and political threats.

News outlets are closing down as a mass migration of eyeballs to the digital sphere further cuts revenue streams. Algorithms drive users towards entertainment, hate, or conspiracy theories and denialism. Meanwhile, the trend of public relations efforts influencing climate journalism and diverting attention away from scientists is becoming stronger.[448]

FIGURE 3

Map showing public support for stronger climate commitments

Source:
Climate Action Against Disinformation.[447]

% 'Strengthen'
0   100
● Dot size is relative to country land area.

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446   The survey, conducted by GeoPoll on behalf of UNDP, was then collated and processed by analysts at the University of Oxford, who weighted the data to create representative estimates of public opinion. See United Nations Development Programme. *Peoples' Climate Vote 2024.* 2024. https://peoplesclimate.vote/document/Peoples_Climate_Vote_Report_2024.pdf.

447   Climate Action Against Disinformation, op. cit.

448   Schäfer, M. S. and Painter, J. 2020. *Climate journalism in a changing media ecosystem: Assessing the production of climate change-related news around the world. Wires.* Climate Change. https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/wcc.675.

Environmental journalists, newsrooms, and content creators face the challenge of conveying the crises in a way that avoids alarmism or inducing excessive fear, which could lead to public disengagement or apathy. An individual can only take so much bad news, and it becomes the responsibility of journalists and content creators to also highlight positive trends, like the global switch to battery-powered cars, conservation successes, the surge in solar and wind energy, and controls on plastic waste and air pollution.

However, the power of the mainstream press has been eroded as the business model of mass media collapses. The crisis in media also coincides with the democratic backsliding detailed in Chapter 1 'Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law.' Threats to journalists reporting on the unsustainable use of natural resources and other environmental issues now come from the same sources that are also undermining democracy, pluralism, and freedom of expression.

The perils of defending the environment

Covering the environment should not be as dangerous as covering a war. UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists has documented the murders of at least 46 environmental journalists since 2010; only six of the perpetrators have been convicted.[449]
In January 2024, assassins gunned down a journalist, who had been reporting on deforestation for a local TV channel.[450] Later in the year, in another country, a journalist was killed while covering illegal logging in a wildlife sanctuary.[451] These cases underscore the extreme risks faced by those reporting on environmental issues, even far from conflict zones.

A UNESCO report covering 2009 through 2023 concluded that attacks on environmental journalists are on the rise, with those in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific being most at risk.[452]

Protecting the environment can be dangerous not only for journalists, but also for environmental activists, who are often a key source of information for media coverage. For example, a student activist in 2020 was deliberately run over by a truck belonging to sand mining contractors.[453] Reporters who went to investigate his murder were subsequently threatened, illustrating the wider climate of intimidation over environmental reporting. The nearer journalists get to powerful local figures engaged in natural resource extraction, poaching, or logging, the more dangerous it becomes.

Beyond physical threats, environmental journalists face systemic pressures, including the misuse of legal mechanisms to intimidate and silence them. According to a 2024 UNESCO issue brief,[454] journalists and media houses covering environmental issues were the targets of 210 legal attacks since 2009 with 94 resulting in criminal charges, including public order disruption, terrorism, hate speech, dissemination of fake news, and criminal defamation; 39 journalists were convicted and jailed.

Civil defamation suits made up 63 of the cases. They often were used to target journalists critical of powerful actors, a trend identified by UNESCO in 2022. Regionally, Europe and North America saw the most litigation attacks (77), the majority of them civil defamation suits, while in Asia and the Pacific (59 cases), imprisonment was the most common legal sanction. Such legal pressures, combined with physical violence and harassment, online abuse, threats, and social intimidation, create an environment where reporting on environmental damage carries severe personal and professional risks.

449 UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists, op. cit.
450 UNESCO. 2024. UNESCO Director-General condemns the killing of journalist Luis Alonso Teruel in Honduras.
     https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-director-general-condemns-killing-journalist-luis-alonso-teruel-honduras.
451 UNESCO. 2024. UNESCO Director-General condemns the killing of journalist Chhoeung Chheng in Cambodia.
     https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-director-general-condemns-killing-journalist-chhoeung-chheng-cambodia.
452 UNESCO. 2024. *Press and planet in danger: safety of environmental journalists; trends, challenges and recommendations.*
     https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389501.
453 Joshi, A. R. 2023. Climate of Fear Persists among Nepal's Eco Defenders as Threats Rise. *Mongabay.*
     https://news.mongabay.com/2023/06/climate-of-fear-persists-among-nepals-eco-defenders-as-threats-rise.
454 UNESCO. 2024. *Press and planet in danger: safety of environmental journalists; trends, challenges and recommendations.*
     https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389501.

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Newsrooms are failing to support journalists who cover
one of the most pressing crises of our time.
The emotional cost is high – but so is the commitment.

Prof. Anthony Feinstein
Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto
and Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre

Moreover, climate deniers with powerful connections in high places deploy bot armies to terrorize those who expose carbon emitters and call for action on renewables. Many journalists are increasingly attacked by toxic trolling on social media and resort to self-censorship as a precaution.

In the end, journalists covering the climate crisis often face the trauma of reporting on relentless disasters and human suffering.

According to The *Climate Journalism Psychological Study*, a collaboration among the University of Toronto, the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, and UNESCO, an online survey of 268 journalists from 90 countries found that 73% believe their work makes a difference, 60% have experienced psychological distress, and 27% report being harassed for their reporting.

A Joint Declaration on Climate Crisis and Freedom of Expression to mark World Press Freedom Day in 2024 highlighted the elevated risk faced by journalists as well as those who defend environmental and human rights.[455] The statement emphasizes that the 'climate crisis poses an unprecedented global challenge, requiring informed, inclusive, and open debate to promote prompt and decisive actions.'[456]

How global communication influences climate action

An increase in public awareness about the worsening impacts of climate breakdown grew in the early 2000s largely because of increased coverage in the mass media.

This represented a welcome change from the late 1990s, when skeptics in governments, often beholden to the fossil fuel sector, were quoted more often in the mainstream press than scientists.[457] But as evidence of climate impact became irrefutable, industrialized countries as well as developing countries began to invest in green energy.

However, populist politicians in several countries in the last four years have won elections and are directly challenging government subsidies for renewable energy. Climate skeptics have again become outright deniers, and once in power, have rolled back funding for decarbonization.[458]

As the triple planetary crisis endangers all life on the planet, the mass media's capacity to draw attention to the urgency of the issues is seriously undermined by the crisis in journalism and in democracy itself.[459]

An intricate and dynamic interaction among scientists and researchers, media and social media, governments as well as their citizens shapes climate action. While climate researchers and government policy are the focus of the media, what journalism gatekeepers decide to cover also shapes government policy.

The journalist's role thus becomes one of translating complex research outcomes in peer-reviewed journals into day-to-day language, spurring policy reform by building public opinion. However, uncovering climate disinformation campaigns is complex and requires strong and viable media ecosystems.

455   OSCE. 2024. *Special Rapporteurs' Joint Declaration on the climate crisis and freedom of expression*. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/b/567968.pdf.

456   Ibid.

457   Keane, P. 2020. How the oil industry made us doubt climate change. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-53640382.

458   Catt, H. 2025. How the political consensus on climate change has shattered. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx20znjejw1o.
        See also BBC. 2025. Trump and the planet: The first 100 days. *The Climate Question (podcast)*. https://www.bbc.com/audio/play/w3ct701r.

459   Coombs, W. T. 2025. *Media and Crisis Communication*. https://www.routledge.com/Media-and-Crisis-Communication/Coombs/p/book/9781032619064?srsltid=Afm BOorEObdPK8Uuk-A8r4TrMvval0LodAb6rkJ-bQBdVhSD-FCdFx7G.

Disinformation campaigns and denialism can be traced back to the tactics used by Big Tobacco to suppress research that proved the link between smoking and lung cancer.[460] And just like the cigarette companies did not simply react with blowback but engaged in a deliberate, systemic strategy to discredit compelling research, including actively funding targeted scientific studies to manufacture doubt, there is a similar reaction from petroleum companies when it comes to linking CO_2 emissions to climate breakdown.[461] The tactics are to discredit journalists and scientists, exaggerate uncertainties, harass, and use public relations tools.

The power of greenwashing

Just as the fossil fuel industry lobbies legislators and politicians not to undermine their drilling interests or enforce emission targets, they 'buy' the media with advertising.[462] And since most mainstream media rely heavily on advertising revenue, the industry uses these ads to engage in 'greenwashing' – presenting themselves and their products as environmentally responsible despite evidence to the contrary. The aim is to persuade the public that climate change is either not happening, not caused by human activity, or at least not the fault of oil companies, and even if it is, that continued reliance on fossil fuels is inevitable.

A report by InfluenceMap shows that in the three years after the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, the world's five biggest oil companies invested more than $1 billion (USD) on 'misleading climate-related branding and lobbying'.[463] The money was usually spent on greenwashing or in direct advertising on digital platforms.

Uncovering the vested interests that support the fossil fuel industry, exposing their political backers, or reporting on the lobbyists and even scientists funded by the fossil sector to spread disinformation, are therefore getting harder when there is a crisis of media viability.

Besides the outside threats to press freedom, journalists face increasing pressure from within their own beleaguered outlets to conform and self-censor. Many media companies play it safe and report on environmental stories without blaming anyone. If some do go into the causes, they often blame the victims of environmental crime rather than the big contractors and the corrupt officials who collude with them.

Squatters face journalistic criticism for encroaching on floodplains rather than real estate developers who engage in land grabbing.[464] Subsistence farmers are accused of destroying nature instead of illegal loggers.[465] Villagers are held responsible for polluting the air, rather than diesel trucks and coal-fired power plants.[466]

Such superficial coverage is form, not substance. Stories only highlight the problems, which usually are already well-known. They rarely name the special interest groups responsible or offer solutions.

Meanwhile, there is the growing trend of 'news avoidance', as readers turn away from headlines because they mostly highlight violence, famine, and apocalyptic predictions. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 found that 40% of those surveyed across the world are tuning out.[467] A way around this could be for journalists to cover not just problems over which people have no control, but solutions that they can initiate themselves.

460   Oreskes, N. and Conway, E.M. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt*.

461   Rapier, R. 2024. Why Big Oil is not Like Big Tobacco. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2024/05/05/why-big-oil-is-not-like-big-tobacco; Angus, C. 2024. The Big Tobacco moment comes for Big Oil. *National Observer*. https://www.nationalobserver.com/2024/02/15/opinion/big-tobacco-moment-comes-big-oil.

462   Bove, T. 2020. The Fossil Fuel Industry's Influence on Environmental Journalism. *Earth Org*. https://earth.org/fossil-fuel-industrys-influence-on-environmental-journalism/.

463   InfluenceMap. 2025. *Big Four UK Banks: Falling Short on Climate Action? A Finance MapReport*. https://influencemap.org/report/Big-Four-UK-Banks.

464   Dhakal, S. Phillips, A. 2024. People 'jump from roof to roof' as floods kill 148 in Nepal. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qz82e7d1jo.

465   Ropero, G. 2022. Philippines needs to move away from 'subsistence farming': Panfilinan. *ABS-CBN*. https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/06/14/22/ph-needs-to-move-away-from-subsistence-farming-pangilinan.

466   Kumar, S. 2023. Stubble trouble: Are farmers solely to blame for the air pollution in Delgi and neighbouring areas? ET Government. https://government.economictimes. indiatimes.com/blog/stubble-trouble-are-farmers-solely-to-blame-for-the-air-pollution-in-delhi-and-neighbouring-areas/105486131.

467   Newman et al. 2025. *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://19565931.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/19565931/Content%20Types/Round%202/Digital_News-Report_2025.pdf.

The impact of social media

All this is happening as news competes for public attention with 24/7 entertainment. Traditional media is a one-way street from newsrooms to doorsteps and living rooms. Digital platforms, on the other hand, are eight-lane expressways with interactive networking, streaming content, and comment threads with feedback loops amplifying the messages.

Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) researchers have found evidence of big tech allowing 'super-spreaders' to flood social media with climate disinformation, allowing accounts to decouple disasters like wildfires and extreme weather from climate breakdown, all the while profiting from greenwash digital advertising.[468]

Fact-checking loses its relevance when facts do not matter anymore on polarized and weaponized social media platforms. Editors at traditional media outlets are no longer gatekeepers. Users now guard their own doors.

And now, the world is entering the uncertain terrain of artificial intelligence (AI) with little clarity about its consequences. Like earlier technological leaps, AI needs powerful data-processing centers and intensive cooling systems, where the energy mostly comes from fossil fuels.

We face the challenge of deciding whether this emerging media trend will contribute to, or undermine, the planet's future. At stake is not only environmental sustainability but also information integrity, since AI-generated content cannot replace scientific rigor or ethical journalism.

BOX 1

Moving forward, journalism has to catch up[469]

To cover climate breakdown, journalists will have to change the way they report and define 'growth' and 'development' and get to the root causes. Journalists have also to factor in ecological cost in their coverage, framing public opinion by disseminating the scientific consensus, reaching policymakers in government, and spurring global action to counter a global threat.

To achieve this, the traditional role of journalism needs to be revisited. This means challenging one of the fundamental notions of journalism itself, that reporters are to observe, to keep a distance, and not to get too involved in a story.

Professional standards historically have required reporters to give weight to all sides, even if one side is demonstrably wrong. In this model, conspiracy theorists, flat earthers, and climate deniers benefit from false equivalence. On social media, they get more traction just because they are louder and rewarded by algorithms.

Sometimes, reporters are straitjacketed by rules that require them to be scrupulously 'balanced' and prohibit them from taking a stand against wrongs. In this regard, journalism may be factually accurate but miss the larger truth. 'Neutrality' may neuter journalists, undermining their capacity to explain trends, explore inconvenient truths, or follow the money to uncover the socio-political roots and ramifications of the world's polycrisis.

Continued ⟶

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468   Climate Action Against Disinformation. 2024. *UK Position Paper on ISD Extra Research*.
https://caad.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/UK-Position-Paper-ISD-Extra-Research.pdf.

469   United Nations. 2022. Five ways media and journalists can support climate action while tackling misinformation. https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129162.
See also the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). https://www.ipcc.ch/.

False equivalence may not always be a result of a deliberate attempt to obfuscate; it also can happen because journalists are not familiar with climate science. A reporter who wants to be fair may give a climate denier voice. The climate beat needs reporters with an in-depth understanding of the interlinkages among the science, politics, and finances of the climate crisis, so their reporting helps find solutions, and is not bogged down in he-said-she-said.

The need for neutral reporting is often cited by media owners who do not want to rock the boat or harm advertising revenue. Their priority is to protect their business partners. In this way, reporters, who are already constrained by the prevailing crisis in journalism, also have to conform to pressure from corporate ownership.

A question of balance

In 2019, researchers at the University of California at Merced tracked the digital footprints of climate scientists and deniers across 200,000 research publications and 100,000 digital and print media articles on climate change.[470] In North America, they found that climate deniers were featured in 49% more media articles than scientists. They concluded that professional mainstream sources are crowded out, while climate disinformation is being amplified.

The numbers show that the media are 'balancing' experts – who represent the overwhelming majority of reputable scientists – with the views of a relative handful of non-experts,

says one of the UC Merced researchers, Professor LeRoy Westerling.[471]

One reason for this is that scientific rigor requires a consensus before a theory can be tested, while conspiracy theorists and disinformation peddlers do not need evidence. This means there will be any number of pseudo-scientists posting wild theories about climate, the dangers of vaccines, and medical breakthroughs, which then go viral. While some scientists choose not to respond directly to avoid amplifying falsehoods, others actively counter misinformation through media appearances, public statements, and collaborations with fact-checkers and science communicators. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories often gain visibility faster than evidence-based corrections can catch up.

Data from a survey published in the journal Nature looked at effective strategies for rebutting climate and vaccine denialism and found that not responding to social media posts by deniers gave them more legitimacy, while providing facts was more effective.[472]

In countries where the scale of justice is askew and heavily favors movers and shakers in government or business, traditional journalism often perpetuates the status quo – which itself is taking a side.

Rigid 'objectivity' when doing environmental journalism is biased against those who have to live with climate-induced hazards, while those who are responsible for historic emissions get away.

470 Petersen, A. M., Vincent, E. M., and LeRoy Westerling, A. 2019. Discrepancy in scientific authority and media visibility of climate change scientists and contrarians. *Nature*. www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-09959-4.

471 Anderson, L. 2019. Media Creates False Balance on Climate Science, Study Shows. *UC Merced*. http://news.ucmerced.edu/news/2019/media-creates-false-balance-climate-science-study-shows.

472 Schmid, P., and Betsch, C. 2019. Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions. *Nature Human Behaviour*. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-019-0632-4?fbclid=IwAR3iBOS_cvgEIgP3G2Tl0K2uJjTnWHMwHZ56UN8SWt_IsA0i2rtNUEDWi4M.

The media make a difference

Journalism plays an important role in combating climate change and it is important that media organizations be able to report early-warning signs so they can be taken seriously by decision-makers and the public.

As shown in the World Trends Report in Data, countries where journalists are independent have more accountable governance structures that can have direct impact on climate action. The ability of media to criticize authorities shows a strong correlation with broader governance structures that influence climate policies. This indicates that in countries where journalists can openly scrutinize government decisions, climate policies tend to be significantly stronger, more transparent, and better enforced. The strength of this relationship underscores that an independent media is one of the most powerful drivers of government accountability in climate action.[473]

When media freedom is restricted, governments are less likely to implement effective environmental policies and misinformation about climate change spreads more easily. This highlights the need for robust legal protections for journalists and strong mechanisms to prevent political interference in environmental reporting.

A path forward

Stronger investment is needed in investigative journalism, boosting the media's ability to do in-depth reporting on environmental crime (and the corruption in high places that allows these crimes to happen) as well as emerging issues like greenwashing and manipulation of the carbon credit market.

We need reporters who understand climate issues as well as media organizations that give them sufficient time to investigate, analyze, and explain their stories as well as to correct falsehoods. We also need governments that will ensure the safety of journalists and protect them from frivolous lawsuits.

Each month, we see heat records being broken, erratic and extreme weather,[474] and the melting of ice caps.[475] Meanwhile with the collapse of the post-1990 world order and a more complicated international geopolitical scenario, we see reversals in climate commitments made in Paris in 2015,[476] new political pressure to keep drilling for petroleum, and the withdrawal from climate negotiations.[477]

Since the crises the planet faces are happening side-by-side with democratic decay, the roots of the climate breakdown and its solutions need to be a part of political, economic, business, and health coverage.

473   Based on Analysis made by Aldo Magogo on VDem Data, the ability of media to criticize authorities shows a very strong correlation with broader governance structures that influence climate policies (R² = 0.831). This indicates that in countries where journalists can openly scrutinize government decisions, climate policies tend to be significantly stronger, more transparent, and better enforced. The strength of this relationship underscores that an independent media is one of the most powerful drivers of government accountability in climate action. When media freedom is restricted, governments are less likely to implement effective environmental policies, and misinformation about climate change spreads more easily. This highlights the need for robust legal protections for journalists and strong mechanisms to prevent political interference in environmental reporting. For more information see Annex 'World Trends Report in Data.' Magoga, A. op. cit.

474   World Meteorological Organization. 2025. *WMO confirms 2024 as warmest year on record at about 1.55°C above pre-industrial level.* https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level.

475   NASA. 2024. *Arctic Sea Ice Near Historic Low; Antarctic Ice Continues Decline.* https://www.nasa.gov/earth/arctic-sea-ice-near-historic-low-antarctic-ice-continues-decline/.

476   Columbia Law School. 2017. *President Trump Announces Withdrawal from Paris Agreement.* https://climate.law.columbia.edu/content/president-trump-announces-withdrawal-paris-agreement-0.

477   World Economic Forum. 2025. *The US enters its 'drill, baby, drill' era. Here's what a top energy leader has to say.* https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/03/us-enters-drill-era-top-energy-leader-oil-gas/.

Protecting journalists is necessary to protect the planet

Those most at risk from climate breakdown live along the low-lying delta of Bangladesh, in low-lying island nations with parts of their territories at risk of permanent inundation like Kiribati and the Maldives, or downstream from expanding glacial lakes in the Himalaya. Yak herders like Tashi Gyalpu may be happy now with more grazing land and a warmer climate, but in the longer term, there are unknown dangers as climate breakdown reaches a tipping point.

The world can act collectively only if citizens and governments know the scale and impact of impending calamities, and what to do to avert the worst risk. That information only can come from a free media and an online ecosystem that is not weaponized by deniers.

As per UNESCO's Issue Brief *Press and Planet in Danger*: 'In the face of the global environmental crisis, the importance of environmental reporting cannot be overstated, and thus advocacy groups, journalism networks, donors, multilateral organizations, and other stakeholders must emphasize the need for a free press and the safety of journalists.'[478]

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478   UNESCO. *Press and planet in danger*, op. cit.

Silencing Science

By **Kate Cell**, Senior Climate Campaign Manager
at the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS)

As the Earth continues to warm and the impacts on our climate grow increasingly severe, the science that seeks to warn and guide us is being silenced. Powerful global leaders and major corporations are ignoring or denying science in a deliberate attempt to mislead the public and delay urgent action needed to protect the planet's habitability.

While the evidence is clear, some are working hard to undermine public understanding of it, often via online harassment or disinformation.
Here is an example from 2024:

- In June 2024, a climate denier with more than 150,000 followers attacked 'climate hoaxers' for suggesting heat waves are getting worse. He used temperature data from only one country in North America to deceive the public about a clear global trend that the country is also experiencing (Figure 4).[479]

- Just a few days later, an extreme heatwave over nine days affected almost five billion people world-wide, a heatwave made at least three times more likely because of global warming (Figure 5).

- Meanwhile, accurate information about the climate is becoming increasingly difficult to find. For example, governments in North America and Latin America over the last 15 years have removed climate resources from their websites or have discredited scientific findings.[480] Examples from 2025 include the removal of climate risk assessment tools, agricultural adaptation guidance, and national climate reports. Even long-standing databases on extreme weather and its economic impacts have been taken offline. This has forced researchers, farmers, and the public to rely on archived copies or independent institutions to access information that was once openly available.[481]

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479 Even for the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data do not support his claim. By focusing on the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, he ignores the U.S. trend and the broader context. The EPA itself makes clear that today's conditions are neither static nor cooling; rather, heat waves are becoming more frequent, longer, and more intense. According to the EPA, the number of annual heat waves in major U.S. cities has risen from about two in the 1960s to six in recent decades. The heat wave season is roughly 46 days longer, and heatwave intensity has increased by about half a degree compared to the 1960s. Nearly all metropolitan areas show statistically significant increases. While the 1930s Dust Bowl remains the most extreme historical example in the U.S., it was fueled by poor land use and severe drought. It in no way disproves evidence of increasing global temperature or heatwave trends. See US Environmental Protection Agency. *Climate Change Indicators: Heat Waves*. https://archive.ph/rZZ4z.

480 Turner, C. 2017. Canada Fought the War on Science. Here's How Scientists Won. *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/4/29/15479888/harper-war-science-resistance-march-climate; Torres, J. G. 2019. Venezuelan Crisis: Government Censors Environmental and Scientific Data. *Mongabay*. https://news.mongabay.com/2019/10/venezuelan-crisis-government-censors-environmental-and-scientific-data/; AP in Rio de Janeiro. 2020. Outcry from Environmentalists as Brazil Fires Official Monitoring Deforestation. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/13/brazil-firing-amazon-deforestation-data.

481 See, for instance, climate.us, launched on September 4, 2025. https://www.climate.us.

Climate hoaxers are falsely claiming that heat waves are getting worse. All you need do is go to the US EPA web site to find this graph showing that claims are false. epa.gov/climate-indica...

latimes.com/environment/st...

FIGURE 5

More than 60% of the world population, nearly 5 billion people, faced extreme heat that was made at least three times more likely by climate change during 16-24 June 2024[483]
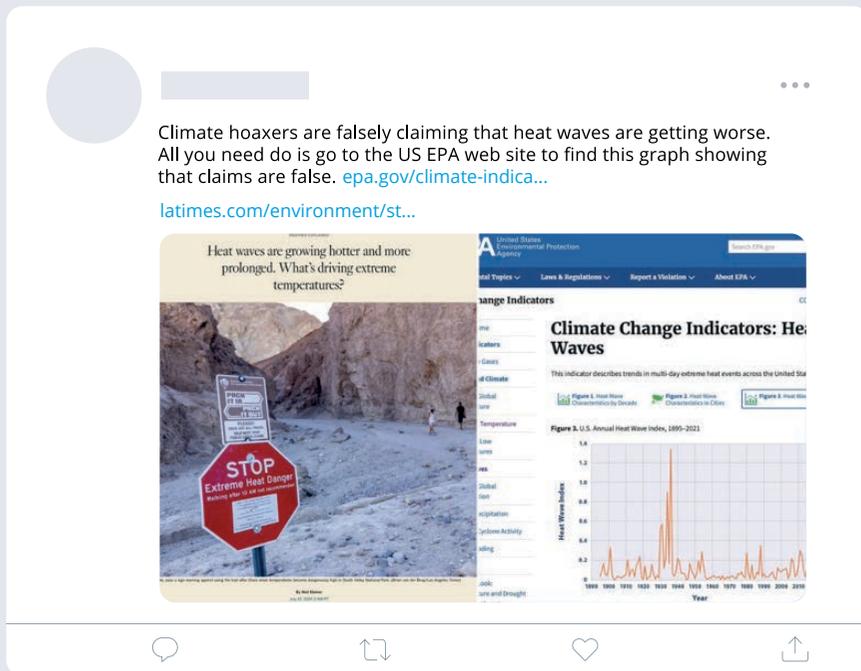
MAXIMUM DAILY CSI
FROM 16-24 JUNE

-5   -3   -1   1   3   5
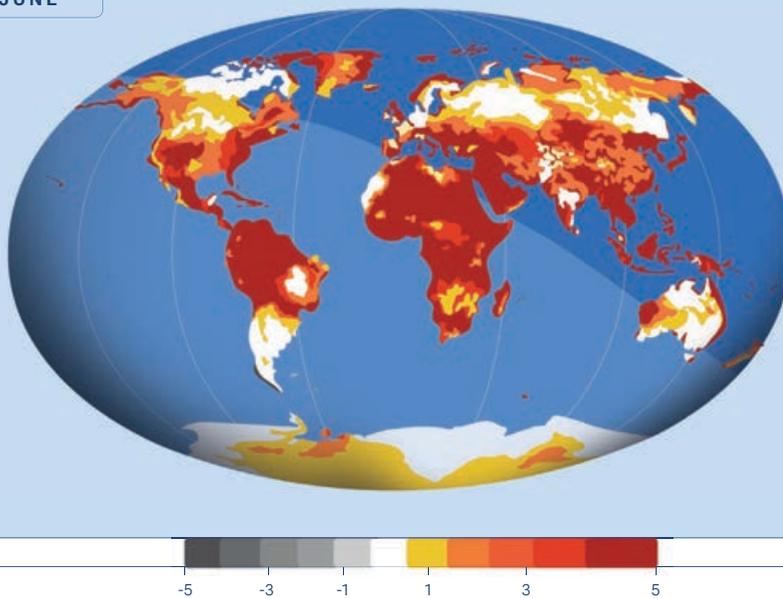
482   Tortoise Media. Hot Air Tool. https://www.tortoisemedia.com/hot-air-explore-tool.

483   Climate Central. 2024. *Analysis: Global Extreme Heat in June 2024 strongly linked to climate change.* https://www.climatecentral.org/report/global-heat-review-june-2024. See also Climate Central. *Climate Shift Index.* https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-shift-index.

This is a story about human suffering from global warming, specifically from extreme heat; the pace of scientific progress; the motives, means, and accomplices of those who thwart climate action and undermine information integrity; and the silencing of science.

The suffering

More than 60% of the world's population experienced prolonged extreme heat in 2024.[484] The World Health Organization cites the 2024 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change finding that 'Heat-related mortality for people over 65 years of age increased by approximately 85% between 2000-2004 and 2017-2021.'[485]

The state of the science

The current and projected impacts of global warming are based on a body of research conducted over decades, which has established a strong scientific consensus.[486]

In 1995, the second Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report concluded that 'the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate'.[487] An April 2025 article in the journal Nature linked the emissions from specific sources to the economic burden of extreme events, finding that between $791 billion and $3.6 trillion in heat-related losses over the period of 1991 to 2020' were caused by a single integrated energy company.[488]

In only 30 years, climate science has advanced from being able to discern human influence on global climate to being able to calculate the cost of one specific impact (heat) caused by one company's emissions. Humans are influencing the climate, and we even can trace those impacts to the emissions of specific fossil fuel companies. This is the state of the science that climate deniers seek to silence.

The motive

The danger that everyone is facing is largely due to the fossil fuel industry and their allied political and corporate interests, who kept their own science from the public while conducting strategic campaigns to block policy change.[489]

In a 2023 paper in the peer-reviewed journal Science, Dr. Geoffrey Supran and his co-authors wrote that 'In private and academic circles since the late 1970s and early 1980s, scientists employed by one of the largest integrated fuels, lubricants and chemical companies in the world predicted global warming correctly and skillfully', while in public, the company 'worked to deny [global warming] – including overemphasizing uncertainties, denigrating climate models, mythologizing global cooling, feigning ignorance about the discernibility of human-caused warming, and staying silent about the possibility of stranded fossil fuel assets in a carbon-constrained world'.[490]

The evidence that fossil fuel companies silenced their own high-quality science in favor of efforts to confuse the public and block policies that would require them to change their business model is also growing stronger.[491]

484   Climate Central. 2024. *Global Heat Review*. https://www.climatecentral.org/report/global-heat-review-june-2024.

485   The Lancet. *Lancet Countdown on Climate and Health*. https://lancetcountdown.org; Milman, O. 2025. Trump Administration Removes Climate Change Information from Federal Websites. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/04/trump-climate-change-federal-websites.

486   NASA. *Scientific Consensus*. https://archive.ph/iJfbT. See also Lynas, M., Houlton, B. Z., and Perry, S. 2021. Greater than 99% consensus on human caused climate change in the peer-reviewed scientific literature. *Environmental Research Letters*. https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ac2966.

487   Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 1966. *The impact of climate change. Contribution of Working Group I to the Second Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/ipcc_sar_wg_I_full_report.pdf.

488   Callahan, C. W., and Mankin, J. S. 2025. Carbon majors and the scientific case for climate liability. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-025-08751-3.pdf.

489   Hall, S. 2015. Exxon Knew about Climate Change almost 40 years ago. *Scientific American*. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/. See also Union of Concerned Scientists. 2015. The Climate Deception Dossiers. Internal Fossil Fuel Industry Memos Reveal Decades of Corporate Disinformation. https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/07/The-Climate-Deception-Dossiers.pdf.

490   Supran et al. 2023. Assessing ExxonMobil's global warming projections. *Science*. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abk0063.

491   Union of Concerned Scientists. 2025. *Decades of Deceit. The Case Against Major Fossil Fuel. Companies for Climate Fraud and Damages*. https://www.ucs.org/resources/decades-deceit.
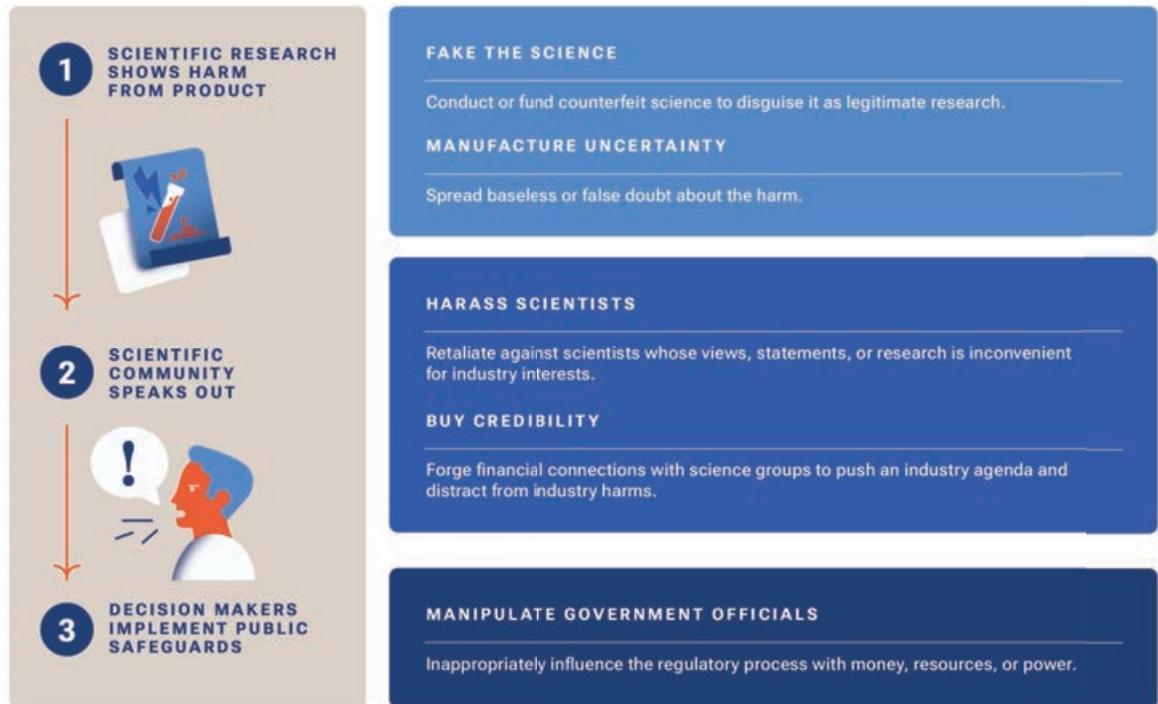
The means

The efforts of corporate, political, and other allied interests to deny climate science, deceive the public, and delay action[492] already have caused real-world harm.[493] In different countries around the world, corporations and politicians deploy the 'disinformation playbook' against science-based policymaking.[494] A process that allows science to inform policy has three stages, but each of these stages faces a predictable set of disinforming tactics designed to undermine policy action (Figure 6). Indeed, many of the same people previously tailored and deployed the disinformation playbook on behalf of the tobacco industry.[495]

Research from the Union of Concerned Scientists and others demonstrates that the fossil fuel industry has used every tactic in the disinformation playbook:

1. Hiring a scientist who used discredited methods and did not disclose industry funding[497]
2. Manufacturing doubt by exaggerating uncertainties in climate change science and targeting teachers and students[498]
3. Harassing climate scientists[499]
4. Buying credibility[500]
5. Manipulating government officials[501]

FIGURE 6

Five tactics used by industry to undermine science.
The disinformation playbook tactics are employed by industry during the scientific process and the science-based decision making process[496]

1. **SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH SHOWS HARM FROM PRODUCT**

FAKE THE SCIENCE

Conduct or fund counterfeit science to disguise it as legitimate research.

MANUFACTURE UNCERTAINTY

Spread baseless or false doubt about the harm.

2. **SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY SPEAKS OUT**

HARASS SCIENTISTS

Retaliate against scientists whose views, statements, or research is inconvenient for industry interests.

BUY CREDIBILITY

Forge financial connections with science groups to push an industry agenda and distract from industry harms.

3. **DECISION MAKERS IMPLEMENT PUBLIC SAFEGUARDS**

MANIPULATE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

Inappropriately influence the regulatory process with money, resources, or power.

492   Climate Action Against Disinformation. 2023. *Deny, Deceive, Delay: Climate Information Integrity Ahead of COP28.* Vol. 3. https://caad.info/analysis/reports/deny-deceive-delay-vol-3-climate-information-integrity-ahead-of-cop28.

493   The Global Climate and Health Alliance. 2023. *Tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century.* https://climateandhealthalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GCHA-ClimateHealth-Briefing-May-2023.pdf.

494   Reed et al. 2021. The disinformation playbook: how industry manipulates the science-policy process – and how to restore scientific integrity. *National Library of Medicine.* https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8651604/.

495   Chang, A. 2023. California's Big Oil Lawsuit Strategy Mirrors Fight Against Big Tobacco. *NPR.* https://www.npr.org/2023/09/19/1198908039/californias-big-oil-lawsuit-strategy-mirrors-fight-against-big-tobacco.

496   Reed et al, op. cit.

497   Mulvey, K., and Shulman, S. 2015. *The Climate Deception Dossiers. Internal Fossil Fuel Industry Memos Reveal Decades of Corporate Disinformation.* Union of Concerned Scientists. https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/07/The-Climate-Deception-Dossiers.pdf.

498   Ibid.

499   Union of Concerned Scientists. 2017. *How the Fossil Fuel Industry Harassed Climate Scientist Michael Mann.* https://www.ucs.org/resources/how-fossil-fuel-industry-harassed-climate-scientist-michael-mann.

500   Hiltner et al. 2024. Fossil fuel industry influence in higher education: A review and a research agenda. *WIREs.* wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/wcc.904.

501   Kirk, K. 2025. *The fossil fuel industry spent $219 million to elect the new U.S. government.* Yale Climate Connections. https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2025/01/the-fossil-fuel-industry-spent-219-million-to-elect-the-new-u-s-government/.

The accomplices

Social media platforms and online search engines join the fossil fuel industry in profiting from spreading climate disinformation to capture users' attention and sell more advertising.[502] An interactive database launched in April 2025 found that climate denier posts grew by 24% on one of the largest online video sharing platforms from 2021 to 2024. Claims that climate policy is an instrument of control now represent around 37% and 40% of climate denier posts on different platforms.[503]

The silencing

Industries that are responsible for most of the world's global warming emissions have not silenced merely their own scientists. They influence and obstruct academic and government research, as well. In some countries, they hold sufficient sway over elected officials to undermine scientific agencies and funding and to block or roll back policies that support greenhouse emissions reductions or measures to adapt to climate change. And in many cases, they fund or are otherwise affiliated with the owners of social media accounts that regularly cast doubt on clear science and attack scientists and the scientific enterprise.

In 2023, the public interest group Global Witness published a survey of 486 climate scientists that revealed 'online harassment and abuse against them imperils their work and ways of communicating.'[504] Two graphs from that study illustrate the attacks on scientists' credibility and the negative impact on their productivity.

> **FIGURE 7**
>
> Targeting of credibility
> *Source: YouGov/Global Witness.*
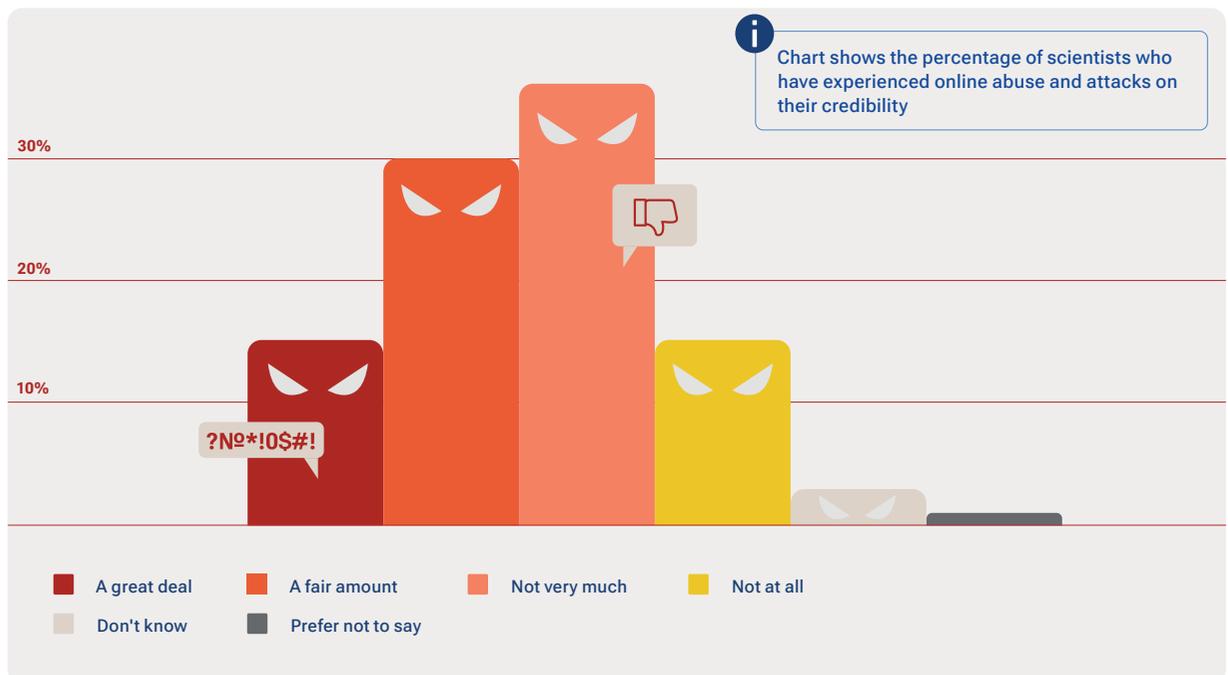
Chart shows the percentage of scientists who have experienced online abuse and attacks on their credibility

Legend:
- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Not very much
- Not at all
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

502 King, J. 2023. *Expert Testimony to Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation.* Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ING2-Committee-Hearing-on-Climate-Disinfo-Jennie-King-Expert-Testimony.pdf.

503 Kirk, K., op. cit.

504 Global Witness. 2023. *Global Hating. How online abuse of climate scientists harms climate action.* https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/global-hating/.

Chart shows the percentage of male and female scientists who have experienced a loss of profuctivity as a result of online abuse

40%

20%

Male Scientists   Female Scientists

■ Have experienced   ■ Have not experienced   ■ Can't remember   ■ Prefer not to say
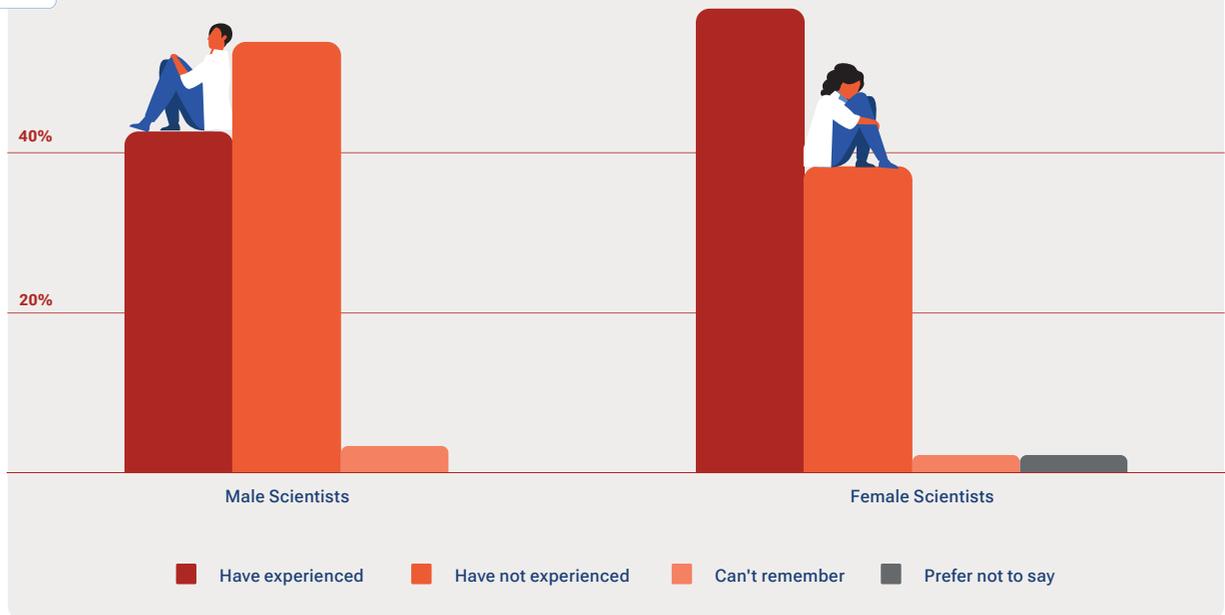
So, what is next?

Action to promote information integrity anywhere supports climate progress everywhere. In September 2024, the UN launched the Global Digital Compact to bridge digital, data, and innovation divides.[505] Soon after, at the G20 in Rio de Janeiro,[506] the UN, UNESCO, and partner nations introduced the Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change.[507]

It seeks to restore trust in science, hold social media platforms and search engines accountable, and help journalists understand the disinformation playbook. Such multilateral initiatives are a positive step toward reducing the capacity of climate deniers and their allies to block progress toward a more just and safe future.

505   United Nations. 2024. *Global Digital Compact.* https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/global-digital-compact.

506   United Nations. 2024. G20 *Leaders' Summit: Brazil, UN and UNESCO launch Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change.* https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/page/g20-leaders%E2%80%99-summit-brazil-un-and-unesco-launch-global-initiative-information.

507   UNESCO. *Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change.* https://www.unesco.org/en/information-integrity-climate-change.

The World Trends Report in Data

By **Aldo Magoga**, Italian data scientist specializing in human rights and justice

Editor's note: The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this chapter do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the author; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Summary

Freedom of expression is under threat worldwide, with steep declines over the last 15 years in media independence, public discourse, and academic freedom.

The right to speak freely, access information, and criticize those in power is weakening. This decline raises urgent questions: Why are these rights eroding? What forces are driving these trends, and what are the consequences for democratic societies, public accountability, and equality? With just five years before the completion of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where do we stand?

This statistical analysis supports the chapters of this report by providing data on the factors that protect, or restrict, freedom of expression and access to information. It also explores correlations between these freedoms and key dimensions of sustainable development, particularly the pursuit of just and inclusive societies, equality and non-discrimination, and progress on climate action.

The evolution of freedom of expression

To understand how freedom of expression has evolved, an index measuring this right in different countries and regions from 1789 to 2024[508] has been analyzed.

The Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index of the V-Dem Dataset[509] ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents complete suppression of freedom of expression and 1 indicates full freedom.

The data shows that freedom of expression has not evolved uniformly. Historical data indicates a global trend of improving freedom of expression and access to alternative information sources, though with fluctuations tied to historical events like the end of colonialism or armed conflicts. A notable upward trend began in the 1980s and continued until around 2012. In recent years (1980-2024), we see that the global trend of freedom of expression does not follow a straight line. In other words, it has experienced ups and downs rather than a simple, consistent increase or decrease.

FIGURE 1

How has freedom of expression changed?
Source:
Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.[510]

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF INFORMATION INDEX

YEAR

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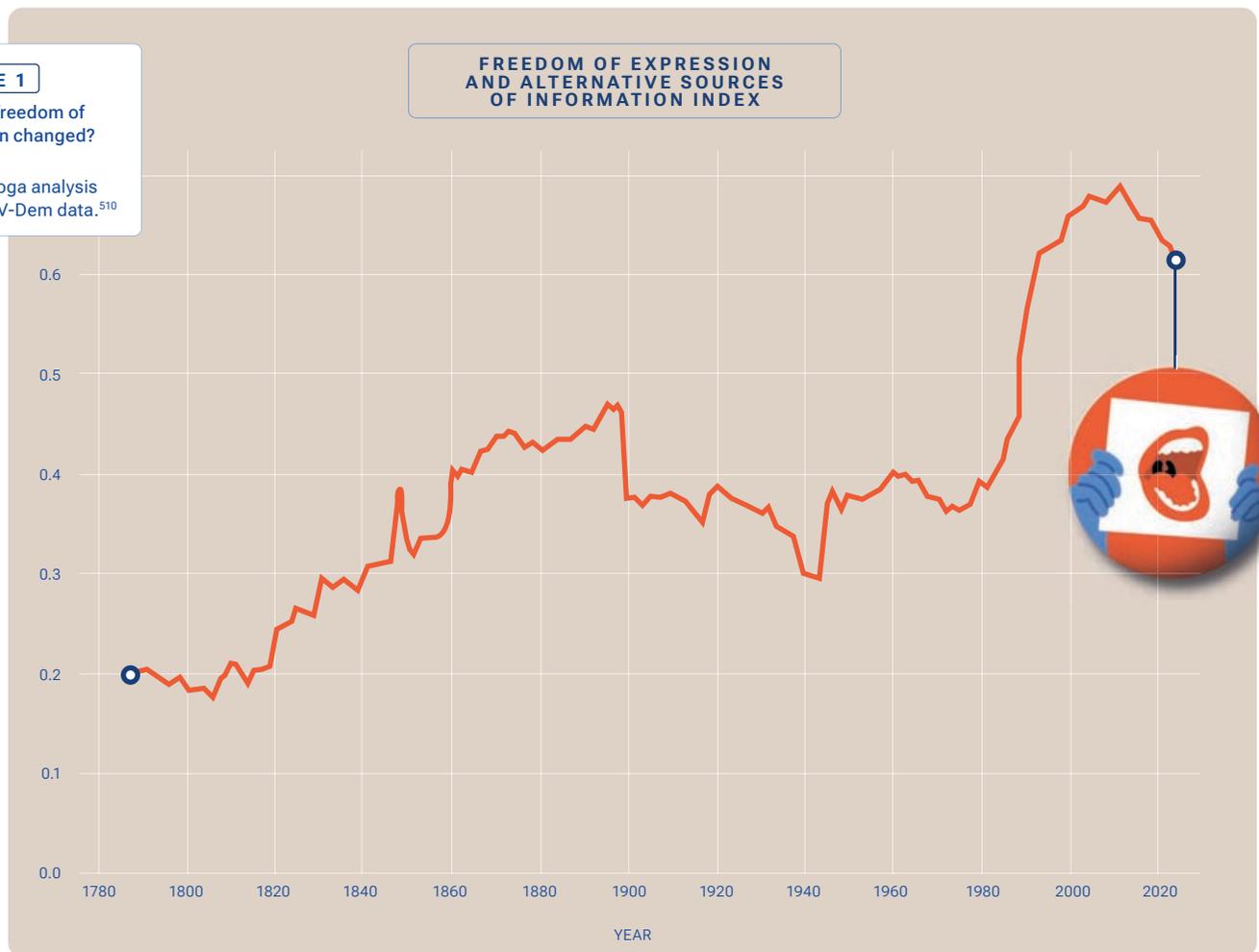
508 The Varieties of Democracy. 2025. V-Dem Dataset. https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/.

509 The index is formed by taking the point estimates from a Bayesian factor analysis model of the indicators for media censorship effort (v2mecenefm), harassment of journalists (v2meharjrn), media bias (v2mebias), media self- censorship (v2meslfcen), print/broadcast media critical (v2mecrit), and print/broadcast media perspectives (v2merange), freedom of discussion for men/women (v2cldiscm, v2cldiscw), and freedom of academic and cultural expression (v2clacfree).

510 Magoga, A., op. cit.

Global Trends (1980 – 2024)

After a period of rapid improvement, the Freedom of Expression Index began to decline across every region. The global average had climbed steadily from roughly 0.4 in 1980 to nearly 0.7 by 2012, reflecting a period of expanding press freedom and open political debate. Since then, however, the figure has fallen toward 0.6, pointing to a worrying erosion of media independence and public discourse.

From the early 1980s through the early 2010s, freedom of expression advanced almost continuously. The break-up of authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, democratic transitions in Latin America and the Caribbean, and broader liberalization elsewhere pushed the index above 0.6 by the turn of the millennium. It peaked at 0.68 in 2012, representing the high-water mark for global press freedom.

Momentum reversed, though, after 2012. Since then, the index slipped by roughly 10% – about 0.76 percentage points each year – signaling a contraction in civil liberties worldwide. Political polarization, tighter state control of traditional and digital media, and growing internet surveillance all have accelerated this downturn.

Several forces explain the recent slide: stronger censorship regimes, more frequent harassment of journalists, heightened media bias and self-censorship, narrowing room for critical viewpoints, and stricter limits on academic and cultural expression. In many countries, new laws now restrict the press, social networks, and even informal public discussions.

The trend underscores a broader reality: the gains of the previous three decades are being rolled back. Safeguarding press freedom and open debate is becoming an urgent challenge across the globe.

Not all regions are the same; the Western Europe and North America region[511] sits well above every place else for most of the past four decades. Although freedom of expression has been declining since 2015, the fall has been gentle and the region still enjoys the strongest media independence and the broadest supply of alternate information sources.

FIGURE 2

Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index
Source:
Aldo Magoga and V-Dem.
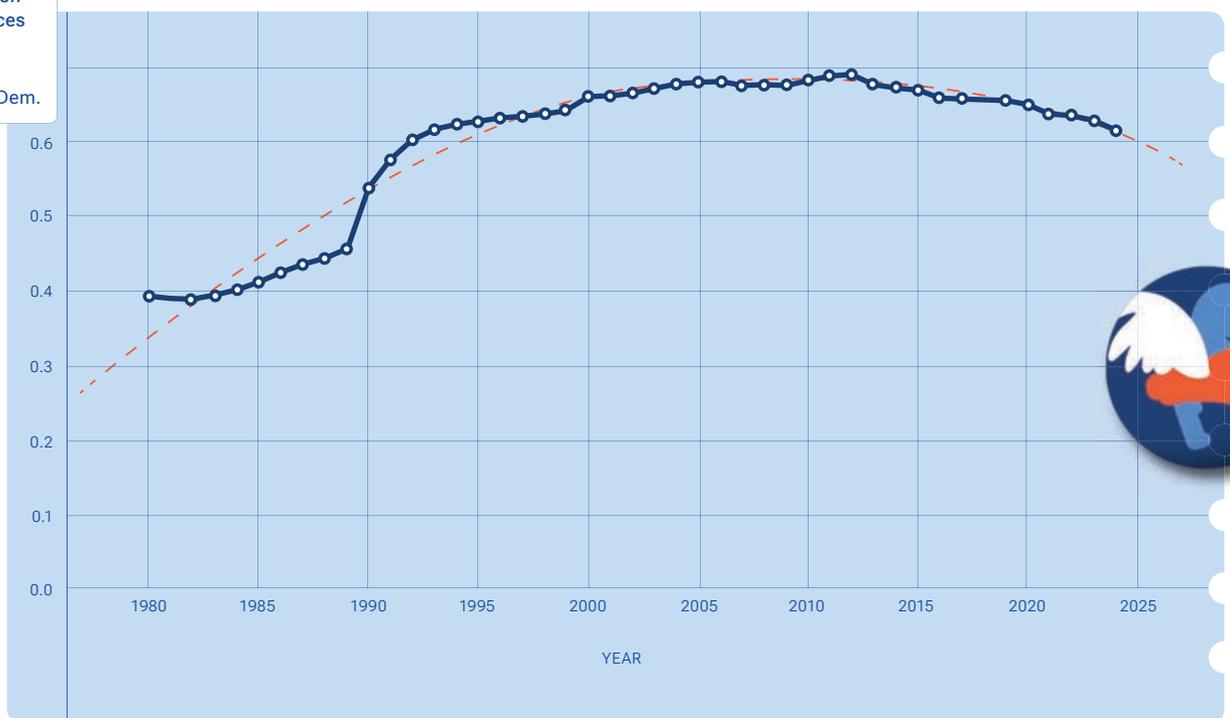
511   As per UNESCO's Regional Grouping, Group I includes 27 States from both Western Europe and North America.

Legend:
- Group I. Western Europe and North America
- Group II. Central and Eastern Europe
- Group III. Latin America and the Caribbean
- Group IV. Asia and the Pacific
- Group Va. Africa
- Group Vb. Arab States
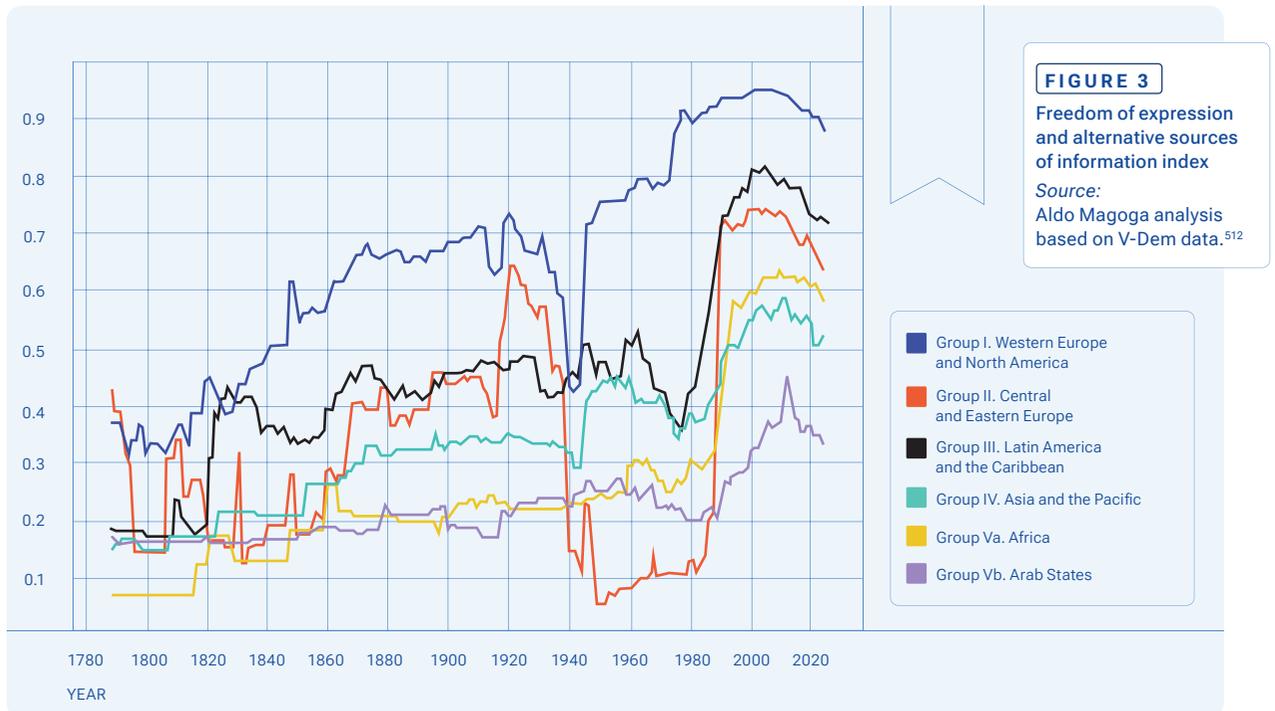
Two regions make up the next tier. Central and Eastern Europe rocketed upward after 1990, mirroring the collapse of one-party states and the rapid adoption of liberal constitutions. Latin America and the Caribbean followed a more gradual climb that begins in the late 1980s with the end of several military regimes. Since 2012, both regions have declined steadily by roughly a tenth of a point, suggesting that democratic backsliding, political polarization, and tighter internet controls are eroding earlier gains.

The mid-range corridor (in South and Southeast Asia) fluctuates between 0.45 and 0.6. Incremental liberalization in parts of South and Southeast Asia explains the gentle rise visible in the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet renewed authoritarianism in several large countries, coupled with expansive digital surveillance laws, dragged the index lower after 2015.

Africa starts from the lowest base but displays the most persistent upward momentum. A long, shallow ascent – from near zero in 1960 to just under 0.3 today – reflects gradual media pluralization and the spread of competitive elections, even if gains remain fragile. The Arab States show the most volatility: a spike pushed the score above 0.4 around 2011, but recent crackdowns and civil conflicts in some of the countries of the region pulled it back toward 0.3 by 2024.

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512   Magoga, A. op. cit.

Why freedom of expression declined between 2012 and 2024?

The freedom of expression index is based upon nine factors that underline freedom of expression, including government censorship, harassment of journalists, and academic freedom. The index uses a scale where 0 represents great restrictions and 3 or 4 represent great freedom.

■ Academic and Cultural Freedom	■ Harassment of Journalists	■ Media Self-Censorship
■ Freedom of Discussion (Men)	■ Media Bias	■ Restrictions on Critical Media
■ Freedom of Discussion (Women)	■ Media Censorship Effort	■ Restrictions on Media Outlets
■ Freedom of Expression Index and Acces to Information		

Why has media freedom declined since 2012? The index offers insights, with the most critical factors being government restrictions and self-censorship.

Media self-censorship has had the most damaging effect on freedom of expression. Each year, journalists and media outlets grow about 4.83 percentage points more likely not to cover risky topics or criticize authorities (almost 63% from 2012 to 2024). They avoid reporting on sensitive issues due to fear of government retaliation, legal action, or violence.

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	0.80	0.30	62.85%	4.83%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	0.72	0.37	47.95%	3.69%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	0.74	0.42	43.26%	3.33%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	1.05	0.64	38.77%	2.98%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	1.04	0.65	37.13%	2.86%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	0.99	0.64	35.13%	2.70%
MEDIA BIAS	0.98	0.65	33.42%	2.57%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	1.02	0.71	30.32%	2.33%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	1.11	0.80	27.74%	2.13%

FIGURE 5

Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index vs components

Source:
Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

Even in countries where formal press freedom laws exist, the growing fear of repercussions has led to widespread self-censorship, limiting the diversity of viewpoints available to the public.

At the same time, governments have intensified their efforts to control and restrict the media. Governments and powerful groups are tightening control on newspapers, television, radio, and other outlets by around 3.69 percentage points each year (almost 48% from 2012 to 2024). This has led to the disappearance of many independent publications, leaving only state-controlled or politically aligned media sources. The result is a less diverse and more controlled information landscape, making it harder for citizens to access objective reporting.

Rising government censorship

Beyond media restrictions, direct censorship and persecution of journalists have escalated significantly in the past decade. Government agencies or powerful actors have expanded direct censorship – blocking websites, restricting broadcast content, and shutting down outlets – by about 3.6 percentage points each year. In some countries, new laws have been introduced to criminalize certain types of journalism or restrict access to foreign media.

A major contributor to this decline is the increasing harassment of journalists. Threats, intimidation, arrests, or violence aimed at reporters have intensified each year by about 3.33%. As a result, many journalists have been forced into exile, imprisoned, or even killed. The growing danger of working in media has further encouraged self-censorship, as journalists weigh the risks of reporting on politically sensitive topics.

The shrinking space for public debate

The decline in freedom of academic and cultural expression (2.86% each year) shows that the shrinking space for public discourse extends beyond journalism. Public figures, including intellectuals, artists, and prominent cultural voices, also have faced increasing restrictions on their ability to express political opinions or critique government actions. This trend highlights a broader shift toward suppressing dissent across society.

Over the last 15 years, every region in the world has reported a decline in freedom of expression. However, the rate of decline and the key contributing factors differ significantly from region to region. Here is a look at the nine categories as well as the overall freedom of expression ranking for each region.

FIGURE 6

Regional differences in the decline
of freedom of expression (2012-2024)

Source:
Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.[514]

GROUP I
WESTERN EUROPE
AND NORTH
AMERICA

GROUP II
CENTRAL
AND EASTERN
EUROPE

GROUP III
LATIN AMERICA
AND THE
CARIBBEAN

GROUP IV
ASIA
AND THE
PACIFIC

GROUP Va

AFRICA

GROUP Vb

ARAB STATES

Value

Avg. V2XFreexp

YEAR

- Academic and Cultural Freedom
- Freedom of Discussion (Men)
- Freedom of Discussion (Women)
- Freedom of Expression Index & Access to Information
- Harassment of Journalists
- Media Bias
- Media Censorship Effort
- Media Self-Censorship
- Restrictions on Critical Media
- Restrictions on Media Outlets

514 Magoga, A. 2025.

FIGURE 7

WESTERN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA REGION (2012–2024).

OVERALL DECLINE:
0.46% PER YEAR

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	2.65	1.80	84.92%	6.53%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	2.54	1.99	54.44%	4.19%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	2.57	2.04	53.18%	4.09%
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	2.11	1.59	51.32%	3.95%
MEDIA BIAS	2.24	1.77	46.90%	3.61%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	2.24	1.82	42.19%	3.25%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	2.48	2.08	40.48%	3.11%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	2.39	2.01	38.08%	2.93%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	2.48	2.17	31.30%	2.41%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.94	0.88	5.94%	0.46%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in the Western Europe and North America region reportedly declined by 5.94%, averaging a 0.46% annual decrease. Although the region still maintains the highest global levels of freedom of expression, the data reveals a clear and consistent downward trend over the past decade.

The most significant decreases were observed in academic and cultural freedom, which dropped by 84.92%, followed by media censorship effort, which increased 54.44%, and harassment of journalists, which worsened by 53.18%.

These trends point to a growing tension within liberal democracies, where once stable protections for expression and inquiry are being weakened by mounting political pressures, polarization, and a hostile information environment.

**CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE (2012–2024)**

OVERALL DECLINE:
0.67% PER YEAR

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	1.59	0.95	63.98%	4.92%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	1.71	1.07	63.96%	4.92%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	1.20	0.62	58.68%	4.51%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	1.13	0.57	55.44%	4.26%
MEDIA BIAS	0.81	0.41	39.80%	3.06%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	1.00	0.60	39.66%	3.05%
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	0.76	0.38	37.89%	2.91%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	0.90	0.55	34.52%	2.66%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	0.68	0.37	30.68%	2.36%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.73	0.64	8.69%	0.67%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in Central and Eastern Europe reportedly declined by 8.69%, averaging a 0.67% annual decrease. This represents one of the steepest declines globally, signaling a worrying regression in democratic safeguards and pluralism across the region.

The most pronounced declines were reported in freedom of discussion for both women and men, each falling by 63.98% and 63.96%, respectively.

Academic and cultural freedom also saw a sharp drop of 58.68%, followed closely by restrictions on media outlets, which worsened by 55.44%. These trends highlight a widespread contraction in the civic space, affecting both public dialogue and the autonomy of educational and cultural institutions.

FIGURE 9

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (2012–2024).

OVERALL DECLINE:
0.53% PER YEAR

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	1.24	0.72	52.14%	4.01%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	1.33	0.91	41.51%	3.19%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	1.63	1.23	40.23%	3.09%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	1.58	1.19	39.69%	3.05%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	1.43	1.08	34.87%	2.69%
MEDIA BIAS	1.43	1.12	31.12%	2.68%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	1.13	0.91	21.84%	1.68%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	0.95	0.75	19.96%	1.54%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	1.34	1.19	15.52%	1.19%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.79	0.72	6.86%	0.53%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in Latin America and the Caribbean reportedly declined by 6.86%, with an average annual drop of 0.53%. This reflects a consistent, multi-dimensional erosion of freedom of expression in a region historically marked by vibrant public discourse and active civil society.

The sharpest deterioration was reported in media self-censorship, which worsened, 52.14%, followed by restrictions on media outlets, 41.51%, and academic and cultural freedom, which declined 40.23%.

These trends signal not only increasing pressures on journalists and independent media, but also a weakening of institutional environments that traditionally foster debate and pluralism.

FIGURE 10

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (2012–2024).

OVERALL DECLINE:
0.51% PER YEAR

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	0.35	-0.25	59.89%	4.61%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	0.41	0	40.62%	3.12%
MEDIA BIAS	0.56	0.2	35.68%	2.74%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	0.53	0.19	33.84%	2.60%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	0.57	0.23	33.61%	2.59%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	0.56	0.27	29.50%	2.27%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	0.66	0.4	25.69%	1.98%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	0.17	-0.06	23.29%	1.79%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	0.33	0.12	21.17%	1.63%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.58	0.52	6.67%	0.51%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in Asia and the Pacific reportedly declined by 6.67%, averaging a 0.51% annual decrease. This marks one of the most pronounced drops in the world, driven by intensifying restrictions on media and growing limitations on open discourse.

The most significant changes were reported in media self-censorship, which worsened by 59.89%, followed by media censorship effort, 40.62%, and media bias, 35.68%.

These shifts illustrate a media landscape that is reported to be increasingly shaped by authoritarian constraints, where overt censorship is paired with the internalization of fear by journalists. The result is a powerful combination of direct repression and widespread self-censorship that severely limits the circulation of independent and critical information.

FIGURE 11

AFRICA (2012–2024)

OVERALL DECLINE: 0.32% PER YEAR
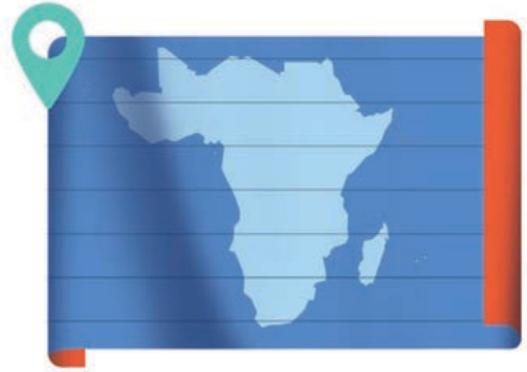
	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	0.61	0.26	34.86%	2.68%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	0.71	0.37	34.33%	2.64%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	0.33	0.01	31.27%	2.41%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	0.99	0.69	29.38%	2.26%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	0.32	0.13	18.20%	1.40%
MEDIA BIAS	0.9	0.74	15.98%	1.23%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	0.8	0.71	9.48%	0.73%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	0.62	0.53	8.41%	0.65%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	0.66	0.6	5.69%	0.44%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.62	0.58	4.12%	0.32%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in Africa reportedly declined by 4.12%, averaging a 0.32% annual decrease. While this represents a more moderate erosion compared to other regions, the underlying components reveal growing constraints on media and civic freedoms.

The sharpest deterioration was reported in media self-censorship, 34.86%, restrictions on critical media, 34.33%, and media censorship effort, 31.27%.

In Africa, key freedoms underpinning pluralistic debate and journalistic autonomy have deteriorated significantly. The combination of rising government pressure on media outlets, increased control of dissenting narratives, and growing fear among journalists has resulted in heightened self-censorship and reduced public access to independent and pluralistic information.

Notably, indicators related to academic freedom and freedom of discussion (for both men and women) also showed smaller but persistent negative trends, compounding the challenge to open expression across sectors of African societies.

FIGURE 12

**ARAB STATES
(2012–2024).**

OVERALL DECLINE:
0.87% PER YEAR

	Value 2012	Values 2024	2012-2024 deterioration	Annual average deterioration
MEDIA SELF-CENSORSHIP	-0.07	-0.89	82.00%	6.31%
RESTRICTIONS ON CRITICAL MEDIA	0.19	-0.46	65.65%	5.05%
HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS	-0.12	-0.7	58.10%	4.47%
RESTRICTIONS ON MEDIA OUTLETS	0.19	-0.39	57.83%	4.45%
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL FREEDOM	-0.12	-0.65	52.67%	4.05%
MEDIA BIAS	-0.02	-0.45	42.41%	3.26%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (MEN)	-0.06	-0.4	34.42%	2.65%
FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION (WOMEN)	-0.15	-0.46	31.27%	2.41%
MEDIA CENSORSHIP EFFORT	-0.48	-0.77	28.78%	2.21%
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION INDEX AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	0.45	0.33	11.33%	0.87%

Source: Aldo Magoga analysis based on V-Dem data.

From 2012 to 2024, freedom of expression in the Arab States reportedly declined by 11.33%, with an average annual drop of -0.87% – the most severe deterioration recorded among all regions.

The most substantial regressions were reported in media self-censorship, which worsened by 82.00%, followed by restrictions on critical media, which increased by 65.65%, and harassment of journalists, which deteriorated by 58.10%. These figures highlight a context of severe repression in some countries, where direct state control over narratives is reinforced by fear, surveillance, and punitive responses to dissent.

At the same time, the region has witnessed the emergence of promising initiatives aimed at strengthening independent journalism, promoting freedom of expression, and addressing new challenges related to the digital environment. Training programs for young media professionals, networks supporting open civic dialogue, and collaborative research on responsible AI use in news production all reflect a growing commitment to building resilient and pluralistic information ecosystems.[515]

515   See for example Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ). https://en.arij.net/.

Key insights

Freedom of expression is essential to democratic health, accountability, and inclusive governance. It does not automatically arise from technology, education, or formal processes; real progress depends on strong institutions and civic engagement.

Freedom of expression is both a sign of and a contributor to healthy democratic systems. Using the V-Dem dataset where 0 represents complete suppression of freedom of expression and 1 indicates full freedom, we can see how freedom of expression strongly correlates with various political, institutional, and social factors.

Freedom of expression: A foundation for democracy

Countries that protect freedom of expression are also those where civil liberties and political participation are the strongest. In societies where people are free to speak, publish, and exchange ideas openly, they are also more likely to enjoy other fundamental democratic rights – such as the ability to vote freely, protest peacefully, and engage in public decision-making. Statistical analysis confirms this close relationship. Using a measure of R^2 (or R-squared), we can measure the strength and proportion of an association between two variables on a scale of 0-1. An R^2 of 1 means two variables are moving together perfectly in a linear fashion. An R^2 of 0 means there is no relationship.

Freedom of expression is very strongly associated with civil liberties, with an R^2 of 0.9331, and even more strongly with political freedoms, where the R^2 reaches 0.9706. These values indicate that countries scoring high on freedom of expression almost always perform similarly well on other key democratic measures.

This means that freedom of expression is not just one right among many – it is a cornerstone of democracy. When it is protected, other rights tend to thrive. When it is restricted, other freedoms often weaken, as well. Supporting freedom of expression, therefore, strengthens the broader democratic fabric.

It promotes openness, accountability, and active civic participation, helping to ensure that citizens can play a meaningful role in shaping their societies.

How free expression sustains transparent and accountable governance

Freedom of expression plays a vital role in promoting government transparency and accountability. A free press and open public debate empower citizens and journalists to scrutinize those in power, expose wrongdoing, and demand better governance. In turn, governments that are more transparent and accountable tend to be more likely to respect and protect free expression, creating a reinforcing cycle of trust and democratic resilience.

This dynamic is strongly supported by data. The strength of the relationship between freedom of expression and overall government accountability is reflected in an R^2 of 0.9133. The link is also high with effective governance, showing an R^2 of 0.8048, and with civil society's ability to monitor government policy, where the R^2 stands at 0.7671. These figures suggest that freedom of expression is not only a right but also a mechanism through which democratic oversight and responsible leadership are sustained.

Open civic space strengthens expression and social cohesion

Freedom of expression thrives where people can freely associate, organize, and participate in civic life. Open civic space not only enables public debate and activism but also helps build trust, solidarity, and democratic resilience. In societies where citizens engage actively in collective action, freedom of expression becomes more deeply rooted and better protected.

This relationship is strongly supported by data. Freedom of expression is closely aligned with associational rights (R^2 = 0.9028), freedom of association (R^2 = 0.8999), and political pluralism (R^2 = 0.8782).

Independent courts and rule of law safeguard freedom of expression

A fair and independent legal system is essential to protecting freedom of expression. When courts are impartial and insulated from political pressure, they provide a crucial line of defense for journalists, human rights defenders, and ordinary citizens exercising their right to speak out. At the same time, freedom of expression helps reinforce the rule of law by increasing transparency and allowing public scrutiny of judicial processes and decisions.

The data highlights these mutual reinforcements. Freedom of expression is strongly associated with the overall rule of law ($R^2 = 0.8207$) and shows meaningful links with judicial independence – both in lower courts ($R^2 = 0.66$) and higher courts ($R^2 = 0.64$) – as well as with compliance with judicial decisions ($R^2 = 0.61$).

Gender equality and inclusion rely on freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is essential for advancing gender equality. It allows individuals and groups to advocate for women's rights, challenge discrimination, and push for more inclusive institutions. At the same time, societies that uphold gender equality – especially by ensuring that women have access to justice – are more likely to protect freedom of expression for all.

This connection is supported by data: the relationship between freedom of expression and women's access to justice shows an R^2 of 0.54. While not as strong as other indicators, this still reflects a meaningful association, suggesting that inclusion and equality are part of the broader ecosystem that sustains open and democratic societies.

A free press drives stronger climate governance

Freedom of expression plays a critical role in climate action. Independent journalism allows the public to scrutinize environmental policies, monitor government commitments, and expose inaction or misinformation. When media can freely question authorities, climate governance becomes more transparent, accountable, and responsive to public demands.

This relationship is clearly reflected in the data: the correlation between media criticism of authorities and the strength of climate governance structures shows an R^2 of 0.831. Countries with a free and independent press tend to perform better on climate governance – highlighting freedom of expression as a key enabler of effective, long-term environmental action.

Freedom of expression helps expose and reduce corruption

Corruption thrives in secrecy, and freedom of expression is one of the strongest tools to confront it. In societies where people can speak openly and the media can investigate without fear, corrupt practices are harder to conceal. At the same time, corrupt and patronage-based systems often restrict expression to protect vested interests and avoid public scrutiny.

Data supports this dynamic: the relationship between freedom of expression and reduced neopatrimonialism (defined as a combination of corruption and patronage) shows an R^2 of 0.7468, a strong correlation between open public discourse and more accountable governance. Protecting free expression is therefore not only a democratic imperative but also a practical strategy for fighting corruption.

Ultimately, the data provide an authoritative mandate: societies aiming to bolster democratic resilience, transparency, stability, and equitable development must prioritize freedom of expression. The exceptionally strong statistical correlations revealed here underline not only the moral imperative but also the practical necessity of safeguarding and enhancing the freedom to express oneself freely and openly.

Statistical analysis for the four chapters of the *World Trends Report*

CHAPTER 1

Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law

Using the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index as a benchmark, this analysis evaluates whether judicial independence, legislative oversight, and executive accountability are decisive in shaping a society's ability to express itself freely.

The legislative: A defender of pluralism

In many democratic systems, the legislature is a counterweight to the executive, ensuring that no single leader or ruling party dominates the political and media landscape. The statistical analysis confirms that where legislative oversight is strong, societies enjoy significantly higher freedom of expression.

- The presence of opposition parties in parliament is the strongest predictor of a free and diverse information environment ($R^2 = 0.72$). This indicates that when multiple political perspectives are represented in the legislature, it becomes much more challenging for a government to monopolize the narrative.
- Legislative investigations ($R^2 = 0.57$) and executive oversight ($R^2 = 0.55$) are also closely tied to media freedom, as they ensure transparency and hold leaders accountable, making it riskier for governments to suppress unfavorable information.

A pluralistic, investigative, and independent legislature is one of the most essential free expression safeguards. It ensures that no single party controls the national discourse and that media outlets can report freely without fear of state interference.

The judiciary: Protecting the space for public debate

If the legislature provides a space for debate, the judiciary ensures that this space is protected. The courts act as guardians against censorship, repression, and legal harassment of journalists and activists. This role is reflected in the data:

- Lower court independence ($R^2 = 0.66$) and high court independence ($R^2 = 0.64$) are among the strongest predictors of freedom of expression. This confirms that when judges can rule without political interference, they are more likely to defend the rights of individuals and media outlets against unjust prosecution.
- Similarly, when governments comply with court decisions ($R^2 = 0.61$), free expression flourishes, as judicial rulings can effectively limit censorship and prevent attacks on the press.

An independent and respected judiciary is a critical pillar of free expression. It ensures that laws protecting press freedom are enforced and that journalists, activists, and citizens have legal recourse when their rights are violated.

The executive: When power is left unchecked

Executives – presidents, prime ministers, and government officials – often have the most direct influence over freedom of expression, as they control law enforcement, regulatory agencies, and public institutions. When other institutions effectively constrain the executive, free expression is more likely to thrive. The analysis highlights key trends:

- Judicial constraints on the executive ($R^2 = 0.70$) and legislative constraints ($R^2 = 0.68$) are among the strongest predictors of free expression. This means that when executives are monitored and held accountable by independent courts and legislatures, they are less likely to suppress critical voices.

- Executive respect for the constitution ($R^2 = 0.47$) is also important, but it does not guarantee free speech on its own. Many governments formally respect constitutional principles while using legal loopholes to restrict information.

Executives are the most powerful actors in shaping media freedom, but their ability to restrict expression is significantly reduced when constrained by strong institutions. Judicial and legislative oversight ensures that no leader can monopolize information.

The broader picture: Institutional strength and the war on truth

The findings from this analysis go beyond statistics. They confirm what history has repeatedly shown: where institutions are strong, information is free; where institutions are weak, truth is controlled.

The data reveals a clear structural relationship between institutional checks and balances and freedom of expression. The most influential institutional mechanisms are not isolated but work together to reinforce transparency, accountability, and the protection of diverse sources of information.

These insights underscore a fundamental reality: freedom of expression does not depend on individual leadership changes or anti-corruption efforts alone – it thrives where institutional defenses are strong and where power is systematically constrained. Even in environments where corruption is prevalent or where executives seek to expand their influence, the presence of robust legislative and judicial checks can counterbalance these forces and uphold spaces for public debate. Conversely, when these institutional safeguards are eroded, the risk of censorship, information monopolization, and repression of dissent rises exponentially.

A strategic approach to defending freedom of expression must therefore go beyond piecemeal reforms. Strengthening legislative oversight, reinforcing judicial independence, and ensuring executive accountability are not just governance improvements; they are the backbone of a society where diverse voices can be heard, the truth can be debated, and power can be held to account.

CHAPTER 2

Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology

Case studies:

Twitter/X and Meta (Facebook)
Analysis of real-world social media platforms highlights how AI-driven policies significantly impact freedom of expression:

Twitter/X:
- Compliance with government requests to takedown content increased from approximately 30–50% before October 2022 to 71% after the same date, reflecting greater alignment with restrictive government demands, notably from account suspensions and content moderation actions. This surge indicates a shift towards mass enforcement and visibility reduction rather than nuanced human moderation.
- Policy adjustments towards hate speech and misinformation policies led to significantly fewer suspensions, yet dramatically more content labeling, reflecting the so call 'Freedom of Speech, Not Freedom of Reach' philosophy.[518]

Meta (Facebook):
- Government requests for user data grew substantially (from 237,414 requests in 2022 to 323,846 by 2024), with Meta maintaining a high compliance rate (~76–78%).

515 Saul, D. 2022. Freedom of Speech' But Not 'Freedom of Reach': Musk Reinstates Kathy Griffin and Jordan Peterson Amid New Policy—But Not Trump Yet. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/dereksaul/2022/11/18/freedom-of-speech-but-not-freedom-of-reach-musk-reinstates-kathy-griffin-and-jordan-peterson-amid-new-policy---but-not-trump-yet/.

- The consistent compliance rate has led to increased user awareness of government surveillance risks, prompting self-censorship and reducing the breadth of public discourse, particularly among journalists and activists.

Social media platforms demonstrate complex enforcement landscapes where policy shifts toward algorithm-driven moderation significantly influence public discourse and the nature of online expression, indicating that practical implementation and enforcement mechanisms are crucial determinants of freedom of expression.

CHAPTER 3

Journalism: Raising Voices for All

The relationship between gender equality and freedom of expression reflects how inclusively power and opportunities are distributed within a society. When gender equality is deeply embedded, diverse voices, particularly those of women and of groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, are amplified, enriching public debate and ensuring pluralism. Conversely, in societies where gender inequalities persist, the suppression and marginalization of women's voices restrict the breadth and depth of public discourse.

This analysis evaluates how critical dimensions of gender equality – such as access to justice, legal protections, political participation, and civic engagement – shape a society's capacity for free and diverse expression.

Access to justice: The foundation of inclusive expression

Women's equitable access to justice acts as a critical foundation for maintaining a free and pluralistic environment. When women can confidently access legal protections and seek redress without discrimination, they can effectively challenge injustices and actively engage in public discourse, contributing to more transparent and open societies.

- Access to Justice for Women (R^2 = 0.54): The strong correlation here indicates that societies that prioritize women's ability to seek justice freely and equitably also tend to protect broader freedoms, ensuring more vibrant media landscapes and robust civic engagement.

Legal protections: Necessary but not sufficient

Legal protections against gender discrimination are essential, yet their effectiveness significantly depends on how well they are enforced and culturally embraced. Societies that implement gender-equal laws effectively create stronger conditions for civic engagement and media pluralism.

- Gender Equality Before the Law (R^2 = 0.29): This moderate correlation highlights that simply establishing legal equality is not enough. Societal norms and strong enforcement mechanisms play vital roles in translating legal protections into real-world outcomes, enhancing women's voices in public debate.

Combating gender-based harassment: Securing participation

Gender-based harassment poses a critical barrier to women's participation in political and civic spaces. Such harassment often excludes women from meaningful engagement, suppressing diverse perspectives, and narrowing public debate.

- Political Harassment of Women (R^2 = 0.17): Although moderate, the correlation emphasizes that even lower levels of harassment have substantial negative effects on women's active involvement, thereby restricting media diversity and pluralistic dialogue.

Structural gender equality: Ensuring diverse civic participation

Structural gender equality encompasses comprehensive legal, political, and social dimensions, strongly influencing the openness and inclusivity of public discourse.

When structural gender equality is present, women's voices become an integral part of the media narrative, contributing significantly to civic dialogue and policymaking.

- Gender Equality Index (R² = 0.56): The robust correlation illustrates clearly that societies prioritizing structural gender equality experience richer, more diverse public discourses and enhanced media freedoms.
- Gender Representation in Civil Society (R² = 0.60): Women's active involvement in civil society strongly correlates with media diversity, highlighting civil society's pivotal role in amplifying traditionally marginalized voices.
- Gender Equality in Political and Legal Spheres (R² = 0.64): This indicator reveals that strong gender protections within governance and legal systems significantly boost freedom of expression, underlining that inclusive governance is a cornerstone for vibrant and pluralistic public debates.
- Political Participation of Women (R² = 0.15): While moderate, this correlation underscores that increasing women's political representation alone without broader institutional and cultural shifts has limited impact. However, meaningful political inclusion remains essential to achieve genuine pluralism.

The analysis underscores the interconnected nature of gender equality and freedom of expression. Robust legal protections, equitable access to justice, active civic engagement, and meaningful political participation are not isolated mechanisms but collectively reinforce each other to create environments conducive to free, diverse, and dynamic public discourse.

CHAPTER 4

Journalism: Protecting the Planet

The relationship between freedom of expression, sustainability, and climate action illustrates how transparency, accountability, and inclusive dialogue shape environmental governance. Effective climate action requires informed public discourse, empowered media, and responsive governance structures.

Conversely, restricted freedom of expression often results in limited public engagement, misinformation, and weaker environmental policies.

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the connections between freedom of expression and key sustainability indicators – including media freedom, public concern about climate change, safety for environmental journalists, and economic development.

Media criticism: A pillar of effective climate governance

An independent and critical media is essential for holding governments accountable for climate policies. Countries where journalists can freely critique authorities tend to adopt stronger, more transparent, and more effective environmental measures.

- Media criticism of authorities (R² = 0.831): The exceptionally strong correlation underscores that media freedom directly contributes to robust climate governance. When journalists can scrutinize policy decisions without fear, governments face pressure to implement and enforce sustainable practices more rigorously.

Public concern about climate change: The influence of economic development

Public engagement with climate change varies significantly based on a nation's level of economic development.
Wealthier countries, benefiting from higher education standards and independent media, typically exhibit greater public awareness and concern.

- Public concern and GDP per Capita (R² = 0.70): The strong positive correlation highlights that economic prosperity and access to information reinforce public understanding of climate risks. Conversely, lower-income countries often prioritize immediate economic survival, diminishing their capacity to actively engage in long-term climate advocacy.

Safety of environmental journalists: Combating climate disinformation

Environmental journalists frequently face threats, censorship, and harassment, especially in countries with weak press protections. Their safety directly impacts the quality and reliability of climate information available to the public.

- Safety of environmental journalists (R^2 = 0.396): This moderate correlation indicates that safeguarding environmental journalists reduces climate misinformation, strengthening the overall media landscape. When journalists can operate safely, the public receives more accurate and unbiased environmental reporting, enhancing climate policy effectiveness.

Education on sustainability: An urgent need to scale up

Integrating education on sustainable development into national curricula is crucial for raising environmental awareness.
However, without accompanying media freedom and open public discourse, educational efforts alone have limited impact.

- Education for sustainable development (SDG 12.8.1, R^2 = 0.034): This correlation demonstrates that as education fosters awareness, it is also necessary to combine educational policies with robust civic engagement and independent media to drive climate action.

Broader implications: Strengthening sustainability through freedom of expression

The analysis reveals several critical insights:
- Independent media emerges as one of the strongest predictors of effective climate governance, reinforcing accountability and transparency.
- Economic prosperity significantly enhances conditions for both public concern and freedom of expression, emphasizing the need to integrate economic and environmental strategies, especially in lower-income countries.

- The safety and independence of environmental journalists are vital in combating misinformation and ensuring informed public debate.
- Education on sustainability is important but must be paired with broader freedoms and civic participation to be truly effective.

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

Conclusion

Since its founding, UNESCO has upheld the conviction that ignorance and mistrust can only be overcome by dialogue, access to knowledge, and respect for truth. Today, however, these values stand at an inflection point. Freedom of expression has been in sustained decline since 2012, eroding trust, fragmenting public debate, and undermining the democratic safeguards that protect peace. If left unchecked, this trajectory risks normalizing a permanent state of crisis.

While many share the aspiration for a world of peace and stability, certain actors disregard scientific evidence, contest factual information, and undermine those who hold differing perspectives. This erosion of shared understanding directly undermines democracy and freedom of expression. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to freely investigate, verify, and publish information of public interest. Democracy is in danger and all too often, so too are the journalists who serve and protect it.

To counteract these trends, journalism is evolving to better serve the public interest. One positive trend is the rise of journalism as an enabler of dialogue. It may not bring peace to the planet, but it is a step in the right direction. Listening is always good.

BOX 1

Bridging divides: Advancing journalism through dialogue
By Deutsche Welle Akademie, Deutsche Welle's center for international media development, journalism training and knowledge transfer

In a world increasingly polarized by autocrats and algorithms, the media can help bridge divides through constructive, inclusive dialogue.

Traditional journalism is changing. It has lost its gatekeeping role as people increasingly get news and information from social media. The media's watchdog role is increasingly being assumed by online influencers. Yet it is difficult to replace the media as a public forum, which is so central for deliberative democracies, social cohesion, and peace.

Actively engaging as promoters and facilitators of public dialogue is thus an opportunity for media houses to regain trust and increase their relevance. Journalists still have to observe and investigate, but they also increasingly need to help communities voice their concerns and form opinions with the direct exchange of divergent views.

The journalist's role in public dialogue is not only that of a reporter but of a facilitator, who encourages diverse voices and ensures constructive exchange on issues of societal relevance. Dialogue methods are not new. They are associated with other well-known professional approaches such as constructive journalism, solutions journalism, peace journalism, and community and citizen journalism - journalism that puts people at the center, is solution-oriented, and empathetic.

Though they typically are small in scale and limited in scope, there are several successful examples worldwide of dialogue approaches in public interest journalism:

- **Agencia Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias** in Brazil is a non-profit local news organization by, for, and about the underprivileged communities of Greater São Paulo. It has helped resolve conflicts and instilled a sense of community and self-worth, reshaping narratives about communities that either were being ignored or depicted negatively.
- **Citizens-Politician Dialogue through Media** in Uganda is an initiative that trains local journalists in solutions journalism and data analysis. This empowers them to report on public service delivery issues, amplifies rural voices, and creates platforms for direct dialogue between citizens and politicians-driving community-led positive change.

There are many other examples of media facilitating public dialogue – not only at the local but also at the regional and national level. Key factors for success include giving a voice to affected communities and linking up with civil society organizations, which know the context and can facilitate trust with those communities.

At a time of declining credibility, promoting and facilitating constructive public dialogue can help media organizations regain trust and relevance. When communities see media organizations not simply reporting about them, but engaging with them, the relationship changes for the better.

Constructive and inclusive public dialogue can identify policy solutions to complex issues through deliberation and legitimize them. It contributes to making authorities more informed and accountable and governance more inclusive. Ultimately, dialogue supports social cohesion in an otherwise increasingly divisive world, defending democratic values and civic freedoms.

Journalism is a force for the future

With the decline of democracy and in a world where AI enjoys more trust than news organization, free, independent, pluralistic, and professional journalism is even more crucial. To advance peace and stability, there is a need to recognize that journalism that serves the public interest engenders:

- Respect for science and the truth
- Justice and accountability
- Dialogue and understanding for everyone, including women, young people and those who live in situations of vulnerability and marginalization.

All of these are characteristics of a society in peace. Yet today's global information environment demonstrates how difficult it will be to achieve a better world.

The data and information presented in this Report lead to an unequivocal conclusion: freedom of expression is not just one right among many, but the cornerstone of democratic resilience, institutional accountability, equality, and sustainable development. Societies that protect press freedom, guarantee civil liberties, and uphold judicial independence consistently achieve stronger governance, greater gender equality, more effective climate action, and broader respect for human rights. Conversely, when freedom of expression is weakened, so too are the checks and balances that prevent conflict.

Today, people everywhere find themselves navigating an increasingly uncertain information environment. The ways we seek, share, and trust information are changing rapidly, shaping how communities understand the world and how societies hold power to account. These shifts carry both promise and peril: they can amplify diverse voices, expand access to knowledge, and strengthen journalism, but they also can deepen divisions, spread disinformation, and silence dissent. The future of our information spaces will not be decided by technology alone; it will be determined by the choices we make together through inclusive governance that puts human rights, dignity, and pluralism at the center.

This Report offers policymakers, international organizations, and civil society a clear picture of today's pressing trends. Responding to them requires more than symbolic reforms or quick technological fixes. It calls for systemic investment in independent institutions, robust accountability mechanisms, and safeguards that guarantee pluralism while amplifying voices too often silenced. Gender equality and climate governance stand out as strategic priorities, reminding us that protecting freedom of expression is inseparable from the broader task of building fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable societies.

The choice before us is stark: continue along a path of erosion and crises, or take decisive steps to rebuild trust, protect information as a public good, and restore dialogue as the foundation of peace. The mandate is clear. Freedom of expression, as the right to seek, receive and impart information, must stand at the center of our collective efforts, not only as a moral imperative, but as the practical cornerstone of a more just, inclusive, and peaceful future.

Appendices

Glossary

Algorithmic bias

The systematic and unfair discrimination that can occur when artificial intelligence (AI) systems reproduce or amplify existing prejudices, stereotypes, or inequalities through their algorithms or training data. Such bias can lead to exclusion, inequality, and digital divides, and may pose risks to cultural, social, and biological diversity, as well as to social and economic equity.[519]

Algorithmic manipulation

The deliberate use of algorithms to influence or steer human behavior, often through personalized recommendations, emotional targeting, or other strategies designed to shape decisions and actions. The practice is frequently employed to maximize profits or achieve specific outcomes and is commonly reinforced by persuasive design and marketing techniques.[520]

Application programming interface (API)

A set of rules and protocols that allows different software applications to communicate with each other. An API specifies how software components should interact, allowing one program to access data or functionality from another program or service via defined endpoints or methods.

Artificial intelligence (AI) assistants

Software applications powered by artificial intelligence designed to perform tasks, provide information, or facilitate interactions on behalf of a user. They use natural language processing, machine learning, and sometimes voice recognition to understand questions or commands and deliver responses or actions.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

AI systems are information-processing technologies that integrate models and algorithms that produce a capacity to learn and to perform cognitive tasks leading to outcomes such as prediction and decision-making in material and virtual environments. AI systems are designed to operate with varying degrees of autonomy by means of knowledge modelling and representation and by exploiting data and calculating correlations.[521]

AI hallucinations

Inaccurate or fabricated information produced by artificial intelligence. Such outputs present information in a compelling, human-like manner and seem credible. As a result, there is a risk faulty information will be accepted as accurate, a phenomenon linked to automation bias.

Astroturfing

The deceptive practice of presenting an orchestrated marketing or public relations campaign while masking the sponsors of a message or organization to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants.

Bot armies

Large networks of automated social media accounts deployed on digital platforms to artificially amplify specific narratives, suppress dissenting voices, or manipulate online discourse. By creating a false impression of consensus or widespread support, bot armies undermine informed debate.

Chatbot

A software application designed to simulate conversation with human users, typically through text or voice interfaces. Chatbots can provide information, answer questions, or perform tasks automatically, often using pre-programmed rules or artificial intelligence to interpret and respond to user inputs.

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519   UNESCO. 2022. *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137.

520   UNESCO. Jaakkola. M. 2023. *Reporting on artificial intelligence: a handbook for journalism educators.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384551.

521   UNESCO. 2022. *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137.

Climate denier

An individual or group that intentionally spreads false or misleading information about climate change, aiming to undermine public understanding and delay necessary actions to address the climate crisis.

Community media

Independent, civil society-based media that operate for social benefit and not for profit. They are present in all regions of the world, providing social movements and community-based organizations a means to express their issues, concerns, cultures, and languages. Community media create an alternative both to national public broadcasters, which are often under government control, and private commercial media. They provide communities with access to information and voice, facilitating community-level debate as well as information and knowledge sharing.[522]

Constructive journalism or solutions journalism

An approach to storytelling that does more than highlight problems: it explores possible solutions and their impact, thereby offering audiences more hopeful and forward-looking perspectives rather than focusing solely on crises or problems.[523]

Content moderation

The process by which online platforms review, manage, or remove user-generated content such as hate speech, disinformation, or violations of laws and policies.

Cyberviolence

Any act of violence, harassment, intimidation, or abuse that is committed, assisted, or amplified through digital technologies and online platforms. It includes threats, stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, hate speech, doxxing, and other forms of online attacks that cause physical, psychological, or social harm to individuals or groups.

Cyberattacks

Any kind of malicious activity that attempts to collect, disrupt, deny, degrade, or destroy information system resources or the information itself.

Deepfakes

Digitally manipulated images, videos, or audio recordings that falsely depict a person saying or doing something they did not. Deepfakes can cause significant harm, including reputational damage, and emotional distress. They are recognized as a form of technology-facilitated abuse.[524]

Digital content creators

Individuals who regularly post content online for public consumption and have more than 1,000 followers. Many of these creators also are known as influencers.[525]

Digital misogyny or online misogyny

A form of gender-based discrimination or violence against women or girls that occurs online, digital platforms are weaponized to spread misogyny and hate. It includes the organized promotion of harmful stereotypes, harassment, and exclusion of women and girls, often amplified through online communities such as the 'manosphere'. Digital misogyny not only affects online spaces, but also shapes real-world attitudes, behaviors, and policies, undermining gender equality.[526]

Disinformation

False or misleading information that is deliberately created and disseminated with the intent to deceive, often with the intent to cause harm. There is no universally accepted definition of disinformation.[527]

522   Buckley, S. 2011. *Community media: a good practice handbook*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000215097.
523   DW Akademie. 2023. Constructive journalism toolkit for trainers. https://akademie.dw.com/en/constructive-journalism-a-practical-toolkit-for-trainers/a-65372611.
524   UN Women. 2025. FAQs: Digital abuse, trolling, stalking, and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women. https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/digital-abuse-trolling-stalking-and-other-forms-of-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women.
525   Ha, L. 2024. *Behind the Screens: Insights from Digital Content Creators.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392006.
526   UN Women. 2024. *UN Women sounds the alarm over online misogyny.* https://www.un.org/en/delegate/un-women-sounds-alarm-over-online-misogyny.
527   United Nations. Countering Disinformation. https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation.

Doxxing or doxing

The act of sharing someone's personal information (such as home address or phone number) on the internet, typically with malicious intent.[528]

Fact–checking

The process of verifying the accuracy of information presented in media, public statements, or online. Fact-checking involves examining evidence, sources, and claims to determine their truthfulness and reliability.

Far right or extreme right-wing

Groups or political parties based on xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance. They promulgate hatred based on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Misogyny is often present in their narratives and is used to justify attacks, drawing attention to the intersection of extremism and gender-based violence.[529]

Forum shopping

The practice of choosing a court or jurisdiction to bring a legal action based on the likelihood of securing the most favorable outcome.[530]

Gender–based violence (GBV)

An umbrella term for any harmful act against someone based on socially ascribed differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or mental harm—or, threats of such acts, including coercion or other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.[531]

Gendered disinformation

A strategy to silence women and gender-diverse voices, which is a form of gender-based violence. The dual nature of the phenomenon in the digital age makes both the definition of the problem and the search for solutions more complex and challenging.[532]

Generative artificial intelligence (AI)

Generative AI is a type of artificial intelligence that responds to questions (or prompts) to create new content – such as text, images, audio and video – by learning patterns from vast datasets. It uses networks to understand the underlying structure of the data and then to produce new, original content that resembles the training data.[533]

Greenwashing

A deceptive practice that uses false or exaggerated claims to convince consumers that a company's products, goals, or policies are more environmentally friendly than they actually are. Greenwashing promotes false solutions to the climate crisis that distract from and delay concrete and credible action, presenting a significant obstacle to tackling climate change.[534]

Hate speech

Any communication, including speech, writing, images, or behavior, that uses pejorative or discriminatory references to attack a person or a group on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other identity factors. Hate speech is often rooted in, and generates, intolerance and hatred. It can be demeaning, divisive, and dangerous.[535]

Information as a public good

The belief that information is accessible to all and serves as a shared resource for humanity. It is both a means and an end for achieving collective human aspirations, including sustainable development, democratic participation, and social well-being. Ensuring information as a public good requires press freedom, independence, pluralism, media viability, transparency of digital platforms, and citizens empowered with media and information literacy. This

528 UN Women. 2025. FAQs: Digital abuse, trolling, stalking, and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women.
https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/digital-abuse-trolling-stalking-and-other-forms-of-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women.

529 United Nations Report of the Secretary-General. *Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief*.
2022. (A/77/266). https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/266.

530 Soraide, R. 2022. *The "Misuse" of the Judicial System to Attack Freedom of Expression: Trends, Challenges and Responses*. UNESCO.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832/PDF/383832eng.pdf.multi.

531 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Gender-based violence toolkit. https://www.unhcr.org/gbv-toolkit/.

532 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 2023. *Gendered disinformation and its implications for the right to freedom of expression*.
Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. (Doc. A/78/288.)
https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a78288-gendered-disinformation-and-its-implications-right-freedom.

principle was enshrined in UNESCO's Windhoek+30 Declaration (2021), which recognized information as a public good essential for development and democracy.[536]

Information integrity

Reliable and accurate information that is part of a system in which information is available to all, enabling people to engage meaningfully in public life, make informed decisions, and exercise their rights. This system is shaped by the actions of a diverse range of actors, including governments, technology companies, media, civil society and individuals.[537]

Jawboning

The practice by which government officials or regulators use informal pressure - such as the threat of future regulation or other consequences - to influence decisions.

Large Language Models (LLMs)

Used by generative AI systems to understand and generate human-like text. LLMs are trained on vast datasets containing billions of sentences and require immense computational resources and energy.

Machine learning (ML) models

An AI program that ingests information (data) to identify patterns and to make decisions.[538]

Manosphere

A loose online network of anti-feminist and misogynistic communities that promote a male supremacist worldview. It is primarily composed of men who gather on websites, forums, and social media platforms to discuss masculinity, relationships, and gender politics from a perspective that blames feminism for societal problems and men's perceived disadvantage.

The 'manosphere' amplifies sexist stereotypes in popular, shareable formats that gain traction at scale with limited accountability, given the anonymity of many of those who post.

Media capture

The control of media by political or commercial interests. It typically is accomplished through a series of systematic, premeditated steps taken by governments and powerful interest groups.

Metadata

Data about data. Metadata provides context about other data, describing its characteristics, such as origin, author, creation date, format, or location.

Misinformation

The unintentional spread of inaccurate information.

News avoidance

The tendency to reduce or refrain from consuming news, often because of perceptions that it is overly negative, overwhelming, or untrustworthy.

New denial

A form of climate change denial in which the existence of climate change is acknowledged, but its severity, urgency, or human causation is questioned. The new denial often is accompanied by misleading narratives, minimization, or conspiracy theories.

Official development assistance (ODA)

Government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries.[539]

533   Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L. 2023. *Your opinion doesn't matter, anyway: exposing technology-facilitated gender-based violence in an era of generative AI*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387483.

534   United Nations. Greenwashing – the deceptive tactics behind environmental claims. https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/greenwashing.

535   United Nations. 2019. The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/un-strategy-and-plan-of-action-on-hate-speech. https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf.

536   UNESCO. 2021. *Windhoek+30 Declaration: Information as a Public Good, World Press Freedom Day 2021.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378158.

537   United Nations. 2024. *Global Principles for Information Integrity.* https://www.un.org/en/information-integrity/global-principles.

538   Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L. 2023. *Your opinion doesn't matter, anyway: exposing technology-facilitated gender-based violence in an era of generative AI*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387483.

539   OECD. Official development assistance (ODA). https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html.

Peace journalism

A reporting practice that highlights non-violent responses to conflict, provides context about root causes, gives voice to multiple sides (including non-elite actors), and presents stories in ways that foster understanding, reconciliation, and peace rather than simply emphasizing conflict and violence.

Phishing

To fraudulently acquire confidential information, such as usernames, passwords, or credit card details, by luring the user with a message that seems to come from a legitimate organization.

Platform reset

A term for returning a computer system to its default or previous state. For major online platforms, such resets have deprioritized news and shifted focus from publishers to creators. As a result, audiences, particularly younger users, access news and digital content through performative social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where content is often unverified and dominated by commentary from digital creators and influencers rather than original reporting from traditional news organizations.[540]

Spoofing

The act of imposters appropriating and misrepresenting another's identity online.[541]

Spyware

Malware watches users' activities, without their knowledge, gathering information, confidential and personal information including online activity, and transmitting this information back to the spyware's user.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)

Legal claims that are typically initiated by a powerful actor (a state body/official, high-profile individual, or company) to intimidate and silence weaker parties who criticize or disseminate public interest messages unfavorable to them. The real objective is not to win the case, but to overwhelm the defendant through protracted legal proceedings, excessive costs – even at the risk of bankruptcy – and the related psychological burden. Defamation charges are very commonly used to deter journalists from advancing their work, preventing the publication of content, or causing its removal, thus discouraging others from covering the same issues.[542]

Synthetic media

Content such as text, images, audio, video that is generated or modified by artificial intelligence to convey information or entertainment. The outputs are highly realistic and in cases like deepfake pornography, can cause significant harm.[543]

Technology–facilitated gender–based violence (TFGBV)

The use of technology to enact or mediate violence against an individual who identifies as a woman. This abuse is differentiated because women and girls are attacked for simply being online and for being girls/women. TFGBV also manifests similarly to real-world violence in that it tends to be enacted more on the most vulnerable and the disempowered.[544]

540   Reuters Institute. 2024. *Digital News Report 2024.* https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024.

541   Posetti et al. 2020. *Online violence against women journalists: A global snapshot of incidence and impacts.* UNESCO. https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNESCO%20Online%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Journalists%20-%20A%20Global%20Snapshot%20Dec9pm.pdf.

542   Soraide, R. 2022. *The 'misuse' of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383832.

543   Squicciarini, M. 2024. *Synthetic content and its implications for AI policy: a primer.* UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392181.

544   Chowdhury, R. and Dhanya, L. 2023. Your opinion doesn't matter, anyway: exposing technology-facilitated gender-based violence in an era of generative AI. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000387483.

Tradwife (traditional wife)

A married woman who embraces traditional gender roles, particularly focusing on homemaking and supporting her husband by raising children, cooking, and keeping the house clean, while he serves as the primary breadwinner. The lifestyle is often presented through social media influencers and raises concerns for the independence and financial security of women.

## Triple environmental crisis or triple planetary crisis

Three significant and interlinked environmental issues that humanity currently faces: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Each has its own causes and effects--and each needs to be resolved to ensure a viable future for the planet.[545]

Trolls

Individuals who deliberately post provocative, inflammatory, or disruptive messages online with the intent to provoke emotional responses, sow discord, or manipulate public discussion.[546]

Zones of silence

Areas where journalists are unable to report because of conflict, threats, or other safety concerns.[547]
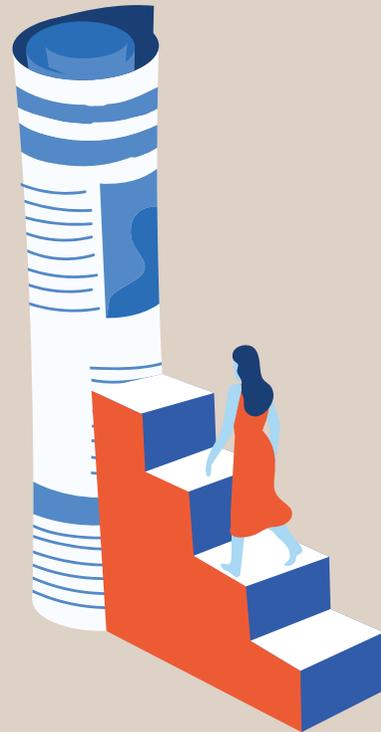
545 United Nations Climate Change. 2022. What is the Triple Planetary Crisis? https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis.

546 UNESCO. Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K., Harrison, J. and Waisbord, S. 2020. *Online violence against women journalists: A global snapshot of incidence and impacts.* https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNESCO%20Online%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Journalists%20-%20A%20Global%20Snapshot%20Dec9pm.pdf.

547 UNESCO. 2023. 2023: *Alarming increase in journalists killed in conflict zones.* https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/2023-alarming-increase-journalists-killed-conflict-zones?hub=687.

Methodology

The *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Report* is UNESCO's evidence-based assessment of global developments related to freedom of expression and media development. It offers a macro-level perspective to inform Member States and other stakeholders seeking to understand the challenges and opportunities in fostering an enabling environment for freedom of expression.

The 2025 edition combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture key trends from 2021 to 2025, drawing on desk research, data analysis, consultations, and regional expertise.

The statistical analysis aims to identify measurable patterns, trends, and correlations across democratic, social, economic, and technological dimensions that influence freedom of expression worldwide.

STAGE 1

Desk research and database development

A global database was developed to systematize information and identify emerging trends between 2021 and 2025. This database served as the foundation for the Report's chapters and statistical analyses, guiding the work of its authors and contributors.

The database draws on a wide range of sources, including:

- UNESCO Communication and Information (CI) Sector Issue Briefs, publications, guidelines, and toolkits;

- Reports and joint declarations by United Nations (UN) and regional Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression, human rights, and related areas;

- Thematic and country reports from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR);

- Annual reports from international and regional organizations working on freedom of expression and access to information;

- Research from civil society organizations, think tanks, and academic institutions;

- Global and regional datasets, including:
  - V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) democracy and freedom indices;
  - The Sustainable Development Goals dataset; The UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists (dates January 2022 to September 2025);
  - Other UN, academic, and civil society datasets on media freedom and access to information;
  - Available transparency reports from digital platforms, including META, X, YouTube and others.

- Specialized media outlets, blogs, and press sources monitoring freedom of expression developments worldwide.

This initial comprehensive mapping identified both global and regional trends, while also revealing data gaps, particularly in terms of linguistic and geographic representation.

To explain the trends, address the gaps in data, and ensure a diversity of perspectives, UNESCO conducted field surveys and engaged experts from diverse backgrounds to contribute as authors and collaborators to the Report. The selection process emphasized diversity across regions, languages, gender, and professional backgrounds. As a result, a team of more than 11 authors and contributors conducted desk research between September 2024 and March 2025. They supplemented the data with narrative and qualitative analysis to identify key trends and provide expert insight into the statistics. Some contributions were drafted in Spanish and French and later translated into English, further promoting multilingual inclusion and enriching the Report with distinct regional perspectives.

STAGE 2
Field survey

In September 2024, UNESCO conducted a survey through its Field Offices and their partners at the national and regional levels to gather qualitative and quantitative inputs on regional and national trends. The survey was designed to minimize data gaps and sought to include diverse regional perspectives, including marginalized and less-accessible respondents, such as those with limited digital access. UNESCO Field Offices acted as intermediaries, engaging directly with local communities to ensure broad perspectives were represented in the evidence base.

The collected responses provided region-specific data on challenges, opportunities, regulatory and policy approaches to freedom of expression and media development, as well as related data sources, to support qualitative and quantitative analysis of relevant regional and national trends.

Responses were received across various regions from individuals representing the media, civil society and intergovernmental organizations.

This allowed UNESCO to integrate diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives, as well as gather references to local sources and initiatives not widely covered in global datasets.

This stage contributed to ensuring the Report reflects linguistic diversity and regional balance across the five UNESCO regions, thus reinforcing the range of perspectives provided by its authors and contributors.

STAGE 3
Multi–stakeholder consultations

To discuss and enrich the findings of the desk research and statistical analysis, and to refine the analytical focus of each chapter, a consultation was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in November 2024 on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. The consultation brought together Member States, civil society representatives, academics, and media professionals. Their insights informed the selection of topics addressed in the Report, ensuring that it reflects the concrete challenges faced by journalists and media organizations worldwide.

Furthermore, specific thematic consultation directly informed the content of the Report:

In 1995, the Beijing Conference was the first UN Conference on Women to recognize the centrality of media and communication to gender equality. To mark the 30th anniversary of Beijing+30, UNESCO initiated an inclusive consultation to review what has happened since, convening experts from across the globe - including academia, media outlets, and civil society – to evaluate progress and identify challenges related to Strategic Objective J.

A two-day international expert consultation held on 21-22 January 2025 in Paris. It served to integrate gendered experiences in media and digital spaces into Chapter 3 of the report, Journalism: Raising Voices for All.

Cross–national survey

To examine public perceptions of AI and its impact on information ecosystems, UNESCO supported a cross-national public opinion survey led by the University of South Carolina College of Information and Communications, in the United States and the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. The survey was conducted in Mexico, Romania, South Africa, and the United States, with representative online samples of approximately 1,000 respondents per country. While not exhaustive, the survey reflects regional differences in data infrastructure and AI adoption rates.

Data from Mexico were collected from 1,001 respondents between 31 March and 7 April 2025. In Romania, 1,009 respondents were surveyed between 27 March and 3 April 2025. In South Africa, 1,010 respondents were interviewed between 31 March and 7 April 2025. In the United States, findings are based on a sample of 1,000 respondents using data gathered independently by the University of South Carolina in December 2024.

The survey was designed using gender, age and regional quotas in the online panels provided by CINT (for Romania, Mexico and South Africa) and Qualtrics (for the United States). After the survey data had been collected from participants, the datasets were weighted further to ensure accurate national representation across additional variables, such as education, occupation type, and locality size, using national census benchmarks.

The four country samples were treated identically in terms of questionnaire design, data collection procedures and post-stratification weighting to ensure consistency and minimize potential biases across countries.

This study builds upon the University of South Carolina's biannual Global Opinion Tracker, enabling for cross-country comparison of public attitudes toward AI and media trust.

STAGE 5

Statistical analysis and correlations

The statistical component of the *World Trends Report* was led by Aldo Magoga, a data scientist with expertise in analyzing issues related to human rights, justice analytics, and environmental sustainability.

To ensure methodological rigor and international comparability, the analysis relied primarily on the V-Dem Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index (v2x_freexp_altinf). The dataset has comprehensive global coverage and compatibility with other democratic and governance indicators.

Complementary datasets were incorporated to contextualize the V-Dem results and connect statistical findings across chapters. These included the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators, Freedom in the World (FIW) indices, and UNESCO's own datasets such as the Observatory of Killed Journalists. Each dataset captures distinct yet interconnected dimensions of freedom of expression, from safety and media pluralism to equality, governance, and sustainability, to ensure coherence across thematic chapters.

The rationale for indicator selection followed a multidimensional framework:
- 'V-Dem indicators' were used to measure the state and evolution of *freedom of expression, media independence, academic freedom, and access to alternative sources of information.*
- The 'SDG indicators' captured how freedom of expression interacts with key areas of the 2030 Agenda, such as gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), climate action (SDG 13), and strong institutions (SDG 16). These indicators were mapped to specific report chapters (see methodology of indicators rationale) to highlight how communication freedoms enable and depend upon broader sustainable development outcomes.
- 'Freedom in the World (FIW)' scores were used as an additional benchmark for assessing political rights and civil liberties, helping triangulate V-Dem data and strengthen cross-validation.

- The UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists provided data on the safety of journalists and levels of impunity, which informed analyses in Chapters 2 and 3 and were statistically compared with governance and rule of law variables.

To connect the various dimensions of freedom of expression, a cross-dataset correlation approach was applied. For example:
- Safety and accountability (using UNESCO's Observatory data) were correlated with V-Dem's freedom of expression scores and SDG 16 indicators on peace, justice, and strong institutions.
- Gender equality and online participation (SDG 5 and 10 indicators) were linked with V-Dem's measures of freedom of discussion and media pluralism to assess inclusivity in the public sphere.
- Climate governance (SDG 13 indicators) was analyzed alongside FIW and V-Dem datasets to identify the role of access to information in fostering environmental accountability and civic engagement.
- Digital and AI trends, discussed in Chapter 1, were interpreted using data on internet penetration and mobile connectivity (SDG 9.C.1) to understand the infrastructural basis of freedom of expression in the digital era.

This integrative approach ensured that the statistical work supported the analytical narrative of the Report, linking datasets thematically rather than treating them as isolated evidence. Each chapter thus reflects a specific facet of the global ecosystem of freedom of expression, connected through shared quantitative foundations.

The statistical work explored correlations between freedom of expression and dimensions of sustainable development, including:

- Safety of journalists and impunity;[548]
- Democracy and civil liberties;
- Government transparency and accountability;
- Civic participation and associational rights;
- Gender equality and access to justice;
- Climate governance;
- Corruption and rule of law.

These analyses allowed for a multidimensional understanding of how freedom of expression both shapes and reflects broader democratic health. Where applicable, regression and correlation analyses were conducted to measure the strength of relationships (R^2 values) between freedom of expression and these governance and development indicators, allowing for quantifiable cross-sector insights.

All research and consultations followed UNESCO's ethical standards and the UN system's data protection and human rights guidelines.

By integrating global datasets, regional insights, and public perceptions, the Report provides a comprehensive view of how freedom of expression evolves and why it remains a cornerstone for democratic resilience, human rights, and sustainable development.

Use of AI–assisted tools

In line with UNESCO's *Internal Guidelines on the Appropriate Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence at UNESCO*, the Report benefited from AI-assisted tools for translations, grammar, and syntax. Generative AI was also used to manage citations.

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548   For detailed information on the methodology used to monitor killings of journalists and impunity, see UNESCO. Observatory of Killed Journalists. https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory.

Author and Contributor biographies

Lead Editor

Randy Covington is the coordinator for the University of South Carolina's UNESCO Chair on Data, Media and Society. He has taught in the university's School of Journalism and served as a consultant and trainer for the World Association of Newspapers (WAN-IFRA), working with some of the leading news organizations in the world. He previously worked in management positions in television news for 27 years.

Researcher, author and peer reviewer

Guy Berger is a retired director at UNESCO. During his 11 years with the Organization, he oversaw the World Press Freedom Day commemorations which culminated in the Member States endorsement of the *Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good*. He is currently the voluntary convenor of the African Alliance for Access to Information and has contributed inputs on information integrity and data access to the 2024-5 G20 processes.

CHAPTER 1

Journalism: Strengthening the Rule of Law

Catalina Botero Marino is a lawyer, director of the UNESCO Chair in Freedom of Expression at the University of Los Andes, an expert from Columbia University's Columbia Global Freedom of Expression initiative, a commissioner from the International Commission of Jurists, a member of the Advisory Council of the Human Rights Institute of the International Bar Association (IBAHRI), and a visiting researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law. She was Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, co-chair of the Meta Oversight Board, and associate judge of the Constitutional Court, and the Council of the State of Colombia.

GLOBAL FORUM FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is the largest global community dedicated to media development, media freedom, and journalism support. Through collaboration, coordination, and collective action, the network of 200+ member organizations, together with dozens of partners, develops, promotes, and implements policies and programs to sustain journalism as a public good. GFMD is headquartered in Brussels, Belgium.

Journalism: Bridging the Promise and Threat of Technology

Marjorie Buchser is currently the Managing Director International at Partnership on AI. She is a former Senior Consultant with UNESCO's section of Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists and a consulting fellow for the Digital Society Initiative at Chatham House. Prior to Chatham House, Buchser was a Senior Strategist at Purpose, a social impact agency, where she developed various advocacy campaigns for the public and the private sectors related to digital inclusion and climate change. She also worked as an Associate Director and Global Leadership Fellow at the World Economic Forum in Geneva and New York, where she led the organization's digital innovation projects and managed the Technology Pioneer Programme.

Renée DiResta is a social media researcher and the author of *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality*. As an Associate Research Professor at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, she studies how information systems are manipulated, and how they can be reimagined -- with particular focus on middleware, decentralized governance, and increasing user agency in digital environments. Previously the technical research manager of the Stanford Internet Observatory from 2019-2024, DiResta's research has long focused on adversarial abuse online—from state-sponsored influence operations to spam networks and child safety threats. She works with government and business leaders to address evolving challenges at the intersection of technology and policy.

From 2018–2019, at the request of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, she led teams investigating the Russia-linked Internet Research Agency's efforts to manipulate American society and elections, and the influence campaign accompanying the GRU's 2016 hack-and-leak operations.

DiResta is a contributor at *The Atlantic* and a contributing editor at Lawfare. She has been a Presidential Leadership Scholar, an Emerson Fellow, a Truman National Security Project fellow, Mozilla Fellow in Media, Misinformation, and Trust, a Harvard Berkman-Klein affiliate, and a Council on Foreign Relations term member.

Dan Sultănescu is a political science and public communication expert with extensive experience in political campaigns, elections, and communication research. He is an Associate Professor at a school of government in Bucharest (SNSPA) and the founder of an interdisciplinary research center (CPD SNSPA). He also founded NewsVibe.ro, a startup for innovative measurement of online and social media impact and is a long-term collaborator of the University of South Carolina.

Andreea Stancea has a Ph.D. in Sociology and is a junior lecturer to the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (SNSPA). Her research focuses on voters' digital behavior, impact of digital platforms on electoral campaigns, and electoral volatility. She has published research articles in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, European Journal of Education, and Humanities and Social Sciences Communications.

Alexei Abrahams is an Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at Hamad bin Khalifa University in Doha, Qatar. He blends computer science and social science methods to study asymmetric conflict and information warfare, with particular application to the Middle East. He is the author of *Social Media Exposed*, an upcoming book on how to archive and analyze social media data in the public interest. Abrahams has worked previously at the Canadian Media Ecosystem Observatory, the Technology and Social Change Project at Harvard University, and the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab.

The International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) is a multi-stakeholder initiative designed to effectively diagnose and address the challenges facing public interest media in low- and middle-income countries. It supports both individual media organizations as well as experiments and innovations at the media ecosystem level, with the goal of ensuring that public interest media have the tools and resources needed to survive and avoid capture in the short term and thrive in the long term. It is based in Paris, France.

Journalism: Raising Voices for All

Rokhaya Diallo is an award-winning French journalist, writer, educator and filmmaker widely recognized for her work in favor of human rights, promoting racial justice and equality. She is a contributing writer to the *Washington Post,* member of the Europe editorial team of *The Guardian*, a researcher in residence for the Gender+Justice Initiative at Georgetown University (Washington D.C.) where she also teaches and was a host for BET channel (VIACOM/MTV group). In France, she has taught in Paris 1- La Sorbonne, and is a commentator for leading radio and TV channels. Diallo has authored several books, including *A lover's dictionary on feminism* (2025), and directed documentaries including *Acting While Black* and *The Parisienne Uncovered.* She has also created the pioneering podcast 'Kiffe Ta Race' along with Grace Ly, the first French-speaking show dedicated to addressing racial issues that was ranked among the best Apple podcasts. In 2022, Diallo launched W.O.R.D. the first French public speaking school to add a wider range of voices in the public sphere.

Journalism: Protecting the Planet

Kunda Dixit is the former editor and now publisher of the *Nepali Times* newspaper in Kathmandu. He also teaches media studies, with a special focus on climate breakdown in the Himalaya, and is the author of *Dateline Earth: Journalism As If the Planet Mattered* as well as *A People War* trilogy.

Kate Cell is the Senior Climate Campaign Manager for the Climate and Energy program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. In her role, she manages the UCS Climate Campaign, leading a multi-disciplinary team of scientists, policy analysts, legislative affairs staff, and outreach and communication experts working to achieve policies that can reduce global warming emissions and increase resilience to climate change impacts. Her team is focused on demonstrating and alleviating the disparate burdens climate change poses to environmental justice communities, low-income communities, and communities of color. Cell also was instrumental in creating the UCS Economists Network. Cell is the former director of Economists for Peace and Security, an organization that works with the United Nations on issues of peace, conflict, war, and the world economy. She holds a BA in English and psychology from Macalester College and studied at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Conclusion

Deutsch Welle (DW) Akademie
DW Akademie is Deutsche Welle's center for international media development, journalism training and knowledge transfer. Their projects strengthen the human right to freedom of expression and unhindered access to information. DW Akademie empowers people worldwide to make independent decisions based on reliable facts and constructive dialogue. As a strategic partner of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, they are active in 60 developing countries and emerging economies. Together with their partners, they work to promote free expression, human rights and the development of functioning media systems worldwide. DW Akademie believes that journalism, education and culture improve people's lives. Powerful stories support positive social dialogue. People need reliable facts, independent analysis, unbiased presentation and universal access to knowledge.

The World Trends Report in Data

Aldo Magoga is a data scientist and evaluation specialist whose career bridges advanced quantitative methods with human rights and justice. He holds a Master's in Physics (University of Turin, Italy) and a Master's in Human Rights (cum laude, Universidad Rafael Landívar, Guatemala). In his second master's thesis at Rafael Landívar, he developed a theoretical model that mathematically linked the Human Development Index, homicide rates, and the rule of law - demonstrating how rights and security operate simultaneously as causes and consequences of human development. With more than 25 years, Magoga has designed innovative measurement systems for the United Nations to monitor impunity, justice performance, and gender-based violence.

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Regional Groupings as employed for the purposes of this Report

Group I.	Western Europe and North America (27)	
Andorra Austria Belgium Canada Cyprus Denmark Finland France Germany Greece Iceland Ireland Israel[549] Italy Luxembourg Malta	Monaco Netherlands (Kingdom of the) Norway Portugal San Marino Spain Sweden Switzerland Türkiye United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland United States of America[550]	

Group II.	Central and Eastern Europe (25)	
Albania Armenia Azerbaijan Belarus Bosnia and Herzegovina Bulgaria Croatia Czechia Estonia North Macedonia Georgia Hungary Latvia Lithuania Montenegro	Poland Ukraine Uzbekistan Romania Republic of Moldova Russian Federation Serbia Slovakia Slovenia Tajikistan	

549 Not a UNESCO Member State.
550 As of October 2025.

Group III.	Latin America and the Caribbean (33)	

Antigua and Barbuda	Haiti
Argentina	Honduras
Bahamas	Jamaica
Barbados	Mexico
Belize	Nicaragua[551]
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Panama
Brazil	Paraguay
Chile	Peru
Colombia	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Costa Rica	Saint Lucia
Cuba	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Dominica	Suriname
Dominican Republic	Trinidad and Tobago
Ecuador	Uruguay
El Salvador	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)
Grenada	
Guatemala	
Guyana	

Group IV.	Asia and the Pacific (44)	

Afghanistan	Malaysia	Thailand
Australia	Maldives	Timor-Leste
Bangladesh	Marshall Islands	Tonga
Bhutan	Micronesia	Turkmenistan
Brunei Darussalam	(Federated States of)	Tuvalu
Cambodia	Mongolia	Vanuatu
China	Myanmar	Viet Nam
Cook Islands	Nauru	
Democratic People's	Nepal	
Republic of Korea	New Zealand	
Fiji	Niue	
India	Pakistan	
Indonesia	Palau	
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Papua New Guinea	
Japan	Philippines	
Kazakhstan	Republic of Korea	
Kiribati	Samoa	
Kyrgyzstan	Singapore	
Lao People's	Solomon Islands	
Democratic Republic	Sri Lanka	

551 As of October 2025.

Group Va.	Africa (47)
Angola Benin Botswana Burkina Faso Burundi Cameroon Cabo Verde Central African Republic Chad Comoros Congo Côte d'Ivoire Democratic Republic of the Congo Djibouti Equatorial Guinea Eritrea Eswatini (Kingdom of) Ethiopia Gabon Gambia Ghana Guinea Guinea-Bissau Kenya Lesotho Liberia Madagascar Malawi	Mali Mauritius Mozambique Namibia Niger Nigeria Rwanda São Tomé and Príncipe Senegal Seychelles Sierra Leone Somalia South Africa South Sudan Togo Uganda United Republic of Tanzania Zambia Zimbabwe

Group Vb.	Arab States (19)
Algeria Bahrain Egypt Iraq Jordan Kuwait Lebanon Libya (State of) Mauritania Morocco Oman	The State of Palestine Qatar Saudi Arabia Sudan Syrian Arab Republic Tunisia United Arab Emirates Yemen

WORLD TRENDS IN

Freedom of Expression and Media Development

GLOBAL REPORT 2022/2025

Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

As the world enters the last five years to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the 2022/2025 *World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* offers a timely analysis of global trends in our information environment. It frames the analysis around two key principles: the need to ensure information as a public good and to ensure information integrity, which have both come under unprecedented threats. These mounting pressures are further compounded by the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which has impacted how information is produced, and which narratives are circulated in our information ecosystems.

Since 2012, global levels of freedom of expression have declined by around 10%, marking a significant decline in press freedom despite some encouraging countertrends, including steps towards strengthening media viability, greater recognition of community radio, and increasing the resilience of investigative journalism. This Report examines these key developments over the past four years combining data analysis and insights from internationally recognized experts to identify global trends. While the Report highlights the serious challenges to media freedoms worldwide, it also makes a compelling case for the essential role of journalism in shaping a world at peace.

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