

EMBARGOED until 12:01 a.m. EDT (04:01 GMT) April 27, 2016

## ***Freedom of the Press 2016:*** **The Battle for the Dominant Message**

**WASHINGTON**, April 27, 2016 — Global press freedom declined to its lowest point in 12 years in 2015, as political, criminal, and terrorist forces sought to co-opt or silence the media in their broader struggle for power, according to Freedom of the Press 2016, Freedom House’s annual report on media freedom worldwide.

“The forces against press freedom were strongest in the Middle East and Turkey, where governments and militant groups pressured journalists and media outlets to take sides, creating a ‘with us or against us’ climate and attacking those who refused to be cowed,” said Jennifer Dunham, director of research for Freedom of the Press.

“Media freedom declined not just in repressive societies but also in Europe,” Dunham said. “Journalists in much of Europe had to contend with new threats from terrorists as well as new surveillance and security laws that could hamper their work. Political leaders in Poland, Serbia, and other countries sought greater control over national media.”

“In China, censorship of news and internet content related to the financial system and environmental pollution increased,” Dunham said. “Professional journalists from established news outlets—as well as Hong Kong-based booksellers—were detained, imprisoned, and forced to give televised confessions, representing a disturbing new pattern of repression.”

Despite the many threats to press freedom, journalists and bloggers worldwide have shown resilience, often at great risk to their lives. Examples include journalists with the Syrian media collective Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, who clandestinely document rights violations by the Islamic State (IS) militant group; investigative reporters in Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, who persist in the face of threats from organized crime; and reporters in China who disregard government directives and publicize politically sensitive information.

### **KEY GLOBAL FINDINGS**

- Only 13 percent of the world’s population enjoys a Free press—that is, where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures.
- Forty-one percent of the world’s population has a Partly Free press, and 46 percent live in Not Free media environments.
- Steep declines worldwide were primarily linked to heightened partisanship and polarization in many countries, and the degree of extralegal intimidation and physical violence faced by journalists.
- Among the countries that suffered the largest declines in 2015 were Bangladesh (7 points), Turkey (6), Burundi (6), France (5), Serbia (5), Yemen (5), Egypt (4), Macedonia (4), and Zimbabwe (4).
- The world’s 10 worst-rated countries and territories were Belarus, Crimea, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

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## **SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

Journalists in East and Southern Africa suffered from a sharp increase in political interference and violence, most notably in Burundi, where nearly all private media outlets were shuttered and numerous journalists fled the country, and Zimbabwe, where the media were drawn into succession-related infighting among leaders of the ruling party. In Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, journalists continued to experience legal and political pressure, as well as physical attacks and intimidation.

“The problems faced by journalists in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa came in the context of a political crisis, contentious elections, or efforts by incumbent presidents to extend their tenure,” Dunham said. “The loss of Burundi’s private radio outlets, which have long been a key source of information, was an especially devastating blow to press freedom in the country.”

Ghana, the only Free country on the continent’s mainland, declined to Partly Free due to heightened legal and political pressure on journalists, media outlets, and press freedom organizations, as well as an increase in violence and intimidation directed at journalists.

## **ASIA-PACIFIC**

Journalists and commentators across much of South and Southeast Asia faced threats and deadly violence for raising controversial topics. Religion, corruption, and territorial disputes were among the subjects that led to retaliation against the Asian press.

The region’s governments tended to ban and prosecute discussion of such issues rather than protecting those who dared to address them. In Bangladesh, the authorities have done little to protect secular bloggers and publishers who have been violently attacked for their views—including five who were brutally murdered by extremists in 2015.

“Many officials appear more interested in protecting themselves from criticism than protecting journalists and bloggers from threats, beatings, or worse,” said Dunham. “Stifling independent reporting and commentary fosters abuse of power and seems to excuse criminal acts.”

An important exception to this trend was Sri Lanka, which experienced a marked improvement in press freedom conditions after a new government took power in early 2015.

The already limited space for investigative journalism and online commentary in China shrank further during the year, continuing a trend of ideological tightening under President Xi Jinping. The disappearance in late 2015 of five Hong Kong residents associated with a local publisher of books critical of China’s leaders, and the purchase of Hong Kong’s leading English-language newspaper by a company with strong ties to the central government, deepened concerns about Beijing’s growing influence over Hong Kong media.

## **EURASIA**

Having already destroyed most platforms for dissent, the authorities in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan deepened systemic controls on the flow of information while making an example of the few independent journalists who continued to operate.

“In Eurasia, we saw a two-part assault on the media in 2015,” said research analyst Elen Aghekyan. “Repressive regimes used censorship and propaganda to further restrict the news that reached their populations, and they persecuted individual journalists who tried to circumvent those barriers.”

Such efforts contributed to Eurasia’s status as the region with the least free media in the world.

## **AMERICAS**

Despite widespread democracy in Latin America, the media were threatened by both criminal gangs and overweening authorities. From harassment while covering demonstrations in Nicaragua to violence and murder in Mexico and Brazil, safety concerns were a fact of life for many Latin American journalists.

“Journalists covering organized crime and corruption in Mexico face extreme levels of violence, and the government has proven completely unable, or unwilling, to address the problem,” Dunham said. “It is especially disturbing that authorities are often reluctant to accept that attacks or threats against female journalists, which can include sexual violence, are related to their work.”

In Cuba, Venezuela, and Ecuador, the main source of pressure on the media was the government itself. Ecuador’s media regulator imposed scores of fines and other administrative sanctions against various outlets, sometimes interfering directly in the details of their reporting on public officials.

## **MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

Repression of media was deadliest in the Middle East and North Africa. Journalists faced demands to display loyalty to political leaders, while IS and other extremist groups continued their violent attacks on reporters.

“Whether in the chaos of a war zone or the oppressive conformity imposed by an authoritarian ruler, journalists in the Middle East and North Africa face some of the harshest conditions in the world,” said Dunham.

In Egypt, nearly all media embraced a progovernment narrative under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Most Libyan media became little more than mouthpieces for whichever government or affiliated militia controlled their region. Amid conflict in Yemen, independent writers and journalists were marginalized or persecuted. And in Syria, IS proved adept at bypassing formal news outlets and using social media to spread its propaganda around the world, in addition to terrorizing journalists closer to home.

## **EUROPE**

One of the first moves of the new right-wing government in Poland was to pass legislation allowing it to hire and fire the management of the state-owned media. The government’s actions were reminiscent of those of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, whose well-established influence over state media was evident in their overtly biased coverage of the refugee crisis during 2015.

“The immediate move against public broadcasters’ independence shows the new Polish government’s determination to silence critics and take charge of the political discourse,” said Sarah Repucci, director of Freedom of the Press.

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In France, the murder of eight cartoonists and editors in the Paris newsroom of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 underscored the ongoing calculations that journalists must make, even in otherwise free countries, about the possibility of retribution for their work.

Officials in France, Spain, and the United Kingdom all proposed restrictive laws in 2015 in the name of public security; the laws in France and Spain were adopted, while the British law is under review. “It’s alarming that the outpouring of support for free expression after the Charlie Hebdo attacks has been displaced by security measures that limit media freedom,” said Repucci.

While not as dramatic as the Charlie Hebdo murders, attacks against journalists in the Western Balkans contributed to an overall decline in media freedom there. In Serbia, multiple journalists suffered physical assaults, reinforcing self-censorship across the media sector. Attacks and death threats in Macedonia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina also raised concerns, with numerous cases involving reporters who were investigating government corruption.

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