

Forum: The General Assembly

Issue: Addressing the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity

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Introduction

Journalism is a profession that requires people to assiduously search for a needle of truth amongst a haystack of other information, one that the public steadily relies on. However, the truth is never intended to be comfortable, and consequently, the information reported by journalists can put global entities and individuals in the hot seat. Therefore, the people in search of the truth, namely these journalists, often face common tactics of intimidation in order for them to essentially cease broadcasting information that is of general candor.

In their dogged pursuit for the truth which is dependent on the journalists themselves, they can often face criminal charges for wanting to explore concepts or other things that the local and national government may oppose, which can cause them to be severely targeted. While journalists do play a pivotal role in informing the world about current affairs and happenings in practically every corner of the world, not everyone wants the truth to come out. However, in certain countries, journalists may not necessarily be allowed to broadcast this and can be sentenced to criminal punishment for doing so. This alleged false information can be through them giving updates on corruption or in general, negative events happening within local politics.

Consequently, this can draw the ire of more powerful political officials, resulting in thousands of journalists being locked up and imprisoned with no means of intervention from their respective governments. One would expect that those committing crimes against journalists deserve to pay the consequences for their actions, but in several countries, the demolishers of truth are often allowed to walk away scot-free. The main question is why? This chair report will delve into past uses of impunity, and how it has adversely impacted the safety of journalists in the present day.

Definition of Key Terms

Censorship

The essential control of the distribution of news and other information by the government or other entities. It is a common tactic employed by typically authority figures to suppress potential opposition or dissent.

Harassment

Aggressive forms of behaviour designed to intimidate someone and make them cower down. These tactics can include stalking, physical violence, online threats, and even potential death threats.

Impunity

Exemption from forms of punishment or pain, and the person committing the offense does not have to worry about facing the law.

Lack of accountability

A situation wherein the perpetrators of something do not face the repercussions for their actions, and get off scot-free.

Press Freedom

The right for individuals, organizations and other entities to share, spread and publish information without fear of being silenced

Self-censorship

When the journalists themselves choose to withhold information or their personal opinions on a subject because they are afraid of the consequences that may follow

Surveillance

Tracking journalists and their activities through a variety of different means in order to obtain information on them while simultaneously threatening their safety

History & Developments

World War II

World War II marked the beginning of journalists having more importance, as they dared to get involved in the conflict themselves in order to cover the story. This conflict was also the first time the concept of censorship was put into play as it was done in order to make sure people's morale stayed at a relative high. Technology and the transmission of stories and news were also arduous, but journalists tried their best to stay involved in the conflict to give true and primary reports on what was happening. This originated from when the reporters became tired of having to rely on interviewing other people their age who had been through the war, but they wanted more than that, essentially the ability to tag along on an air raid to talk about the risks surrounding bombing missions at length. Although very unconventional, the request was finally approved, and the journalists onboard were made to undergo gun training to learn how to wield weapons in case of an emergency. The mission for the most part turned out to be successful despite the planes faring worse and losing one of the seven on the way. This was one of the

first few incidents where journalism really went beyond interviews, and was now available for the people to hear about as first-hand accounts.

Watergate Scandal

The Watergate Scandal was a scandal involving the former President of the United States, Richard Nixon, and one of the world's most well known journalism agencies, the Washington Post. On June 17 1972, President Nixon's political team broke into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters (DNC) in an attempt to leverage his opponents through wiretapping phones, stealing confidential documents and other forms of spying. While an act of espionage, the Nixon administration then attempted to cover up the whole break-in. However, two Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein started to figure out a connection while Nixon kept everything under wraps and was re-elected.

As time went on, it came to light that the whole system under Nixon was corrupt as it was rife with money laundering, spying, obstruction of justice and other political backhand ways. Through leaks, insiders and public records, Woodward and Bernstein continued to report on the story for 2 years, culminating in Nixon finally resigning. The scandal marked a significant change in legislation, leading to the passing of the Freedom of Information Act in 1974 allowing civilians to access federal government information.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (ongoing)

The current Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to a collection of journalists being killed, primarily the ones from locally and regionally based news agencies within the Middle East like Al Jazeera. In fact, this conflict has been considered the most deadly since 1992 as within 2 weeks of the conflict arising, a whopping 34 journalists were already killed. Another reason as to why this conflict has garnered the attention of many correspondents is because the death is shockingly high vis-à-vis that of other major conflicts such as the Russo-Ukrainian war or even the two previous World Wars. The large death toll has crossed 116 of journalists and media workers, surpassing the morbidity rates of other previous conflicts since 1992. Main questions and concerns that have been raised by peace keeping forces are mainly surrounding the pressing issue of whether the journalists were targeted, or whether they were simply killed while being caught in the cross-fire.

Murder of Jamal Khashoggi

Jamal Khashoggi was a high-profile Saudi journalist who was murdered in the Saudi Arabian embassy in Istanbul on 2nd October 2018. Originally Saudi Arabian, he had been a close friend of the Saudi royal family, and had reported on important happenings to do with the Soviets and Osama Bin Laden for a few local news organizations. However, he decided to go into self-imposed exile in 2017 after bonds were broken with the royal family, while writing a monthly column in the Washington Post.

How the conflict happened:

Khashoggi first visited the consulate on 28 September 2018 in Turkey to collect documents stating that he was divorced in order for him to marry Hatice Cengiz, his Turkish fiancée. However, he was told to come back on the 2nd of October, and did so, entering the consulate at 13:14 Turkish time. He gave Cengiz two mobile phones before leaving, and also told her to call an adviser to the Turkish president at the time in case he did not make it out of the consulate despite reassuring friends he would be safe. After Khashoggi failed to reappear, the Saudi government blatantly denied any involvement in his disappearance, stating that he had left the consulate after a short period of time.

On the contrary, the opposite was said on 20th October, where the government said the journalist had died due to a fight as he had refused to return to Saudi Arabia, and officials later came forward saying he died due to being put in a chokehold. There have been several accounts of the way Khashoggi died, with some takes involving Turkish collaborators to dismember the corpse, Saudi nationals and even death squads.

Nonetheless, the essence of Jamal Khashoggi's death remains simple, as the perpetrators of such a crime have still not been brought to complete justice, and several different people are alleged to have been involved in the plot. Such a case has been deemed by the UN as having "failed to meet international standards" (BBC).

Major Parties Involved

Mexico

Mexico has been referred to as one of the world's most unsafe places for journalists to be in as impunity is granted to a majority of the perpetrators of such crimes. The idea of hypocrisy also remains quite prevalent as in fact a majority of government and public officials are part of the people that harass journalists in the nation ("Killings of Journalists under State Protection in Mexico"). The threats are essentially connected to some of the violent crime groups within Mexico along with drug cartels that mainly target journalists as well. Main reasons as to why journalists within the nation tend to be targeted is attributed to the simple reason of journalists themselves lacking basic protections such as social and institutional. This makes reporters particularly vulnerable to threats and other forms of aggression and harassment, which can further lead to self-censorship.

Gender also has a vital role to play in the treatment of journalists as violence against female journalists has increased by 5 times since 2013 (CIMAC). While prosecution is an option, the lack of evidence in most cases where gender is a contributing factor turns out to be fruitless, and similarly, little to no evidence regarding other crimes perpetrated against journalists generally go unresolved.

Eritrea

The Republic of Eritrea follows a cycle of silencing any dissent within the journalism realm through systematic impunity, arbitrary detentions, disappearances of journalists, and the overall restriction on freedom of the press and information (VOA News). The nation is also known to have violated human rights on multiple occasions, going to the extent of torture to get confessions out of civilians. From 1996

onwards, there have been laws passed limiting freedom of the press through several mechanisms. In 1996, media broadcasts were banned, and journalists needed to obtain special licenses in order to work. This was then followed by another rule in 2001 where all autonomous news agencies were banned, meaning state controlled media and press was the only way to get access to information.

Netherlands

The Netherlands has been regarded as one of the main places where press freedom is virtually guaranteed. Through several articles within the nation's constitution and protections under governmental law, these are all factors that can be mainly attributed to the country being ranked 4th worldwide on the World Press Freedom Index. That being said, several Dutch journalists refrain from reporting on sensitive issues such as climate change, agriculture and immigration because of fear of retaliation from the general public that can pose potential threats to them.

China

While the constitution does officially guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of the press (RSF), this narrative does not necessarily materialize in terms of the dissemination of information on the whole. Several major news agencies within the PRC are owned by the government while the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sends out a daily notice to the media detailing what can and cannot be publicized online with regards to the news. There have also been measures taken by the CCP in order to soften dissent.

Afghanistan

After the Taliban takeover in August of 2021, roughly 50% of all media and news outlets within the nation have suspended operations with regards to free and independent reporting. 153 news agencies have actually been banned from operating in the Islamic state, and the Taliban has prohibited women reporters from continuing their work. As a result, this has led to almost no press freedom whatsoever in the country. Bomb blasts and other forms of suicide attacks, also target the press, making it extremely unsafe for journalists to report on current happenings.

India

The main causes that lead to journalists within the Indian subcontinent being targeted are because of causes such as Maoist insurrection, terrorism, and many other forms. Many journalists also face harassment, especially women that are afraid of being exploited and abused in their workplaces. Journalists also face the potential threats of being assaulted or physically attacked.

North Korea

While Article 67 of the North Korean constitution officially guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press, this is not the reality for journalism within the dictator controlled state. The Kim regime has been

known to have an excessively tight reign over media and information dissemination as there is one singular state-run news channel that North Koreans have access to, Korean Central Television. This news agency broadcasts shows and other programmes that portray the Kim family in a wholly positive light. While there are also other shows consisting of operas and dramas, the idea is that all media broadcasting has been vetted by the North Korean government. Other forms of broadcasting through radio and newspapers are also completely state run and must be approved before being transmitted.

Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters without Borders)

Reporters Without Borders (originally Reporters Sans Frontières) is a powerful organization with an overarching mission to fight for freedom of the press. The organization has its origins in Paris but their mission extends past that, spanning 5 continents with a simple mission of fighting for press freedom. Through carefully compiling evidence, they focus on making sure that information is accessible to all, regardless of political context. However, in the past few years, RSF has highlighted how countries are becoming more and more vigilant about freedom of press and speech, and are cracking down more on the nature of information being broadcasted.

Al Jazeera

Al Jazeera has been a longtime advocate for journalist rights, and even more so due to some of their journalists being killed in conflict zones where their killers have gotten away with impunity.

Since the launch of the news agency, 12 Al Jazeera journalists have died while covering conflicts globally, and the agency is committed to guaranteeing journalists impunity but also for countries to honor their promises instead of opening fire on unsuspecting journalists. Additionally, some countries have gone as far to ban Al Jazeera, the most recent being Israel on May 5, 2024. Other countries that have prohibited the streaming of the aforementioned news platform include the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Bangladesh. After the continued Israel-Hamas war, other Arab countries have also gone to the extent of blocking and banning Al Jazeera.

JOURNALISM

Al Jazeera journalists killed on the front lines

Since launching in 1996, 12 Al Jazeera journalists have been killed while on assignment.

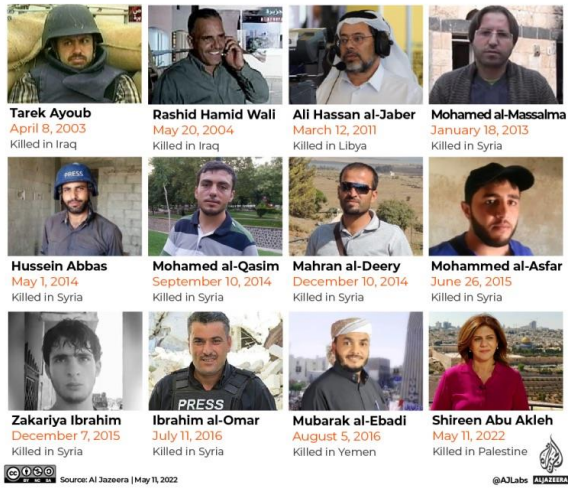


Figure #1: Full list of killed Al Jazeera journalists

Timeline of Events

Date	Event Name	Description
December 1993	The United Nations General Assembly proclaims World Press Freedom Day is to be celebrated on May 3	UNESCO officially declares May 3rd as the day for World Press Freedom, a day commemorating the courage and perseverance of journalists as they report on issues worldwide.
October 17th, 1994	Murder of Dmitry Kholodov	Dmitry Kholodov was a Russian investigative journalist that dedicated a lot of time to uncover corruption within Russia's military. However, when he got close to the truth, he was murdered as a way to silence him.
2006	Initiation of the Impunity Index	The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) establishes the Impunity Index, a method of tracking countries where the killers of journalists walk free.
2008	Resolution adopted regarding safety of journalists	The United Nations passes a resolution dedicated to maintaining the safety of journalists.

2012	Establishment of International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists	The United Nations officially establishes 2nd November as International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. This day commemorates the death of 2 French journalists in Mali.
2016	Resolution is passed by UNSC regarding violence and journalists	The United Nations officially passes a resolution to combat the issue of impunity surrounding journalist killings
2018	Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi is killed	In a sudden turn of events, Jamal Khashoggi is killed in the Saudi consulate in Turkey. Both countries deny any foul play, and the issue of impunity arises with regards to the perpetrators.
2020-early 2023	COVID-19 pandemic worsens conditions for journalists	As journalists begin to challenge official governmental narratives regarding the handling of the pandemic, many are silenced as a consequence of their dissent.
2023 (ongoing)	Conditions continue, addition of organizations advocating for journalist rights	While the death toll for journalists continues to rise, other journalism based organizations have started rallying together to form concrete evidence to hopefully address the safety issues journalists face on a day-to-day basis.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Establishment of International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists:

There have been several attempts to solve the issue so far. One notable attempt has been by the establishment of 2nd November being considered as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. The idea of this was to bring attention to the essential harassment that journalists face on sometimes even a daily basis, and to bring to light the appallingly low conviction rate for offenders committing crimes against journalists. Most recently, the 2023 theme was focused on the integrity of elections, public leadership within addressing the issue of impunity and violence along with other crimes perpetrated against journalists. The theme for the 2024 commemoration of this day is regarding the safety of journalists in crises and emergencies.

Tracking of journalists killings:

There have been several means of tracking journalist killings and those who have attacked such reporters. Several organizations have also done so in order to keep tabs on mortality rates and to act as evidence for bigger issues and killings that may ensue. These organizations include Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and many more. However, there is no well-established database yet that keeps tabs on the exact perpetrators, making it hard to bring the killers and murderers to justice.

Possible Solutions

Reporting mechanisms:

One potential solution to the issue is through the creation of independent entities, free from governmental interference as a method of journalists to communicate with more legal aspects and to report potential issues that arise regarding their safety. Such a platform can advocate for transparency and can ensure self-censorship does not occur as a barricade from spreading the truth. Through these methods, journalists can still broadcast information to the world without fear of retribution, and can facilitate tracking down officials who might be using different tactics of intimidation. Such a protocol could work in terms of advocating for journalist rights, and also prioritizing their safety when reporting.

Engagement through online means:

Social media has served a platform for connecting people and uniting people for a common purpose as well. By leveraging such a platform in order to make the masses aware of the struggles journalists face on a daily basis, it can unite people in fighting together for changes. However, social media also has a negative side, as it can incite further violence and can pit social groups against one another given sensitive topics. Simultaneously, social media also has the potential to spread misinformation, going against what the idea of the proper dissemination of information.

Journalist support networks:

Considering there is a large community of journalists that have been through or are currently in the ongoing struggle of facing threats to their safety, support networks may prove to be a safe and timely way to further build the idea that journalists can indeed help. Elements such as safety training for journalists, resource distribution, legal assistance and even emergency responses can help in making journalists feel like they are not alone but in a community where there are like-minded individuals that can help them feel more safe.

Capacity building for law enforcement:

Law enforcement such as police can receive training on freedoms that can be granted to the press, which can consequently reduce killings and harassment rates. Other forms such as creating timely plans in order to help journalists should they be compromised, or even dedicated task forces regarding focusing on resolving on crimes against journalists can help in mitigating such an issue. However, a potential issue that may arise is regarding nations and potential infringement on sovereignty considering that often crimes take place across several countries involving different nationalities.

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