

# Not just words

How reputational attacks harm  
journalists and undermine  
press freedom

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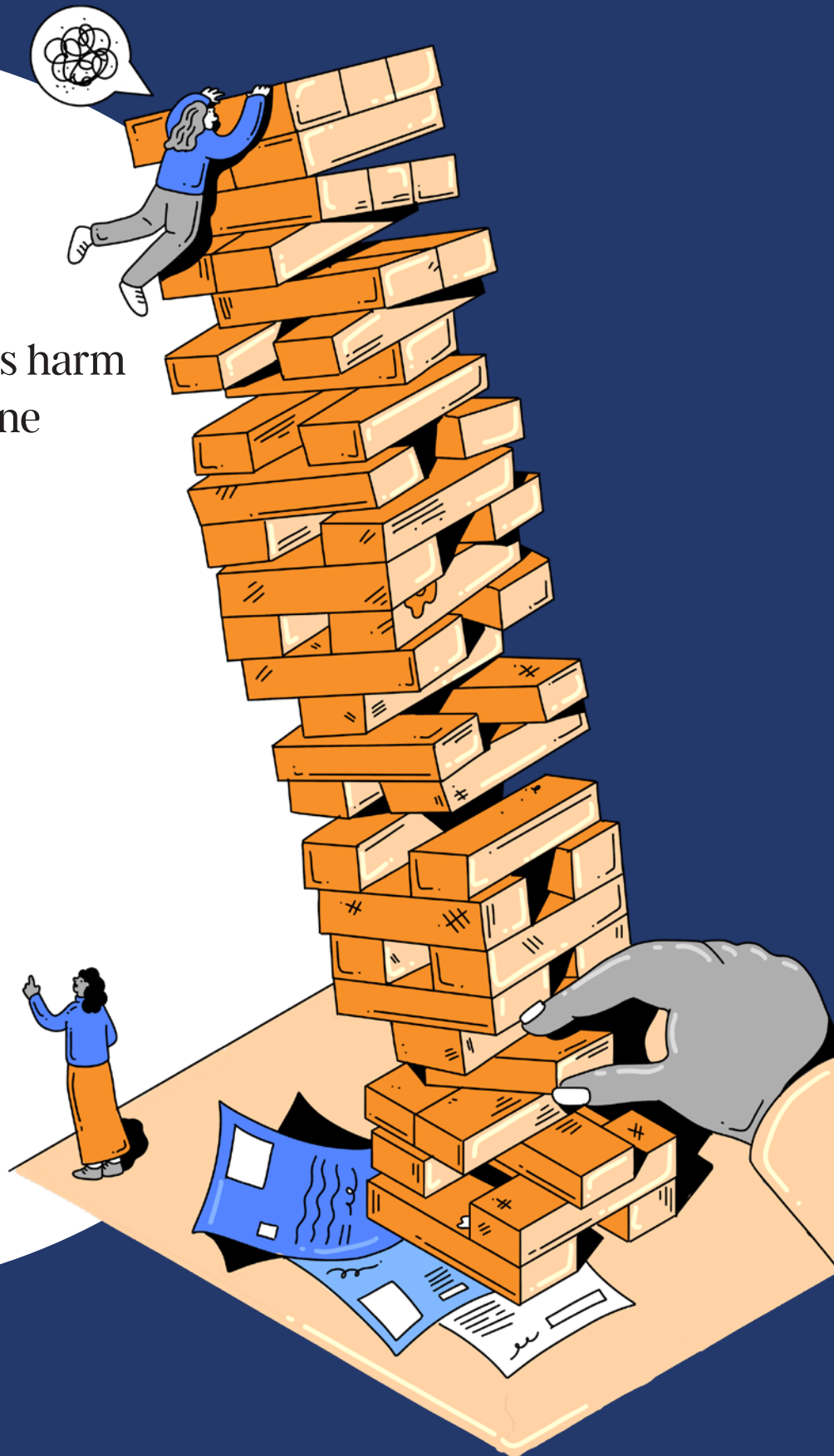
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For the full project team and acknowledgements, [see the credits](#).

An executive summary of this report is available to download in [English](#), [French](#), and [Spanish](#).

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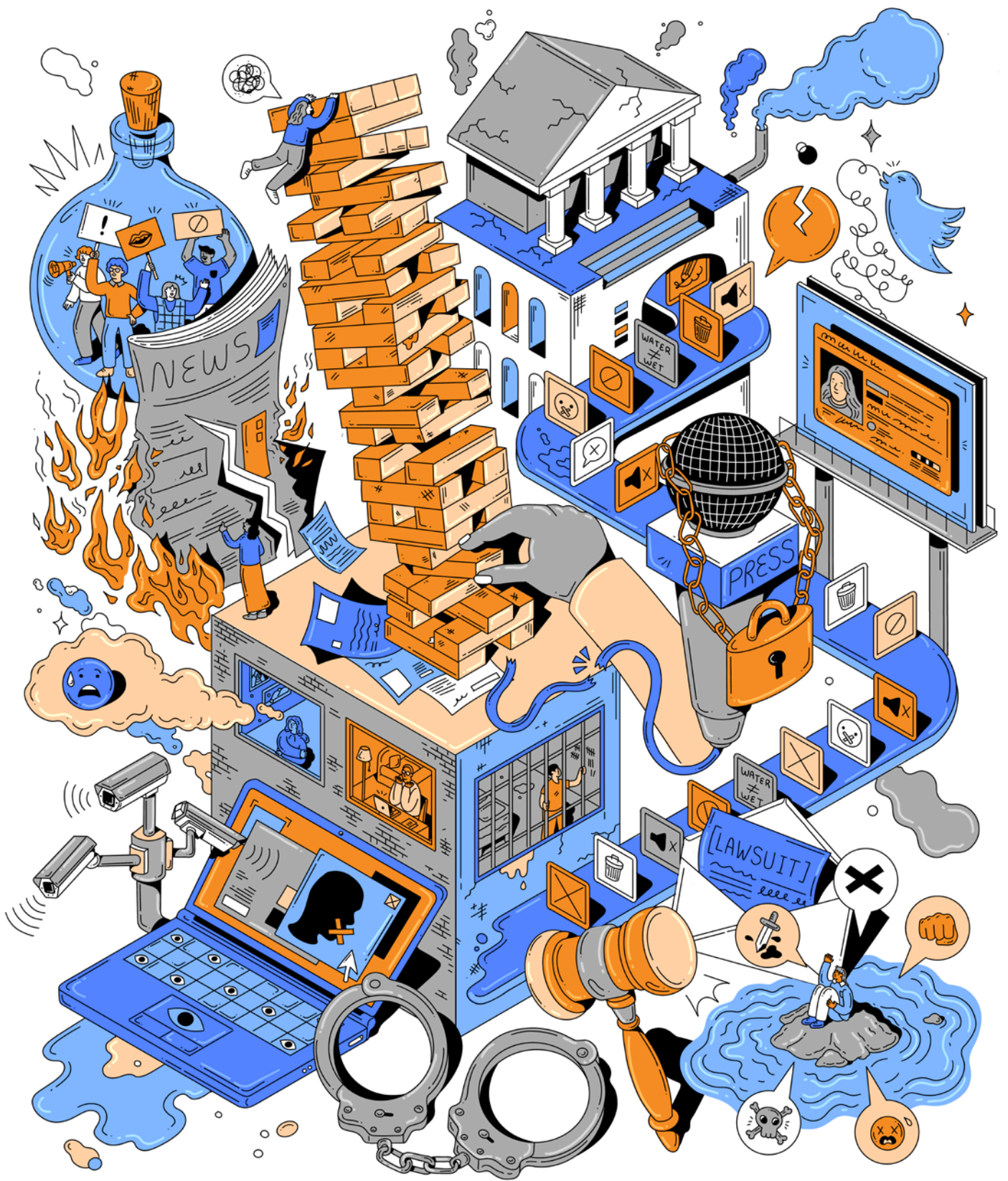
FREE  
EXPRESSION  
MATTERS



JODIE GINSBERG

PRESIDENT OF THE COMMITTEE  
TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

*“More and more we see leaders in supposedly democratic countries denigrating the media, casting journalists as ‘enemies of the people,’ as untrustworthy. It is hardly surprising that the corrupt, the abusers of power, would seed such a narrative.”*



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## **Foreword**

Democracy is in decline worldwide and a free and independent press is often one of the first casualties of that decline. This is evident in the growing trend among those in positions of power to cast aspersions on the media. More and more we see leaders in supposedly democratic countries denigrating the media, casting journalists as “enemies of the people,” as untrustworthy. It is hardly surprising that the corrupt, the abusers of power, would seed such a narrative. Sadly, however, such a narrative is seeping increasingly into the general population, who increasingly grow to distrust all journalists. That undermines the credibility of journalism, and contributes to an increasing lack of safety for journalists worldwide. But it is not just journalists who suffer when the media comes under attack: we all do. Journalism is essential for holding the powerful to account, for exposing abuses of our human rights, and for ensuring we all have access to the information to which we are entitled.

This report from the Global Reporting Centre compellingly illustrates the ubiquity of credibility attacks against journalists and the scope and severity of the effects they have on media workers and journalism more broadly. I hope it provokes reflection and action.

—JODIE GINSBERG

PRESIDENT OF THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

# Executive summary

Journalists' reputations are under assault around the world. Among journalists we surveyed, 63% reported at least monthly attacks on their individual reputations — and 19% reported facing them daily. Rates were even higher for attacks on the reputations of their news outlets or the broader news media sector.

These are concerning findings because reputations are critical in journalism. A journalist's reputation affects whether they are heard and believed, trusted by potential sources, and often whether they can survive economically. So journalists' reputations are often attacked by those who want to hide the truth or evade accountability.

We define “reputational attacks” as public messages intended to discredit, delegitimize, or dehumanize journalists. These attacks are frequently online, but can also be mounted in politicians' speeches, news broadcasts, and courtrooms. They can range from epithets in Twitter comments, to groundless claims in legal suits, to sophisticated disinformation campaigns using manipulated videos. An Iranian-American journalist shared a video with us created to misrepresent her reporting. “See! They put scary music in the background and zoom in on my face,” she said. “It's a psy-op.”

Today, these reputational attacks appear to be increasing due to changes in the information environment (including the rise of social media platforms) and political landscapes (such as the global trend of democratic backsliding). At the same time, press freedom and trust in journalism appear to be in decline globally, and threats to journal-

ists' safety are on the rise. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least 67 journalists and media workers were killed in 2022, the highest since 2018, and a record 363 were in jail as of December 1, 2022.

We investigated how widespread reputational attacks contribute to the risks and challenges that journalists face. While there is extensive research on efforts to delegitimize news outlets and journalism – particularly efforts by political leaders – there has been little research that investigates how reputational attacks affect individual journalists' safety and professional autonomy. With that in mind, we focused on five key questions:

1. **How frequently do journalists face attacks on their reputations?**
2. **What are the forms and sources of these attacks?**
3. **What are the personal and professional consequences of reputational attacks, including their links to violence and legal repression?**
4. **How do reputational attacks and their consequences vary for journalists in countries with different press freedom contexts?**
5. **How do they vary for journalists with different gender, ethnic, racial, or religious identities?**

To explore these questions, in 2022 we conducted a global survey. It was completed by 645 journalists, who resided in 87 countries, spanning a wide range of press freedom levels. The survey was available in six languages (English, Arabic, French, Hindi, Portuguese, and Spanish). 42% of survey respondents identified as women and 23.1% identified as belonging to a marginalized racial, ethnic or religious group in their respective countries. We then conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with 54 journalists.

We have eight key findings:

**1** Reputational attacks are prevalent globally, with survey respondents reporting they encountered at least monthly attacks targeting them personally (63% of respondents), their organization (75%), or the news media sector (90%).

**2** The most common sources of reputational attacks were politicians and public officials (reported by 72% of respondents). Respondents in countries with low levels of press freedom reported considerably more reputational attacks from politicians and political parties in power than those in high press freedom countries

(58% vs. 22%).<sup>1</sup> This is a significant distinction, because those who control the government have greater access to resources and influence with agencies (like the police) that can be deployed in tandem with reputational attacks. Attacks from opposition politicians and parties were relatively consistent across press freedom levels. Reputational attacks from other sources – such as criminal organizations and police, military or intelligence agencies – were rarer, but more closely associated with certain harms (such as physical violence and criminal charges).

**3** False or misleading accusations of political bias were the most commonly reported form of personal reputational attacks (54% of respondents), followed by claims of incompetence (43%) or unethical conduct (42%).

**4** Journalists who faced frequent (at least weekly) reputational attacks were much more likely to have been physically attacked or threatened with violence. While our survey can not reveal a causal relationship, some interviewees described cases in which reputational attacks led directly to assaults or serious threats.

**5** Journalists who faced frequent reputational attacks were more likely to have experienced harm to their mental and physical health, to have seriously considered quitting journalism, and to have relocated from their city or country to avoid or mitigate threats. They were also more likely to face legal repression, i.e. be targeted with arrest or legal actions because of their work.

**6** These findings suggest that reputational attacks can have a negative impact on journalists' autonomy and ability to do their jobs. Moreover, 40% of respondents said that they changed or reduced their reporting on some issues to avoid efforts to discredit or harass them. The reported rate of this “chilling effect” was fairly consistent across the board, even among respondents who faced relatively infrequent reputational attacks.

**7** Journalists who belong to marginalized racial, ethnic, or religious groups in their countries reported more frequent reputational attacks. 48% of these respondents experienced weekly reputational attacks, and 23% faced weekly attacks targeting their identity. By contrast, these numbers were 33% and 5% for respondents who did not identify as belonging to marginalized groups. In addition, respondents who identified as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic, or religious groups were more likely to have been a victim of a physical attack, to have been threatened with non-sexual violence, to have considered quitting journalism, to be displaced from the

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1. For this study we defined levels of press freedom based on [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)'s 2022 rankings](#). Those ranked #1–60 are high press freedom countries, #61–120 are medium, and #121–180 are low.

city/region/country they report from, and to experience harm to their mental health.



Gender is an important dimension of reputational attacks. Our survey found that women received reputational attacks at comparable rates to men, but the forms differed. Respondents who identified as men were more likely to be accused of committing a crime. Respondents who identified as women were more likely to be attacked based on their gender or sexual orientation, and more likely to face sexualized harassment and threats of sexual violence. Women also reported higher rates of harm to their mental health (63% vs. 49% for men).

Based on our findings and existing literature, we argue that reputational attacks warrant more attention. They are not “just words” and they are not productive media criticism. They can cause or exacerbate personal and professional harms to journalists. They can be used strategically to complement or increase the likelihood that journalists will face violence, legal repression, or other severe attacks on their safety and autonomy. Our report therefore concludes with several recommendations:

**Newsrooms, press freedom bodies and civil society organizations should develop monitoring systems** to identify reputational attacks and harassment targeting journalists. They should also **develop best practices to defend journalists’ reputations**, from expressions of public support to legal action against those who defame or threaten journalists. Critically, best practices should address the additional risks journalists face due to their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and other aspects of their identities.

**Newsrooms should establish protocols to support journalists** who face attacks on their reputations and harassment. Protocols should include preventive measures like cyber-security training, and reactive measures like legal and psychological assistance. Journalists should not be left to cope with reputational attacks on their own.

**Social media companies should improve their anti-abuse tools, content moderation, and capacity to assist targeted journalists**, along with providing greater transparency to independent researchers and civil society organizations.

**Governments should strengthen commitments to protect journalists’ rights** and freedom of the press, and hold to account those who violate journalists’ rights – including other governments.

More broadly, actions must be taken to address the systemic and ongoing damage to journalism and public discourse. This can poison the atmosphere for journalism more generally, undermining journalists’ collective safety and ability to promote accountability, truth-telling, and democracy.

# Introduction

“Journalism is absolutely more dangerous, more polarized and less trusted than it used to be,” wrote a Canadian journalist in our survey.

Those sentiments are widely held. Indeed, as journalism scholar Silvio Waisbord observes, “the problem of journalists’ safety is worse and more complex today than in the recent past. This explains why the problem has received growing attention globally, and why it is hard to find solutions” (Waisbord, 2022a, p. 1948).

Our study contributes to this discussion by focusing on a common but under-theorized and under-studied dimension of threats to journalists’ safety and autonomy: attacks on their reputations. By “reputational attacks,” we refer to public messages that can discredit, delegitimize, or even dehumanize journalists, and can therefore change how audiences perceive or treat them.

In 2022, hundreds of journalists were assaulted, jailed, and censored around the world. Many face significant harassment, particularly online. Why focus on attacks on their reputations?

First, reputational attacks often prefigure or accompany more straightforward threats to individual journalists’ security and ability to do their job, including violence and legal repression.<sup>2</sup> This report investigates these linkages, and shows that reputational attacks make journalism more dangerous.

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2. Legal repression refers to the use of police or the legal system to punish, silence, or obstruct journalists, in violation of their right to freedom of expression.

Second, attacks on the reputations of journalists and journalism organizations can poison the atmosphere for journalism more generally, harming trust in journalists as well as their safety, and undermining their ability to promote accountability, truth-telling, and democracy. This is clearest when heads of government lead the charge, as seen recently in the United States (Donald Trump), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), India (Narendra Modi), El Salvador (Nayib Bukele), the Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte), and elsewhere.

Third, reputational attacks are easier to dismiss as “just words” or an unpleasant but necessary form of media criticism. There is no doubt that journalists should be corrected or held to account for errors or unethical behavior, and vibrant press criticism makes for healthier journalism. But a balance needs to be struck between guarding freedom of expression – including legitimate criticism – and addressing communication that undermines journalists’ ability to safely and effectively pursue their work.

Overall, this report seeks to clarify when, how, and why reputational attacks are most harmful. By clearly identifying factors that make reputational attacks more harmful, journalists and their allies can design more targeted and effective responses.

In this introduction, we summarize existing research on threats to journalists’ safety (with an emphasis on digital threats), explain this report’s analytical framework and key terms, and list our research questions.

## **Threats to journalists’ safety and press freedom**

Journalists faced significant safety risks in 2022. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) found that at least 67 journalists and media workers were killed, the highest number since 2018 and an almost 50% increase from 2021. The year also ended with a record number of journalists in prison for their work, at 363, as of December 1, 2022 (Getz, 2022). These threats to the safety of journalists highlight broader developments that undermine the physical, psychological, digital, and economic safety of journalists (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; Waisbord, 2022a).

## **Technologies of control**

Governments have expanded their technological toolkits to control and silence journalism. There has been an intensification of the use of digital technologies to surveil, censor, and harass journalists. The Pegasus Project found that at least 180 journalists were likely targeted with spyware sold to more than 50 governments by Israel-based NSO Group (Forbidden Stories, 2021). The omnipresent fear of surveillance in many countries has a chilling effect – when journalists (and their sources) self-censor due to fears of physical, psychological, or economic risks (Di Salvo, 2022; Guterl, 2022).

Surveillance risks can also prevent sources from coming forward. As Mexican journalist Marcela Turati said in an interview to CPJ, “if a journalist can’t keep her sources secret, it’s like taking us out of the water we swim in. You take away the right of people to report abuses” (Hootsen, 2022).

## Online threats and harassment

Online harassment is widespread and poses a hazard to journalists’ security, mental health, and freedom of expression (Miller, 2021; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Waisbord, 2022b). It has been identified as a serious problem in countries including Brazil (InternetLab, 2022), Canada (IPSOS, 2021), India (Bhat & Chadha, 2022; Majumder, 2022a), the Philippines (Neilson & Ortiga, 2022), and the United States (Gottfried et al., 2022). Online harassment is a more global phenomenon than the murder or jailing of journalists for their work, the latter occurring much more frequently in regions experiencing armed conflict or countries in the Global South (Waisbord, 2022a).

Women and racialized journalists experience significant harassment online (Chen et al., 2020; Claesson, 2022; IPSOS, 2021) and offline (Miller & Lewis, 2022b; Westcott, 2019). A global survey of 625 women conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and UNESCO found that 73% had faced some form of harassment online, and that rates were higher for women who identified as Black, Indigenous, Jewish, Arab, Asian or lesbian (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022).

Beyond identity, journalists’ visibility (Miller & Lewis, 2022a), and their beat or role (Adams, 2018), have also been linked to online harassment. Investigative journalists, particularly those who focus on repressive governments or criminal organizations, face much higher levels of online violence as well as legal repression (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Waisbord, 2022a).

## Safety and press freedom more broadly are in decline

Governments, civil society organizations, and the United Nations have all identified the increasing risks to journalists as part of broader declines of press freedom. Populist leaders around the world have accused independent media of being “enemies of the people” or “fake news,” including current or recent leaders of Brazil, India, Israel, the Philippines, and the United States (Bhat & Chadha, 2022; Carlson et al., 2021; Lubianco, 2020; Meeks, 2020; Panievsky, 2021; Ressa, 2022; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020). As the journalism sector faces these top-down attacks, individual journalists also face more spontaneous or loosely-coordinated harassment and reputational attacks by members of the public, which Waisbord refers to as “bottom-up, citizen vigilantism” (2020, p. 1031).

For these reasons, civil society, governments, and international organizations are paying increased attention to the risks faced by journalists (e.g., International Women’s Media Foundation, 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). This has led to new efforts to improve the safety of journalists in Europe (European Commission, 2021), and a United Nations resolution<sup>3</sup> calling for stronger and more consistent action by governments to protect journalists and hold to account those who harm journalists or threaten press freedom (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

## **Reputational attacks and their consequences**

There are myriad cases of false and malicious attacks on journalists’ credibility by governments, corporations, criminal organizations, and individuals seeking to avoid exposure and accountability. Such efforts are not new, but appear to be more frequent and to have assumed new forms, such as digital disinformation campaigns (PEN America, 2022; Radsch, 2022).

For instance, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi faced intense efforts by troll accounts aligned with the Saudi government to smear his reputation shortly before and even after he was murdered in Turkey in 2018 (Abrahams & Leber, 2021; Al-Rawi, 2021). Moroccan journalists Omar Radi and Soulaïmane Raïssouni were disparaged on Facebook by a network of fake Facebook accounts, which were identified by our research team and the Digital Forensic Research Lab (Kann et al., 2022). Gauri Lankesh, an Indian journalist, faced relentless online campaigns, including accusations by Hindu nationalist groups that she was a “Hindu hater,” before she was murdered in 2017 (Rueckert, 2023).<sup>4</sup>

Dealing with reputational attacks and harassment can be resource intensive and emotionally taxing, and can shape whether and how journalists cover contentious issues (Claesson, 2022; Holton et al., 2021; Post & Kepplinger, 2019). Audiences who encounter uncivil messages in comments on news stories are likely to believe the whole news organization lacks credibility, and not just the story being commented on – what researchers call a “toxic atmosphere effect” (Masullo et al., 2021) – contributing to declining trust in journalism (Newman et al., 2022).

One major issue in this area is the terminology. Research on negative or hostile communication targeting journalists refers to it as “harassment,” “incivility,” “abuse,” “dark

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3. This resolution calls for further efforts to advance the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, as part of the 10-year anniversary of that 2012 initiative. See [news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130117](https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130117) for more details.

4. Forbidden Stories, a global network of journalists, credited Lankesh as an inspiration for a series of investigations of the disinformation-for-hire industry: [forbiddenstories.org/case/story-killers](https://forbiddenstories.org/case/story-killers).

participation,” and “violence.” (For more detailed discussions of the different terms that can be used, Al-Rawi & Kim, 2023). The distinction between these terms is often unclear – as is the distinction between them and acceptable media criticism.

For this report, we use three terms:

**Reputational attacks** are public messages (e.g. broadcast TV, Twitter, politician’s speech) that, as we defined in our survey to respondents, “may undermine journalists’ reputations or credibility.” These include allegations of unprofessionalism to claims that journalists are traitors to dismissive comments about their personal identities, and often take the form of false or misleading statements.<sup>5</sup>

## Types of hostile communication



**Reputational attack:** public messages intended to undermine journalists’ credibility with audiences.



**Harassment:** public or private messages that journalists consider abusive or harmful.



**Media criticism:** public evaluations of journalism to bring about positive change.

Reputational attacks can discredit, delegitimize or even dehumanize journalists. They work by changing how audiences perceive and/or treat journalists.<sup>6</sup>

There is little systematic research that focuses specifically on the forms and consequences of reputational attacks against individual journalists, and how these may vary across different countries or journalists’ identities. One important exception is the major report by ICFJ and UNESCO, which identified “professional and reputational threats” as one of the most common of 12 types of online attack (Posetti & Shabbir,

5. Reputational attacks do not always need to contain false or misleading information; we included this detail in some survey questions to further distinguish reputational attacks from legitimate criticism.

6. The audiences of reputational attacks may vary greatly in size, and can be reached via “private” messaging apps like Telegram or WhatsApp (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020).

2022). Among the 625 journalists identifying as women that they surveyed, 23% experienced “professional threats” such as false allegations about their conduct as journalists, and 42% experienced “reputational attacks” such as efforts to demean their intelligence or morality.

Reputational attacks may overlap with **harassment**, which we defined to survey respondents as “actions or communication, including private messages, that are abusive, sexual, demeaning, hostile or violent in nature.” Harassment can directly affect journalists’ safety, wellbeing, and socio-economic status, or perceptions of these – it doesn’t necessarily involve an audience.

In scholarship, harassment refers to a spectrum of behaviours and communication including violent threats, hate speech, sexualized comments or propositions, and insults intended to intimidate, belittle, or shame journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2020; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Miller defines harassment as “unwanted abusive behavior,” and argues that targeted journalists should help determine what counts as “unwanted” and “abusive” (Miller, 2021, p. 4).

**Media criticism**, a third key concept, refers to public evaluations of journalists’ performance and journalism organizations to bring about positive changes. As the media freedom organization Article 19 notes, while efforts to discredit and harass journalists should be opposed, “genuine criticism or scrutiny of the news media or individual journalists who fail to uphold ethics and values should not be equated with attacks against the media” (ARTICLE 19, 2021, p. 18).

Scholarship on media criticism has long emphasized its importance for holding news media to account, encouraging reflexivity among journalists, and enhancing the democratic contributions of the press. However, scholars have increasingly looked at toxic forms of criticism, or “anti-press rhetoric,” that are used to undermine journalism and threaten journalists, often by actors pursuing anti-democratic aims (Cheruiyot, 2022, p. 1). This toxic or “delegitimizing” media criticism is typified by the “*absence of reasoning and the presence of incivility*” (Egelhofer et al., 2021, p. 656, emphasis in original).

There can and should be debate about what counts as tolerable media criticism and what counts as reputational attacks or harassment. The distinctions between these need to be worked out in different contexts. In fact, a main motivation for this study is to help understand the forms and consequences of reputational attacks, to better determine how those lines might be drawn.

# Context and methodology

## **Context: ongoing political and pandemic-related upheavals**

The survey for this report was conducted in 2022, focusing primarily on journalists' lived experiences in the preceding 12 months. During this period, journalism organizations faced several forms of upheaval and challenges. Some of these were related to political developments in specific countries, such as presidential or national election campaigns in Brazil, Colombia, Kenya, and the United States. However, a broader context was the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic emphasized the importance of robust journalism to raise awareness of health risks, provide factual information, and hold public institutions to account. Many journalists, including some interviewed for this report, felt high levels of public appreciation, especially in the early months of the pandemic.

However, research across countries found “the pandemic crisis exacerbates existing obstacles to press freedom and adds new dimensions to the already documented threats” (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021, p. 1344), including new legal restrictions, economic pressures, and enhanced forms of surveillance affecting journalists and journalism organizations (Jacobsen, 2020). Other threats included smear campaigns, online harassment, and physical aggression that targeted journalists, primarily because of their reporting on the pandemic and on public health measures such as masking and

vaccines (Egwu, 2022; Posetti, Julie et al., 2020b; Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021).

At the same time, trust in journalism declined in many countries, driven not only by the social and political cleavages associated with the pandemic, but also anti-press populist movements and leaders (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2022).

## **Survey methodology**

This study used a global survey of journalists to identify broad patterns in their experiences with reputational attacks, and how those relate to different press freedom contexts and journalists' identities. 645 journalists responded. We then conducted in-depth interviews with 54 of them to develop more fine-grained insights into the forms and consequences of reputational attacks. The University of British Columbia oversaw ethics clearance for the multi-language survey and interviews.

A 45-question survey was available online from April 1 to October 1, 2022. It was available in English, Arabic, French, Hindi, Portuguese, and Spanish. Individuals could complete the survey anonymously, but they were given the option to share an email address with our research team for potential follow-up (378, or 58.6%, did so).

Researchers with the Global Reporting Centre – with assistance from staff at the Committee to Protect Journalists – used a snowball survey method. We contacted national and international press freedom and journalism organizations, asking them to share the survey with their networks. We also directly contacted journalists in our professional networks and reached out to some journalists who report on disinformation (found by identifying journalists in news databases that include “disinformation” and/or “misinformation” in their stories).

All survey respondents self-identified as “journalists over the age of 18.” We included questions about personal identity (gender, age, and whether they belong to a marginalized racial, ethnic or religious group in their country), and professional identity (role, years in journalism, type of news organization, political orientation of their organization). For more information on the survey questionnaire, contact Chris Tenove, the report's lead author.

## **Demographic breakdown of survey respondents**

The 645 journalists who completed the survey were based in Asia (99 respondents), Europe (160), Latin America (156), North America (130), Sub-Saharan Africa (69), and Oceania (12). We did not have the capacity to safely and effectively share our survey in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but still received 19 survey responses from journalists there. Within regions, some countries have much higher responses

than others (e.g. 79 of 99 Asian respondents reside in India or Pakistan).

About 10% of respondents report on countries in a different region than where they live. Most of these journalists reside in North America or Europe but report on Asia, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

57.0% of respondents identified as men, 41.6% as women, and less than 1.4% identified as “other” (with the option to write in how they identified). We reached our goal of approximately equal gender representation in some regions (Asia, North America, Europe) but fell short in others (Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa). In follow-up interviews with many respondents, we acquired richer information about the perspectives of members of some under-represented groups in our survey (e.g. women journalists in Latin America).

As part of our outreach, we aimed to reach a significant proportion of respondents who identify as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic, or religious groups in their respective countries. In some regions (Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, North America), more than 20% said they had a marginalized ethnic, racial or religious identity – though this number was much lower in Europe and Latin America.

The journalists who responded to our survey cannot be assumed to be representative of all journalists globally or in particular countries. Doing so for a global survey, with nuanced analysis by country or region, would require tens of thousands of respondents (the closest approximation to this is the Worlds of Journalism project, see Hanitzsch et al., 2019). It would also require the existence of a full list of journalists globally to sample from, which does not exist. (For more on these challenges see Molyneux & Zamith, 2020).

We therefore do not claim our quantitative findings can be directly extrapolated to the wider populations of journalists.<sup>7</sup> (We provide some quantitative analysis of the four countries that received the most responses – Brazil, Canada, Colombia and India – in the Appendix). To supplement our survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with journalists (described below) and with press freedom advocates across geographic regions.

Despite the exploratory nature of our survey, we believe its findings reveal likely patterns regarding journalists’ exposure to reputational attacks, the personal and profes-

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7. As a test of our sample’s representativeness, we asked respondents to estimate how the frequency of reputational attacks targeting them compares to others in their news organization. 35% believed they are more frequently targeted, 39% less frequently targeted, and 26% “about the same” as others in their newsrooms. While this is a subjective evaluation, it suggests our sample is not highly skewed in one direction or the other.

sional impacts of these attacks, and how reputational attacks and their consequences may be shaped by journalists' locations and identities. We hope other researchers will interrogate and extend our findings.

## **Interview methodology and sample**

We conducted 54 in-depth interviews with journalists who completed our survey. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were conducted between August 2022 and February 2023. These interviews enabled us to probe key issues that emerged from the survey findings, including the relationship between reputational attacks and a journalist's identity, violence, legal repression, and other harms. We also interviewed 16 members of press freedom organizations to further contextualize our survey and interview findings.

We chose to conduct at least five interviews regarding the four countries examined in case studies in the Appendix (Brazil, Canada, Colombia and India).

Of the 54 journalists we interviewed: nine reside in Asia, 11 in Europe and Central Asia, 17 in Latin America, eight in North America, seven in Sub-Saharan Africa, and two in the Middle East and North Africa. Of these interviewees, 33 identify as women, and 15 as belonging to marginalized religious, ethnic or racial groups in their country of residence.

The majority of interviews were conducted via video chat. All interviews were transcribed, translated to English (if conducted in Hindi, Portuguese, Spanish, or Urdu), and imported to ATLAS.ti for thematic analysis. To do so, researchers carefully read the transcripts and labelled quotations with "codes" regarding the themes addressed. We used a combination of predetermined codes (e.g. psychological impacts of reputation attacks) and codes that emerged during analysis (e.g. anti-vaccine groups as a source of reputational attacks). We then analyzed each theme by examining all quotations by interviewees related to these themes.

All quotations in this report are from interviews conducted by our research team unless indicated otherwise. Some quotations have been translated to English (from French, Portuguese, Spanish, or Urdu).

Interviewees were given the option of being named or not, in which case we provide their country of residence, basic details about their professional role and additional details as needed (e.g. gender, ethnicity, or reporting beat). Named interviewees have given their consent.

We are very grateful to all individuals who spoke with us on this challenging topic.

# Key findings on reputational attacks

## 1. How frequently do journalists face attacks on their reputations?

Reputational attacks are ubiquitous

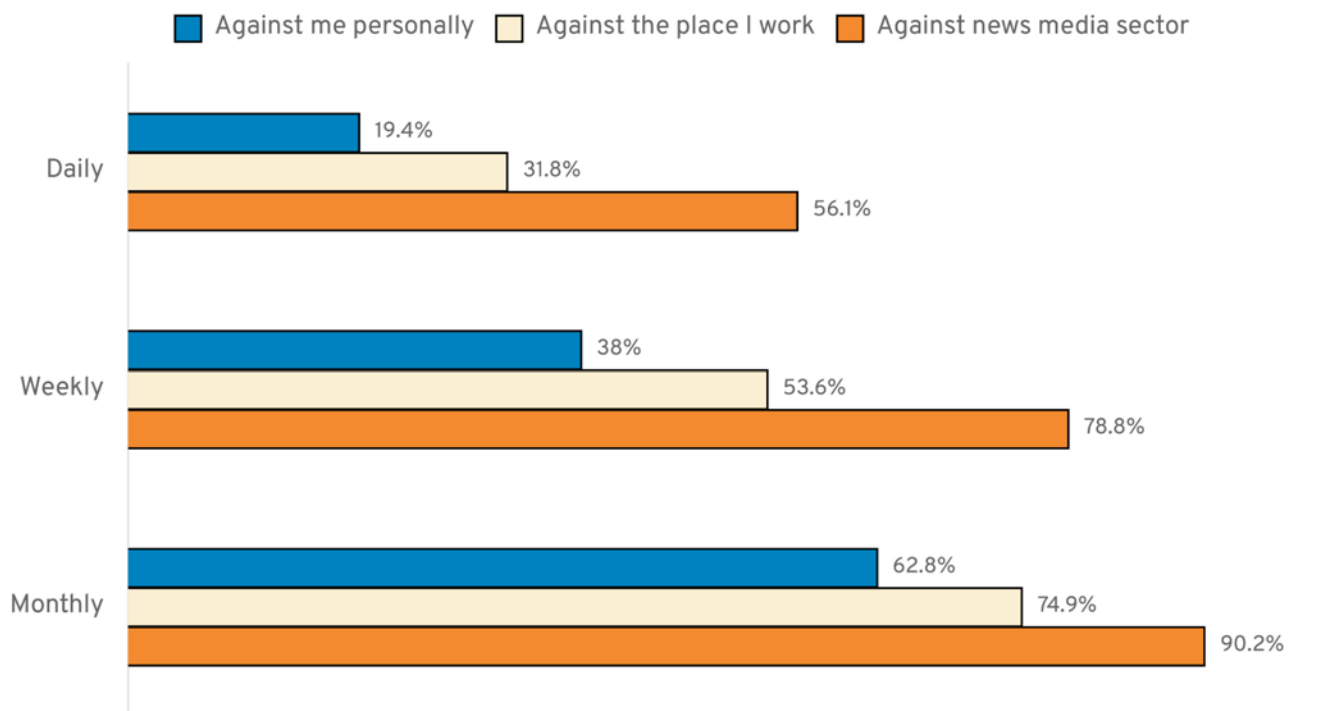
Our survey found that most journalists regularly encounter reputational attacks that target them individually, their affiliated organizations, or the news media more generally. 82.5% of respondents reported they encountered public messages attacking their personal reputation or credibility at least yearly, 62.8% at least monthly, 38% at least weekly, and 19.4% daily.

For the rest of this report, we will focus on individually-targeted reputational attacks. Doing so enables us to examine relationships between reputational attacks and potential individual-level consequences such as being assaulted, perceived harm to mental health, and changes in how one reports on issues. However, it's important to keep in mind that these individual attacks against journalists occur alongside even more frequent attacks against their news organization and the broader news industry.

Many interviewees stated that the frequency and intensity of reputational attacks had increased in recent years. Some credited rising social tensions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with recent research (Egwu, 2022; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021; Posetti, Julie et al., 2020a). A Canadian journalist who reports on far right movements noted that the hostility and attacks on her reputation “certainly escalated during the

COVID-19 pandemic, especially as anti-vaccine, anti-mandate, anti-lockdown views really took hold and were very much interwoven with anti-establishment narratives, which included the mainstream media as a part of the establishment.”

**Fig 1.1 Frequency of reputational attacks**



A correspondent for a national broadcaster in Ireland said he believes the unprecedented reputational attacks he faced were due to “the resentment some people felt [because] they were locked down, that it wasn’t totally justified, and that the media were in bed with the government and spreading lies and fake news.”

Some interviewees credited increasing reputational attacks to the rise of social media platforms and general changes in the information ecosystem. These claims align with recent research on the ways in which social media platforms and news comment sections not only support positive engagement, but also facilitate harassment or “dark participation” by hostile actors (Miller, 2021; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Quandt, 2018).

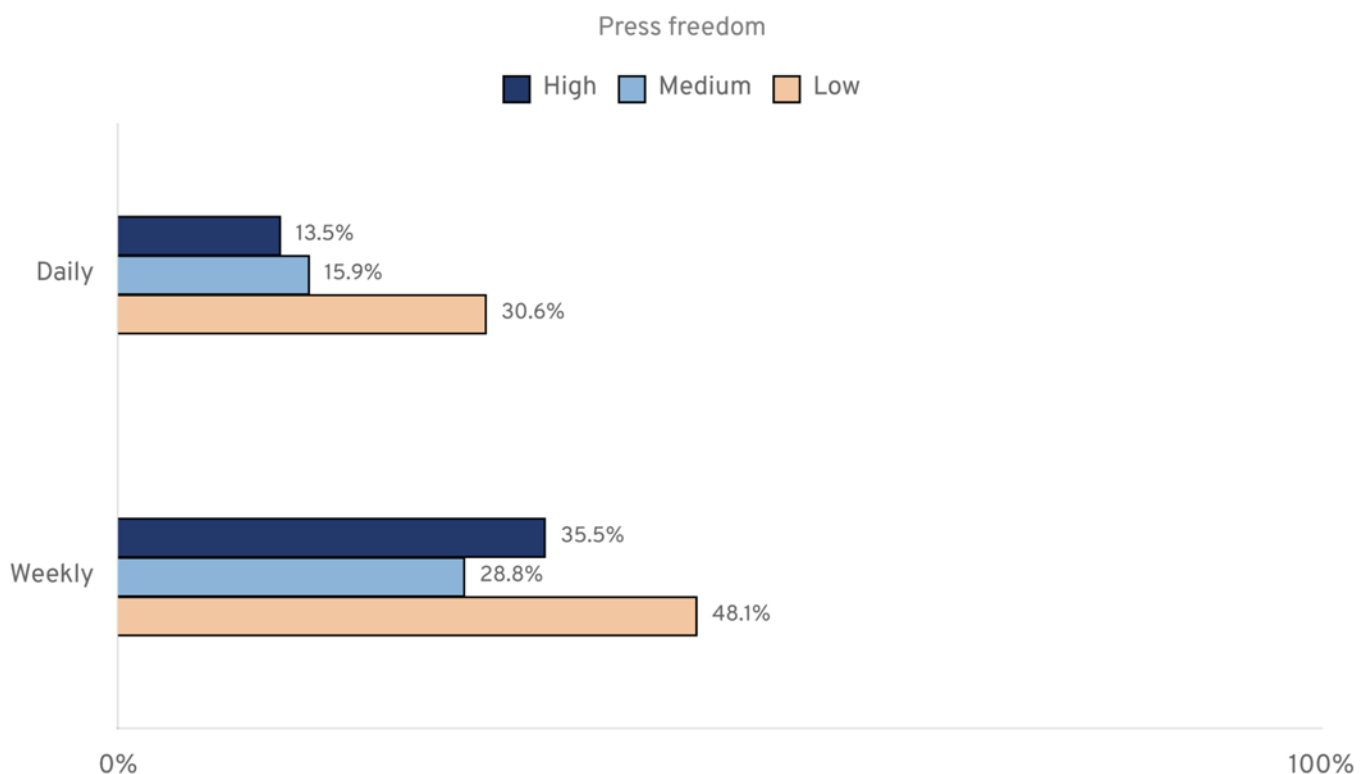
However, the most common explanation among respondents for increasing reputational attacks was a change in the political context, either due to democratic back-sliding or increased political polarization. For instance, in countries including Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United States, populist leaders and their supporters have attacked the press during political campaigns. (See the next section on press freedom, and case studies on Brazil and India in the Appendix.)

Some also described spillover effects. Several interviewees, none of whom were American, claimed that former U.S. President Trump’s hostility toward mainstream journalists had served as a model in their own country for anti-press attacks. Press freedom advocates pointed to the role of other regional leaders, including Brazil’s Bolsonaro, India’s Modi, and Mexico’s López Obrador, in contributing to more brazen anti-press rhetoric and behavior from governments elsewhere in the world.

## Journalists face more reputational attacks in countries with low press freedom

While journalists from all countries surveyed faced regular reputational attacks, respondents were most likely to experience them at a high frequency in countries with low press freedom.<sup>8</sup>

**Fig 1.2 Does the frequency of reputational attacks vary by press freedom level?**



In Brazil, which saw a precipitous decline in press freedom during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, presidential elections in October 2022 were preceded by millions of

8. For this study we defined levels of press freedom based on [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)’s 2022 rankings](#). Those ranked #1–60 are high press freedom countries, #61–120 are medium, and #121–180 are low.

negative online comments targeting Brazilian journalists (RSF, 2022). Lais Martins, an investigative journalist in São Paulo, told us that former President Bolsonaro, his family members in politics, and allied politicians all regularly and explicitly attacked the credibility of the press, feeding an antagonistic “us against them” feeling among their followers toward journalism. The result, she said, is a “no-holds-barred atmosphere” in which denigrating and threatening journalists became widely acceptable.

Interviewees noted that the reputational attacks did not only come from politicians or party members, but also from business interests, civil society organizations, or others who benefit from links to those in power. As a Brazilian journalist covering environmental issues and corruption in a small provincial city said, **“the issue here is more basic and it is more vile. It concerns money. It’s as simple as that.”**

In India, respondents and interviewees pointed to escalating hostility toward the press since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. “No government in India has really been a great friend and admirer of press freedom, but we are seeing two differences,” said senior journalist Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, who has also written a biography of Modi. “One is that there is a greater amount of coordination and planning behind these attacks on the media. And second is that [these attacks are mostly] ideologically motivated.” (See our case study on India in the Appendix.)

In Mexico, the country with the most killings of journalists in recent years (Kahn, 2023), there have been significant efforts to discredit journalists. Sara Mendiola, director of the Mexican press freedom organization Propuesta Cívica, told us that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador frequently spends his daily morning press conference “attacking journalists who are being critical of his government, journalists who are demanding transparency of his administration, journalists who are investigating officials who belong to his government in corruption matters” – and that those messages are replicated by other public officials throughout the country (see also Washington Post Editorial Board, 2022). “In the country that is the deadliest and most violent against the press, to feed those discourses is dangerous,” she said.

Jeremy Bransten, the acting editor-in-chief of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), said that the network faces regular reputational attacks.<sup>9</sup> “Just this week, we had the Iranian government designate our Persian language service as a supporter of international terrorism,” he told us in December, 2022. “So it’s just kind of absurd, right?”

“We constantly see attacks on WhatsApp or Telegram or Facebook saying our jour-

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9. RFE/RL is a news organization that receives funding from the U.S. Congress to work in 23 countries with poor press freedom.

nalists are traitors and they should go to prison or jail or be persecuted,” said Patrick Boehler, senior digital strategist at RFE/RL. The link between reputational attacks and threats to safety is particularly clear in countries with low press freedom, he said, “especially in an environment of high polarization or political suppression.”

Press freedom isn’t the only factor that shapes reputational attacks in a country, of course. For instance, we also looked at trust in journalism. Some countries, such as the United States, have relatively high press freedom but low trust in journalism. Respondents were more likely to face weekly reputational attacks in countries with low trust in journalism (42.0%) or moderate trust (42.2%) compared to high trust (25.3%).<sup>10</sup>

## The transnational reach of government reputational attacks

“Transnational repression” can occur when journalists are targeted by governments of repressive countries from across borders (Michaelsen, 2020). Tactics include violence, digital surveillance, and smear campaigns, such as those experienced by Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi leading up to his murder in Turkey in 2018 (Abrahams & Leber, 2021; Al-Rawi, 2021).

Iranian diaspora journalists have also faced extensive efforts to discredit them to audiences within Iran and in their country of residence (ARTICLE 19, 2021; Berger & Dehghanpisheh, 2022). For instance, Masih Alinejad, a U.S.-based reporter for Voice of America’s Persian-language service, has faced smear campaigns and online harassment. U.S. law enforcement interrupted an Iranian kidnapping plot against her in 2021, and in 2023 three men were indicted for participating in a plot to murder her (Alinejad, 2022; Garrity, 2023). In an interview with CPJ, Alinejad explained that Iranian authorities “want to use me as an example to create fear among journalists who live in exile, especially those who dare to criticize the Islamic republic” (Jacobsen, 2022).

Negar Mortazavi, an Iranian-American journalist based in the U.S. said that she has faced contradictory reputational attacks.

“I’ve been called a CIA agent and an Iranian regime agent in the same day, once even in the same tweet! It’s ridiculous, but it’s working,” she said. “It has an effect in intimidating me, and in turning the [Iranian diaspora] community against me, sometimes my own friends and family members against me...This is the most draining of all.”

In addition to vitriolic accusations by hundreds of anonymous social media accounts,

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10. We used the 2022 trust in journalism findings from the Reuters Institute’s [2022 Digital News Report](#), which provided trust levels for 40 countries, based on polling conducted in January or February of 2022. 79% of our 645 survey respondents resided in these 40 countries. Residents of countries not part of this report were excluded from this calculation.

actors have created and shared online videos edited to misrepresent and demonize her.

Other interviewees described how the governments of China, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia pursued campaigns to undermine their reputations, sometimes paired with violence or legal repression. Research suggests that transnational campaigns from countries including China, Iran, Russia, and Venezuela appear to disproportionately target women journalists (Awasthi, 2023; Bradshaw & Henle, 2021).

# Michela Wrong      United Kingdom & Rwanda

BY CHRIS TENOVE

Michela Wrong knew she was going to face reputational attacks from the Rwandan government and its supporters for her 2021 non-fiction book, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* (Wrong, 2021). The smear campaigns began even before the book's official launch, accusing the British journalist of racism, neo-colonialism and historical misrepresentation. They escalated after the book's publication.



Wrong has reported on African politics for close to three decades, including as a Reuters correspondent covering the Rwandan genocide, and has published five books. She was initially sympathetic toward the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)'s interventions to protect the Tutsi minority from further slaughter. But in recent years, she and other journalists have questioned the extent to which the RPF and its commander Paul Kagame were complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity (Epstein & Gatebuke, 2021; Rever & Moran, 2020).

In her book, Wrong describes how Rwanda's government, with Kagame as president since 2000, has attempted to silence dissident voices within and beyond its borders. Most recently, in early 2023, Rwandan independent journalist John Williams Ntwali died under suspicious circumstances (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The government appears to use Pegasus spyware to monitor journalists and other critics (Access Now, 2020). And a recent investigation suggests that the government makes false or misleading claims to the Interpol system and U.S. authorities in its efforts to repress journalists and other critical voices abroad (Mureithi & Zalan, 2022).

Wrong describes campaigns of misinformation and harassment against her on social media platforms — promoted by government-aligned news organi-

zations, but echoed by non-Rwandan academics and other voices in the U.K. She says that these campaigns appear coordinated and consistently advance several narratives. Despite reporting on the genocide in the mid 1990s, Wrong is accused of being a “genocide denier” — a crime in Rwanda. She says they also claim that “I was really in the pay of the Ugandan intelligence service, and that I was paid \$330,000 by Ugandan intelligence to write my book.”

Another false claim is that she had a relationship with Patrick Karegeya, Rwanda's former head of external intelligence who later became a critic of the Kagame government. (Other female journalists have faced this allegation; see Taylor, 2021.) He was murdered in South Africa in 2014 and is the main character in her book. “I am [portrayed as] a grief-stricken, bitter and twisted mistress, mourning my dead lover. And this claim has been repeated endlessly, endlessly.”

The online accusations and fears of digital surveillance cause a psychological toll, Wrong says, and knows other journalists and researchers who have been intimidated into silence. “I think there are very few governments in the world that do what Rwanda does,” says Wrong. “I think it's right up there with China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.”

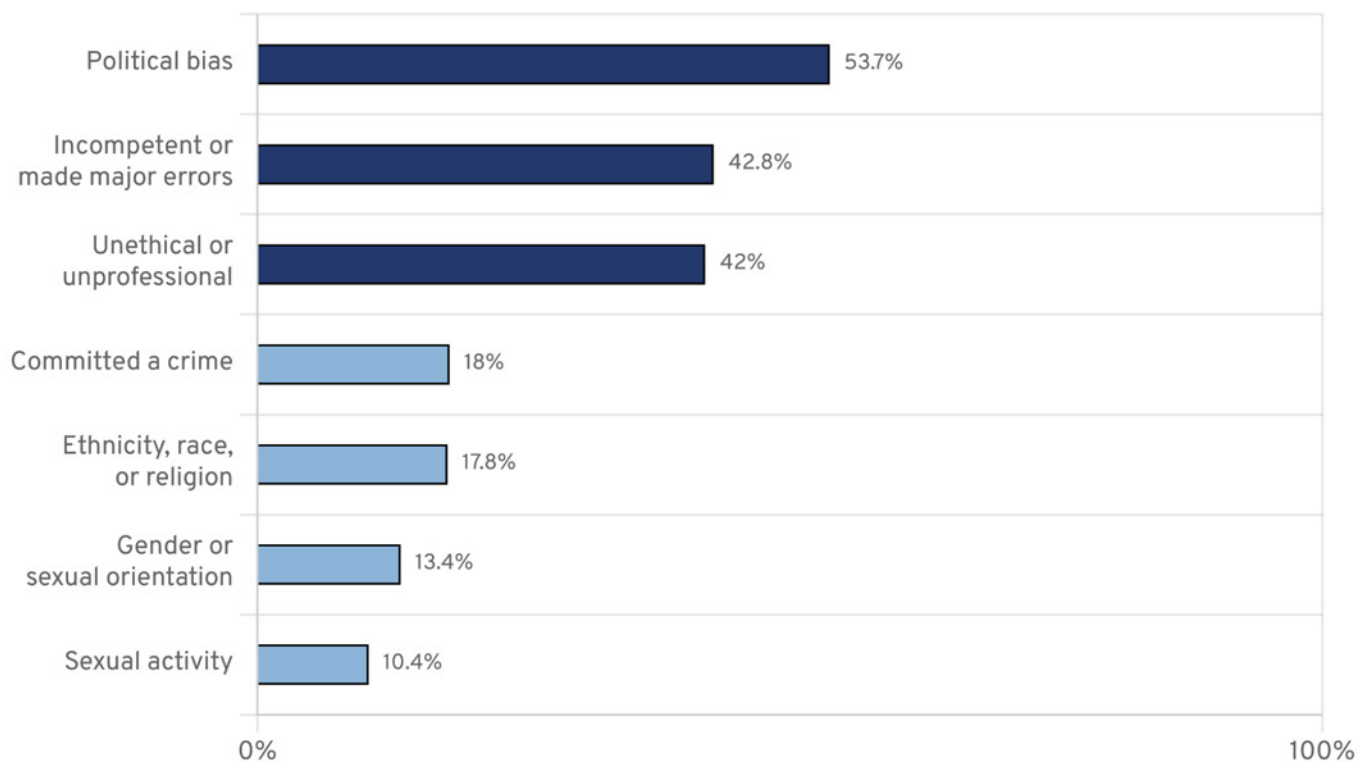
## 2. What forms do reputational attacks take?

Reputational attacks can propagate different narratives about journalists. Survey respondents and interviewees were asked to identify how frequently they faced false or misleading accusations, and insights into what forms those claims took.

### Accused of political bias

The most common accusation journalists faced (54% of respondents) was that they were aligned with, or biased toward, a political party or faction.

Fig 2 **What did reputational attacks focus on?**



Such claims were particularly common in India, where 73% of respondents (48 of 66) said they were falsely or misleadingly accused of having a political bias or a relationship to a political party (at least monthly). As one Indian journalist noted, “People from the right wing have made all of these ridiculous claims. They called me anti-Gujarati, anti-Hindu, anti-India, and all of these. And there were, I am not exaggerating when I say this, thousands of tweets.”

In Brazil, 52% of respondents (28 of 54) said they faced individual reputational attacks alleging political bias at least monthly. While 59% believed the national party (then

led by Bolsonaro) was a common source of reputational attacks, 57% of respondents pointed to opposition parties, including now-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's Workers Party. Interviewees told us they faced more intense hostility if they reported on social justice issues, including reproductive rights or racial equality, or challenged the government's pandemic policies.

Journalists were also accused of political bias in countries with high press freedom, like Canada, where 56% of respondents (53 of 95) reported monthly accusations. One reporter said that while his newspaper in Calgary is sometimes called a "right-wing rag," he is more often accused of being "a lefty," "Marxist," or an "apologist" for left of centre governments.

Another Canadian interviewee, a freelance investigative journalist, said that when his stories are posted on Twitter, competing groups of "political trolls" will quickly launch accusations such as "'you're liberal scum,' 'you're partisan,' 'you're a far-left activist,' 'you're a far-right nut job.'"

"People are just immediately attacking and not offering any sort of constructive criticism or disagreeing on the merits," he said.

In South Africa, also a high press freedom country, a journalist who reports for local news media in KwaZulu-Natal province told us, "Whenever I look into something that is fraud or corruption within the local municipality, I immediately get slammed with allegations of having or driving my own political agenda forward."

A China-based journalist who works for British and American science magazines faced attacks on her reputation when she reported on the origins of COVID-19. "People would be saying that I was a CCP mouthpiece, that I was a lying hack, that I was a Chinese agent," she said.

Accusations of political bias can be particularly acute during elections.

In Colombia, 61% of respondents (36 of 59) reported monthly accusations of political bias. These were particularly prominent in the run-up to national elections in May 2022, as well as between the first and second rounds of presidential elections. According to Colombian press freedom organization FLIP, online and offline attacks against journalists were 59% higher during the 2022 election period compared to the previous election period in 2018 (FLIP, 2022). There is also evidence of "inauthentic activity" on social media (e.g. posts from bot farms) during the 2022 elections (DFRLab, 2022), a phenomenon also seen in other Latin American countries (Crisis Group, 2020).

A Colombian journalist at an online news portal said that, during the 2022 election

campaigns, reputational attacks and accusations of bias increased: “Any report that does not align well with the narrative of a particular party may be subject to attack.”

Another Colombian journalist, who works for a TV news organization, described how then-president Iván Duque appeared at a public event during the campaign, shortly after their organization published a critical report. “The first words of the President of the Republic were to attack the media,” said the journalist. “The president said this in a sardonic and mocking tone, attacking the credibility of Noticias Uno and saying that our newscast publishes fake news.”

## Accusations of corruption, treason, or being a foreign agent

Respondents reported that they often face false or misleading claims of unethical behavior (42.0% reported this at least monthly) or that they are incompetent or made major errors (42.8% at least monthly). Journalists that face false or misleading claims about criminal behavior (18.0%), particularly crimes against their nation, are more likely to face legal repression and violence.

In Pakistan, interviewees described being accused of being “envelope journalists” (an allusion to bribing people with envelopes of money), often alongside claims of lying or defaming a public official. In more extreme cases, journalists were accused of treason. Even though treason charges rarely result in a conviction, a news editor in Pakistan explains, “in the public perception, it’s a matter of honour.”

In Mexico, press freedom advocate Mendiola told us that governments sometimes attack the work of investigative journalists by saying they are simply upset “because they are not being given money,” and not interested in the truth.

A journalist in Colombia faced false claims that she is paid to post stories. In a recent case, she said, she told one of those accusers that she may initiate a defamation suit against them, because accusations of corruption significantly impact her ability to work as a journalist.

A journalist who reports about Venezuela from exile explained that there have been multiple false stories about him that suggest unethical or criminal behavior. “I have suffered constant attacks on my reputation and that of my family. Everything has been said about me, from being a homosexual who goes around irresponsibly and knowingly infecting others with AIDS, to being an associate of Mono Jojoy [a Colombian FARC guerilla leader].”

Several journalists explained that campaigns to label them as corrupt or criminal were targeted towards specific audiences to maximize their impact. The editor at an inves-

tigative news outlet in Serbia described how the government accused his organization of not paying its taxes. Tax inspectors visited their outlet regularly for several years, sometimes sending teams on weekdays or weekends to audit their books. Throughout that period, government officials regularly accused the outlet of tax evasion in public forums and to international organizations. “It’s really exhausting when you have to defend yourself for years from tax authorities,” he said. “I am not sure if we were able to recover from that.”

Across many countries, interviewees reported that they were accused of being foreign agents, and in particular being associated with the CIA (the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency). An Asian-American journalist noted that accounts she believes to be linked to the Chinese government regularly call her an “American imperialist” or a “stooge of the CIA,” ignoring “the frankly progressive news organizations that I’ve generally worked with during my career.”

An Iranian-American journalist said the CIA accusation is so common in Iran that no one believes it anymore. A journalist from Botswana, by contrast, found that accusations of CIA links were damaging. “We were paraded with our pictures on the front pages of the main newspaper in Botswana,” he said, with claims that they received CIA money. **“It was a way of punishing us. It was a way of saying to the public, ‘These guys, you cannot trust them, because they have an agenda, an agenda to topple the government, to destabilize the country.’”** Even his mother and friends questioned him about it. “It was traumatizing.”

In Somalia, a journalist who worked as a fixer for the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and German outlets, said militia told him, “‘Oh, you are a spy, you work for foreigners.’ A lot of the threats to my life came from that.”

Bransten, the acting editor of RFE/RL, said that staff in Russia and Central Asia are frequently accused of being “foreign agents,” a claim that is sometimes pursued in the courts and that also exposes individuals to violence.

“Once you’re designated as a foreign agent,” he said, “it engenders all of this follow up harassment.” We return to those associations between reputational attacks and violence or legal repression later in this report.

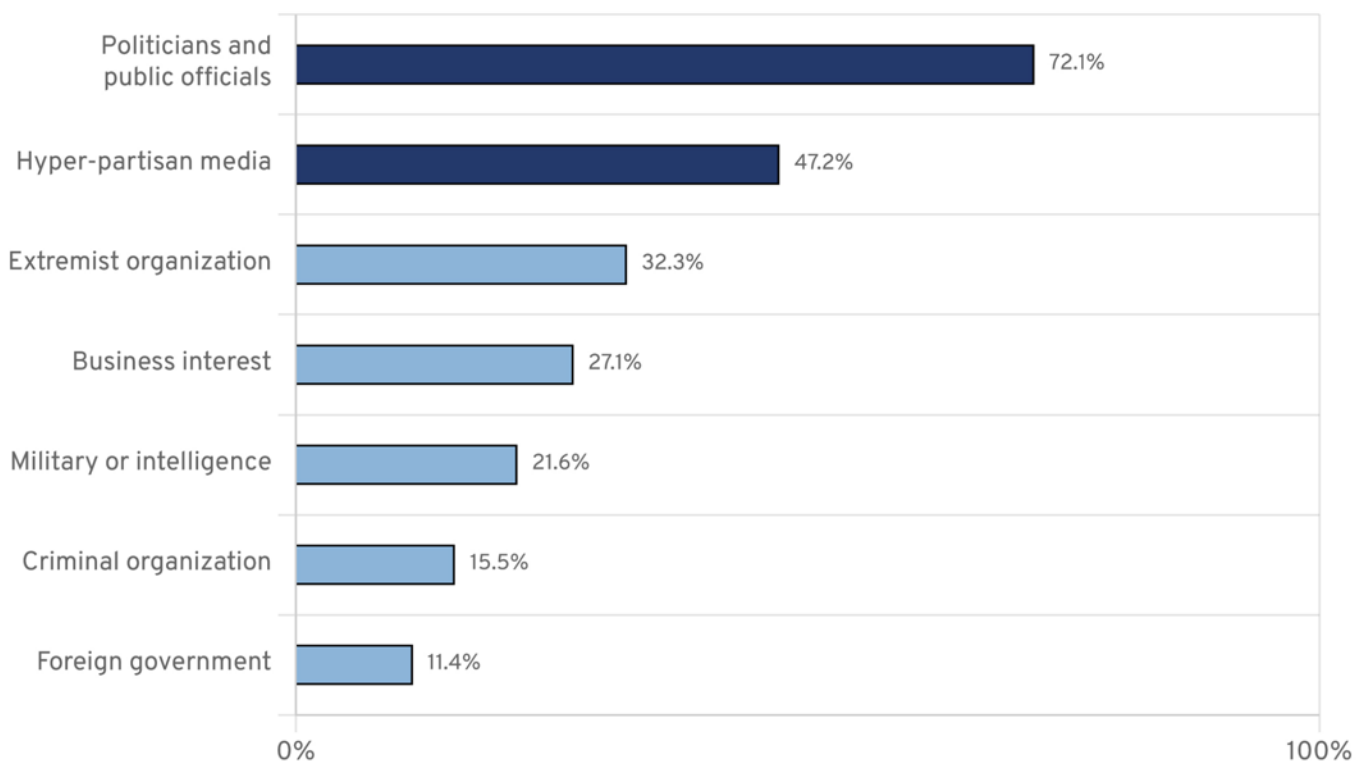


### 3. What are the sources and motives of reputational attacks?

#### Politicians and public officials are the most common source

Respondents most commonly faced reputational attacks from politicians and public officials (72.1%). These include opposition politicians and political parties (44.6% of respondents), politicians or officials in power with the national government (39.3%), and those in sub-national governments, such as municipalities or provinces (34.2%).

Fig 3.1 What are the sources of reputational attacks?



Journalists in low press freedom countries were more likely to face reputational attacks from politicians and political parties in power at the national level than those in high press freedom countries (58.3% vs. 21.5%) and at sub-national levels (45.6% vs. 24.6%). By contrast, reputational attacks from officials in opposition political parties are relatively consistent across all press freedom levels.

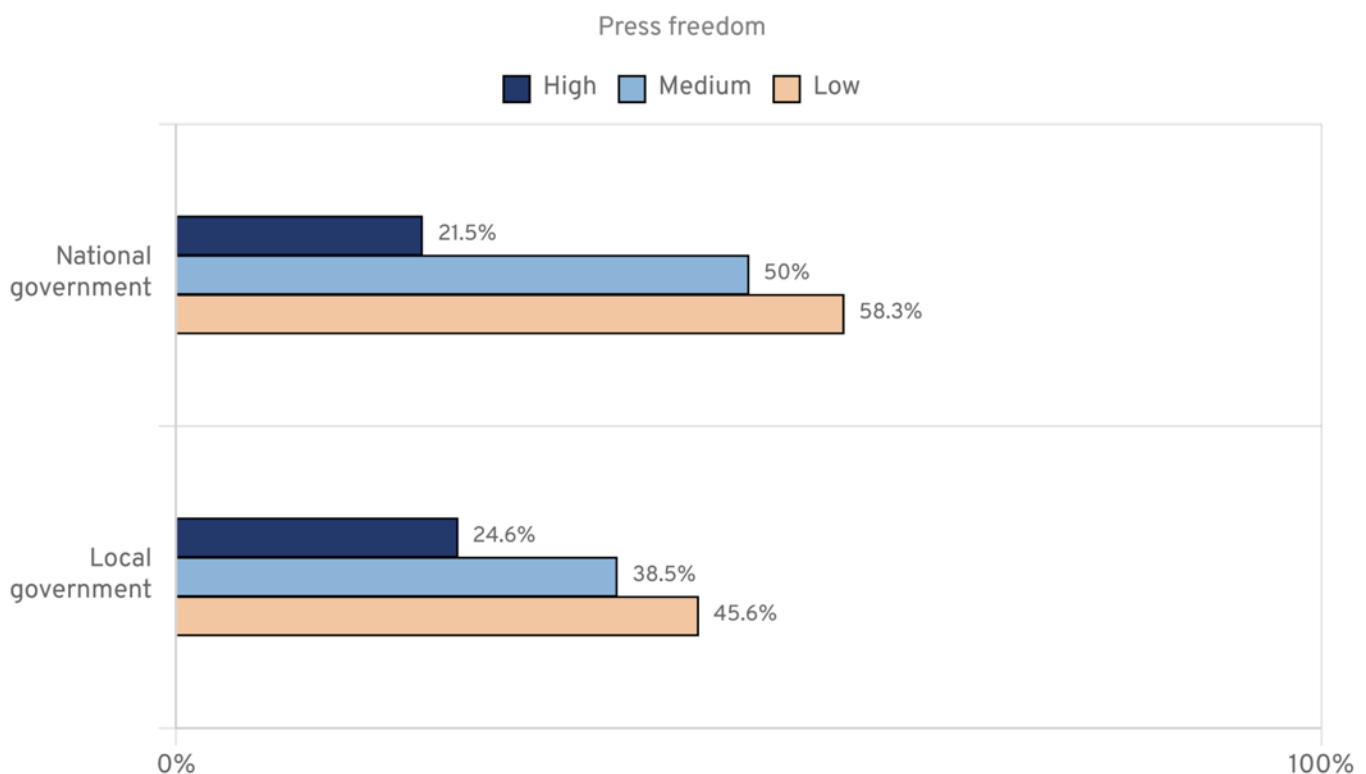
This is an important distinction, because those in control of government usually have access to more resources, and agencies (including police) that can be used in tandem with reputational attacks.

“[I]t is more worrying when these attacks come from the state itself, because the state is supposed to guarantee the protection of the press,” said an investigative journalist in Bogotá, Colombia.

Respondents in India were particularly likely to identify the national governing political party as a source of reputational attacks, with 76% making this claim. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, the government has targeted journalists with legal repression, surveillance via Pegasus spyware, and harassment and reputational attacks by both officials and a semi-coordinated online network of tens of thousands of supporters (Bhat & Chadha, 2022; Krishnan, 2022).

In Pakistan interviewees also described government-orchestrated efforts to harass and discredit them. The journalist and editor Benazir Shah, who wrote critically of a provincial government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, said she was accused by the health minister of making up facts, which was followed by hundreds of hostile online messages. “They made graphics about me and there were vlogs about how wrong my information was,” she said. “What I found common in these accounts was that most of these handles had [the minister’s] political party’s insignia or their flag or the prime minister’s picture, because he belonged to the party of the Prime Minister, which was Imran Khan at that time.”

Fig 3.2 **Sources of reputation attacks differ by countries’ press freedom levels**



In Brazil, 59% of respondents identified the government and supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro as a source of reputational attacks. The founder of a news outlet in northeastern Brazil said that when her organization published fact-checks about Bolsonaro, “the online attacks became more frequent, more intense.”

A journalist and press advocate in Mozambique explained that reputational attacks are wielded by those with “political power” at all levels, “sometimes from local authorities, sometimes from high level personalities, which are related to the [national] ruling party.”

## Military, security and intelligence agencies

Military, security, and intelligence agencies were less frequently reported as sources of reputational attacks (22%) compared to politicians and public officials. This differed according to press freedom level: 29.9% in low press freedom countries, 26.2% in medium, and 14.1% in high. However, the involvement of these agencies was associated with particularly serious or sophisticated campaigns against journalists.

“The biggest red line for us is the military,” said a news editor in Pakistan. “If you talk about it [critically] then you are in trouble. So you have to really figure out how you are going to present your criticism without triggering anyone.”

Research suggests that security and intelligence of many governments use online trolling groups for domestic and foreign efforts (Bradshaw et al., 2021). These government-aligned operations have been extensively examined in countries such as China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey (ARTICLE 19, 2021; Bradshaw & Henle, 2021; Freedom House, 2022b; Radsch, 2022).

Two interviewees described being the targets of trolling campaigns they suspect were orchestrated by the Rwandan government. A Canadian journalist who reports on Rwanda said he faced an immediate “onslaught of criticism on social media” when he released a documentary about efforts by the government of President Paul Kagame to hide its role in violence before and after the 1994 genocide. He adds, “I was naive in understanding how sophisticated a dictatorship can be, and how far it will go to craft narratives that are helpful to them.”

## Hyper-partisan news media

Hyper-partisan media were one of the most commonly-reported sources of reputational attacks globally – especially by journalists in countries with high press freedom (52.2%) compared to medium (42.3%) and low (41.2%).

# Harish Pullanoor India

BY MANIMUGDHA SHARMA

Harish Pullanoor is the editor of Quartz India and a journalist with nearly two decades of experience. In 2022, he relocated to the U.K. with his wife and two daughters, alarmed at what he saw as the deterioration in India's socio-political environment in recent years.



"I don't think journalism has ever been safe in the country," he says. "But now it is in your face."

Pullanoor says the vitriol against him intensified late in 2018 after he wrote about the Sabarimala Temple controversy (Pullanoor, 2018), much to the chagrin of some Hindu nationalists. That year, the Supreme Court of India had allowed the entry of all women into the temple, following a petition by activists. Before then, women of reproductive age were not allowed in, as the deity in the temple is believed to be a celibate male.

The reputational attacks on Pullanoor came from what some researchers call the "Hindu right," which includes the BJP (the party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi) and supportive right-leaning organizations and citizens — this network is hostile to journalists critical of the Modi government or Hindu orthodoxy (Bhat & Chadha, 2022). The attacks come from both within and outside the government, the latter through social media platforms and digital media outlets like OpIndia that have sprung up in the last decade as proponents of Hindu nationalism (Bhat & Chadha, 2020).

Pullanoor has faced online accusations that he is 'anti-Hindu,' 'anti-national,' and on the payroll of Pakistan's external intelligence agency (which has itself been accused of orchestrating terror

attacks on India). These are very serious claims, since India has very stringent anti-terror laws that — according to rights organizations — are used to silence dissidents (Dhawan, 2022; Jafri, 2023).

Apart from reputational attacks targeting him personally, Pullanoor was threatened on Facebook by accounts he didn't recognize and was sent edited, demeaning photographs of his wife. The vitriol directed at his family gave him nightmares. "That is when I thought, okay, we've lost it. The end game is close. I've got to leave," he says.

Pullanoor decided to move to the U.K., where he felt his two daughters could pursue their education and careers without being targeted for being women or for having "non-conformist" views. He continues to write critically about news and politics in India.

Pullanoor is not optimistic about press freedom in India, which has been in decline under the government of Prime Minister Modi.

"They have drawn the line: you are either with us or against us," Pullanoor said.

A Canadian journalist who covers far-right groups explained how her reporting and moral character were disparaged by hyper-political news organizations, and by far-right or alt-right influencers on streaming videos and podcasts. “[They] did a bad faith video about me ... a matching podcast and an article. They pushed it out on all their social media platforms. And after that, I started getting a lot of messages about how I’m a liar and how I’m making it up.”

Two other Canadian journalists described similar experiences when targeted by hyper-partisan news media. One said hyper-partisan media “will punch back if you try to push it.”

Hyper-partisan news media outlets often exist as temporary online news sites or pages, according to several interviewees. The founder of a news organization in Botswana told us, “There is a mushrooming of these online newspapers ... that are designed only to sort of target certain people. [Many] are sponsored Facebook pages, and anonymous pages that are used to spew hatred and sometimes even threats against journalists.”



For a period, he said, “every week in and out, they wrote stuff about our organization, to say, ‘these guys are sponsored by the CIA’ and all that.”

Other researchers have identified how reputational attacks by hyper-partisan influencers can generate online abuse. For instance, looking at the targeting of two American journalists by prominent former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, researchers found “the prevalence of hateful speech targeting those journalists increases in the immediate aftermath, often taking days to decrease” (Brown et al., 2022).

## A global backlash against journalists by anti-mask, anti-vaccine, and anti-lockdown groups

Globally, many journalists experienced significant challenges to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic, including what they saw as an increase in efforts by governments to constrain press freedom (see *Context and methodology*). Survey respondents and interviewees told us that they were especially likely to face reputational attacks and hostility from individuals opposed to vaccines and other public health measures.

The research lead for a fact-checking organization in Spain stated that, “there is an anti-vaccine movement in which if you publish any content that has to do with the COVID vaccine, they immediately attack you because they have already generated a narrative that consists of saying that the vaccine is a poison, that the vaccine is injecting us with Soros’ globalism.”

George Claassen, the ombudsman for a South African media organization, also stated that he faced unprecedented levels of online vitriol during the first two years of the pandemic, primarily from those opposed to vaccinations. “I personally have never been so intimidated as during this period,” he said.

Miriam Lewin, Public Defender of Audiovisual Communication Services in Argentina, said “physical attacks are not common in Argentina ... But during the pandemic we did have some attacks on individual journalists and crews covering the anti-vaccine movements and rallies.”

A Canadian health journalist said that when she published stories on COVID vaccines, and in particular on vaccines for children, she faced hostile accusations on Twitter, including:

*“you are corrupt and in the pocket of Big pharma,” “you’re killing children,” “the blood is on your hands,” and “if you have children, they should be taken from you.”*

In one instance, “all throughout the night, my phone notifications kept going off. It was almost like my story had been posted on a group chat somewhere and everybody was like, ‘You’ve got to go write to this chick and take her down a notch.’ ... I’ve had that kind of experience before and I found out then that my articles were posted in an anti-vaccine Facebook group.”

Conversely, several survey respondents noted that they also faced reputational attacks – including from government officials – if they questioned vaccine effectiveness, lockdowns or other public health policies.

## **4. Do reputational attacks vary due to journalists’ personal identities?**

Targeted for belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic and/or religious groups

Journalists who identify as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic and/or religious (RER) groups in their country (23.1% of respondents) showed higher overall frequencies of reputational attacks (48.3% facing them weekly) compared to those belonging to non-marginalized groups (33.1%).

These journalists also faced more frequent reputational attacks focused on their identity, with 38.1% facing such comments at least monthly (vs. 9.3% of journalists who did not identify as belonging to a marginalized group).

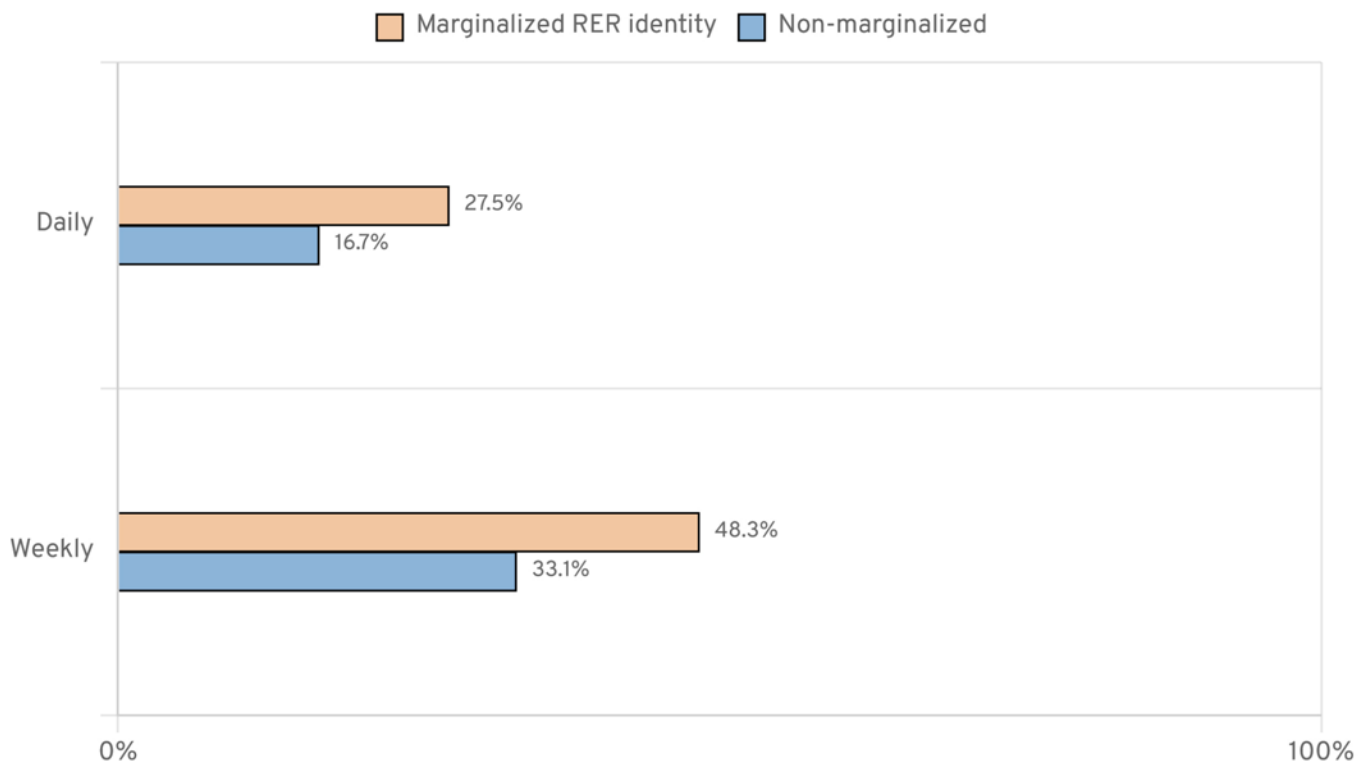
Respondents belonging to marginalized RER groups were also somewhat more likely to be targeted for gender or sexual orientation (19.5% vs. 11.1%), showing that journalists’ may be targeted for multiple dimensions of their identities. Finally, those belonging to marginalized RER groups were somewhat more likely to be targeted for their political views (56.4% vs. 41.8%).

An Asian-American journalist told us a state broadcaster in China called her a “foreign bitch,” and online trolls make comments like, “she only dates white men,” and “race traitor.” She saw these as examples of attempts to diminish or “other” her based on both her gender and ethnicity, as she gets these comments when critical of Chinese government policy but not American government policy. “I do think overall like there’s a lot of ‘You look and are ethnic Chinese, how dare you say what you say and stand with the imperialist’s narrative.’”

A Pakistan-born journalist who lives and works in Canada noted that certain stories trigger reactions that attack her personal identity.

For instance, she said that one story she did on racism led to people on social media “telling me and [racialized] people who were part of my story to go back to where they came from and stuff like that, and all the typical racist stuff that people do say.”

**Fig 4.1 How often were reputational attacks reported by members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and/or religious (RER) groups?**



In South Africa, journalism continues to struggle with the legacy of anti-Black racism (Govenden, 2022). But interviewees noted that reputational attacks are sometimes targeted at other racial and ethnic identities. An Indian South African journalist told us that a local politician (about whom she reported instances of potential corruption), publicly accused her of being a “racist” who “can’t stand to see a black person succeed.”

George Claassen, Public Editor for News24 and Ombudsman for Media24 CommunityPress, said prominent opposition politicians will often “play the race card,” targeting both white and Indian journalists. Women journalists are attacked for both their gender and race, he said. “Accusations against them when they report factually from the court or when they write opinion columns are really toxic. And you can see it is actually blowing from the fact that South Africa still has a very patriarchal society.”

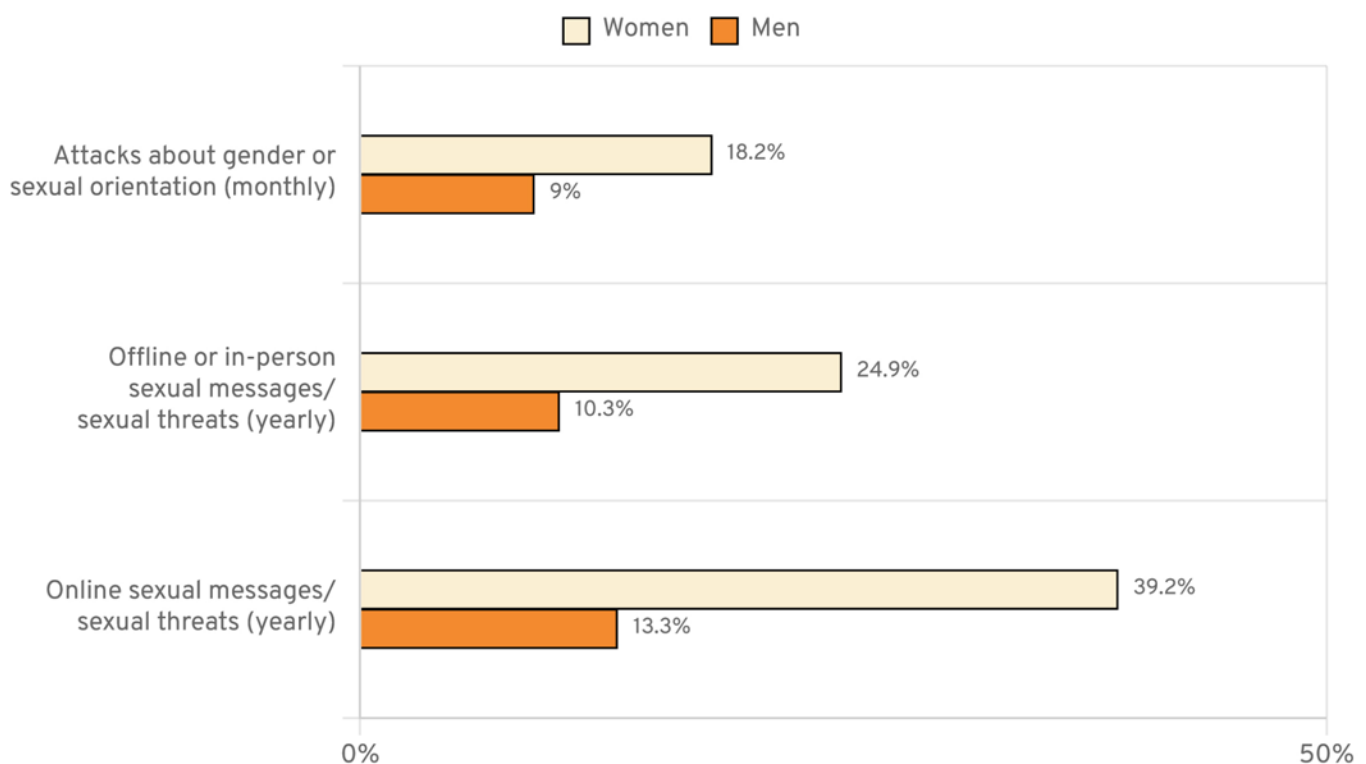
In India, journalists who are not Hindu or who belong to lower caste groups are more likely to be targeted for reputational attacks, harassment or legal actions (Ghosh, 2022). “Muslim journalists clearly are a target of criminal charges” at disproportionate rates, said Samar Halarnkar, editor of Article 14, a website focused on research and reportage related to the rule of law.

## Gender and reputational attacks

Journalism organizations and academic researchers have documented the extensive and damaging online and offline harassment faced by some women journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Erkmen et al., 2022; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2021; Westcott, 2019). These often take the form of sexual depictions or threats. For instance, Indian journalist Rana Ayyub described a deepfake pornographic video, digitally altered to look like it was her (Ayyub, 2018).

Overall, women respondents in our survey reported slightly less frequent reputational attacks than men: 35.3% of women said they faced at least weekly reputational attacks compared to 39.3% of men. However, this difference is small, and inconsistent across press freedom contexts. For instance, in high press freedom countries, women were slightly more likely to report weekly reputational attacks (37.4%) compared to men (33.5%).

Fig 4.2 **How did reputational attacks vary by gender?**



In contrast to these relatively small differences in overall frequency, there were more substantial differences in the forms of reputational attack (as well as their impacts, discussed in a later section). Respondents who identified as women received more frequent attacks about their gender or sexual orientation, with 18.2% facing these claims on at least a monthly basis compared to 9.9% for men.

Respondents who identified as men were more likely to state that they faced reputational attacks from the police (21.4% vs. 7.3%), and somewhat more likely to be targeted by criminal organizations (19.2% vs. 10.3%) or the military or intelligence (25.9% vs. 15.3%). This difference is partially due to the fact that we had a higher proportion of male respondents in low press freedom countries, where journalists reported more frequent attacks from these sources. No other source was selected at a substantially higher level depending on the respondents' gender.

Women journalists in Pakistan began organizing in 2020 against online harassment and attacks on their credibility (South Asia Monitor, 2020). As one journalist explained, **“We weren’t just targeted for being journalists, we were also being targeted for being women.”**

The campaigns against them appeared to primarily come from accounts affiliated with the PTI party, then in power and led by Prime Minister Imran Khan. However, the same journalist noted that the more explicit attacks from political sources echoed the gendered dismissals that women journalists faced more broadly. “To this day, some of what we face on social media and in personal life are comments like, ‘What do you know about politics? Stay in the kitchen,’” she said. “I even felt a lot of resentment within my own organization or amongst the male colleagues around me, that ‘you’re only on TV because you’re pretty and you just look nice.’” “Men get trolled, too,” said another female journalist in Pakistan, “but not in the same way.”

A news editor in Pakistan concurred, suggesting that men were more likely to be targeted for physical violence. But, she said, “it’s not that women don’t face the threat of physical violence, but those in power or those who coordinate these attacks, they think that women are softer targets so they can be silenced by just throwing sexualised abuse at them or talking to their families. This happened to me. The military’s social media wing, they reached out to my father first and they told him, ‘We are watching her so tell her to stop.’”

Similar comments were made by Indian interviewees. “Women journalists are more vulnerable because ours remains a very hugely patriarchal society and all kinds of sexist, scandalous tales can be spread about them,” said Mukhopadhyay.

“Women are especially targeted, and they feel increasingly at risk,” said Kunal Majumder, CPJ’s India representative. As an example he noted that in 2022, more than 20 female, Muslim journalists were listed by an app as being on “auction” to be servants (Majumder, 2022a).

In Mexico, women journalists and women-led media report on some of “the most difficult and complex issues of corruption and serious human rights violations,” said Leopoldo Maldonado, who directs the Mexico and Central America office of the rights organization Article 19. “So, evidently this also places them in a place of additional risk as journalists and as women. The attack on their privacy is brutal.” He highlights the doxxing of women journalists, including publicizing private information about their families and relationships.

The abuse of women journalists in Brazil has been well-documented (Abraji, 2021b). One interviewee noted that gender became the focus of the attacks by those on the right or far right when they report on certain topics. “I positioned myself in favour of women’s reproductive rights and was attacked a lot on Twitter because of this persecution that exists on the abortion issue,” she said.

Another Brazilian interviewee described how she faced similar language in response to some of her fact-checking articles. “I think that because I am a woman, the attacks became more intense.”

A journalist in Slovenia noted that women are regularly disparaged for their gender. Comments she faces often suggest “she’s incapable of doing anything, and she’s either stupid or she’s lazy ... they are denying us individual capabilities simply because we’re women.” These views exist in the Slovenian media itself, she continues, with editorial and leadership positions primarily being held by men.

Arzu Geybullayeva, a journalist from Azerbaijan who has contributed to workshops and events with women targeted for harassment, said, “The way we’re being harassed differs – someone gets doxxed, I would get rape threats, someone would get something else ... [But] there’s always an overarching goal to diminish our reputation, to really discredit the work that we do.”

*Note: 266 respondents identified as female, and 364 as male. Six identified as “other,” with the option to write in how they identified. These six journalists were not included in our gender analysis due to the small sample size.*

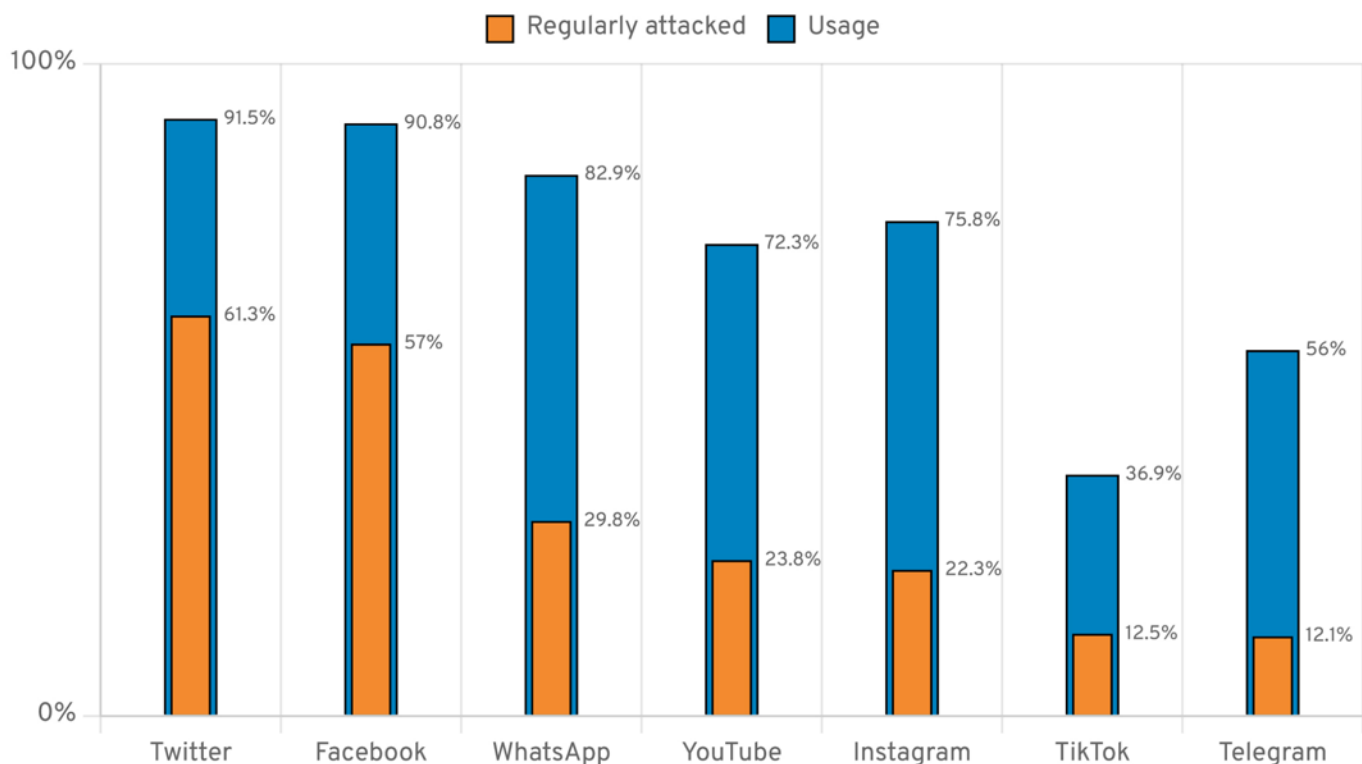
## 5. Reputational attacks thrive on social media platforms

For better or worse, the digital shift in journalism has transformed opportunities for journalists and audiences to engage with each other. Quandt introduced the term “dark participation” to refer to this “bleak flip side” of audience participation, which includes bullying and hateful engagement with journalists (Quandt, 2018).

Social media platforms, according to our respondents, are the primary vector of reputational attacks and harassment. Twitter and Facebook are the most used platforms for respondents, and over half of them identified the platforms as the sites where their reputations are “regularly attacked.”

An Iranian-American journalist who faced extensive online campaigns told us that “Usually, an operation starts on Twitter and then spills into Instagram and Telegram. Twitter is more for elites, but it is highly weaponized, and [messages attacking her] can go viral on Twitter.”

**Fig 5 Which social platforms did journalists report using most? How often did they experience attacks on those platforms?**



Two interviewees who experienced extensive abuse on Twitter over multiple years explained that they would sometimes receive direct assistance from Twitter staff when abuse was especially intense. Both noted that they had been unable to reach that team at Twitter since the company's mass layoffs following its purchase by Elon Musk in 2022.

Meta's Facebook and Instagram platforms were also raised as common platforms for reputational attacks. Interviewees from Azerbaijan, Brazil, Botswana, and India all described how they were smeared by Facebook pages that were created with the apparent goal of discrediting them and other voices critical of their national governments.

While Telegram was the least likely of these seven platforms to be identified as a vector for reputational attacks and harassment, journalists targeted on Telegram say it can be particularly toxic because the service makes little effort to address abuse. The Iranian-American journalist mentioned above said, "Telegram is the worst. There is no one to contact if you have a problem."

Reputational attacks and harassment were most likely to come from anonymous social media accounts (reported by 65.5% of respondents), though almost as many respondents (58.7%) said they came from accounts using real names. 50.9% believed that the social media accounts attacking them were "bots." 23.3% said that reputational attacks included the use of fake or manipulated media.

Not all reputational attacks occur online. Respondents also reported that reputational attacks came in a speech or announcement from a public official or politician (34.4%), or would be published and broadcast by other news organizations (mentioned by 25.8%). Interviewees identified that there would often be a "call and response" effect, in which these offline messages would be amplified online, and online campaigns might feed back into comments by politicians and rival news outlets.

The dynamic is similar to that identified by Posetti and Shabir (2022), with respect to the relationship between online and offline violence: "It represents a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle: digital harassment and threats beget offline attacks; and offline abuse (e.g., presidents targeting women journalists during public appearances) can trigger an escalation of online violence which, in turn, heightens offline risks" (p. 8-9).



# Impacts of reputational attacks

Interviewees in this project reported that colleagues, police, and online critics often say that attacks targeting their reputations are just words, not real threats. However, our survey finds that journalists who face frequent reputational attacks are more likely to experience violence and threats of violence, legal repression, and a range of personal and professional harms. While the survey cannot reveal whether reputational attacks triggered, followed, or were in other ways linked to these harms, interviews reveal how they may be related.

## **6. Reputational attacks are associated with violence and threats of violence**

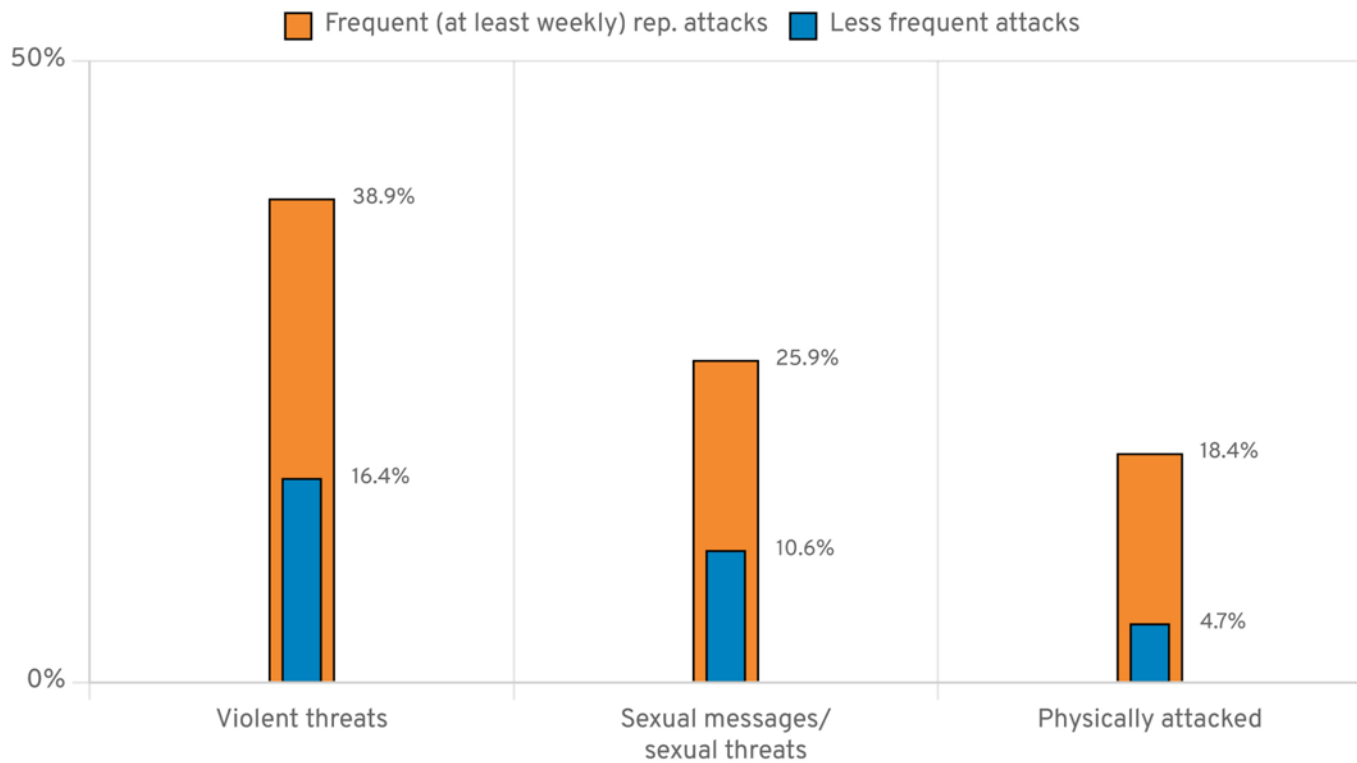
Interviews revealed several mechanisms that may link reputational attacks to increased exposure to violence and threats.

### **The ‘firestarters’ – prominent individuals discredit journalists and then supporters threaten violence**

Many interviewees noted that they received death threats, threats of violence, and sexualized threats after an attack on their reputation by a prominent individual – the “firestarter,” in the words of one interviewee. These prominent individuals, often politicians, would usually stop short of violent or hateful language, but their supporters would take it to that level.

For instance, as Pakistani journalist Shah explained, “the federal ministers, they tag you [online] or they say, ‘This journalist is lying’ ... Then the second phase is you get these anonymous accounts that attack you and they abuse you and then they send you rape and death threats. And that continues for days.”

**Fig 6.1 Were those who faced frequent reputational attacks more likely to face offline threats and violence?**



A Serbian journalist described a similar situation: “After the mayor ... called me a foreign agent, the next day I started receiving death threats from, let’s say, ordinary people who supported him.”

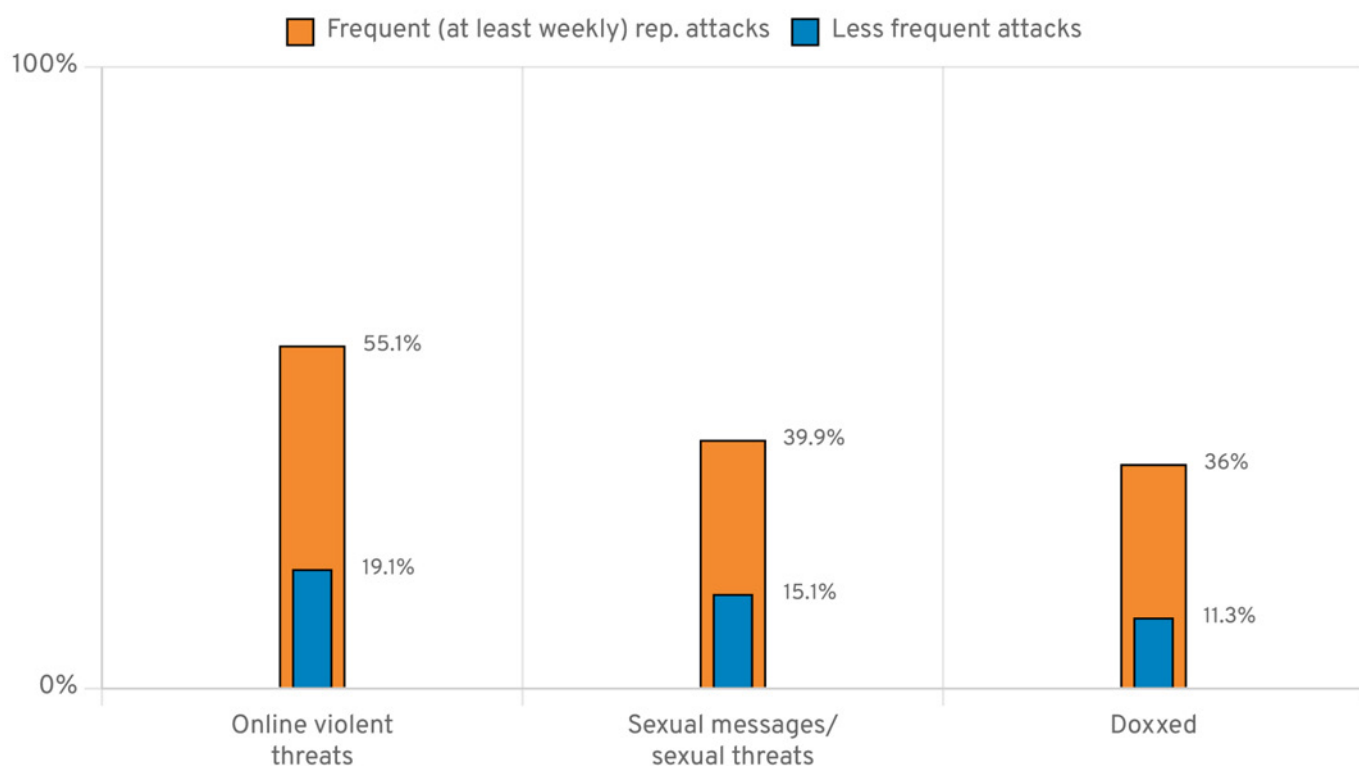
A Canadian journalist explained that far right influencers targeted her on their live-stream videos, which then spread via other platforms. Because the influencers show what she looks like, she said, “security professionals tell me to wear a hood outside, and carry an umbrella and milk to counter pepper spray because that was a threat. I’ve got to constantly change my route for walking my dog. And it’s made me look over my shoulder everywhere I go. I don’t really feel safe going out anymore.”

Interviewees told us that combining reputational attacks with doxxing was particularly intimidating. For example, an Iranian-American journalist described having her home

address posted several times on Facebook and Twitter. One time, she said, an account “posted my address on Twitter and said, ‘Her family should not feel safe.’ ... So, I have all of these multi-layered worries.”

In another extreme case, a journalist’s apartment in London was broken into, he said: “My laptops were stolen and photographs of my daughters were left in a jacket pocket in my room as a form of bullying. This event was followed by a massive online smear campaign, and envelopes sent from Tbilisi with the same photographs left in my room which had on that occasion threats to sexually abuse my daughters (both minors).”

Fig 6.2 **What about online threats and violence?**



## Reputational attacks stoke mob violence

Reputational attacks against news outlets or the press in general can also contribute to hostile or dangerous crowd activities. After RFE/RL and its journalists were accused of being foreign agents, online death threats were made against the bureau chief and several journalists in Kyrgyzstan, said acting editor-in-chief Jeremy Bransten. Shortly after that, “We had a sort of a mob show up outside the bureau, threatening to burn it down,” he said.

In India, journalists have been attacked while reporting on political rallies and demonstrations, and some interviewees linked these assaults to reputational attacks on jour-

nalists by political officials.

For instance, in a well-known case, Saritha S. Balan was attacked in 2018 while reporting on the protests evoked by India's Supreme Court allowing young women entry into the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. Previously, women of reproductive age were not allowed entry as the deity in the temple is believed to be celibate and male. While some accused her of seeking to enter the temple, Balan told us that she was more than 40 kilometers from the main shrine when a mob she believed to be instigated by Hindu nationalist partisans attacked her. "They were not actual devotees of the shrine," she said.

The attack damaged her spine and left her hospitalized for more than three weeks. If the injury had been worse, she said, it would have ended her career and maybe even her life.

In Canada, interviewees and survey respondents said accusations that they were complicit in government public health policies led to in-person threats and occasional assaults by groups protesting those measures.

"I've witnessed protesters screaming to kill all journalists in an organized anti-mask protest, claiming we are the source of misinformation," claimed one survey respondent. (See Canada case study in the Appendix for more details.)

## **7. Smearing journalists' reputations in courts of law and public opinion**

Many respondents had faced and/or been threatened with legal repression, which refers to the use of police or the legal system to punish, silence, or obstruct journalists, in violation of their right to freedom of expression.

Overall, 53.4% of respondents had faced legal repression of some form in their careers, including 28.1% who had faced arrests or criminal charges (including being charged, threatened with charges, and/or convicted), and 40.7% who had faced or been threatened with civil lawsuits. Those who reported frequent reputational attacks were much more likely to have experienced legal repression.

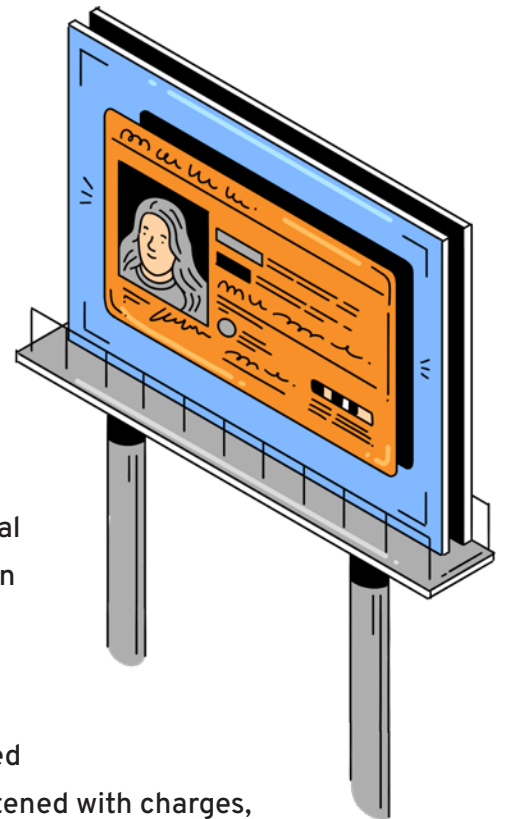
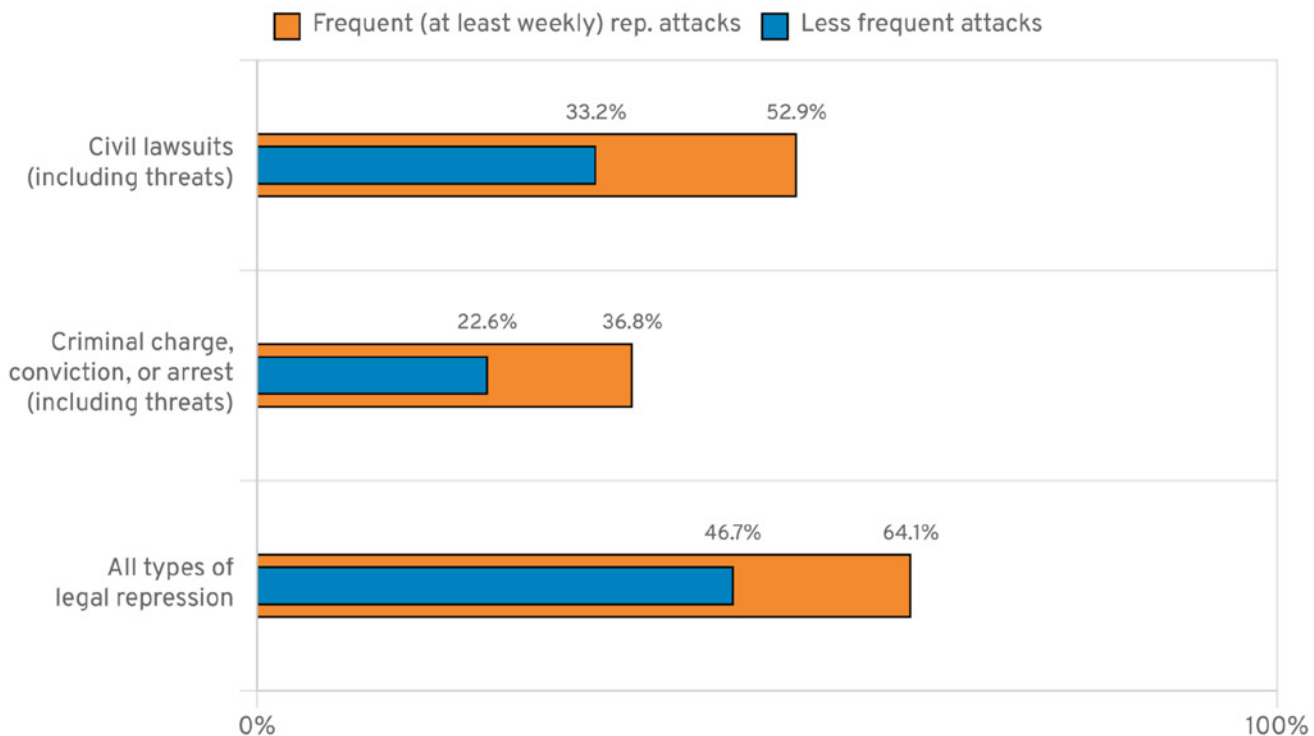


Fig 7 **How common was legal repression?**



In Colombia, press freedom organizations have highlighted the use of legal repression to silence journalists (FLIP & Article 19, 2021). “I think that now the most sophisticated mechanism of attacks on journalists in Colombia is judicial harassment,” we were told by a Colombian journalist working for a news magazine.

Bransten of RFE/RL told us that 30 of their journalists working in Russia were designated as foreign agents by Russian authorities, forcing some into exile and leading to more than 17 million euros in fines against the outlet (Sullivan, 2022). Moreover, in Russia and other countries in the region, the legal designation that a journalist is a “foreign agent” or a “criminal” serves as “a signal to some of these trolls or surrogates to go after you ... it engenders all of this follow-up harassment.”

A journalist for local media in KwaZulu-Natal province described how local authorities have retaliated against her reporting by pursuing cases of *crimen injuria*, a law against intentionally harming the dignity or privacy of another person. Describing her initial response to one such case, she said, “I just laughed like a loon every time I thought about it, because it was so ridiculous, the things that he said in his police statement were laughable.”

When legal cases against journalists reach their conclusion, they can result in jail terms, fines, or other forms of punishment. However, many interviewees who experi-

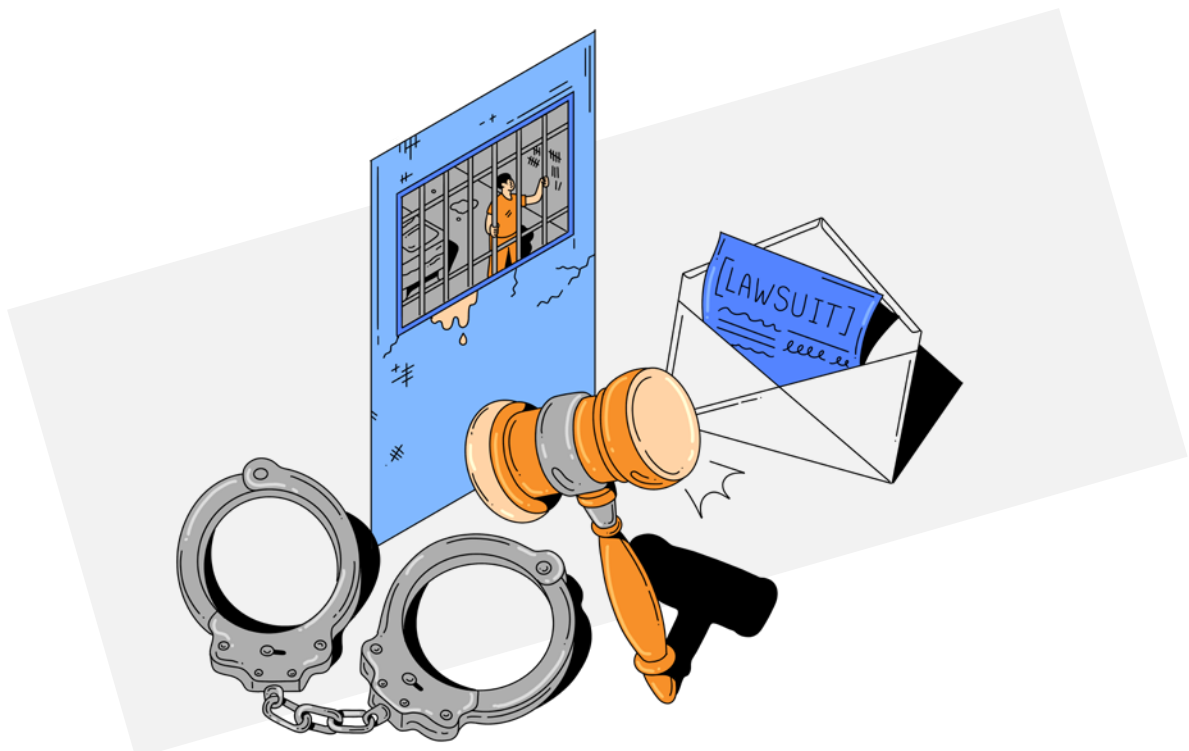
enced legal repression noted that merely being accused can have major consequences, including requirements to provide evidence, to participate in legal processes (often in person), and short-term incarceration awaiting bail.

Mendiola, director of Propuesta Cívica in Mexico, highlights the rise of legal actions against journalism. She noted that public officials, politicians, and businessmen file lawsuits accusing investigative journalists of moral damages or crimes against their honour, often seeking millions of pesos in damages. “When a journalist is sued for moral damages, he or she has to face emotional and economic wear and tear ... Often the journalists stop investigating.”

These legal actions are part of the broader efforts to stigmatize critical journalists as promoting false news or being part of the “lying press,” said Mendiola.

These issues are particularly common in India. Among Indian respondents, 58% had faced arrest or legal action for their journalism (38 of 66 respondents). (See India Case Study.)

Halarnkar, the journalist and press freedom advocate at Article 14, told us that reputational attacks through social media later become cases of legal harassment exercised by the local or national governments. “Things begin with what seems to be unorganized online attacks on journalists,” he said. “Then the role of the IT cell becomes more apparent,” as the online messages involve “individuals affiliated with the ecosystem of the ruling party and Hindu right-wing groups.”



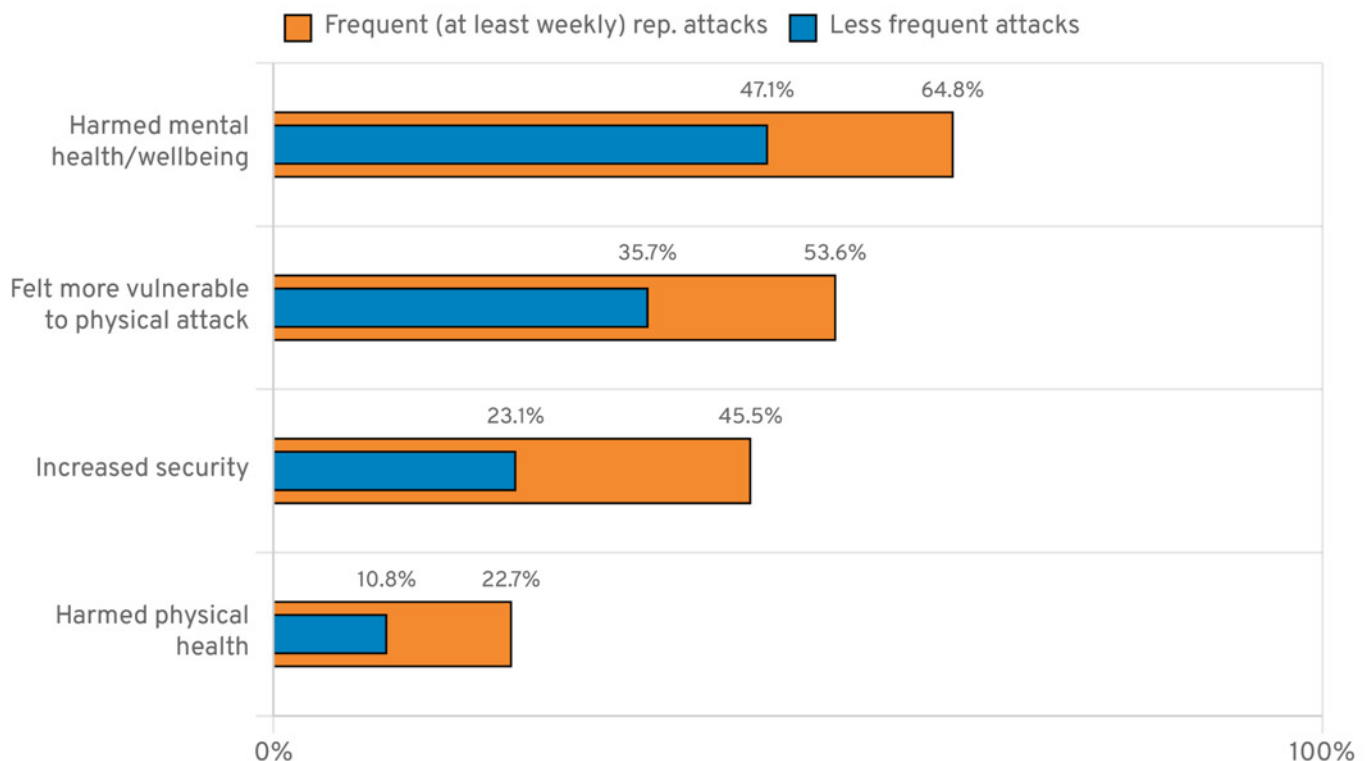
In some cases, these accusations “are organized and funneled to the justice system,” Halarnkar said. One way this happens is through open calls on social media for legal harassment of journalists and press freedom advocates. In one case, a prominent Hindu nationalist influencer tweeted that he would offer INR 1,000 to anyone who would file a charge against journalist Mohammed Zubair, INR 10,000 if they could get him arrested, and INR 50,000 if they could get him convicted and put behind bars for long (OpIndia Staff, 2022).

The conviction rate is low for criminal cases against Indian journalists, but the targeted journalists must hire legal assistance, provide documents, and attend court processes. **“These laws are being deployed not to see a case through, but because the process is the punishment,”** said Halarnkar.

## 8. Reputational attacks cause professional and personal harms

Survey respondents who face regular reputational attacks also reported higher rates of professional and personal consequences.

Fig 8.1 **What were some common impacts of reputational attacks on journalists?**



## Irene Benito Argentina

BY JUAN MERCHAN

Irene Benito, an investigative journalist in Argentina, has frequently faced efforts to undermine or silence her reporting in the province of Tucumán, in the country's northwest. She has faced trumped-up legal cases against her and her family members, as well as online and offline campaigns attacking her credibility.



Benito works at *La Gaceta*, a daily newspaper in the provincial capital of San Miguel de Tucumán. She's worked as a journalist for 17 years and is also trained as a lawyer. In 2015, she began investigating allegations of professional malpractice against a group of public and private lawyers. Shortly after, in 2016, Benito's father was charged in a case related to his business activities.

This legal proceeding (which has since involved other members of Benito's family) is still ongoing. Over the past three years, she and her family members have faced threats of legal action that Benito said coincide with the publication of her stories in *La Gaceta*. The Senate and Chamber of Deputies of Argentina have denounced the cases against Benito's family as legal persecution, and they affirm that these legal cases were retaliatory (El Senado y Cámara de Diputados, 2020).

The Argentine Journalism Forum, the Inter American Press Association, and the LED Foundation have all documented her case and criticized attacks against her. Benito's case was included in the U.S. government's 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices as an example of attacks from political figures against journalists, specifically when they use the legal system to undermine freedom of expression in the country (Department of State, 2022).

"Essentially, I have been criminalized," she says. "There is no judicial independence here and the system is being used [by officials] to intimidate me, to punish me, in order to maintain impunity."

The accusations made against Benito in legal cases have been repeated in local news media outlets and online forums, along with blatant personal attacks. Biases against women in the province have contributed to her treatment, she says, as well as the fact that she is married to a woman.

"A lot of really insulting things have been said [about me]," says Benito. "But, in the end, I must read between the lines and understand what these attacks mean: 'We do not tolerate this woman because she is different ... and she is not afraid.'"

Our survey is unable to distinguish the extent to which these higher rates of negative consequences are due to the reputational attacks themselves or to the associated increase in exposure to violence, legal repression, and other hostile acts. The 54 follow-up interviews we conducted suggest that reputational attacks on their own have negative consequences, but the combination of reputational attacks and other hostile actions is particularly harmful. Interviews also revealed additional impacts of reputational attacks beyond those explicitly raised in the survey.

## Reputational attacks contribute to journalists leaving home or going into exile

A number of survey respondents said they left their city, region, or country to avoid reputational attacks and harassment. Those who faced weekly reputational attacks were much more likely to do so (19.7% vs. 10.2%). These were almost entirely in countries with low or medium press freedom.

In some cases, journalists relocated within their city or country to avoid risks of violence in the short-term. For instance, a Colombian journalist describes how reputational attacks by allies of the provincial governor caused him to flee to the country's capital, when they began to be accompanied by violent threats.

"I had to leave for a while to Bogotá, where I settled for three or four months," he said. "It was not only because of the [reputational attacks], but also because of the security issue, because here in this region we are more exposed."

A Somali journalist who worked in the city of Bosaso was targeted with a rumor that he was an agent of the governments of Somalia and the U.S. Several members of local militias then phoned him to say he would be killed if he made any false reports about them, prompting him to relocate to another region in the country.

Similarly, a Pakistani journalist left the country because she and her parents were being surveilled and harassed when she worked on stories critical of the local government. "I don't know about other journalists, but I do feel that I have some responsibility towards my loved ones and my family," she said, explaining her decision to move to Canada. "I can't jeopardize their safety for the work that I'm doing."

A Turkish investigative reporter was routinely threatened with arrest for her journalism, and lived "underground" in the country for five months to avoid arbitrary arrest. However, after government officials attempted to take custody of her children, she realized she could no longer stay. Though she still faces occasional reputational attacks from Turkish officials and some members of the local Turkish diaspora, she feels much safer in Canada. But exile comes with steep costs. "You left one person behind,

the person you were before [you went into exile],” she said. “You try to just keep that person alive ... while you just try to survive yourself [in this new country].”

Another journalist in Pakistan observed that several colleagues left the country once networks of political actors began to treat them as “highly toxic,” making it dangerous and difficult to do their job. “They say, okay, now we [will go] abroad and do true journalism.”

However, those journalists can then face new accusations: that they just wanted to get citizenship abroad. This theme was repeated by several interviewees now in exile – including journalists from Venezuela, Mexico, Iran, and Pakistan – the reputational attacks continued as long as they kept working as journalists.

## Harm to mental and physical health

There is a growing global recognition that many journalists experience a psychological toll due to their work, and there is a growing belief in the industry that a “mental health revolution” is needed to address it (Cabra, 2023). Some recent studies link increasing harm to mental health to the prevalence of online harassment (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Stahel & Schoen, 2020). For instance, a recent survey of 404 journalists in South Korea found that online abuse and harassment (especially doxxing) were correlated with psychological trauma, and that the psychological trauma in turn led to an increased likelihood individuals would quit journalism (Lee & Park, 2023).

Among our survey respondents, 54.4% said that reputational attacks and harassment had caused harm to their mental health, which rose 64.8% among those who face weekly reputational attacks (vs. 47.1% of those who did not). 15.7% reported that their physical health suffered; here, too, those who faced weekly reputational attacks faced higher levels (22.7%) compared to those who did not (10.8%).

The Colombian journalist María Fitzgerald, a journalist specializing in human rights and gender at *Cambio Colombia* magazine, described how she and other journalists faced police violence during demonstrations after political figures had stoked hostility. “During the 2021 demonstrations in the country, I was beat up by the police. One editor I was working with had a nervous breakdown during the same period. I personally couldn’t fall asleep at night.”

People just get worn out, said the founder of a Brazilian fact-checking organization. “We are living in a moment in Brazil where we are in a polarized scenario, and no matter how much we rely on factual truth, we are increasingly being questioned.” Facing distrust and hostility leads to mental exhaustion and, she said, many colleagues have simply left the profession.

This feeling was echoed by a research lead for a fact-checking organization in Spain. “The problem with continuous, habitual and constant attacks is that, even if you do not pay much attention to them, they always leave an effect,” he said. “It can end up generating a feeling that it practically doesn’t matter what you say, because you are not going to convince anyone who is not already convinced.”

“There is one kind of stress that comes from witnessing violence firsthand, which many of us who have been reporters in Delhi have,” said Indian journalist Rana Uday, who now lives in Canada. “So that doesn’t leave you. **And then when you are gaslit by thousands of people online who say, ‘No, what you saw didn’t happen.’ It makes you question everything, it makes you question your own eyes, it makes you question your own experiences.** And of course you are scared of being attacked. So you stay silent sometimes.”

Interviewees also described the mental health toll their treatment has on family members. A journalist in Botswana who faced sustained reputational attacks said, “all along I had seen myself as this very professional guy, but now it was being challenged in the public domain,” he said. “That was very traumatic. Also, my wife was affected, my parents were affected ... those insults hit you more than when [they are not affecting] just you alone.”

“The pressure that I was experiencing was far greater than I thought at the time,” said a Serbian journalist, who said the mental health impacts continue to affect him and his family years later. “A broken bone will heal in one month, but the mental health issues are there to stay for a long time.”

## Professional precarity and the decision to quit journalism

Respondents who faced frequent (at least weekly) reputational attacks were more likely to seriously consider quitting journalism (39.1% vs. 21.9%) and to reduce or temporarily cease working as a journalist (17.7% vs. 10.5%). Across press freedom contexts, respondents contemplated quitting journalism at similar levels. “It is exhausting,” said a Colombian television reporter. “I am looking for a job because I do not want to continue working in this field.”

“The problem is that we are losing and we will be losing journalists,” said a journalist in Slovenia. “It’s not just [individual] journalists being attacked, it’s the actual profession.”

An editor for a broadcaster in Central Asia said that despite his attempts to support staff, they became overwhelmed by reputational attacks and violent threats. “Sometimes it gets to be too much,” he said. “They transfer from investigative teams to less

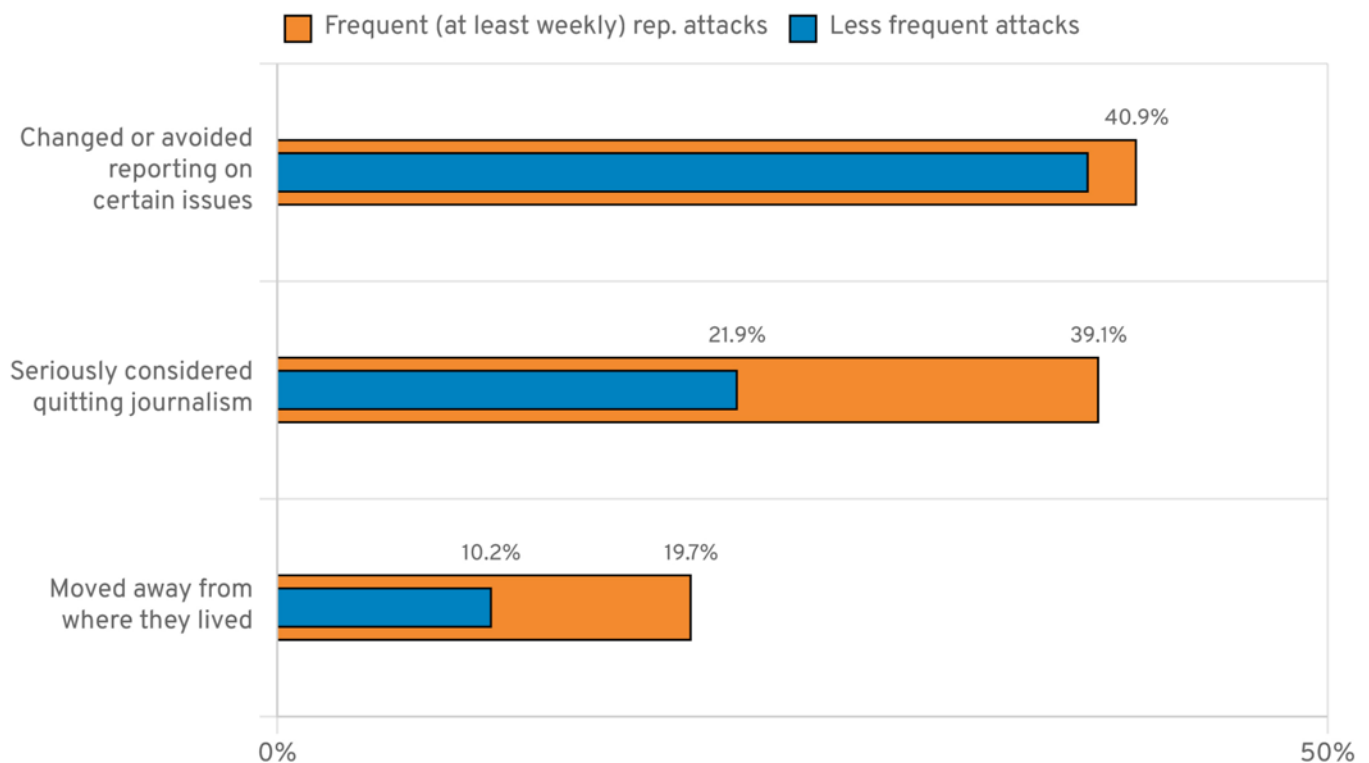
onerous duties, or they even drop out of journalism altogether.”

Journalists – especially freelance journalists – also explained their fears that reputational attacks would limit their future opportunities for employment.

For instance, an Asian-American journalist who is frequently smeared by China’s state media and aligned social media accounts said that she finds reputational attacks more concerning than death threats.

“The straightforward [online attacks] are the rape and death threats. They’re so over the top that they have little impact on me, in the sense that it’s very unlikely anything will come of them,” she said. “What’s difficult for me has been the criticism of my work professionally. There’s obviously concern that some fraction of people might start believing in the misinformation and propaganda. **Ironically, it only redoubles my will to do better journalism, to speak up against misinformation, and to speak up in support of press freedom – so probably the opposite of the attacks’ intentions.**”

Fig 8.2 **A chilling effect?**



A freelance science journalist who was smeared as a dupe or agent of the Chinese government for her reporting on the origins of the COVID-19 virus said, “I had won quite a few international awards, I had a strong track record, but I felt really worried about

editors now seeing me as [untrustworthy] or biased,” she said. “Especially when you write about controversial topics, editors really have to have faith in you.”

Journalist Uday Rana said that he feared that news outlets would stop hiring him after thousands of online accounts accused him of being ‘anti-Hindu’ or a ‘self-hating Hindu.’ In particular, he feared that in Canada, where he had recently moved, editors would not understand the context. “You feel like your life is over,” he said. “Nobody is going to ever consider you a serious journalist ever again.”

These comments support other research, which finds that freelance journalists fear that online campaigns against journalists will result in their “being perceived as ‘difficult’ and thus losing important contacts and job opportunities” (Pekkonen & Sanomat, 2017).

Several interviewees noted that they were so focused on their journalism that they ignored the risks, but family members pleaded with them to leave the profession. A Serbian journalist told us, “my father was saying, ‘I’m begging you, do not continue doing this. Choose another profession.’”

## The chilling effect

The “chilling effect” refers to the extent to which journalists may self-censor, primarily by not reporting or publishing on topics or perspectives that may be in the public interest due to fear of physical, psychological, or economic risks (Fadnes et al., 2020, p. 5). This response impact was widespread among survey respondents, with 39.5% indicating that they avoided or changed their reporting on some issues to avoid reputational attacks or harassment.

A journalist who used to regularly report on Indian politics said he does less so now, because he fears an online campaign against him. “I’m always second-guessing myself. I’m always saying, ‘I wonder what’s going to follow me? Are these Hindu right-wing groups going to keep writing emails to my employers?’” he said. “I wonder if that is the chilling effect that they wanted to achieve.”

One Brazilian journalist, who had not suffered significant reputational attacks, said that she didn’t report on some topics or individuals because she didn’t want to be one of the “marked figures” who are repeatedly targeted. Journalists like Patrícia Campos Mello and Vera Magalhães, according to her, “end up sort of taking the blow for everybody.” The fear of attacks on her reputation by prominent individuals, she admits, “ends up impacting what kind of subjects I choose to cover and how far I go in the subjects.”

Some respondents noted that changing one's approach to reporting is not always chilling. "I'm a little bit more careful about what I say online," said a journalist and war correspondent from Central Asia. "I don't see it as self-censorship because I'm still writing about it. I just decided there is no point in being so vocal about my views of the relations between these two countries because those who know me already know where I stand, and there is no way I will be able to convince haters."

Perhaps surprisingly, those who faced at least weekly reputational attacks reported about the same levels of self-censorship (at 40.9%) as those who face reputational attack less frequently (at 38.6%). Why might this be the case? One Turkey-based interviewee with a history of facing reputational attacks said, "I believe this is the case for many other journalists who have experienced online harassment for many years. We've developed an immunity to some of the harassment, though I cannot say that I'm completely fine with it and I don't take it personally."

Similarly, a journalist in Pakistan said that being regularly smeared and harassed on social media by politicians and their supporters "impacts how you feel about ordinary citizens, because you just assume everybody is talking about you like these people on the internet are. But still... it didn't stop me from reporting again on these issues."

While more frequent reputational attacks did not translate into higher levels of self-censorship among respondents, they do still function as a form of censorship. Clearly, journalists are less able to report on topics if they are jailed, go into exile, quit journalism, or experience other negative consequences that are associated with higher frequencies of reputational attack. So "chilling" still happens.

## **9. Journalists' personal identities and the impacts of reputational attacks**

Journalists belonging to marginalized groups experience more harm

Journalists in our survey who identified as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic and/or religious (RER) groups were more likely to decide to leave their city, region, or country due to the reputational attacks and harassment they faced (26.1% vs. 9.9%), to change whether or how they report on issues (45.5% vs. 37.4%), and to seriously consider quitting journalism (35.6% vs. 26.1%), due to reputational attacks and harassment.

Reputational attacks on journalists' identities can also relate to political conflicts. For instance, in India, Hindu nationalist politicians and their supporters target Muslim,

Christian, and other non-Hindu journalists. Although many journalists recognize that Muslim colleagues face particular challenges, some reports suggest anti-Muslim bigotry in newsrooms is still increasing (Ghosh, 2022).

A similar dynamic exists regarding caste, a system of social hierarchy. An Indian journalist who identifies as Dalit, the group facing the most intense discrimination, noted that some of the public criticisms she faces are mirrored in comments by fellow journalists. Colleagues have made jokes or snide remarks about her caste, leaving her feeling isolated and unsupported. “You will hardly find a Dalit woman or a man in these newsrooms,” she said. “My mental health [has been] super bad, especially when I was facing casteism in my newsroom.”

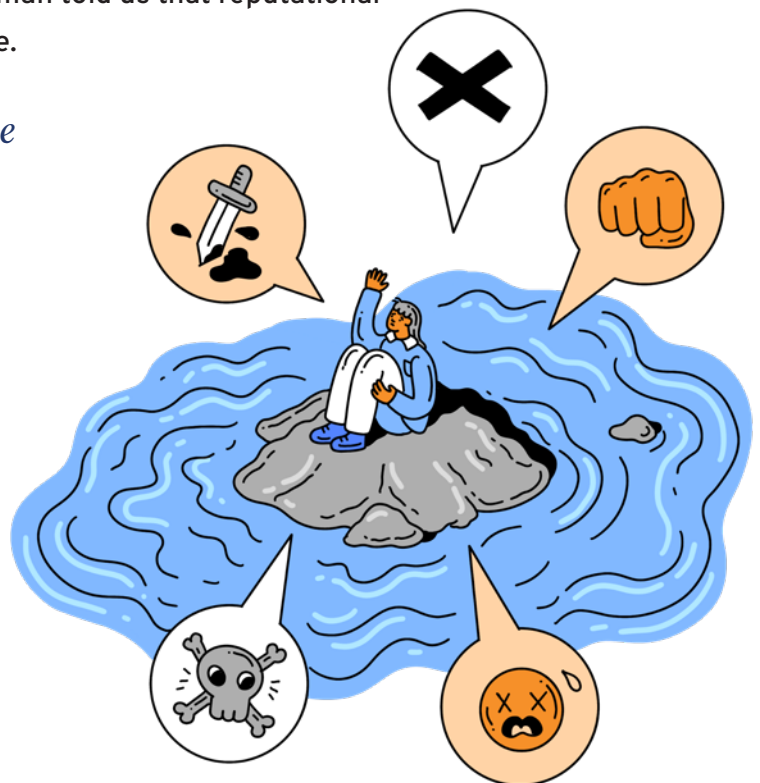
She, too, sometimes contemplates leaving India to avoid being targeted because of her gender and caste identity. “Sooner or later I want to go abroad, because I don’t want to live in danger at all times.”

In Brazil, a recent study found that Black and Indigenous women journalists often faced vitriolic messages on Twitter targeting their personal identities (Santana & Martins, 2022). As one journalist and researcher noted, the study confirms the observation that in addition to more direct hate speech, Black and Indigenous journalists are often attacked for their “mental capacity or professional competence” in addition to the accusations of political bias faced by many white journalists.

A Brazilian journalist who is a Black woman told us that reputational attacks make her feel unwell and unsafe.

*“The attacks make me very sick,” she admits. “I have depressive and anxiety disorders. I can say with great certainty that they intensified after each attack. It’s horrible not to feel safe, either on the street or on social media.”*

The experiences of these female journalists align with the finding that “other forms of discrimination – such as racism, religious bigotry, homophobia and transphobia



– intersect with sexism and misogyny to worsen and deepen women journalists’ experiences of online violence” (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022, p. 47).

## Gender and professional or personal harms

The impact of reputational attacks and associated harms against women journalists threatens “not only their freedom of expression, but also society’s right to information from diverse media,” according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Khan, 2021, p. 13):

The harm caused by online violence, sexist hate speech and disinformation are real and diverse, affecting the mental and physical health of those targeted, undermining their confidence and autonomy, stigmatizing them and generating fear, shame, and professional and reputational damage (ibid., p. 8).

Our report provides further evidence for these concerns. Female journalists shared many of the same impacts at similar levels to male journalists, but women reported much higher rates of in-person sexual messages/sexual threats (24.9% received these at least yearly, vs. 10.3% of men), and higher rates of harm to mental health (62.8% vs. 48.6%).

Men, by contrast, were more likely to have been physically assaulted at least yearly (13.1% vs 5.4%), and to face in-person threats of non-sexual violence (31.4% vs. 15.3%).

In interviews, women explained how misogynous and sexualized messages impacted their mental health and professional autonomy.

A Brazilian journalist described how “the attacks were very related to the question of me being a woman, like ‘slut’, ‘prostitute’, ‘she deserves to die,’ something very heavy like that,” she said. “Sometimes I would cry because I would think, ‘My God, I am studying, working, doing something, and people go there on my profile [to] send a message saying that I deserve to die!’

A Canadian investigative journalist said that she no longer keeps her Twitter DMs open or makes her work phone number public because of threats of sexual violence. “Emails might have generic subject heads, and then I’d open them up and there would be a rape threat. Like, all of a sudden, out of nowhere. That really shook me. “My male colleagues don’t have to worry about that,” she said. “I’m definitely at a disadvantage because of my gender.”

Azerbaijani journalist Arzu Geybulla told us that both men and women face campaigns to discredit them through accusations of sexual misconduct and the release of intimate

images or videos. “The reputational damage to men versus women is very different” in a traditional Muslim society like Azerbaijan, she said. “Not only is your professional credibility on the line, but also your position as a woman in society.”

As with journalists who belong to marginalized racial, ethnic and/or religious groups, women often find the discrimination they face in reputational attacks is mirrored in the newsroom. Respondents claimed that women’s concerns about gendered harassment received insufficient attention or were dismissed as a sign of their “weakness” by colleagues, echoing the findings of a recent study on female journalists in the U.K. and India (Claesson, 2022, p. 14).

A journalist in Pakistan said, “You don’t really see advocacy for helping women around trauma, around bullying or trolling on Twitter.” Male journalists are “very dismissive” about these issues, she said, and so they are not addressed “because women aren’t really leading newsrooms.”

This interviewee, along with others in Brazil, India and the Czech Republic, argued that it was critical for women to be in leadership positions in news outlets and press associations so that gendered attacks on reputation and safety are dealt with seriously.



# Conclusion

Many journalists are courageous and willing to publicize the truth even when they face resistance. Criticism and counter-claims are inevitable, and often valuable. However, journalists should not have to work in a toxic atmosphere in which the press is regularly discredited and stigmatized, and in which some journalists face targeted campaigns to undermine their reputations and safety.

**“If a journalist lacks a good name and credibility, he is dead,”** a Colombian investigative reporter told us. He was referring to the critical roles that reputation plays in working with sources and building a trusting audience, but also to the threats of violence he faced after being targeted by a local politician’s smear campaign.

Our study found that journalists who faced frequent reputational attacks were more likely to have reported violence and legal repression. More research is needed to clarify when reputational attacks contribute to these harms and when they do not. However, we document how in at least some cases, actors appear to strategically use reputational attacks to make it more likely for journalists to be threatened or physically attacked, or to exacerbate the professional and economic damage from legal repression.

Even when reputational attacks do not contribute to violence or legal action, journalists targeted with frequent reputational attacks experience a range of personal and professional harms.

Too often, attacks make use of stereotypes or slurs regarding journalists' identities, including their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion. In doing so, these reputational attacks exacerbate social, economic, and professional obstacles faced by journalists belonging to marginalized groups. Furthermore, our study finds that reputational attacks that target journalists' identities are particularly likely to be associated with perceived harm to mental health and a reduced willingness to continue to work as a journalist.

Our findings suggest that journalists who work in countries with low levels of press freedom are more likely to face frequent reputational attacks, and more likely to experience physical violence or legal repression alongside them. Journalists are most at risk when political leaders and government officials themselves pursue reputational attacks. In such cases, they may influence large numbers of followers to take mob action (whether online, offline, or both) against journalists, or they may use legal measures in tandem with campaigns versus journalists.

However, even in countries with stronger press freedom, widespread reputational attacks against journalists and journalism organizations are reducing journalists' abilities to safely and effectively do their jobs. This is particularly evident in countries with declining or low trust in journalism, including Canada and the United States.

## Evaluating threats from reputational attacks

The relationship between reputational attacks and violence or other negative consequences is clear in our findings, but it is also complex.

Many different factors can play a role.

How, then, to evaluate risks? Based on our findings and existing literature, we propose several key factors to consider when assessing risks.

These include:

1. **Virulence of message** (insulting to aggressively hostile to dehumanizing or hateful)
2. **Frequency** (rare to regular to flooding)
3. **Source type and prominence** (member of public to prominent source to prominent source with followers capable of violence)
4. **Targeting of personal identity** (none vs. targeting one identity factor such as gen-

der or race vs. targeting multiple marginalized identities)

#### 5. Coordination among sources (uncoordinated to loosely-coordinated to orchestrated by governments or other organizations)

The context is also critical. Reputational attacks are more likely to be linked to violence or legal repression in countries where these tools are more often used against journalists.

Distinguishing between different types of reputational attacks and associated harassment is important for assessing risk and designing appropriate responses, but it's not always easy to do, especially for the journalist being targeted.

“When it happens, you don’t really differentiate between whether these are reputational attacks or harassment, because at that point in time you just feel like you’re being attacked on all fronts and everything feels humiliating and everything feels degrading,” said Arzu Geybulla, a journalist from Azerbaijan. “Once you sit down and you clear your mind and you have a moment to think, you can start to differentiate.”

Given how difficult it is for individual journalists to evaluate and address reputational attacks, she said, it is critical to get support. That begins by realizing, “you’re not alone,” she said. “This has happened to many people, unfortunately.”

## Risk assessment

FACTORS	LOWER RISK	MEDIUM RISK	HIGHER RISK
VIRULENCE	Insulting	Aggressively hostile	Hateful or dehumanizing
FREQUENCY	Infrequent	Frequent	Continuous or swarming
SOURCE TYPE	General public	Actor with large following	Prominent actor with coercive followers
IDENTITY TARGETING	None	Targets organization or ideology	Targets personal identity including gender or ethnicity
COORDINATION	None	Loosely	By government or organization

# Recommendations

What can be done? First, we need to take reputational attacks and journalist safety more seriously. Fortunately, governments, civil society, and journalism organizations have put forward extensive policy recommendations in recent years on issues of journalism safety. Here, we build on some of those recommendations, focusing on those that pertain most clearly to reputational attacks and their consequences.

## 1. Monitor reputational attacks

Our findings suggest that reputational attacks may trigger or accompany violence, legal action, and targeted harassment. News organizations and press freedom associations should develop monitoring systems to identify reputational attacks and assess the associated risks. The framework introduced above may offer a starting point.

News organizations have a responsibility to protect the health and safety of journalists they employ, and monitoring reputational attacks can help them do so. However, some interviewees noted that news organizations may be unable or unwilling to adequately protect their staff, let alone freelancers.

It is therefore also important for independent organizations to play a monitoring role. The International Civil Society Coalition on the Safety of Journalists (2022) calls for “the establishment and operation of independent, civil society-led national, regional, and global reporting and monitoring platforms to collect and disseminate information about attacks against journalists and on media freedom in an accessible, easy to use and standardised manner” (p. 3).

Given the pivotal role that social media platforms play in facilitating efforts to discredit and harass journalists, platforms need to provide appropriate assistance to such monitoring systems.

## 2. Develop newsroom protocols and support

News organizations need to address reputational attacks – as well as harassment and violence – as a matter of occupational safety. To do so, they should develop and implement clear strategies to respond to reputational attacks and associated risks, including commitments to train and assist journalists in maintaining online and offline security, and providing appropriate access to legal and psychological expertise.

Research shows that individuals are better able to deal with online harassment when it is treated as an organizational responsibility, and not just a matter for targeted individuals to cope with (Holton et al., 2021; Nelson, 2023). Unfortunately, some organi-

zations exacerbate the harms faced by journalists (particularly women) targeted with reputational attacks (Claesson, 2022). For example, some journalists we interviewed noted that employers may require them to actively engage audiences online or post contact information, even if these actions expose them to abuse.

Many interviewees and experts noted that cyber-security measures for journalists are critical. However, “information security cultures within newsrooms remain nascent, ad hoc, or nonexistent, despite increasingly vitriolic environments facing the media” (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022, p. 3). News organizations should provide journalists with the appropriate training and tools, including access to third-party applications to identify, document, and collaboratively manage online abuse, like Block Party.<sup>11</sup>

While interviewees expressed appreciation for cyber-security assistance and access to professional mental health treatment, they were most grateful for a genuinely supportive newsroom – if they had one. A journalist told us his supervisor “completely understood what happened, and I think that made the difference.” Another journalist said, “I have a very supportive and humane editor regarding these issues, but I know of colleagues who face difficulties in feeling welcomed and safe in their organizations.”

Support from colleagues is a critical piece of resilience to harassment (Kantola & Harju, 2023). Journalists frequently turn to colleagues for support, and news organizations should create an environment that incentivizes this mutual assistance. When newsroom support is done well, researchers and practitioners find, “collective assistance recontextualizes experiences of harassment and abuse into experiences of aid and solidarity” (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022, p. 13).

### 3. Defend journalists’ reputations

In addition to providing support and addressing the risks that result from reputational attacks, many journalists in our study said they would like their employer or news organization to more actively protect their reputation when it is under attack – beyond managing the harms and risks of the attack.

Such responses can take different forms in different circumstances, according to journalists and press freedom advocates we interviewed:

- **Unambiguous expressions of public support for a journalist’s actions and reputation**
- **Investigation of the sources of reputational attacks**

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11. [blockpartyapp.com](https://blockpartyapp.com)

- **Requests of social media platforms to address content violating their terms of service**
- **Legal action against those who defame or threaten journalists**

Interviewees whose reputations were defended by their news outlets often expressed gratitude. However, journalists themselves should be consulted on a case by case basis to determine whether or how their organization responds to attacks.

## Resources for journalists and newsrooms to address online abuse

### FOR INDIVIDUALS

[Resources for protecting against online abuse](#) from the Committee to Protect Journalists contains regularly-updated resources to address issues from harassment to smear campaigns, and are available in multiple languages.

[Online Harassment Field Manual](#) from PEN America has extensive and accessible resources, developed with a particular eye to address risks to women, BIPOC, and/or LGBTQIA+ journalists, available in multiple languages.

[Online Violence Response Hub](#) from the Coalition Against Online Violence (CAOV) has extensive resources for journalists and newsrooms.

### FOR NEWSROOMS

[The Freelance Journalist Safety Principles](#) by the ACOS Alliance (a coalition of news organisations, freelance journalist associations and press freedom NGOs), available in multiple languages.

[A Guide to Protecting Newsrooms and Journalists Against Online Violence](#) from the International Women's Media Foundation.

[Newsroom Guide for Managing Online Harm](#) developed for Canadian newsrooms by Hannah Storm and #NotOK.

[Protecting Journalists from Online Abuse: A Guide for Newsrooms](#) developed by Gideon Sarpom, founder of iWatch Africa, for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

[Protocol for Newsrooms to Support Journalists Targeted with Online Harassment](#) from the International Press Institute (IPI).

#### 4. Address how gender, ethnicity, and other identity factors influence reputational attacks and their consequences

The threats faced by women journalists have begun to get more attention, including through organizations like Article 19, the Coalition Against Online Violence, the Coalition For Women In Journalism, the International Women’s Media Foundation, and Troll-Busters. It is now widely recognized that, in the words of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, “Attacks on female journalists violate not only their freedom of expression, but also society’s right to information from diverse media” (Khan, 2021, p. 13).

There are also significant gaps regarding the challenges faced by journalists who identify as belonging to racial, ethnic, and/or religious groups in the countries where they work. And research by our team and others suggests that journalists who are marginalized along multiple lines of identity, such as being women who belong to marginalized ethnic or religious groups, can face particularly damaging reputational attacks. More research needs to be done on these intersections of identity and harmful reputational attacks, and better responses need to be developed that are attentive to journalists’ identities and social contexts.

Moreover, our findings support research by others that shows that individuals belonging to under-represented groups in journalism often experience insufficient support – and are sometimes discredited by voices within their own newsrooms. As a result, “The lack of newsroom support around online harassment sometimes ties into broader conversations about the lack of diversity in newsrooms and whose voices are heard or prioritized and whose are not” (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022, p. 10).

#### 5. Strengthen coalitions to counteract reputational attacks and support journalists

Journalists are targeted for reputational attack and harassment from many directions, including local politicians, business interests, extremist groups, and their national governments. To address this broad set of antagonists, journalists need broad networks of “media allies” (Harlow et al., 2022, p. 11) or “public-private-civic safety coalitions” (Waisbord, 2022a, p. 1951). These coalitions should span government, labour unions, civil society, and the journalism industry. Ideally these coalitions should cross political divides.

These coalitions can support journalists who lack supportive newsrooms, including freelancers or individuals at under-resourced or hostile workplaces. They should also include international press freedom organizations, which are particularly important

for journalists working in countries with poor press freedom, where governments are ineffective protectors or even the antagonists of journalists (Harlow et al., 2022).

## 6. Take seriously the role played by journalists and hyper-partisan media organizations

Journalism organizations, including hyper-partisan news outlets, are a major source of reputational attacks and harassment. To address this, national and international press associations, along with journalism outlets themselves, should clarify that existing ethical commitments to accuracy, fairness and non-discrimination should also apply to reporting about journalists.

For instance, the International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter of Ethics states that "slander, libel, defamation, [and] unfounded accusations" amount to serious professional misconduct, and that journalists should "ensure that the dissemination of information or opinion does not contribute to hatred or prejudice and shall do their utmost to avoid facilitating the spread of discrimination on grounds such as geographical, social or ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, disability, political and other opinions" (IFJ, 2019). Moreover, it encourages each journalist to "show solidarity with his/her colleagues, without renouncing his/her freedom of investigation, duty to inform, and right to engage in criticism, commentary, satire and editorial choice."

## 7. Improve social media platform policies and transparency

Social media platforms have become necessary and often positive tools for journalists, but they are also where journalists most frequently encounter reputational attacks. Many of our interviewees faced reputational attacks and harassment on social media platforms, and few expressed satisfaction with any platforms' actions.

Platforms should introduce or improve anti-abuse tools available to users, with functions that can be used by individuals with public roles and larger followings such as journalists. These include improved in-app tools for users to identify and screen abuse, and for users to create and maintain boundaries to separate their professional and personal identities (for more detailed recommendations see PEN America, 2021; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022, pp. 241–243).

It is important to empower users to address reputational attacks and harassment, but the labour of addressing abuse should not fall primarily on users. Social media companies need to better enforce policies that address abusive content or content that may expose individuals to violence. As has been widely recognized, platforms too often fail to enforce their own policies, particularly when violations are committed by high-pro-

file perpetrators. Platforms also frequently lack the cultural and linguistic expertise in many countries and regions. Moreover, journalists and press freedom advocates told us that Twitter – the most used platform by our survey respondents – appeared to have become less responsive to journalists’ safety needs.

To guide policies and enforcement, platforms should implement human rights due diligence and conduct risk assessments, as set out in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (International Civil Society Coalition on the Safety of Journalists, 2022, p. 6; Khan, 2021). This will need to include addressing the potential disproportionate impacts on journalists due to their gender, race, or other identity-related factors.

While social media companies can and should take these actions on their own, it has become clear that government regulation is necessary, provided such legislation adheres to international standards to protect freedom of expression. Close attention should be paid to the implementation of the Digital Services Act in the European Union, as an example of legislation to require platforms to clarify, enforce, and transparently report on their policies to address harms.

## 8. Strengthen government protection of journalists’ rights

Governments have a critical role to play, including as part of their responsibility to prevent, protect, and provide remedy for violations of journalists’ human rights. Efforts at the United Nations, the European Union, and other intergovernmental groups take steps in that direction by clarifying that states should make commitments to protect journalists, including against in-person and online violence.

These commitments also include investigating and holding to account those who commit violations. As Article 19 (2020a, p. 7) notes in a report focusing on women journalists, “there is also an overwhelming body of reporting that a particular barrier to justice for women journalists, who face online harassment or receive threats of violence online, is a failure of public authorities to take these threats seriously.”

With respect to social media companies, state governments should:

- Impose meaningful transparency and accountability requirements. This includes providing sufficient data to independent researchers and journalists to enable them to investigate harassment and disinformation targeting journalists. Platforms should also be transparent regarding the existence and enforcement of policies or practices to address abusive content including violent threats, hate speech, and doxxing.

- Impose meaningful requirements to address online violence that targets individuals based on their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and other categories protected under international human rights obligations.

(These recommendations draw on: ARTICLE 19, 2020b; Khan, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 2022)

As our research shows, governments and public officials are themselves a major source of reputational attacks. Governments should not be involved in campaigns of reputational attacks and harassment, and consider codes of conduct for government agencies and public officials regarding harassment or disinformation campaigns targeting journalists (International Civil Society Coalition on the Safety of Journalists, 2022).

Additionally, governments should work with social media platforms and other partners to mitigate and discourage such activities, while protecting freedom of expression. For instance, further efforts should be made to advance the recommendations made by UN special rapporteurs and other international fact-finding bodies that have revealed government complicity.

These eight recommendations could help reduce the harms that journalists experience due to reputational attacks and harassment – and ultimately help preserve and protect their ability to promote accountability, truth-telling, and democracy. But broader action is needed to address the systemic damage to journalism and public discourse.

# Appendix: country case studies

To better understand reputational attacks and their impacts in different national contexts, this section presents case studies focusing on Brazil, Canada, Colombia, and India – the four countries we received the most responses from. (However, due to the non-random sampling and limited numbers of respondents, our survey findings cannot be assumed to be representative of all journalists in these countries. Rather, they indicate broad patterns that warrant deeper investigation.) Each case study draws on survey responses, follow-up interviews with at least five respondents, interviews with press freedom advocates, and desk research.

The four countries differ in their levels of press freedom. We categorize Canada as a country with high press freedom, Brazil as medium, and Colombia and India as having low press freedom.<sup>12</sup>

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12. For this study we defined levels of press freedom based on [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)'s 2022 rankings](#). Those ranked #1–60 are high press freedom countries, #61–120 are medium, and #121–180 are low.



## Brazil

54 respondents  
to survey

Press freedom rank 110 of 180 countries  
(RSF 2022 rankings)

32% faced weekly reputational attacks  
(vs. 38% for survey respondents overall)

59% identified politicians or officials in power  
with the national government as source  
(vs. 39% overall)

59% experience harm to mental health  
(vs. 54% overall)

59% changed or avoided reporting on issues due  
to reputational attacks  
(vs. 40% overall)

39% seriously considered quitting journalism  
due to reputational attacks and harassment  
(vs. 29% overall)

## Overview

Political misinformation and disinformation has been a recurring issue in Brazil that has intensified in recent years (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022, p. 96). Election observers identified “unprecedented” levels of disinformation during the 2018 elections, won by former president Jair Bolsonaro (ibid). The Bolsonaro government was later alleged to have created an “office of hate” that attacked its critics online (Freedom House, 2020).

Journalists have been subject to attacks, both online and in person. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least 44 journalists have been killed in connection with their work since 1992.<sup>13</sup> Brazil made headlines around the world in 2022 after the murder of British freelancer Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira (Ayres, 2022). And in January 2023, when Bolsonaro supporters stormed the nation’s congress, dozens of journalists were harassed and attacked (CPJ, 2023a). Lawsuits and legal threats are often used to attempt to censor journalists (Freedom House, 2020).

## Political conflict and corruption drive most reputational attacks

The most commonly identified source of reputational attacks<sup>14</sup> was the national ruling party and its politicians (59%), which at the time of the survey was President Bolsonaro and his Liberal Party. The president, his family members in politics, and other pow-

13. [cpj.org/data](https://cpj.org/data)

14. The survey received 54 submissions from journalists who resided in Brazil. Of those, 29 identified as men (54%) and 25 as women (46%). 7 respondents (13%) identified as belonging to marginalized religious, ethnic, and/or racial groups. Interviews were conducted with five journalists who had completed the survey, and with three press freedom advocates.

erful politicians set the tone for hostility toward journalists, according to journalists and press freedom advocates we interviewed.<sup>15</sup> **When authorities attack the reputations of journalists it “authorizes ordinary civilians to do so as well,”** an interviewee explained. **“If the president does it, why shouldn’t I?”**

Reputational attacks did not only come from Bolsonaro and his supporters. The second most common source was opposition parties and politicians (identified by 57% of respondents), which at the time included the Workers’ Party of now-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. In addition to the politicians and political parties, civil society groups were a major source of reputational attacks (51% of respondents). These organizations are often highly partisan – Bolsonaro and other conservative politicians are backed by religious organizations, while Lula and other left-leaning politicians are popular with trade unions.

According to respondents, 52% of journalists surveyed reported accusations of political bias at least monthly, and 26% reported monthly claims of incompetence or unethical behavior.

A Brazilian journalist noted that after fact-checking a local partisan media site, its owner published a series of Instagram posts to his 100,000 followers. “He started to slander me, saying I was not a competent journalist, that I was paid by the government here or the city government,” she said. “I joke with people that if I had earned as much money [from corruption] as he was saying, I wouldn’t be living with my mother anymore!” But jokes aside, she said, “That’s when my life turned to hell.”

Several interviewees stated that efforts to discredit journalists were motivated by corruption or business interests. One journalist confided under the condition of anonymity that after writing a story about the invasion of Indigenous land by wealthy landowners, he lost his job. “The request for me to be fired came from the governor of the state government ... they approached the owner of the website I was working for and told her to tell me to go away. She sent me away.”

## Impacts of reputational attacks and harassment

Survey results show that reputational attacks can alter journalists’ professional output. 59% of respondents said they avoided or changed reporting on sensitive issues to reduce the risk of attacks, and 39% said they had seriously considered quitting journalism. Both these figures were higher for Brazilian respondents than for survey

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15. According to press freedom organization Abraji (2023), 557 episodes of reputational attacks, assaults, or other forms of aggression against journalists were reported in 2022, and 41.6% were attributed to Bolsonaro and three of his sons.

respondents overall (which were 40% and 29%, respectively).

One interviewee said that many of her colleagues in journalism had quit, due to the hostility directed at them during the period of time when the Bolsonaro government was in power. As a journalist, she said, “You work every day to do something for society ... you earn very little money, and you still have to suffer for it.”

Those who continue to work as journalists pay a psychological and physical toll. Reputational attacks were identified by 59% of respondents as harming their mental health, and by 18% as harming their physical health.

One journalist said that reputational attacks and fear of violence not only contributed to her depressive and anxiety disorders, they also affected other areas of her life. For instance, she experienced difficulties renting an apartment because she was hesitant to share the personal information required to apply online. Such precautions were necessary, she said, “to protect myself and those I love.”

Not all interviewees were victims of online harassment, though they all recognized it as a real threat. Lais Martins, who works as an investigative journalist in São Paulo, said, “I have never been the target of an attack. But I recognize that it is a super serious problem, and I think that just its existence prunes our work as journalists. So I guess I end up self-censoring myself because of the potential of an attack on credibility or damage to my reputation.”

## How reputational attacks and impacts are related to identity

Respondents and interviewees both emphasized that a particular level of vitriol is directed at women, particularly women of colour, which aligns with recent research (Santana & Martins, 2022).

“A white male journalist speaking on a certain subject will carry some weight. A woman or a Black woman, a young journalist, will carry less,” said a female journalist who chose to remain anonymous. Another interviewee, a journalist and researcher who also preferred to not be named, shared her experiences of online harassment: “Because I am also a woman, I think that the attacks became more intense...”

**“It is very exhausting, because the [worst] offenses are always sexual, delegitimizing you as a woman and not as a professional. Because as a professional they wouldn’t have anything to say, to attack,”** said a third female journalist speaking under the condition of anonymity.

## Existing and recommended support

31% of respondents reported that they took no action offline to mitigate the effects of reputational attacks. 30% of respondents said they sought help from colleagues or from press freedom organizations. 22% reported their harassment to the police, and only 6% pursued legal action. Some respondents commented that they sought support from organizations such as the Network for the Protection of Journalists and Communicators<sup>16</sup> and the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji).<sup>17</sup>

The International Press Institute's Ontheline Platform for Newsrooms provides resources and best practices for media outlets and journalists to prevent, combat, and address online harassment and abuse, available in Portuguese and other languages (IPI, 2020). Abraji (2020) has also published guidelines on legal measures journalists can take when faced with online threats. Abraji (2021a) created a Legal Protection Program for Journalists, dedicated to helping journalists whose reporting is being constrained by legal proceedings, and CPJ (2023b) published updated resources for journalists in need of legal aid support in 2023.

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16. [rededeprotecao.org.br](https://rededeprotecao.org.br)

17. [abraji.org.br](https://abraji.org.br)



## Canada

95 respondents  
to survey

Press freedom rank 19 of 180 countries  
(RSF 2022 rankings)

40% face weekly reputational attacks  
(vs. 38% for survey respondents overall)

67% said hyper-partisan media are a source  
(vs. 47% overall)

40% said extremist organizations are a source  
(vs. 32% overall)

63% experience harm to mental health  
(vs. 54% overall)

43% considered quitting journalism due to reputational attacks and harassment  
(vs. 29% overall)

### Press freedom context

Canadian journalists experience increasing levels of online and offline harassment (IPSOS, 2021; Unifor Media Council, 2023). A survey of 1,093 journalists and media workers by IPSOS in November 2021 found that in the previous 12 months, 65% of respondents had faced online harassment and 38% had faced it in person (IPSOS, 2021, pp. 4–5). Those who identified as women, BIPOC, or LGBTQ2+ reported more severe online harassment than other journalists.

Increasing harassment comes amidst declining public trust in news media. In 2022 it dropped to the lowest point in seven years, according to a Reuters Institute survey (Brin & Charlton, 2022a). Just 42% of Canadian respondents trust news “most of the time,” a fall of 13% since 2016. This decline mirrored a drop to 29% in Canadians’ belief that news media are independent from political influences (Brin & Charlton, 2022b).

### Polarization, distrust and reputational attacks

Political polarization is at the root of most reputational attacks, harassment, and violence that Canadian journalists face, according to our survey respondents and interviewees.<sup>18</sup>

Respondents to our survey were most likely to report being accused of political bias (56% face this at least monthly), followed by being incompetent (54%), unethical (46%), and engaged in criminal activity (19%).

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18. Based on 95 completed surveys, 50% identified as male, 47% as female, 3% as “other,” including respondents identifying as non-binary or trans. 25% of respondents identified as belonging to a marginalized group. 15% primarily report outside of North America. 41% work for public organizations including CBC/Radio-Canada, 44% for private organizations, and 15% for public-private/other forms. We did follow-up interviews with seven and spoke to three press freedom advocates on the Canadian situation.

Compared to journalists in other countries, Canadian respondents were more likely to report that hyper-partisan media were a source of reputational attacks (67%). At the same time, Canadian respondents were far less likely to have said that the national (14%) or provincial or municipal (19%) governing parties or officials were sources of reputational attacks. However, 50% said that opposition political parties were a source.

A long-time political columnist said that efforts to smear or harass him online are primarily driven by political cleavages in his province of Alberta. “I’ve been around more than 30 years,” he said, “and it’s never been so polarized.” While there is anger on both sides of the political spectrum, he and other interviewees said that right-wing politicians and commentators have stoked anger toward mainstream journalists.

Multiple interviewees noted that an accusation of bias or unethical activity from a prominent figure, such as someone associated with an alternative right-wing publication or a YouTube personality, would lead to dramatic increases in the volume or intensity of online hostility.

**“I’ve had far right-wing media make news items, videos, and memes about me personally,”** said a journalist for an investigative television program.

A newspaper reporter in Alberta described how an extreme right-wing political figure did a livestream that featured “quite a bit of slanderous, defamatory stuff about me, including accusations of pedophilia.” The comments were shared by other people online, he said. “It was certainly upsetting.”

The most polarizing issue in recent years has been government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The online backlash against journalists covering this topic often seems to be coordinated. Another interviewee, who worked on a TV documentary about anti-vaccine groups in the United States, said the leaders of these groups “called on all their followers to write [CBC] ombudsman complaints and tried to discredit our journalism through one of their online TV shows, including posting photos of myself and two colleagues.”

Journalists who cover hate groups or extremist groups were particularly likely to face organized campaigns of harassment and reputational attacks. “When the neo-Nazi gang really came after me, I was getting phone calls frequently, and text messages,” a freelance journalist told us.

## Threats, hostility pushing people out of journalism

While physical attacks on journalists are relatively rare in Canada, there was an apparent uptick in 2022. During the time of the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa, the Canada

Press Freedom Project recorded “at least 21 documented incidents of harassment and intimidation and at least seven assaults of media workers at convoy-related events alone” (Lindgren et al., 2022).

“It’s harder to do our jobs,” one respondent wrote. “People are very violent. We’ve had things thrown at us, even when kids are present. We now take security to cover previously mundane events.”

“I’ve witnessed protesters screaming to kill all journalists in an organized anti-mask protest, claiming we are the source of misinformation,” stated another survey respondent.

A journalist who covers far-right groups told us, “My image has already become a poster for everything [far-right groups] view as harmful and evil about mainstream media ... I genuinely feel like my life is at risk.”

Many respondents stated that reputational attacks and distrust made journalism more difficult. “Getting sources to talk is more challenging, and going to certain events requires a lot more caution and safety measures,” said a TV reporter in an interview. “I don’t think people know how risky the job is now.”

Several survey respondents specifically referred to a chilling effect. “It makes it harder to want to pursue the more controversial stories with a real fear for your family’s safety if you step into that lane,” a respondent wrote.

Respondents in Canada were more likely to have said they seriously considered quitting journalism due to the reputational attacks and harassment they face (43%) compared to journalists from other countries. “It’s made good journalists quit,” one wrote. “I have colleagues who left the field because of this,” another stated. “I wouldn’t advise anyone to join this field and I think it’s pushed many journalists into leaving,” wrote a third respondent.

63% of Canadian respondents said that reputational attacks and harassment were causing harm to their mental health, and 17% said these attacks were harming their physical health. Several interviewees and survey respondents mentioned that hostility toward news media affected relationships within their own families.

## How reputational attacks and impacts are related to gender

Journalists’ gender influences the forms and consequences of hostile communication. Overall, 27% of respondents who identify as women received in-person threats of sex-

ual violence while working, while none of the male respondents had.<sup>19</sup> A national health reporter explained how someone found her private email and used it to create an account on a dating app. “So as you can imagine, I got a lot of very unpleasant emails,” she said. Around the same time, she and some colleagues received Twitter posts wishing them violence or death. “It really soured my thinking around social media,” she said. “I’m kind of at a place now where I feel uncomfortable being on a lot of those platforms.”

Another reporter said that following several threats for her previous stories, **“I can’t even meet with a source in person without sending my boss my location and calling her when I’m done, because she’s so concerned about my safety.”**

Respondents who identified as women were more likely to mention experiencing harm to their mental health than men (74% vs. 51%) or to have seriously considered quitting journalism (56% vs. 32%). Findings from an IPSOS survey, too, found that women journalists experienced higher levels of psychological harm than male colleagues (IPSOS, 2021).

In a 2022 campaign calling for an end to online violence against women journalists in Canada, the Coalition for Women in Journalism reported it had documented “dozens of cases of online violence against women journalists in Canada – the majority of them from far-right, anti-immigrant, and anti-mask groups.”<sup>20</sup> Many of these occurred in the aftermath of a series of tweets in 2021 by Maxime Bernier, leader of the right-wing People’s Party of Canada, that shared journalists’ email addresses and encouraged supporters to “play dirty” (Buchanan, 2022). Canadian news media organizations published a joint public statement on October 5, 2021, condemning hate or harassment against journalists, which “inordinately target women and racialized journalists” (Gentle, 2021).

## Existing and recommended support

In the face of reputational attacks and harassment, Canadian respondents were most likely to turn to colleagues or supervisors for support (48%), followed by friends or rel-

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19. Given the small sample size of journalists in Canada, and in particular the small number of journalists who identify as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic or religious groups, we cannot make statistically robust claims about associations between frequencies or consequences of reputational attacks. The percentages we report in this case study are indicative of relationships that require further research to confirm.

20. [womeninjournalism.org/campaigns-all/end-online-violence-against-women-journalists-in-canada](https://womeninjournalism.org/campaigns-all/end-online-violence-against-women-journalists-in-canada)

atives (28%), medical or psychological health practitioners (25%), and police (14%).<sup>21</sup> 41% didn't seek support or assistance.

Canadian journalism organizations have begun to advocate strongly for action against online and in-person harassment, including initiatives by CBC/Radio-Canada, Unifor, the Coalition For Women in Journalism, and the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ). These organizations have made several overlapping recommendations.

**Better organizational support:** News organizations should provide support for their employees who face reputational attacks, harassment, and safety or health risks (Unifor, 2023). The #NotOK project, initiated by CBC/Radio-Canada, commissioned a set of guidelines for newsrooms to manage online harms (Storm, 2022). In 2022, the Canada Press Freedom Project was launched to track and publicize incidents that threaten press freedom.<sup>22</sup>

**Resources for journalists:** Unifor, the union representing many Canadian journalists, provides a detailed set of steps to take and resources available for journalists targeted with abuse (Unifor Media Council, 2023). The Committee to Protect Journalists developed a new guide for Canadian journalists to help them navigate legal risks they face when covering protests, including potential actions by police that might limit their reporting (CPJ & TrustLaw, 2023). Journalists can also reach out to CPJ directly with specific safety-related questions or concerns.

**More effective responses by police:** The CAJ and over 40 news organizations wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on September 1, 2022, regarding “the increasing and alarming online hate and harassment targeting journalists and journalism as a profession” (CAJ, 2022). The letter called for better processes by which police can receive complaints from journalists about threats, investigate those threats, and inform journalists about the progress of the investigation or resulting actions.

**More effective responses by social media platforms.** The CAJ letter also called for social media companies to more effectively address harassment of journalists on their platforms. Similarly, Unifor's plan of action calls for quicker and more effective action by platforms – and for the government to hold platforms accountable for failing to address libel, defamation, and hate speech targeting journalists.

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21. Respondents could choose more than one source of support, so percentages add up to more than 100%.

22. [canadapressfreedom.ca](https://canadapressfreedom.ca)



## Colombia

59 respondents  
to survey

Press freedom rank 145 of 180 countries  
(RSF 2022 rankings)

53% face weekly reputational attacks  
(vs. 38% for survey respondents overall)

56% identified politicians or officials in local or  
provincial governments as a source  
(vs. 34% overall)

46% reported that criminal organizations were a  
source  
(vs. 16% overall)

54% have avoided or changed how they report to  
avoid reputational attacks  
(vs. 40% overall)

27% have relocated as a consequence  
(vs. 14% overall)

*“In Colombia, after the peace agreements between the Colombian government and the FARC guerillas, the attacks on [the reputations of] journalists have increased ... It is common to find fake news aimed at discrediting specific journalists or outlets. These attacks tend to come from members of the society and then are replicated by politicians or people in positions of power.”*

—MARÍA FITZGERALD, HUMAN RIGHTS JOURNALIST SPECIALIZING IN HUMAN RIGHTS  
AND GENDER AT CAMBIO COLOMBIA MAGAZINE

### Press freedom context

Colombian journalists face high rates of violence and legal actions, contributing to a poor (and worsening) press freedom environment. In the past decade, 10 journalists have been killed in connection to their work.<sup>23</sup> 2022 was a particularly dangerous year. Two journalists were murdered as a consequence of their investigative work (Rafael Emiro Moreno and Wilder Alfredo Córdoba) (FLIP, 2023). In 2023, a collective of journalists with Forbidden Stories investigated Moreno’s murder and the widespread corruption he had been reported on (Dupont de Dinechin, 2023).

The Bogota-based Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP), an independent organization that monitors violations of press freedom, found that in 2022:

- 2 journalists were killed
- 8 journalists went into exile
- 20 journalists were physically attacked
- 218 journalists were threatened with violence

23. CPJ Database (2023), [Journalists Killed in Colombia](#), 2012-2022.

- 84 journalists were harassed
- 5 journalists had to leave their hometown to avoid threats (FLIP, 2023)

## The state is the largest source of reputational attacks

Colombian respondents to our survey<sup>24</sup> were more likely than journalists in other countries to identify two sources of reputational attacks: municipal or state government officials (reported by 56% of respondents in Colombia vs. 34% overall) and criminal organizations (46% in Colombia vs. 16% overall).

Raissa Carrillo, FLIP’s Coordinator of Defense and Support of Journalists, said that in Colombia “most of the sources of the attacks against journalists in the past years have been mayors, budget expense managers, ministers, public servants, and politicians in general.”

For instance, the Mayor’s Office of Yopal campaigned against journalists for reporting negatively about city policies, which FLIP denounced as a “strategy [that] discredits the voices that criticize the local administration and promotes a climate of hostility towards the press” (FLIP, 2022).

One respondent said that the current government in the province of Cauca “has media and journalist friends who at a certain moment may attack us, because we regularly publish articles that the regional government does not like.” Another journalist said that his publications were gathered in a file that was sent to a regional governor who then threatened to stop advertising in his media outlet.

Reputational attacks and violence against journalists have increased during recent periods of political attention, including national strikes in 2021 and the 2022 national elections (FLIP, 2021). One survey respondent, describing the backlash to reporting during those times, said: “The harassment consisted of violent threats, slanderous messages, and a massive number of [complaints made to social media platforms] with the goal of having my accounts closed down.”

Several respondents in our survey believe the polarized political situations and the corruption that permeates some areas of the Colombian state are key elements that make journalists more vulnerable to politically-motivated reputational attacks. One respondent said, “The reputational attacks are frequent, especially in this area where corruption is rampant, and politicians and officials attack news media to generate a

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24. Based on 59 completed surveys, 22% identified as women, and 20% identified as belonging to an ethnic, racial, or religious minority group. We did follow-up interviews with six journalists and spoke to three press freedom advocates on the Colombian situation.

smokescreen for what they steal from the state.”

## Criminal organizations and militias

Criminal organizations in Colombia were the third most commonly-identified source of reputational attacks (mentioned by 46% of respondents). Despite the 2016 peace agreement between the national government and FARC guerillas, journalists continue to face violence, particularly when reporting on militias and criminal organizations participating in drug trafficking (CPJ, 2022).

Militias and criminal organizations can also pose a risk to journalists’ editorial autonomy. A survey respondent said he was forced to publish official statements by an armed group, which in turn affected his reputation. “The [reputational] attacks against me come from people who accuse me of belonging to [those] armed groups.” (Wilder Alfredo Córdoba, one of the two journalists killed in Colombia in 2022, had also been pressured by armed groups to publish their official statements through his independent media outlet (FLIP, 2023, p. 11). Those responsible for his murder have not yet been identified.)

Members of a civil society group (40%), as well as business persons and corporations (35%) are also significant sources of reputational attacks. One respondent said: “I shared an environmental news story affecting a multinational company through my Twitter account and two senior officials of the company, including the environmental and communications officers, made comments that it was fake news, instead of denying the complaints.”

## Safety risks prompt journalists to take precautions or leave town

28% of survey respondents in Colombia reported that they had been physically assaulted in the previous year, a number that rose to 48% for those that faced at least weekly reputational attacks.

A survey respondent wrote: **“The attacks have made my job more dangerous. I am on constant alert. I even tinted the windows of my car more. I live in constant fear of [being attacked while] doing my job.”**

Another commented: “I changed my social habits so as not to be easily spotted by my likely attackers.” In fact, 46% reported that they increased their physical security at work or at home to address increased safety risks associated with reputational attacks.

Colombian survey respondents also reported higher levels of certain personal and professional impacts due to reputational attacks. 60% of respondents said reputation-

al attacks have made them feel more vulnerable to potential physical attacks. 50% of them said that their mental health has been harmed. And a significant proportion (27%) had at some point left their city, region, or even the country, to reduce risks from reputational attacks and harassment.

Many respondents (54%) said that they changed or avoided reporting on issues to avoid attacks, and 29% have seriously considered quitting journalism.

One survey respondent wrote: “I used to publish my weekly columns. I stopped doing it a year and a half ago because my children already have social networks and I don’t want them to see how they mistreat their mother and I don’t want them to be mistreated.”

In their 2022 annual report, FLIP documents a total of 44 online attacks against women, primarily through social media. One interviewee observed that some hostile actors appear to believe that “it is easier to intimidate us, [they consider] us weaker – and even more so if we have children.”

## Existing and recommended support

Colombia has become a regional hub for independent organizations that monitor press freedom and promote the safety of journalists. In addition to FLIP, a group of Colombian media outlets co-founded the Inter American Press Association (SIP in Spanish).<sup>25</sup> In response to increasing levels of legal harassment targeting journalists in Colombia (FLIP & Article 19, 2021), El Veinte, an organization created by lawyers and legal-support professionals, provides legal support to journalists when politicians or powerful figures take them to court for their work.<sup>26</sup>

Journalists reporting from Colombia turned to press freedom organizations for support at higher rates than other respondents. In our survey responses, 64% of the journalists in Colombia confirmed that they seek support from these organizations compared to 26% of respondents overall.<sup>27</sup> Several survey respondents said that seeking assistance from FLIP was the most effective action they took to protect themselves. Survey respondents suggested several actions that Colombian journalists can take to address reputational attacks and threats. One option is to communicate these incidents to the public to raise awareness and seek support. Another option is to file a formal com-

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25. [sipiapa.org/contenidos/acerca-de-la-sip.html](https://sipiapa.org/contenidos/acerca-de-la-sip.html)

26. [elveinte.org/que-es-el-veinte](https://elveinte.org/que-es-el-veinte)

27. This high number is likely to partly be a result of the fact that FLIP shared information about our survey with their network of journalists, although it was just one of several news outlets and press freedom organizations to which we announced our survey.

plaint with the Police and Public Prosecutor's Office, which can lead to an investigation and possible legal action. To put pressure on authorities to act, journalists can seek to have other media outlets publicize the attacks or threats. Finally, for personal security, journalists could seek protection from organizations such as the Unidad Nacional de Protección (National Protection Unit), or UNP.

Organizations such as Article 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Inter American Press Association, and the International Press Institute, have condemned attacks against journalists in Colombia. They have also issued a series of recommendations for journalists and press freedom defenders in the country.

**Resources to face legal threats and other issues:** El Veinte and FLIP have published online tools that journalists can access if they encounter legal harassment due to their reporting (FLIP, 2011). A helpline and a web form are also available to report urgent cases. El Veinte provides pro bono lawyers for journalists who cannot afford to pay for their defence and provides them with all the legal tools throughout the case. They also provide legal copyediting services and psychological support to journalists.

Legal responses for women journalists in Colombia improved in 2022 after a local court acknowledged that there is a trend of online violence against female journalists in the country. The court ruled that political parties and leaders who use or allow these attacks against female journalists may be subject to sanctions and investigations. Journalists in need of legal support may also consider reaching out to the Legal Network for Journalists at Risk (LNJAR), a network of organizations intended to support journalists facing legal harassment or targeting related to their work (FLIP, 2023).

**Physical protection:** The Unidad Nacional de Protección provides protection to individuals who face risks related to their work, including journalists. The program offers a range of protection measures for journalists, including bodyguards, armored vehicles, and panic buttons. The UNP also provides psychological support to journalists who have been threatened or attacked, and it offers training for journalists to reduce safety risks.



## India

66 respondents  
to survey

Press freedom rank 150 of 180 countries  
(RSF 2022 rankings)

56% face weekly reputational attacks  
(vs. 38% overall)

38% face daily reputational attacks  
(vs. 19% overall)

76% identify politicians or officials in power with  
the national government as a source  
(vs. 39% overall)

52% said hyper-partisan media are a source  
(vs. 47% overall)

63% experience harm to mental health  
(vs. 54% overall)

42% changed or avoided reporting on issues due  
to reputational attacks  
(vs. 40% overall)

## Press freedom context

*“We used to laugh this off. We didn’t think it would happen here. We thought it happened in dictatorships, not here in India ... The one thing we had was a free press and a largely impartial judiciary. As journalists we did not fear a knock on the door. Now we do.”*

—SAMAR HALARNKAR, EDITOR OF ARTICLE 14, A WEBSITE FOCUSED ON RESEARCH AND REPORTAGE RELATED TO THE RULE OF LAW

## Overview

India, often referred to as the ‘world’s largest democracy,’ has a fast-growing media industry expected to be worth \$100 billion by 2030 (Anand, 2022). This economic growth belies declining press freedom in the country. In 2022, several organizations united to highlight the declining state of press freedom: “The authorities’ targeting of journalists, coupled with a broader crackdown on dissent, has emboldened Hindu nationalists to threaten, harass, and abuse journalists critical of the Indian government, both online and offline, with impunity” (Amnesty International, 2022).

International democracy watch dogs have drawn a connection between shrinking press freedom and the expanding power of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Freedom House, 2022a). Since Modi was elected in 2014 there have been an increasing number of arrests and other state action against journalists. According to the Free Speech Collective, between 2010 and 2020, 154 journalists in India were arrested or faced government hostility for their work, with over 40% of them coming in 2020 alone (Free Speech Collective, 2020, pp. 2010–2020). Indian journalists have also faced surveillance by government actors

using Pegasus spyware (Srivas & Agarwal, 18 Jul 2021). India's federal government, the governing party, and government-friendly media have rejected these reports (Times of India Staff, 2022), and a senior government official stated they are part of an international conspiracy to malign India (PTI, 2023).

Many journalists who participated in our survey<sup>28</sup> recognised 2019 as a pivotal year for press freedom in India as Modi's party returned to power with an even bigger mandate. The party has since pursued greater control of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, both by changing its special constitutional status and by cracking down on dissent. The press in Jammu and Kashmir has faced police raids, arrests, seizures, and legal restrictions including journalists put on 'no-fly lists' (Bhasin, 2023). At least 35 journalists in Kashmir have faced state action since 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Beyond Kashmir, many journalists critical of the government or of Hindu nationalism have faced legal actions, including high-profile journalists Rana Ayyub, and Siddique Kappan (Perrigo, 2021). These journalists have been targeted by social media mobs who also pressure their employers to terminate their employment. Scholars have noted the existence of a "close and interactive relationship between the so-called mob represented by these citizens and the state" (Bhat & Chadha, 2022).

## Reputational attacks led by governing party and supporters

Respondents from India reported high frequencies of reputational attacks overall, with 56% facing at least weekly reputational attacks targeting them as individuals.

76% of respondents identified the national governing party or government as a source of reputational attacks, followed by hyper-partisan news media (52%), sub-national ruling parties or governments (36%), civil society groups (36%), and extremist organizations (35%). Extensive research has shown that there is a nexus between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party at national and state levels, the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS (Prime Minister Modi was formerly a senior RSS member), and those who support the Hindu nationalist agenda (Bhat and Chadha 2022, 2020). Hindu nationalism, as scholars have pointed out, rejects the constitutionally-enshrined secularism of the Indian republic and promotes India as a Hindu

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28. Based on 66 completed surveys by journalists in India. 35% identified as women, 61% as men, and 5% preferring not to say. 39% identified as belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic and/or religious groups. 61% reported they are employed full-time by one organization, and the remainder work free-lance or part-time. Respondents were most likely to describe themselves as working in print journalism (61%) or online-only news outlets (31%), with fewer working in TV (20%) or radio (13%). Their news organizations were national in reach 57%, followed by transnational (24%), regional in India (16%), or local (3%). We conducted follow-up interviews with five Indian journalists and spoke to three press freedom advocates.

country where Muslims and Christians are ‘outsiders.’ Large sections of the media in India today have amplified this divisive propaganda, while those that resist it are seen as enemies.

Journalist and author Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, a biographer of India’s prime minister, said that Modi has long promoted the narrative that journalists critical of the government, especially the English-language press, are part of an “unholy alliance between liberals, communists, dynastic supporters, and enemies of India outside the border, are all hand-in-glove to destabilize the government, the leader, and thereby the people.”

At the same time, some anti-establishment journalists label others as lapdogs of the regime, further undermining the credibility of the media.

## Impacts of Reputational Attacks

Journalists in India face high levels of legal repression (IPI, 2023). 58% of respondents (38 of 66) had faced some form of legal repression in their careers, including civil lawsuits (44%) and arrest or criminal actions (39%).

Press freedom advocates we spoke with suggested that the Indian government tested new mechanisms of harassment and legal repression on independent journalists in Kashmir before deploying them throughout India. Echoing those remarks, a Kashmir-based journalist wrote, “If Mr. Modi succeeds in introducing the Kashmir model of information control to the rest of the country, it won’t be just press freedom that is at risk, but Indian democracy itself” (Bhasin, 2023).

“The reporters who write for us are often threatened, especially in Kashmir. Once, a police officer detained our reporter for five hours, intimidated and slapped him. While he was holding him, he called me and accused us of publishing fake news (the only problem he could point to was a misidentified building of his headquarters in a photograph) and demanded we change a headline, which we had never done but did for the first time because our reporter was at risk,” said one of the interviewees.

In the Indian-administered Kashmir region, this same journalist said, cases filed against journalists are often accompanied by illegal raids on their houses. Journalists’ families have been harassed, too, with phone calls from police and other security forces seeking to intimidate the journalists. “All this has escalated,” he said. “It is unfolding as we speak.”

Another interviewee, a Dalit journalist, said she had had two Delhi Police Special Cell officers show up at her home during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, telling her to report to the local police station. “I got a UAPA (India’s anti-terror law) notice that had so

many charges written on it,” she said in an interview. The state did not end up charging her, but she said that the episode has had a chilling effect.

Six respondents had been physically assaulted in the preceding year (four of these received at least weekly reputational attacks, two did not). Respondents who reported at least weekly reputational attacks were more likely to receive online and offline threats of violence and to face legal repression in the last two years.

63% of respondents reported harm to their mental health, 23% relocated to avoid risks, and 11% reported harm to their physical health. These figures did not vary significantly between journalists, regardless of how frequently their reputations were attacked. The most common professional impact of reputational attacks was for journalists to change or reduce reporting on certain issues to avoid attacks (42%) and to seriously consider quitting journalism (29%).

One respondent said the attacks **“made it difficult to interact with and trust people outside of the profession, in the society.”** Another was “cautious in answering phone calls, responding to abuse or attacks on social media” and kept a close watch on his loved ones.

A third journalist wrote that his profession has become “more dangerous,” and that “scores of colleagues have had criminal cases filed against them merely for writing stories; some are in jail; a few charged under a draconian anti-terrorism law or preventive detention law that makes bail either very difficult (the former) or impossible (the latter). Others have endured tax raids, been stopped from flying abroad, and been subjected to other harassment. You tend to think the knock on the door will come, sooner than later.”

## How reputational attacks and impacts are related to identity

Identity also formed a basis for reputational attacks. 47% of respondents reported that they experienced at least monthly reputational attacks targeting their race, ethnicity, and/or religion.

A 2022 Stimson Center survey of the Indian public found that the majority expressed anti-Muslim sentiments – and that these sentiments were more common among Modi’s supporters (Clary et al., 2022). Reports suggest Muslim journalists critical of the prime minister or the BJP government are often branded as anti-national, anti-Hindu, or anti-India (Ghosh, 2022).

Terms like “sickular” (to suggest that secular people are sick) and “presstitute” (a play on the word prostitute) have been used against journalists critical of the government.

Dalit journalists also face caste-based abuse and are derided for being beneficiaries of affirmative action. In some cases, women journalists critical of the government reported receiving rape threats or being stalked (The Wire Staff, 2021), or finding their images used in pornographic deepfake videos (Ayyub, 2018). The recent high-profile cases of Rana Ayyub and Mohammed Zubair – Muslim journalists who have faced legal charges in addition to years of online smear campaigns – illustrate how reputational attacks can be linked to legal repression (Lakshman, 2022; Majumder, 2022b).

“Muslim journalists have a tougher time than non-Muslim. Most of the people eventually convicted tend to be Muslim. And Dalits,” said an Indian journalist whose organization has documented the pervasiveness of this discrimination in legal and reputational attacks.

While survey respondents in India were less likely to report reputational attacks targeting their gender (20% faced such claims at least monthly) than respondents overall, our interviewees and other research sources suggest gender is often a factor.

## Existing and recommended support

Most of our participants said that the existing support mechanisms at the organization level are inadequate, so they did not seek their help. Nearly 40% said they took no action against online reputational attacks, while 31% said they reached out to a colleague or supervisor for help. 29% confided in their friends or family.

Those seeking institutional support reached out to external organizations, such as a press freedom or civil society organizations (22%) or the police or other official authorities (14%). 11% pursued legal action. 15% of respondents said they sought medical or psychological help.

Freelance journalists in particular lack institutional support, said several survey respondents. As freelancer Uday Rana put it, despite “remarkable” independent journalism in India, there “isn’t a lot of institutional strength to back it up.”

Even journalists affiliated with big media outlets lack institutional support, particularly when they face legal actions on top of reputational attacks. “There is no legal protection,” says Harish Pullanoor, India editor for *Quartz*. He says that while journalists in the United States are protected by the First Amendment, “there is nothing in India. Once the government decides to [take legal action against] you, you’re on your own.”

In scenarios like these, journalists may prefer not to report online harassment or cyberbullying, even when they have organizational backing. Another journalist said he stopped posting his views on Twitter due to Hindutva trolls, and “searched and deleted

tweets and [Facebook] posts which had the word Modi or BJP” to avoid trouble. Reputational attacks and the lack of institutional support are pushing many journalists away from the profession. “It is discouraging to journalists who are already working under hostile conditions and are overworked and underpaid,” said one survey respondent.

The CPJ, in partnership with TrustLaw, have created a “Know Your Rights Guide” for Indian journalists to help them understand their rights when faced with police harassment, legal threats, or arrest (CPJ & TrustLaw, 2023).

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