

Executive summary

*[The full report, **Not just words: how reputational attacks harm journalists and undermine press freedom** is available at globalreportingcentre.org/reputational-attacks]*

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%).¹ 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

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.