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UNESCO: Topic #2 - Protecting Perspectives in Journalism

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As per Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has “the right to freedom of opinion and expression.”¹ Yet, in journalism, this right is being jeopardized. There are two aspects of this issue that reinforce each other. Firstly, media and press freedoms are being severely restricted and censored. Secondly, the safety and security of journalists are being threatened. Addressing both these issues is crucial to safeguard the vital role of journalism.

“Media freedom implies the liberty to publish and distribute content on any platform, free from the control, censorship, or harassment of the state.”² Unfortunately, between 2015-2020, there was an 85% decline in this freedom of press worldwide³, with 27 countries experiencing a substantial decline in freedom of expression.⁴ Not only are some governments investing in “online surveillance capabilities to monitor opposition figures, activists, and journalists,”⁵ but in the name of preventing mis- and disinformation online, many regulations and laws are being established, further curbing the media freedoms of journalists and individuals. The freedom of expression is not absolute (meaning that some restrictions on expression are permitted, for example: hate speech or death threats),⁶ however, governments and digital media platforms are abusing this in order to censor individuals without any transparency or accountability.

Apart from these restrictions on freedom of expression, journalists are in a uniquely dangerous position due to their work. Between 2016 and 2021, 455 journalists were killed while on duty, with particularly high incidence rates in Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Arab countries.⁷ This year alone, over 53 journalists have been killed while working, and danger

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380618>, page 44

³ See footnote 2, page 10

⁴ See footnote 2, page 45

⁵ See footnote 2, page 52

⁶ <https://youtu.be/Wg8fVtHPDag?si=F7z33b4P4J11ZH5u>

⁷ <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory>

is only increasing, especially for female journalists.⁸ Despite a decrease in death rates, non-lethal attacks are on the rise, including increased imprisonments,⁹ physical attacks, kidnapping, harassment, threats, harm to family members, and detentions. From January 2019 to June 2022, 759 individual attacks against journalists were reported.¹⁰ Clearly, significant efforts are needed to enhance the safety and protection of journalists and uphold their rights.

Efforts to improve this situation have been ongoing, showing notable progress in recent years. Some of the key advancements have been through research initiatives, action plans, legislation, law enforcement reforms, training, judicial training, advocacy, awareness, and funding.¹¹ Despite this progress, there is still much work ahead.

While researching, please consider:

- What methods for improving the conditions of journalists have been effective? Which have not? How can we use this information to implement better recommendations and regulations for the improvement of media freedom and journalism?
- How can we limit the abuses of power and restrictions seen used by governments?
- How do recent digital advancements play into the rising challenges regarding freedom of expression?
- In what ways do freedom of expression and necessary censorship ostensibly contradict each other? Can a balance be found between these two values?
- Is there a way to hold digital media companies and governments accountable?

Keep in mind that these questions are only here to guide you. Further research regarding this important topic is highly recommended. Remember that you are representing the views of your given country, not your personal opinions, so direct your research accordingly. Additionally, all writing must be your own, and all sources must be cited! All papers will be submitted through TurnItIn to check for plagiarism, which will not be tolerated under any circumstance.

⁸ <https://www.unesco.org/reports/safety-journalists/2022/en>

⁹ See footnote 2, page 83

¹⁰ <https://www.unesco.org/en/freedom-expression-rule-law>

¹¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/un-plan-action?>

Please do not hesitate to email any questions, comments, or concerns to me at rkaplowi@mail.yu.edu. I'm looking forward to meeting all of you and having an awesome time together!

Sincerely,

Ruthie Kaplowitz

Chair, UNESCO

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