

Don't shoot the messenger

by Meike Eijsberg

To many of you, May 3rd was just another Friday. Perhaps you woke up, possibly hungover, just in time to attend your 11AM class. Perhaps you resurrected from a night of studying in Voltaire. But in the meantime, 174 journalists spend that day jailed for the simple act of reporting the truth. May 3rd is the day to raise awareness about these individuals and the media environment they live and report in: it's World Press Freedom Day.

The importance of press freedom

Freedom of the press is the principle that communication and expression through various media should be considered a right to be exercised freely. It's important because a free press monitors the actions of the government and therefore plays a vital role in informing citizens about public affairs. Unfortunately, this right is not globally recognized. In fact, media independence is under threat in every region of the world. According to *Reporters Sans Frontières* (RSF), who publishes the World Press Freedom Index every year, only one fourth of the world falls within the 'good situation' or 'satisfactory situation'. In percentages, that means only 9% of humankind lives in a country where press freedom is 'good'.

Violence and abuse

The bad news is: things are not improving. In the worldwide movement away from democracy, the most vulnerable institution, arguably, is the free press, and the most disposable people are journalists. Daniel Pearl, Marie Colvin and Jamal Khashoggi are only a few of the 1148 journalists killed in the last 20 years. Most of you will probably also remember the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks of 2015, when 9 media workers of the French satirical magazine were killed and several others were wounded. These figures are increasing, whilst the number of headlines are decreasing.

A worsening worldwide issue

Journalists are not only being targeted by terror-

ists or in war. All over the world, press freedom is deteriorating due to factors such as rising populism and expanding authoritarianism. Take the United States for example. As of 2019, the country has joined the ranks of 'problematic' countries. The reason?

A certain fake-tanned, blond-haired President, known for his

the media news," or "alternative facts." Trump attempted to block

Even here in the Netherlands press freedom is deteriorating. According to a NVJ (Dutch Union for Journalists) survey, 392 of the 638 journalists (61%) who completed the survey, have been confronted with threats in their professional practice in recent years.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands still resides in the top-5 of the World Press Freedom Index. The situation elsewhere is much worse. In India, for instance, journalists critical of Hindu nationalism are subject to online harassment campaigns, and 6 of them have been murdered. It's worse in Mexico, which is considered the world's deadliest country for the media. Here, many deaths are not even reported because the government is usually

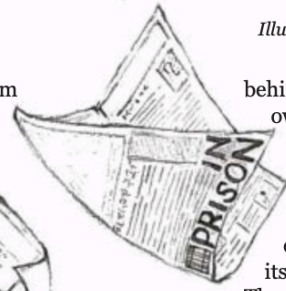


Illustration © Sandra van der Meer

behind it. In Russia, the state owns and excessively controls more than 60 percent of the country's 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals. China is another extreme case, known for its relentless censorship.

The CCP and the government continue to maintain ultimate authority over all published, online and broadcast material. Officially, only state-run media outlets have government approval to cover CCP leaders or other topics deemed "sensitive."

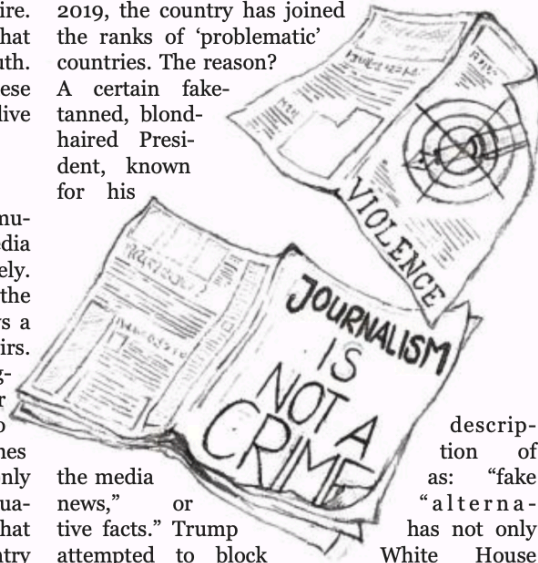
Prospects and solutions

Are there any solutions? According to press freedom NGOs, such as RSF and the Committee to Protect Journalists, there is hope. They regularly organize campaigns to raise awareness and constantly lobby various international bodies. Ultimately, their goal is the creation of United Nations Special Representative for the Safety of Journalists.

In the meantime, these NGOs are also assisting journalists directly by providing bulletproof vests and helmets for those who are entering a high risk environment. RSF has even created a safety guide for these reporters, as well as an online survival kit to teach how to circumvent censorship.

Although these actions and campaigns are truly wonderful, what we need above all are courageous reporters to continue pursuing the work they do. Just last week, two journalists from Reuters were released from Myanmar, bringing the aforementioned number down to 172. Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo spent 500 days in prison and were finally cleared after a presidential amnesty. Will they stop reporting? No. In fact, Wa Lone told reporters he can't wait to go back to the newsroom.

What can *you* do? Previously mentioned NGOs always accept donations and so does your country's journalist union. Contribute, and support those who risk their lives to bring us the truth.



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