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WORLD TRENDS IN

Freedom of Expression and Media Development

GLOBAL REPORT 2022/2025



Journalism: Shaping a World at Peace

Executive Summary



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The *2025 World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* offers a deep dive into the state of freedom of expression and media development over the past four years (2022–2025). Drawing on original research and data-driven insights, it examines global shifts through two critical lenses: information as a public good and information integrity. The findings reveal that these values are under unprecedented pressure, threatening the world's ability to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.10 (public access to information and fundamental freedoms) by 2030. This erosion not only endangers that target but also casts a long shadow over the broader SDG agenda, where progress depends on reliable, accessible information.

Press freedom has experienced its steepest decline since 2012. V-Dem's Global Freedom of Expression Index has dropped by 10% over the past 10 years, a stark indicator of how press freedom is eroding despite isolated countertrends.

This decline mirrors broader patterns: weakened parliaments and judicial institutions, falling levels of public trust, and deepening polarization. It has also coincided with setbacks in equality, alongside rising hostility toward environmental journalists, scientists, and researchers.

At the same time, the growing dominance of major technology companies – and the consequences of their shifting policies and practices – have created fertile ground for hate speech and disinformation to spread online. These dynamics directly affect the information ecosystems relied upon by vulnerable groups, including children and teenagers.

Taken together, these political, social, and commercial pressures are undermining media freedom, plurality, and diversity. Over the past two years, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has further sidelined the value of the media. At the same time, audiences are inundated with entertainment and other content often encompassing cultural and

gender biases. Chat interfaces optimized for user engagement amplify this trend, pushing their content in the wider information ecosystem ahead of public interest journalism and professional news.

The Report also details escalating threats to journalists' safety, with women journalists disproportionately targeted. It underscores the growing weaponization of legislation to suppress independent journalism and the alarming rise in journalists being forced into exile. Adding to this, the Report draws attention to the deepening existential crisis of media viability.

Finally, the findings spotlight: the lack of momentum and resources for awareness-raising through to media and information literacy (MIL), leaving societies ill-equipped to navigate today's complex information environment.

At the same time, the Report highlights countercurrents pushing back against these negative trends. Between 2020 and 2025, an estimated 1.5 billion people gained access to social media and messaging platforms, expanding opportunities for citizens to engage with information as a public good.

Other encouraging developments include the rise of collaborative investigative journalism, the steady growth of paid news subscriptions, an increased participative governance of online content, and multistakeholder initiatives to counter climate disinformation.

In another positive example, a large tech company has joined forces with content creators, including media outlets, to block unauthorized AI bots from scraping their work, offering a rare alignment of corporate power and media protection.

Taken as a whole, the narrative unpacks what these intertwined negative and positive trends mean for elections, climate action, young people, and the SDGs. It concludes by underscoring the critical need to strengthen initiatives that advance both information integrity and information as a public good. The core message is clear: without renewed, multi-stakeholder governance of communications, firmly rooted in freedom of expression and access to information, regressive trends will continue to dominate.

By the numbers: Freedom of expression in crisis

THE BIG PICTURE

Global decline

Freedom of Expression Index has **dropped**

-10% since 2012.



A historically significant & unprecedented shift. Comparable contractions occurred only during extraordinary periods, including World War I, the rise of authoritarianism until the end of World War II, and the Cold War.

Democracy shrinking



For the first time in 20 years, non-democratic regimes **outnumber** democracies.

72%

of the world's population now lives under

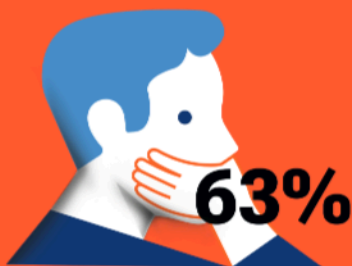
non-democratic ruling

— the highest level since 1978.



MEDIA UNDER PRESSURE

Self-censorship **up**



63%

since 2012 (+4.83% each year).

Governments intensified efforts to control & restrict the media by



48%
in 12 years.

Criminal defamation laws still exist in



160
states.



jailed in 2024 — near record high.

VIOLENCE & THREATS AGAINST JOURNALISTS

310 journalists
killed in the last 3.5 years.



85% of cases
of killed journalists
unresolved in 2024.



46
environmental
journalists murdered
since 2010
only 6 convictions.



WOMEN JOURNALISTS AT RISK

24 women journalists killed
(2022 – Sept. 2025).



Out of **283** attacks studied:
online harassment was
the **most common** (2023).



73%
of women journalists
reported **digital attacks**
(2020 survey).



41%
experienced verbal
and/or physical sexual
harassment, yet only
1 in 5 reported it.



SOURCE UNESCO 2025. World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2022-2025. Infographic. Data adapted from UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists; UNESCO The Chilling, 2021; PROLEDI, Universidad de Costa Rica, 2025; European Center for Press and Media Freedom, 2024 and WAN-IFRA, 2022

TRUST & INFORMATION CRISIS

7 out of 10 people believe journalists, governments & business leaders **deliberately** mislead the public.



67% of users encounter online hate speech; LGBTQI people (33%) & racial/ethnic minorities are the **most targeted**.

9 in 10 voters in 16 countries fear disinformation **will affect elections**.



BIG TECH & MEDIA ECONOMY

Nearly **1/3** of the world lacked Internet access in 2024.



Meta, Amazon, Alphabet control

50%+

of recorded global ad spending.



Only

0.5%

of overseas development aid went to **media & information**. (2016-2022)



CLIMATE & INFORMATION WARS

Data centers

1.5% of global electricity use
(expected to double by 2030).



From 2021 to 2024, climate denial posts increased by 24% and 40% across major digital platforms.



Environmental journalists under attack

— rising trend in assaults and murders.

At least **749** journalists reporting on environmental issues were attacked in **89 countries** between 2009 and 2023.



SOURCE UNESCO 2025. World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2022-2025. Infographic. Data adapted from Chen, Sophia. Nature, 2025; Tortoise Media. Hot Air Explore Tool and UNESCO, Press and planet in danger, 2024.

Countertrends Shaping AI, Media & Information

POSITIVE MEDIA & GOVERNANCE TRENDS

Investigative collaboration:

Surge in cross-border investigative journalism.

Subscriptions up:

More people are paying for online news.

Participatory governance:

UNESCO's *Social Media 4 Peace Project* and similar initiatives strengthen inclusive content governance.



EXPANDING ACCESS & EXPRESSION



1.5 billion people gained access to social media and messaging platforms between 2020-2025

COMMUNITY MEDIA RECOGNITION



Of 194 countries, **96 (49%)** now legally recognize community media.

Among these countries

More than

3/4

provided some form of **financial support** - most commonly through reduced license or signal transmission fees.

Over

1/3

offered **direct funding**.



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As the world enters the last five years to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the *2022/2025 World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development* offers a timely analysis of global trends in our information environment. It frames the analysis around two key principles: the need to ensure information as a public good and to ensure information integrity, which have both come under unprecedented threats. These mounting pressures are further compounded by the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which has impacted how information is produced, and which narratives are circulated in our information ecosystems.

Since 2012, global levels of freedom of expression have declined by around 10%, marking a significant decline in press freedom despite some encouraging countertrends, including steps towards strengthening media viability, greater recognition of community radio, and increasing the resilience of investigative journalism. This Report examines these key developments over the past four years combining data analysis and insights from internationally recognized experts to identify global trends. While the Report highlights the serious challenges to media freedoms worldwide, it also makes a compelling case for the essential role of journalism in shaping a world at peace.



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