

Journalism on the Front Line: Cyber-Physical Precarity and Democratic Backsliding in the United States



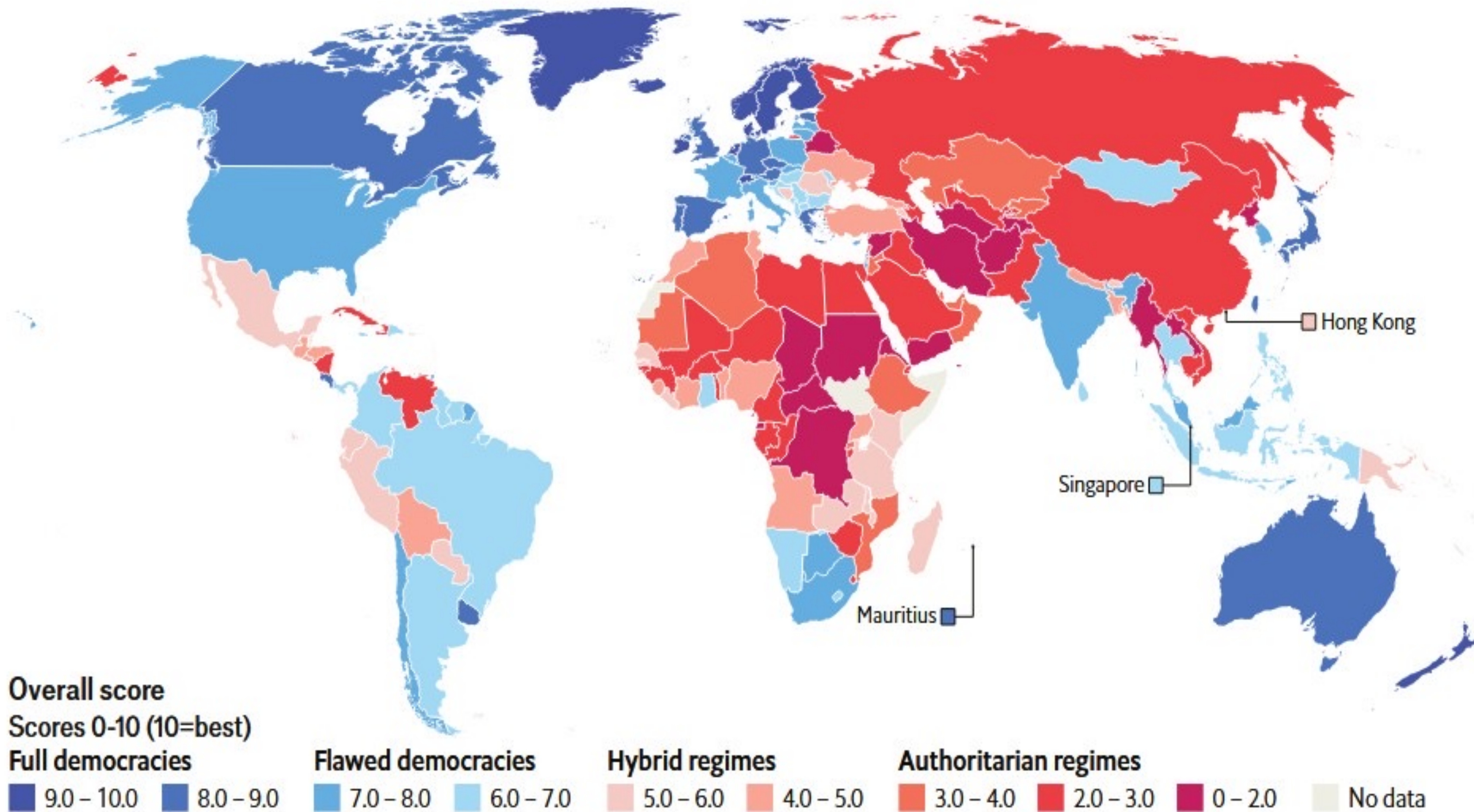
Jon Gerberg/The Post

Dr. Jennifer R. Henrichsen



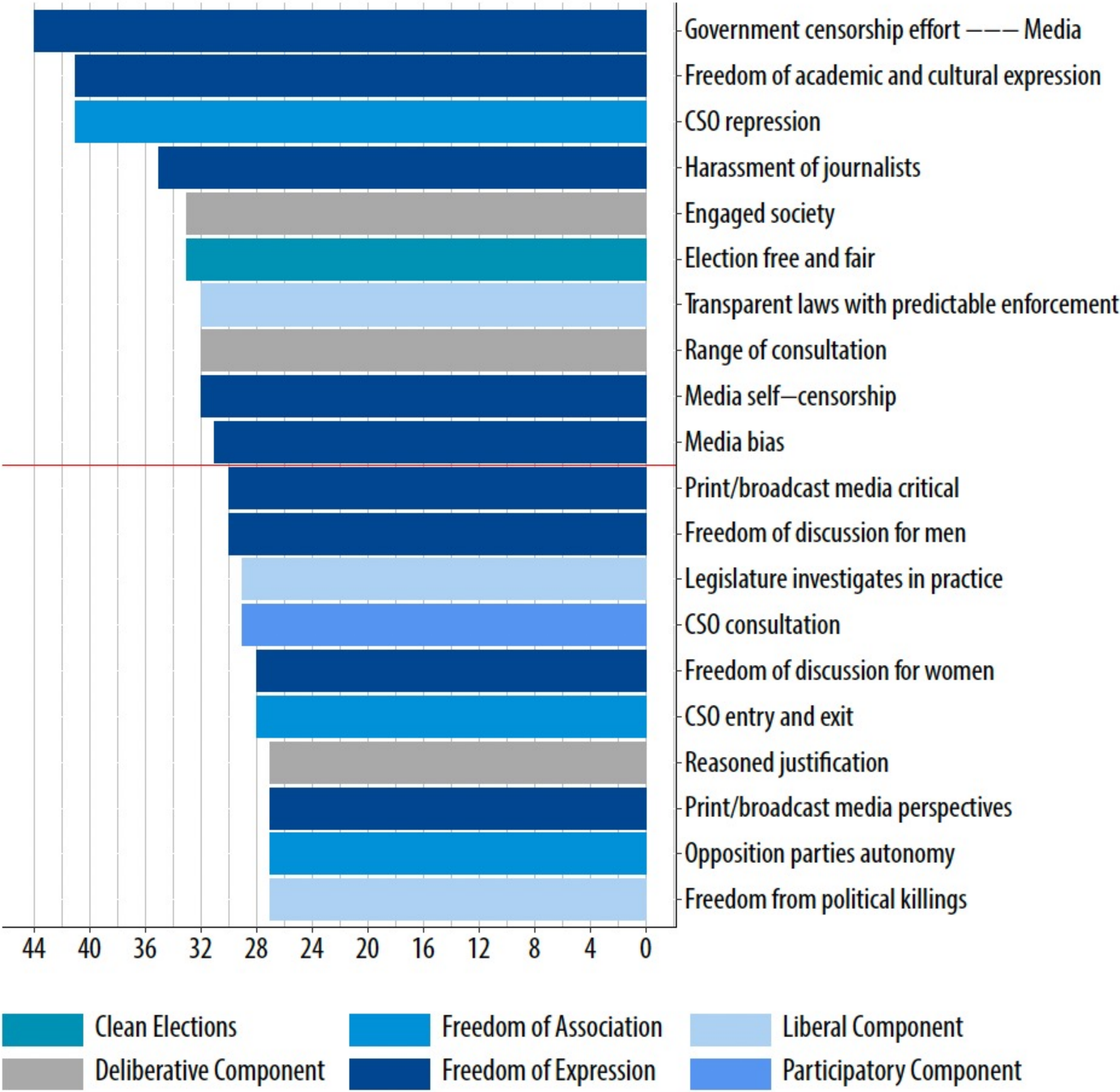
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Edward R. Murrow
College of Communication

Democracy Index 2024, global map by regime type

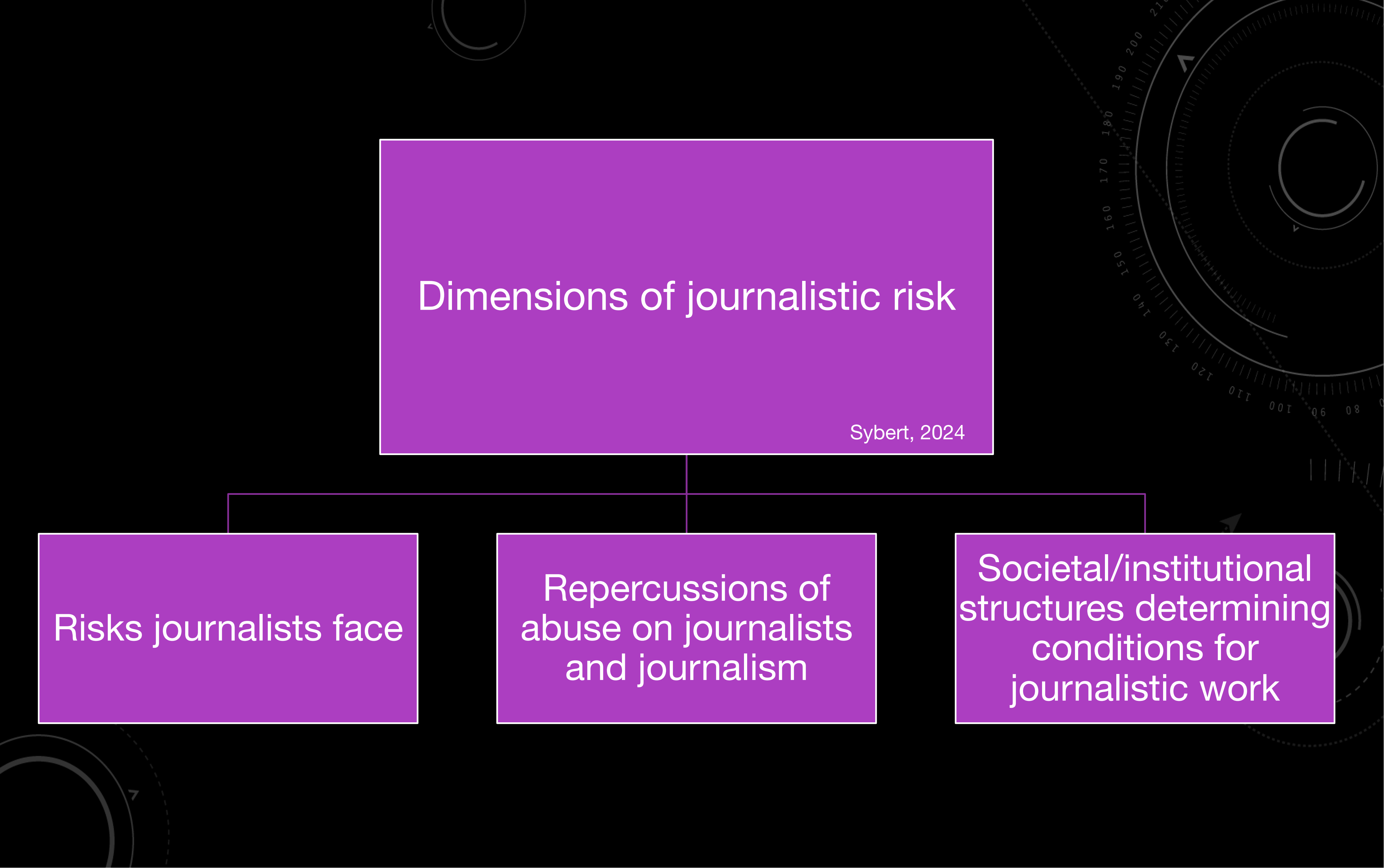


Source: EIU.

FIGURE 8. TOP 20 DECLINING INDICATORS, 2014–2024



Dimensions of journalistic risk



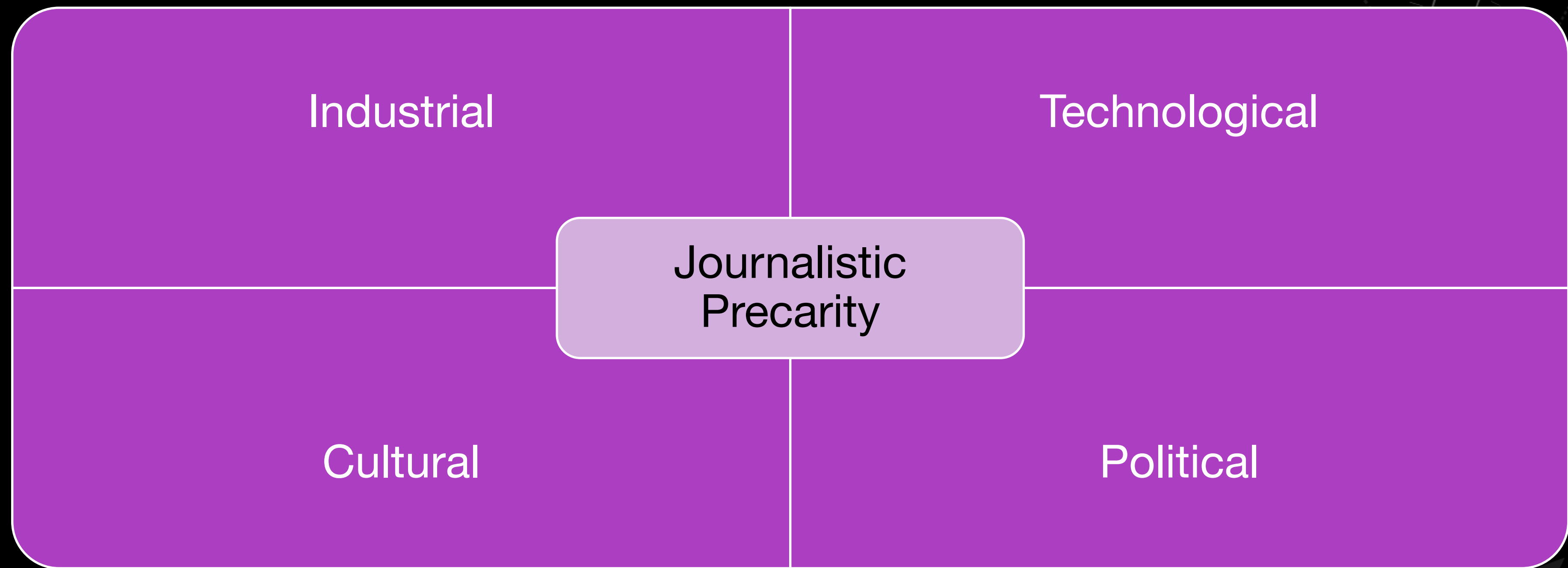
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graph TD; A[Dimensions of journalistic risk] --- B[Risks journalists face]; A --- C[Repercussions of abuse on journalists and journalism]; A --- D[Societal/institutional structures determining conditions for journalistic work]
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Sybert, 2024

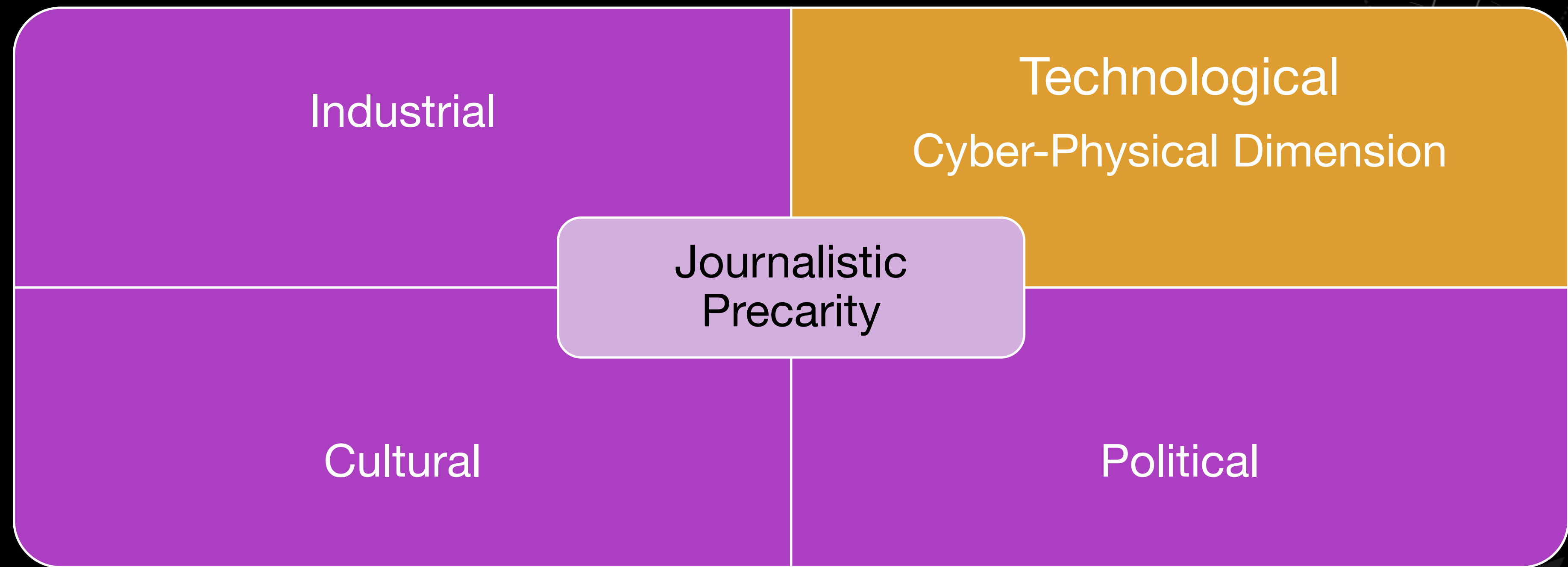
Risks journalists face

Repercussions of
abuse on journalists
and journalism

Societal/institutional
structures determining
conditions for
journalistic work



Journalistic Precarity: The uneven distribution of objective and subjective insecurity in newswork
(Sybert, 2024)



Journalistic Precarity: The uneven distribution of objective and subjective insecurity in newswork
(Sybert, 2024)

The Darkening Tide of Digital Repression and the Risks of Journalistic Reluctance (under review with Columbia University Press)

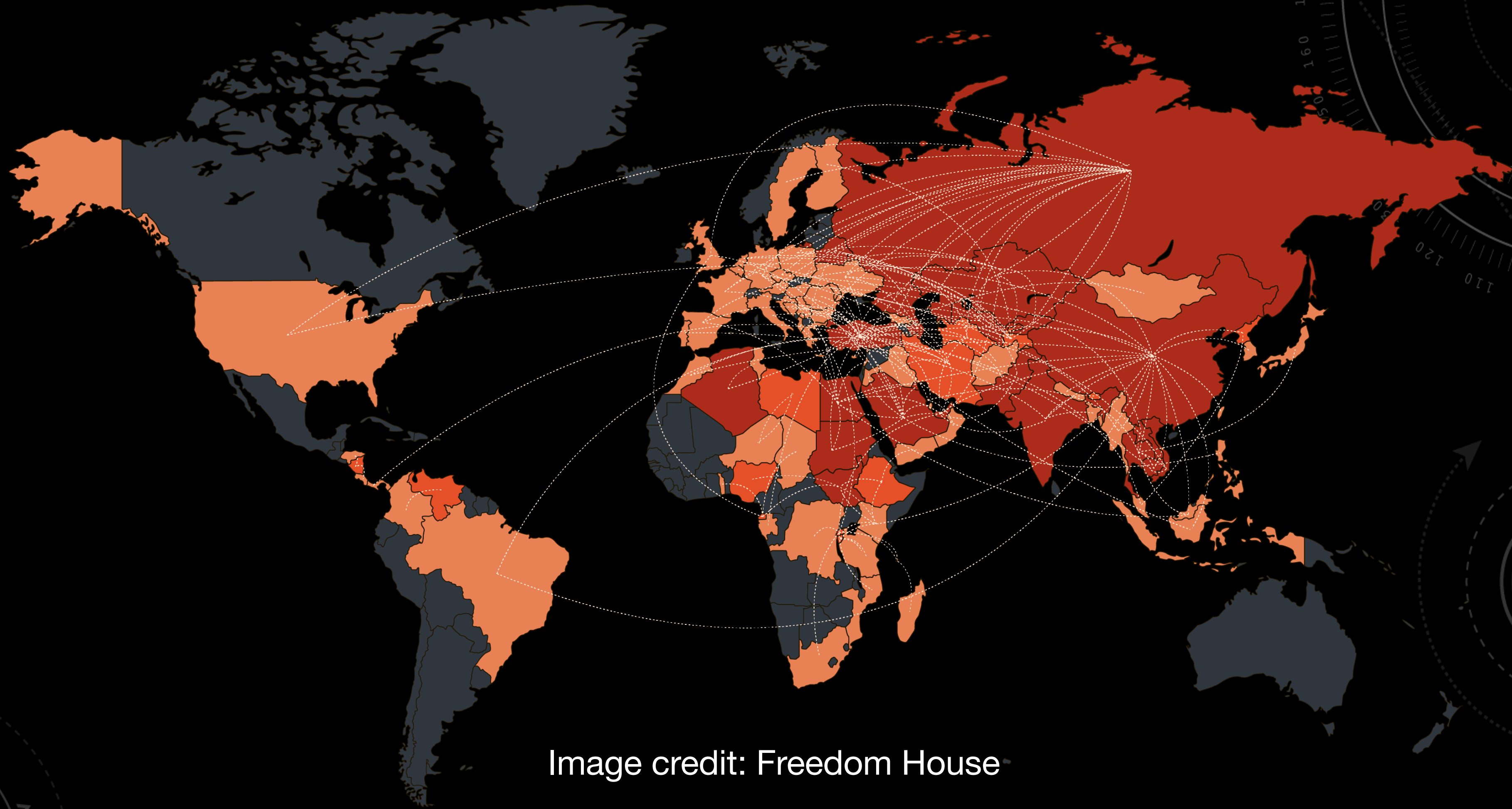


Image credit: Freedom House

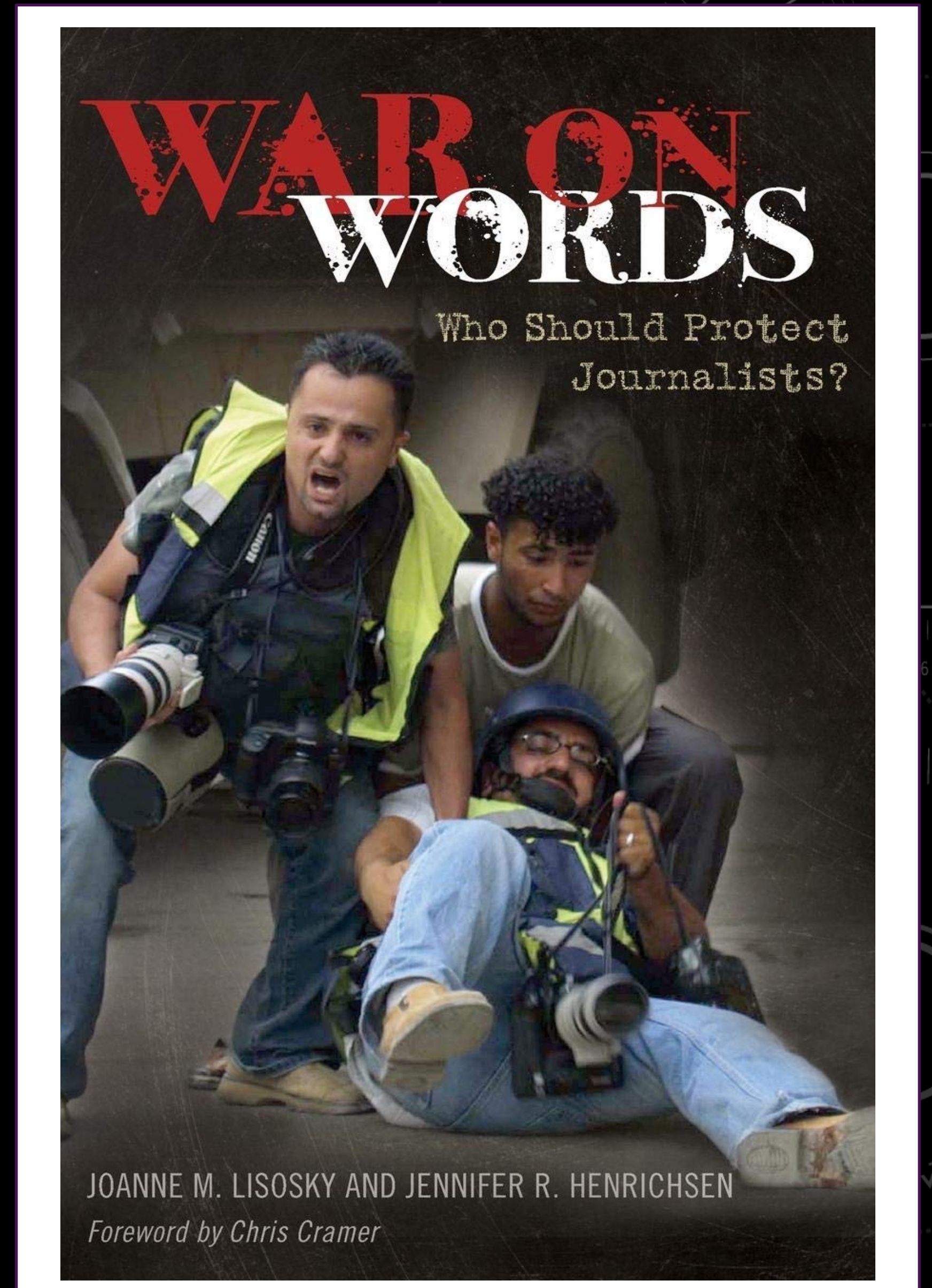
Risks Journalists Face Cyber-Physical Dimension

Journalists are being murdered around the world in response to their work

Local journalists targeted > foreign correspondents

Majority of journalistic murders go unpunished (i.e., widespread impunity)

Current safety strategies insufficient

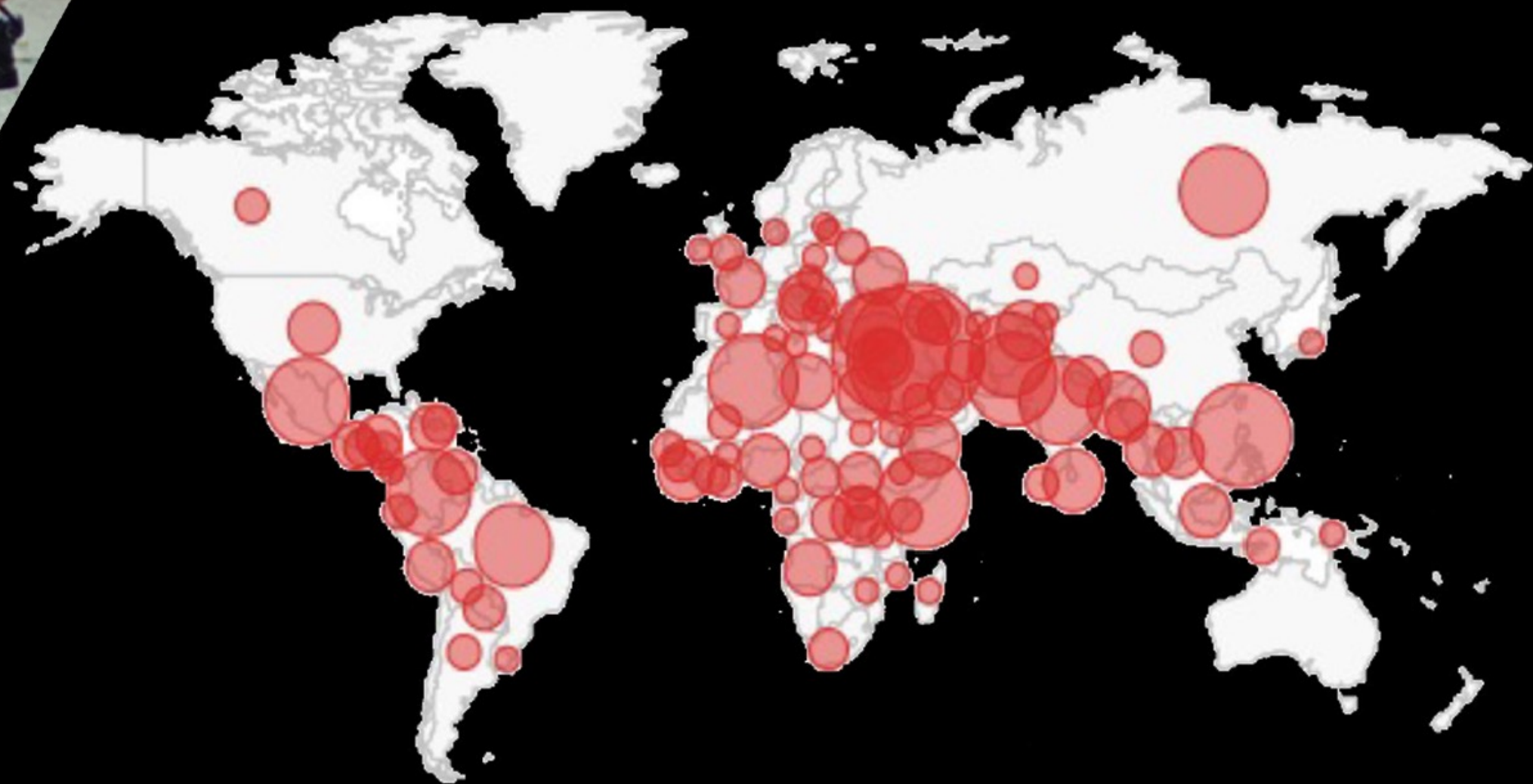


Lisosky, J. M., & Henrichsen, J. R. (2011). *War on words: Who should protect journalists?* Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Press.

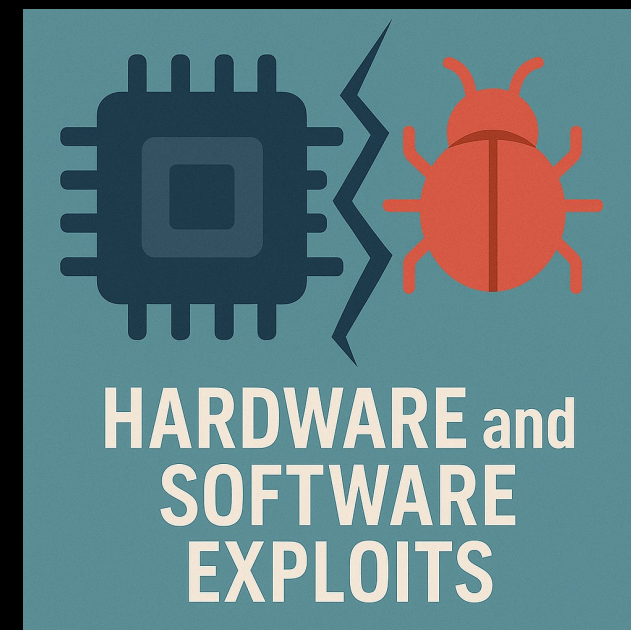
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JOURNALISTS KILLED

1992 - 2026
Motive Confirmed
(Committee to Protect
Journalists)



Risks Journalists Face Cyber-Physical Dimension



Henrichsen, J. R., Betz, M., & Lisosky, J. M. (2015).
Building digital safety for journalism: A survey of selected issues.
UNESCO.

Risks Journalists Face: Cyber-Physical Dimension



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mob Censorship: Online Harassment of US Journalists in Times of Digital Hate and Populism

Silvio Waisbord 

Pages 1030-1046 | Published online: 24 Sep 2020



Research Article

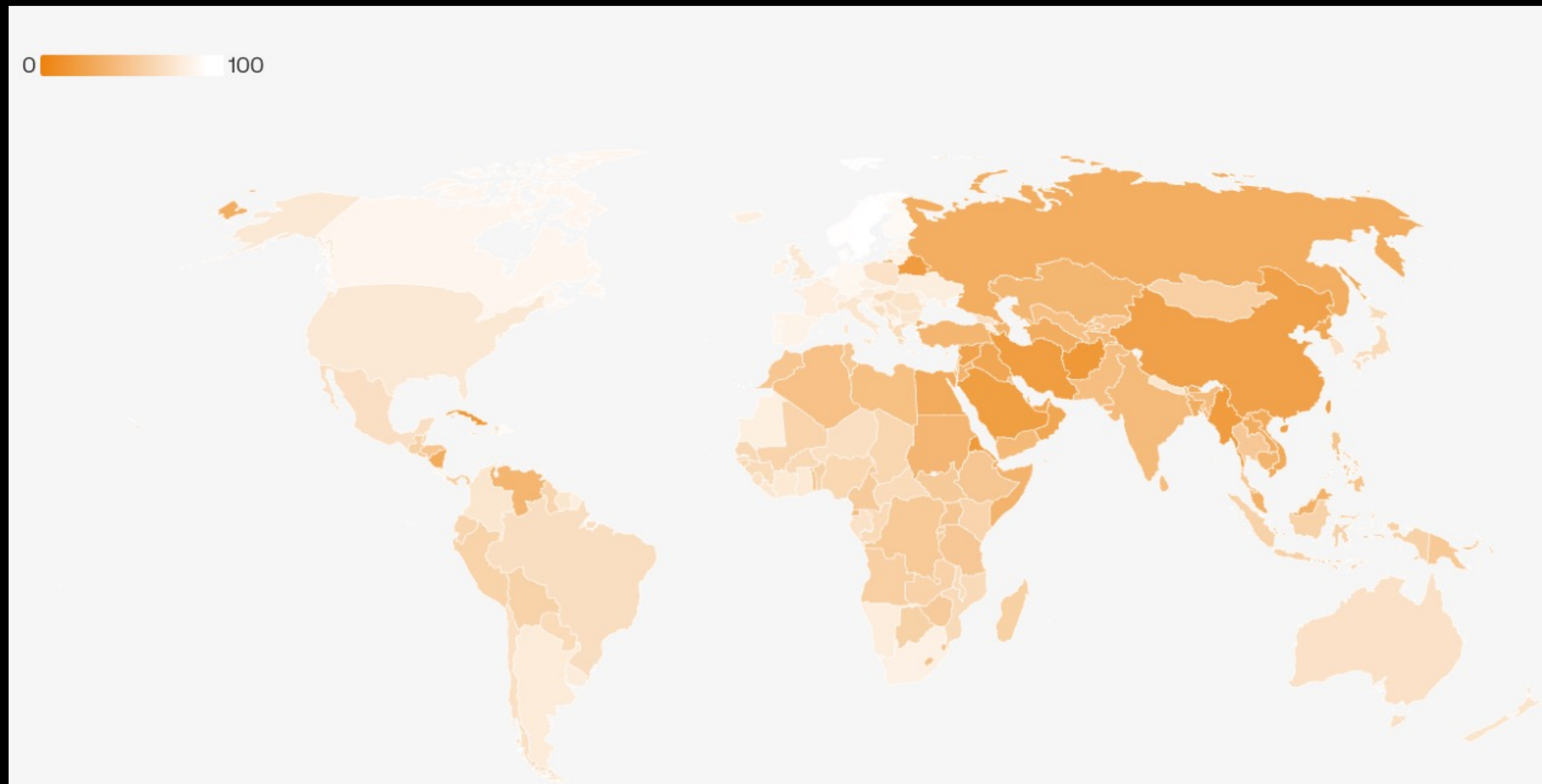
Expanding the Analytical Boundaries of Mob Censorship: How Technology and Infrastructure Enable Novel Threats to Journalists and Strategies for Mitigation

Jennifer R. Henrichsen   & Martin Shelton 

Published online: 14 Sep 2022

Risks Journalists Face: Cyber-Physical Dimension

Media Freedom Under Threat: Legislative Attacks Against Journalists
(Henrichsen et al., under contract with Routledge)



100 (white) represents the highest possible level of press freedom
0 (dark orange) represents the worst press freedom
World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders, 2024

Risks Journalists Face: Cyber-Physical Dimension

Press coverage and normative newsgathering practices about journalist killings → inadvertent complicity with systemic violence; revictimize journalists and constitute discursive violence

JOURNALISM STUDIES
2025, VOL. 26, NO. 10, 1169–1186
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2492731>

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

 Check for updates

Complicity and Revictimization: Discursive Violence in Mexican and U.S. Press Coverage of Mexican Journalist Killings

Elizabeth M. Chambers  and Jennifer R. Henrichsen 

Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

ABSTRACT

With an environment of organized crime, criminal impunity, and precarious press freedom fueling systemic violence against journalists, Mexico consistently ranks as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world. News coverage is a vehicle to publicize this violence and pressure governing bodies into action, but past research suggests Mexican news coverage often ignores the issue of systemic violence against journalists. Research on this coverage is limited and none has considered U.S. coverage of these killings despite close ties between the countries and U.S. contributions to organized crime in Mexico. The objective of this study, then, was to compare how Mexican and U.S. news organizations cover Mexican journalist killings using the framework of metajournalistic discourse to explore whether this coverage revictimizes journalists through discursive violence. Using qualitative text analysis and drawing on critical discourse analysis, the study examined coverage of the 19 journalists and media workers killed in Mexico in 2022 through 77 news articles from Mexican and U.S.-based outlets. Findings revealed how normative newsgathering practices create inadvertent complicity with systemic violence and how denials and dehumanization revictimize journalists, constituting discursive violence. These findings have implications for public awareness, journalistic authority and independence, and policymaker actions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 October 2023
Accepted 8 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Discursive violence;
journalism safety;
metajournalistic discourse;
Mexico; press freedom;
violence against journalists

Repercussions of Abuse on Journalists

Mental health (Blumell, Mulupi & Arafat, 2023)

Self-censorship/departure from field (Ferrier, 2018; Waisbord, 2020)

Journalistic autonomy (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016)

Audience-journalist relationship (Lewis et al., 2020)

Freedom of expression and democratic function (Høiby & Ottosen, 2017; Miller, 2023)



Image credit: WAN-IFRA

Repercussions of Abuse on Journalists

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nowhere to Feel Safe Anymore Mapping Public and Organisational Violence Against Journalists in Belgium

Florence Le Cam  , Manon Libert , Bart Vanhaelewyn  & Sarah Van Leuven 

Published online: 25 Jan 2025

Research Article

“It’s Trauma on a Deadline”: Change, Continuity and Harm After the “Racial Reckoning”

Archie Thomas   & David Nolan 

Published online: 21 Nov 2024

DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Special issue call for papers

BEING WELL AT WORK: ADDRESSING SAFETY, SECURITY, AND WELL-BEING IN DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Global political and technological environments are increasingly fraught with deepening political polarization and the expansion of populist governments, ongoing wars, and the Covid-19 pandemic, while dramatic labor shifts in tech and media companies and extreme volatility in crypto markets reflect intensifying tech disarray; impacting journalistic well-being. The need for journalists to engage in online connective practices through social platforms linked to capitalist social relations on structural and organizational levels, from the web to news organizations, has also contributed to journalists’ poor well-being, with journalists experiencing acute and chronic forms of harassment from audiences that come with few, if any, protections or responses from news organizations (Feinstein et al., 2015; Tandoc et al., 2021).

The effects of this environment on journalists and journalism are significant, and range from self-censorship and mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020) to disconnection and departure from the profession (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022). Together, these conditions, among others, have important implications for the well-being of journalists, which includes “the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning” (CDC, 2018). The condition of well-being also has financial implications for newsrooms: from the recruitment to the retention of journalists who may want to leave the profession altogether (Mathews et al., 2020).

Journalists at news organizations, freelance journalists, and those in managerial, editorial, and production positions have reported dramatic increases in psychological and emotional labor and trauma coupled with declines in their well-being and sense of personal and professional happiness. In a report on Canadian journalists’ mental health, well-being, and trauma, Pearson and Seglins (2022) found an alarming amount of stress in all corners of the news industry. While news organizations lean further into digital and social media platforms for content creation, sharing, and commodification, they also ask journalists to accept the increased blurring of their personal and professional lives across numerous public-facing platforms in an always-on environment that facilitates online and offline harassment as well as identity dilemmas (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022). This special issue will examine these issues from different news actors’ experiences globally, including journalists, managers, policy-makers, and technology companies.

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS



Jennifer R. Henrichsen
Washington State University, USA



Valérie Bélair-Gagnon
University of Minnesota, USA



Avery E. Holton
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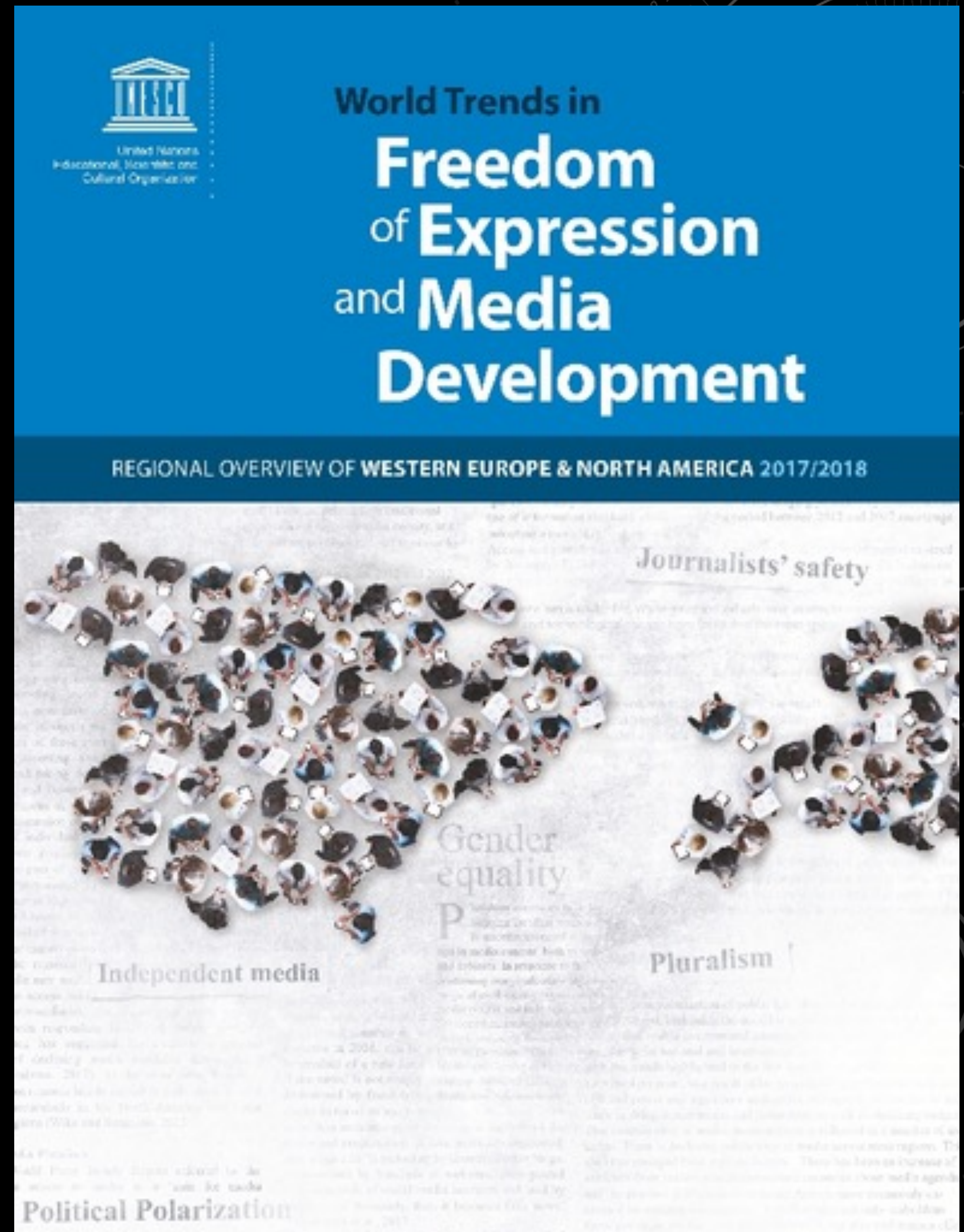
Claudia Mellado
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile



Rebekah Tromble
George Washington University, USA

Societal/Institutional Structures on Journalism Practice and Roles

- Heightened climate of populism and nationalism and governmental measures to monitor 'fake news' can impede media independence
- Media concentration, media convergence, and media capture indicate risks to media pluralism/independence/freedom
- Political turmoil, violent groups, verbal attacks can decrease journalism safety

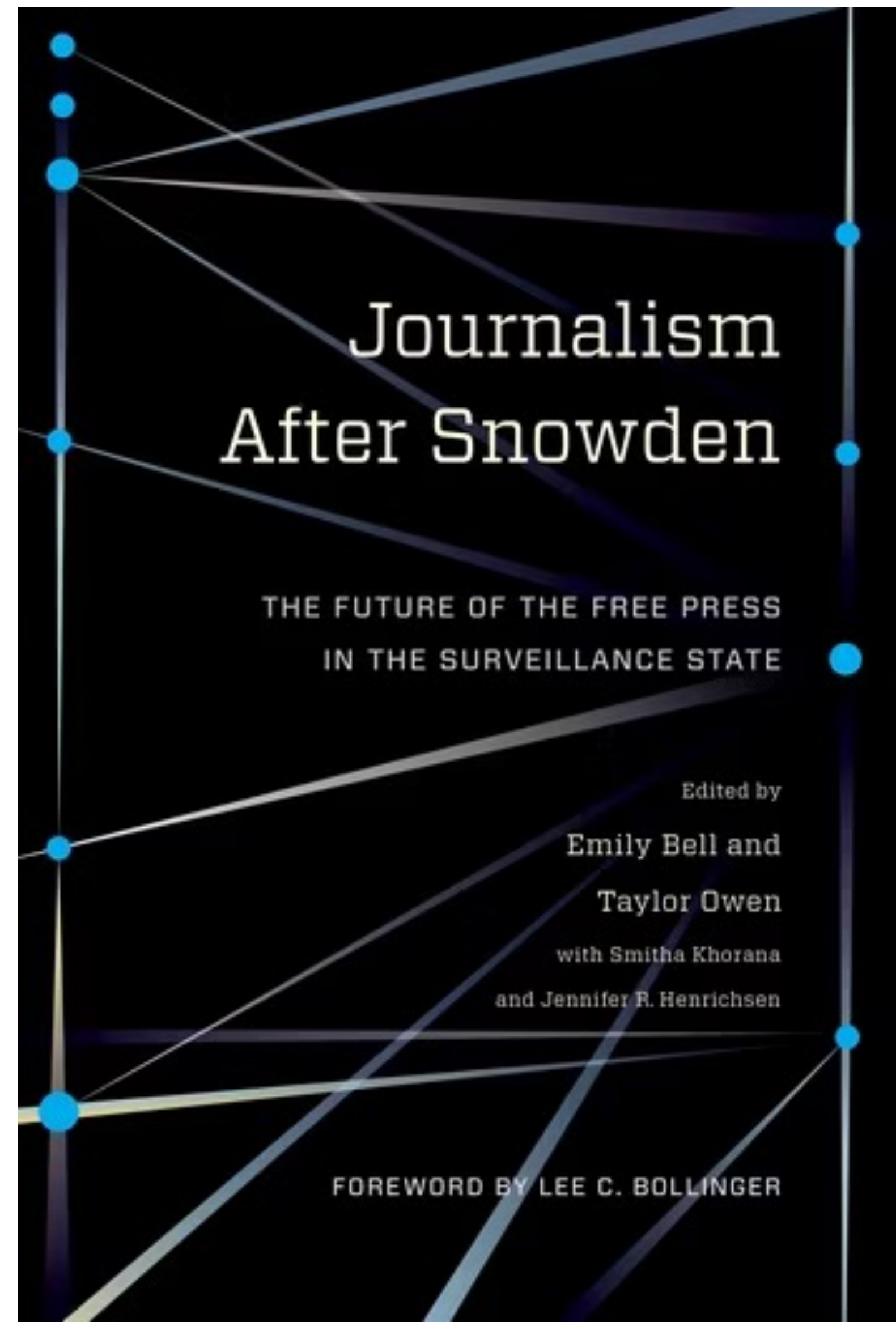


Henrichsen, J. R. (2018). *World trends in freedom of expression and media development: Regional overview of western Europe and North America 2017/2018*. UNESCO.

Societal/Institutional Structures on Journalism Practice and Roles

The political, institutional and physical infrastructure of surveillance and how these elements affect:

- journalism practice (e.g., technical challenges, power dynamics between sources and journalists)
- role of journalism (e.g., curtailment of national security reporting)

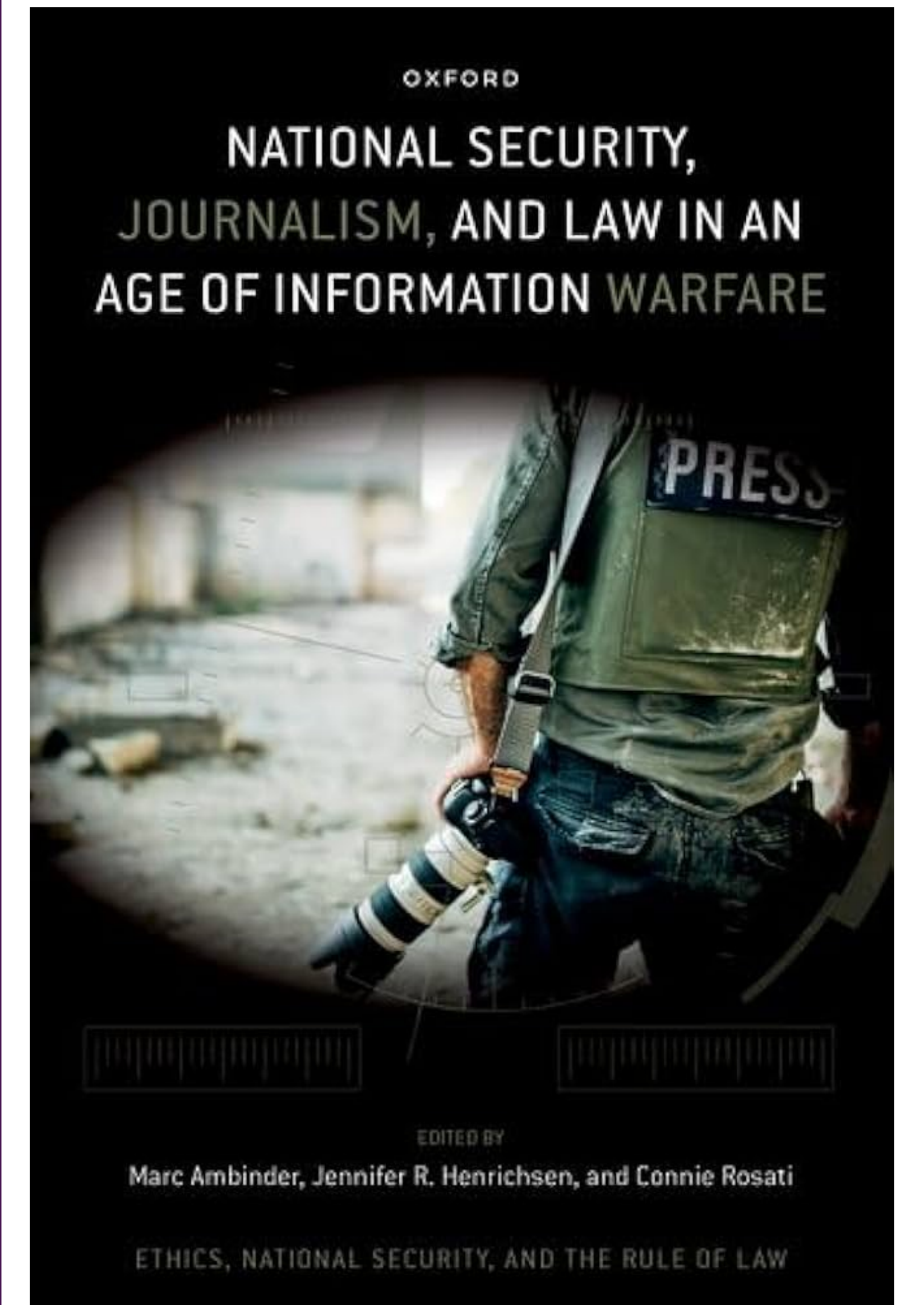


Bell, E., & Owen, T. (Eds.) (with Khorana, S., & **Henrichsen, J. R.**). (2017). *Journalism after Snowden: The future of the free press in the surveillance state*. Columbia University Press.

Societal/Institutional Structures on Journalism Practice and Roles

Journalism at increased risk amidst:

- intensifying and ubiquitous surveillance technologies
- strategic disinformation
- information warfare
- an influx in information and disseminators



Ambinder, M., **Henrichsen, J. R.**, & Rosati, C. (Eds.) (2024). *National security, journalism, and law in the age of information warfare*. Oxford University Press.



NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL

ASSESSMENT

31 October 2022

NICA 2022-22810

(U) Digital Repression Growing Globally, Threatening Freedoms

(U) Key Takeaways

(U) **Scope Note:** This NICA responds to a request from the DNI for an assessment of the implications of governments' use of the Internet and other digital technologies to suppress freedom and control public debate. The assessment focuses on digital repression, which we define as the use of digital information and communication technologies to surveil, manipulate, or coerce individuals or groups to control public debate and prevent challenges to leaders' hold on power. Several related topics are outside the scope of this paper, including governments' efforts to influence public opinion outside their borders, with the exception of their diaspora communities; to shape foreign election outcomes; or to conduct cyber attacks.

(U) We assess that foreign governments are increasingly using digital information and communication technologies to monitor and suppress political debate domestically as well as in their expatriate and diaspora communities abroad. Leaders exercise digital repression because they fear that open debate of political or social topics could jeopardize their hold on power.

- (U) Censorship, misinformation and disinformation, mass surveillance, and invasive spyware are the primary tools of digital repression. During the past few years, governments—including some backsliding democracies—have become adept at using these tools to suppress public debate.
- (U) Digital repression is threatening freedom globally because both autocrats and personalist leaders in backsliding democracies are increasingly using such practices to try to exercise control over domestic content creators and their audiences as well as dissident expatriates.
- (U) The risks are likely to intensify in the coming years in view of the growing use of social media platforms with global reach and debate about how Western social media platforms should think about the challenges.

(U) We assess that states' use of these methods to monitor and limit dissent probably will become even more pervasive, targeted, and complex in the next few years, further constraining freedoms globally. Mitigating against the growth of digital repression probably would require the establishment of unified international norms and protecting the Internet's architecture through coalitions with likeminded governments, civil society, and technology corporations. The development and spread of innovative technologies and approaches that help populations bypass governmental controls could help create openings for individuals to exercise greater digital freedoms within repressive states.

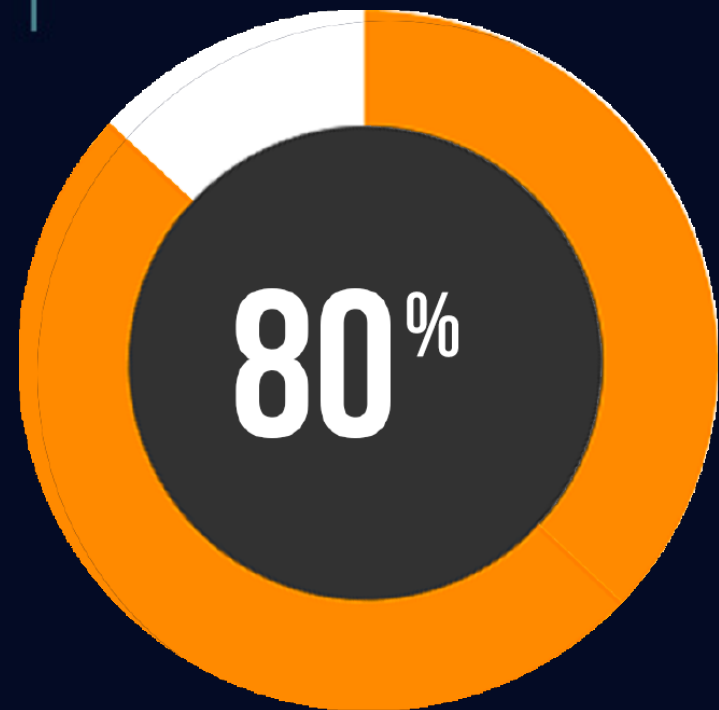
Digital Repression: “The use of information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state.” (Feldstein, 2021)

Digital technologies
produce, track and retain
data, implicating key
tenets of journalistic
practice

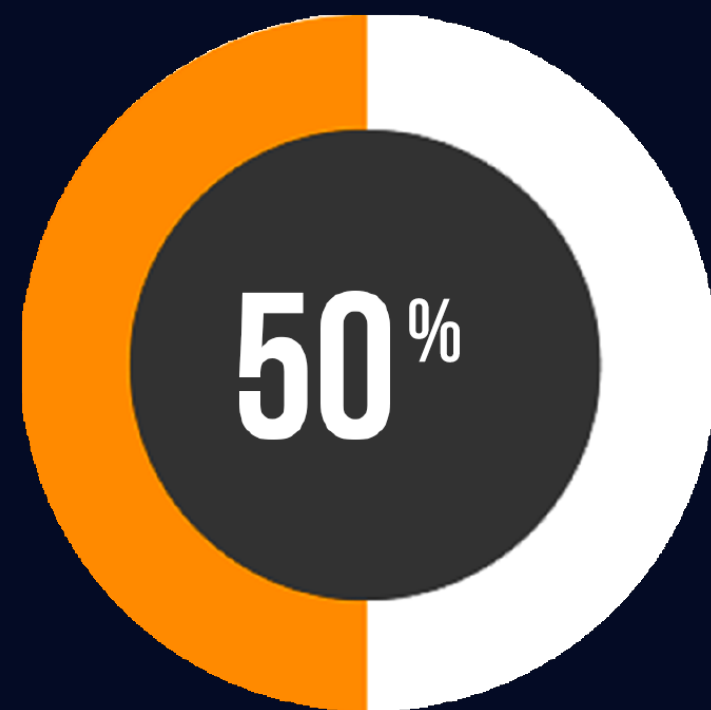




Slides from: *The Post*, 2017



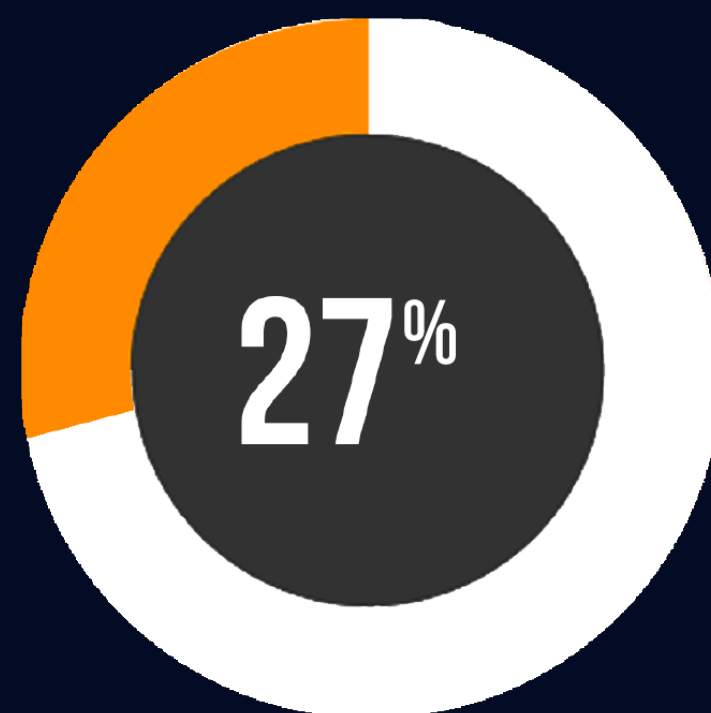
Belief that being a journalist increases likelihood of data collection



Do not use digital security tools to protect information



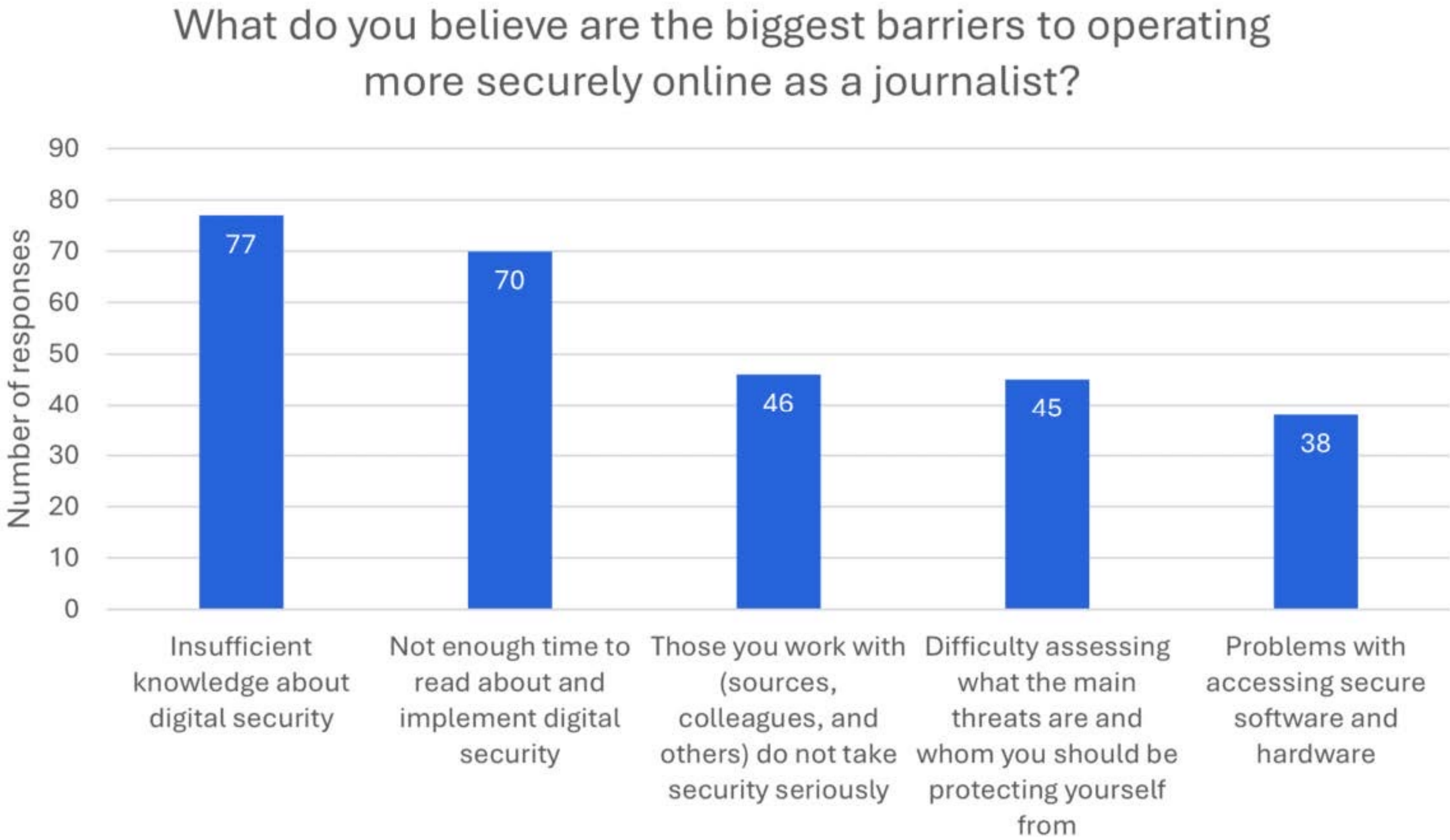
Majority of journalists have not received training about digital security



"Some time" in the past 12 months researching how to improve it

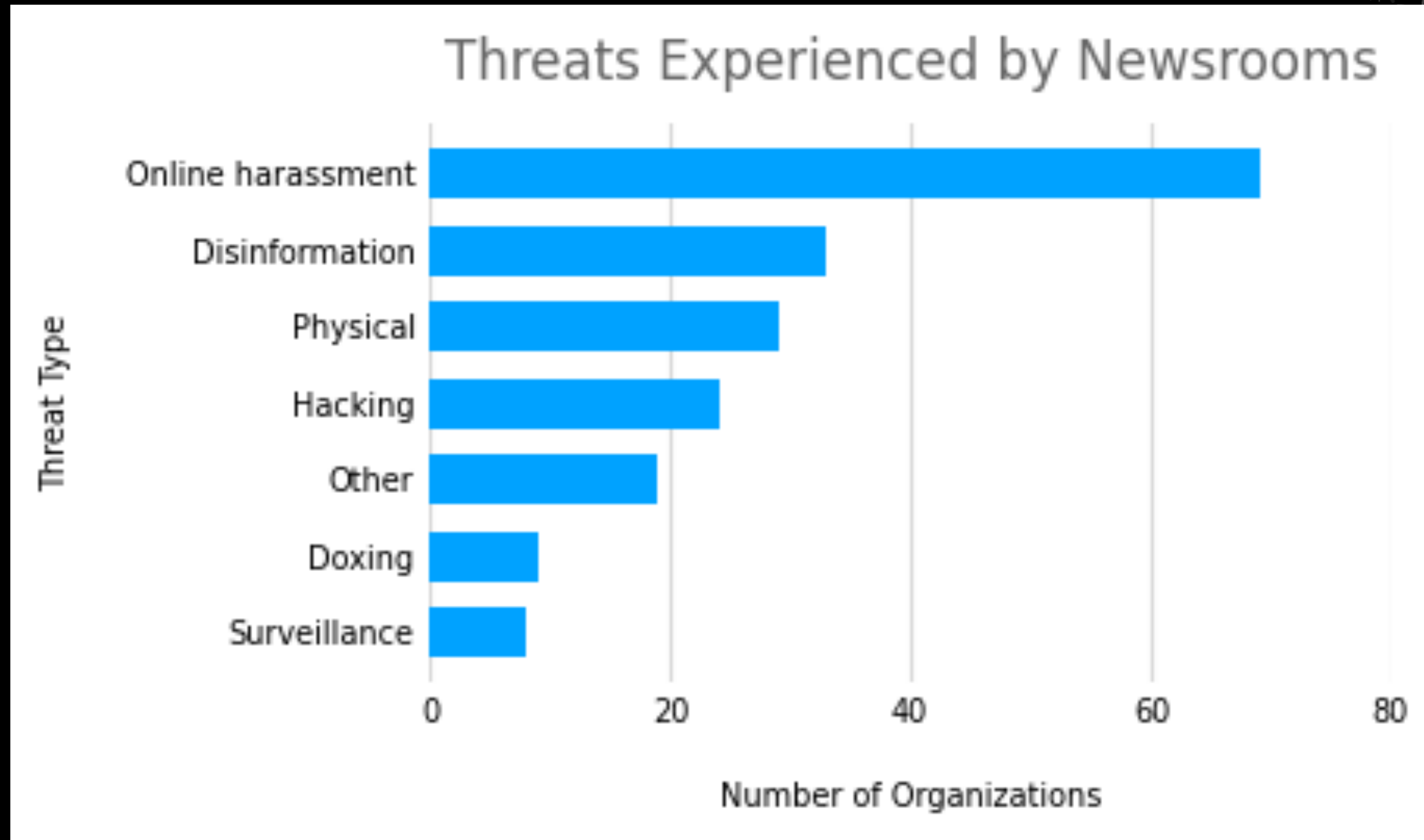


74% of surveyed journalists either agree or strongly agree that they could face risks to their digital safety because of their work



“A Survey on Digital Security Trends Among Journalists in Central and Southeastern Europe”, Internews, 2024

2024 Survey of Washington News Organizations (Henrichsen et al., 2025)



66% of news organizations surveyed said journalists at their organization had experienced safety or security issues within the last five years.



The New York Times

229



The New York Times

Although journalists may feel that being a journalist may make them more vulnerable to information security concerns, it has not inspired significant behavior changes around protective digital technologies.

The Darkening Tide of Digital Repression and the Risks of Journalistic Reluctance (under review with Columbia University Press)

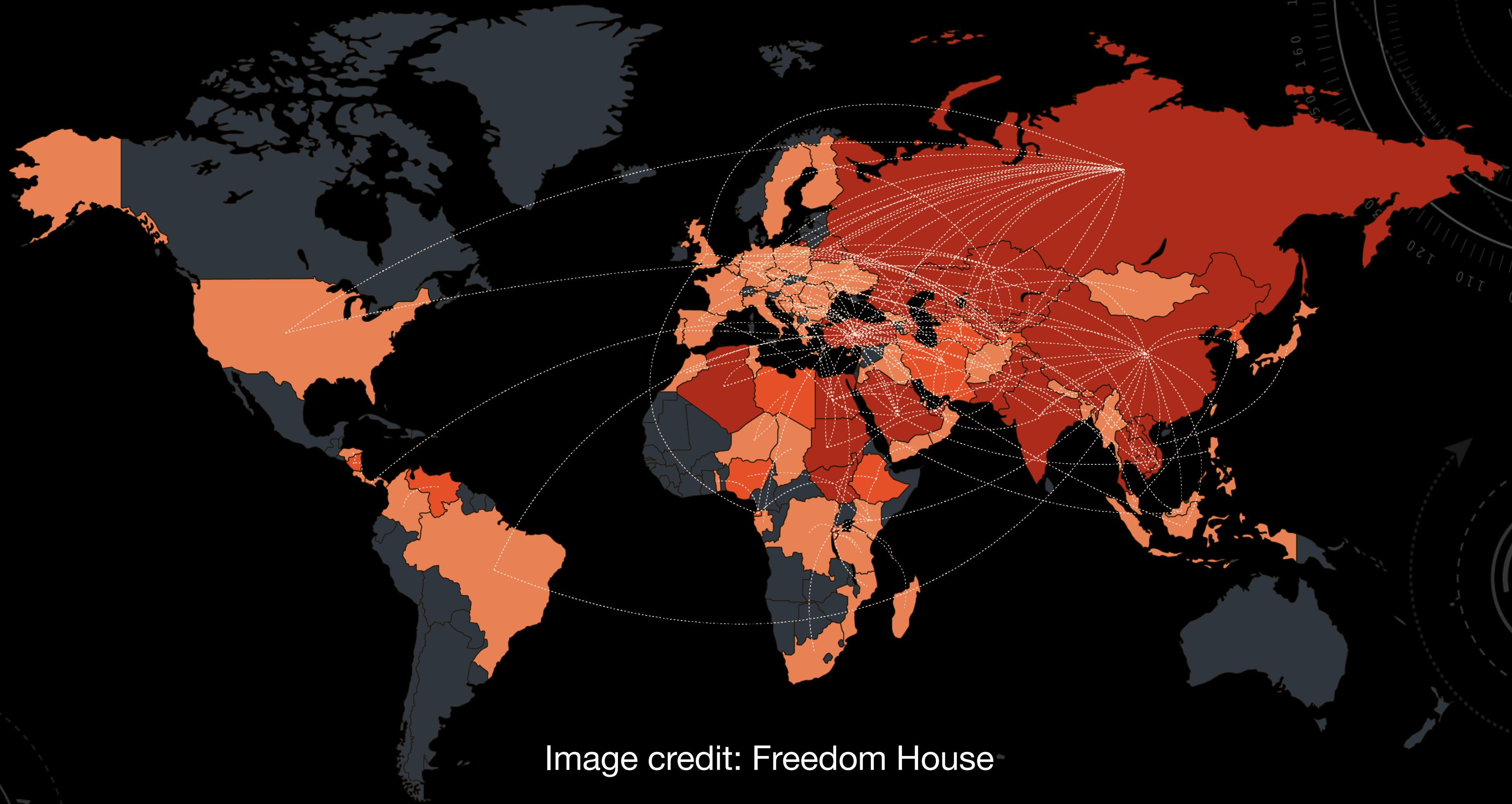


Image credit: Freedom House

Key Questions

Why are journalists and news organizations reluctant to engage in protective technologies even as attacks against journalists increase?

Amidst rising cyber-physical precarity, how can information security be integrated into journalism effectively?



Slides from: *The Post*, 2017

Information security:

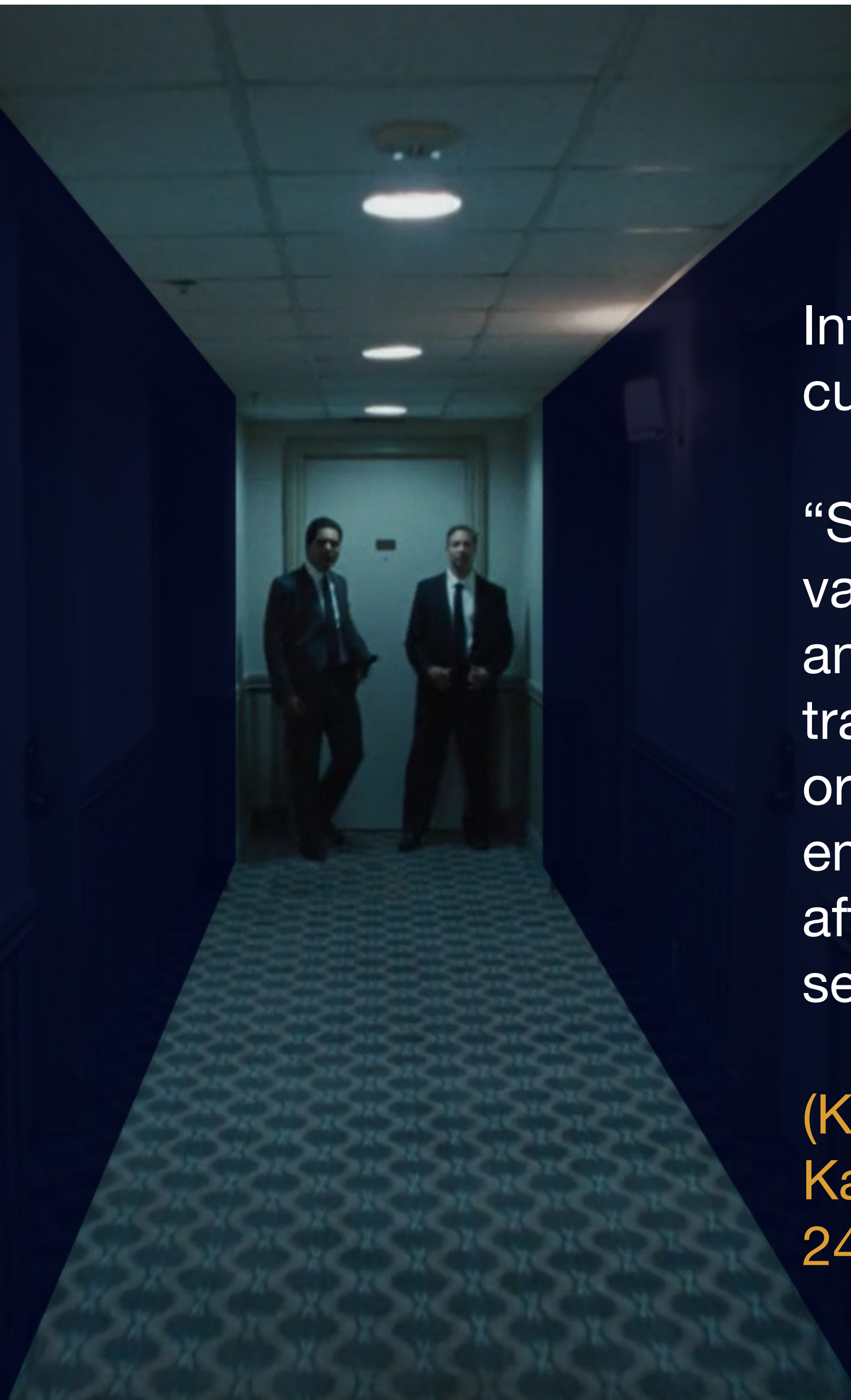
“The protection of information and information systems from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, disruption, modification, or destruction in order to provide confidentiality, integrity, and availability.”

(National Institute of Standards and Technology)

Information security cultures:

“Shared pattern of values, mental models and activities that are traded among an organisation’s employees over time, affecting information security.”

(Karlsson, Astrom, & Karlsson, 2015, p. 247)





THEORETICAL FRAME



New Institutionalism: provides a sociological view of institutions to illuminate how they interact, how they can influence human behavior, and how they aim to gain legitimacy and survive within a world of other institutions (Lowrey, 2006; March & Olsen, 2008)

THEORETICAL FRAME



Institutional isomorphism: when institutional fields mirror dominant practices and forms to avoid claims of negligence and to gain public legitimacy (Lowrey, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)

THEORETICAL FRAME



Institutional isomorphism: Occurs through three mechanisms of change: coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures.

Coercive (e.g., regulative pressures)

Mimetic (e.g., imitation of peers)

Normative (e.g., professionalization)

THEORETICAL FRAME



Institutional entrepreneur: an individual capable of sparking institutional change because they are creative individuals whose social positions and skills allow them to recognize problems or opportunities and take advantage of enabling conditions to alter the social order (Eisenstadt, 1980; Battilana et al., 2009).

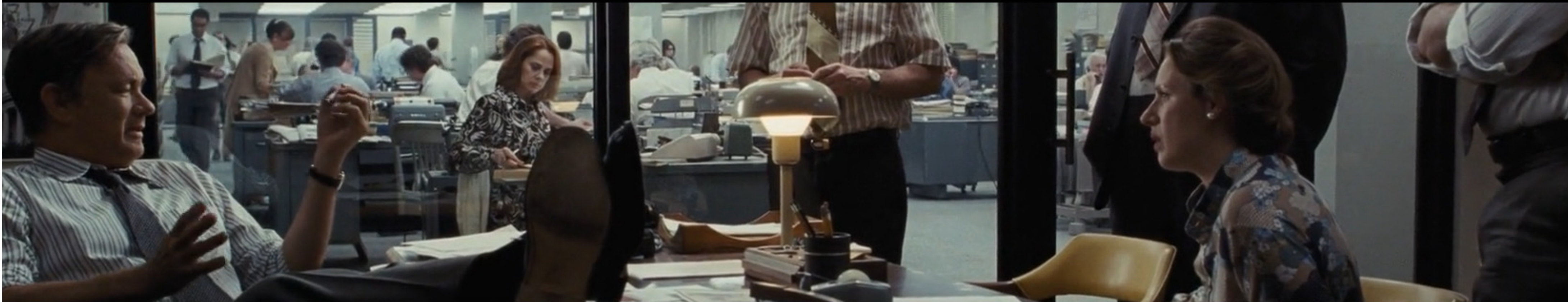
THEORETICAL FRAME



Decoupling: when organizations seek to achieve institutional legitimacy by engaging in superficial change or action while still continuing core activities (Lowrey, 2018; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)



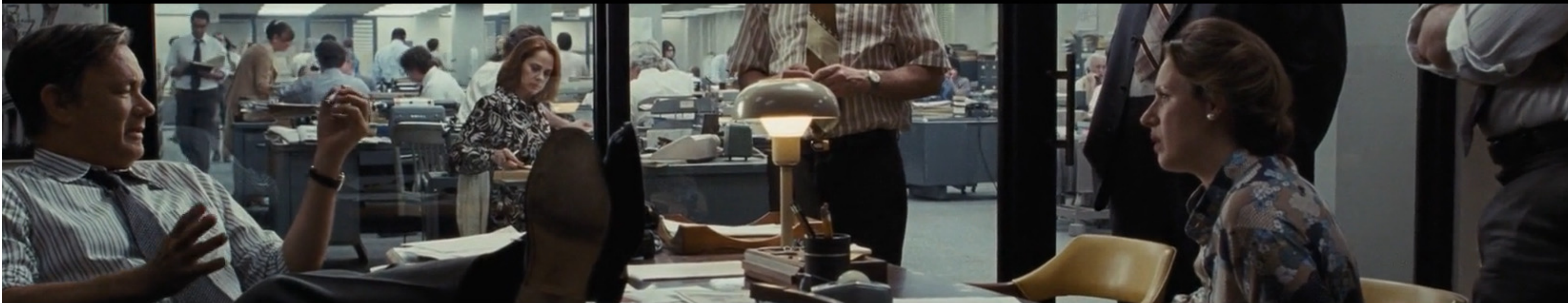
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



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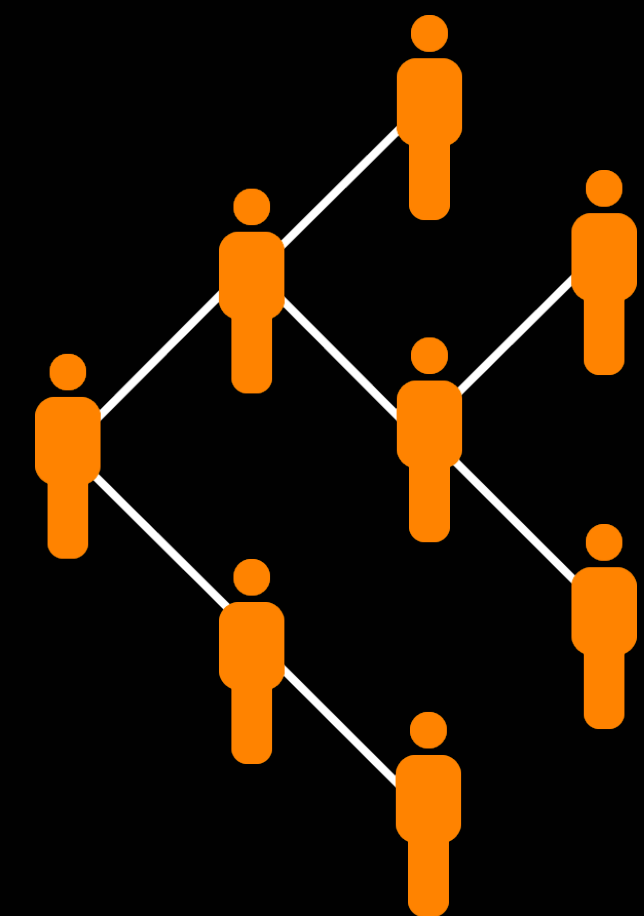
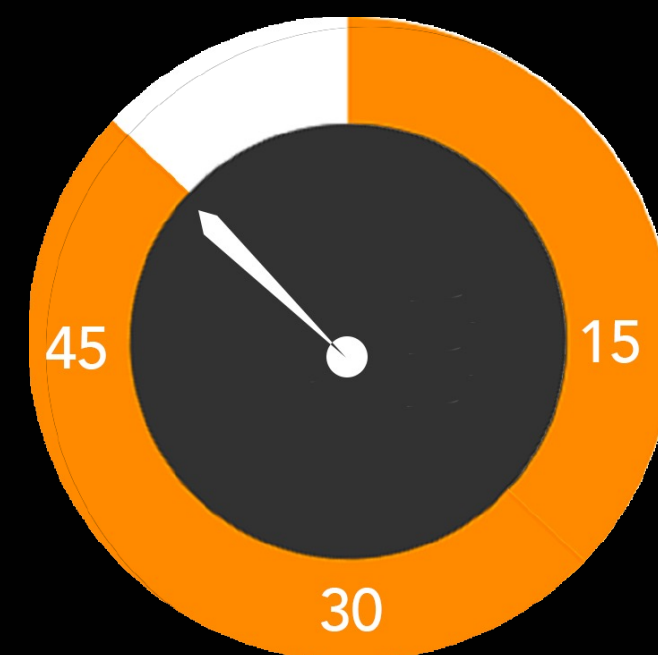
Journalists/Editors
Technologists
Journalism professors
Journalism students
Media lawyers
Nonprofit/academics

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



45 Male/ 34 Female

White
Black
LatinX





OBSTACLES FACING INFORMATION SECURITY KNOWLEDGE



Occupational Disinterest

Mental Models

Commercial logics

OBSTACLES: OCCUPATIONAL DISINTEREST



Security as an individual and not a collective responsibility

“People are not necessarily always plugged into this idea of security being everyone’s job.”

–Information security trainer

OBSTACLES: REACTIVE ORIENTATION AMONG MANAGEMENT



Reactive orientation

“Something really bad needs to happen for people to take it seriously...it’s just incompetent management really. I feel like my direct supervisor will take me seriously. But for these things to happen, there’s money involved.”

–local journalist

OBSTACLES: MENTAL MODELS



“Security by obscurity” mental model

“The vast majority feels like nobody’s out to get them. They’re not doing anything that’s important, [nobody’s] going to try to steal their stuff. Even the ones that are doing sensitive stuff feel like they’re generally protected.”

—media lawyer



security by obscurity

OBSTACLES: MENTAL MODELS



“Security by insularity” mental model

“Security is a really easy thing to overlook, especially if you haven’t had a breach. If you haven’t been intimately involved in wide-scale harassment...or doxing or swatting or being hacked...people just think the stakes are really low and they’re just wrong.”

– journalist and security trainer



security by insularity

OBSTACLES: COMMERCIAL LOGICS



Competing institutional logics hinder security adoption

“You want ease of use, but you also want security, and those things can work against each other. Sometimes you’re going to compromise on one or the other.”

– media lawyer

OBSTACLES: COMMERCIAL LOGICS



Security at odds with journalistic practice

“You have to walk this line between having them use something that’s maybe digitally safe or encrypted or whatever, without scaring them off, freaking them out.”

– information security technologist

OBSTACLES: COMMERCIAL LOGICS



Frictions between departments can limit security integration

“Shadow IT culture”

– information security technologist





DISCOURSE ABOUT SECURITY RAISES SECURITY SALIENCE

News flashpoints (Waisbord & Russell, 2020) and critical incidents (Zelizer, 1990)

Consolidation of journalists as an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1990)

Opportunities for enhanced autonomy and legitimacy



RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



Evidence of isomorphic pressures occurring at the coercive, normative and mimetic levels around the issue of information security and journalism

RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



Sources as coercive pressure

Adopting information security tools to signal that a journalist can be trusted

“I take this seriously...it’s sort of like a bat signal.” – *journalist*

Example of coercive isomorphism

RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



SecureDrop: anonymous, whistleblowing submission platform

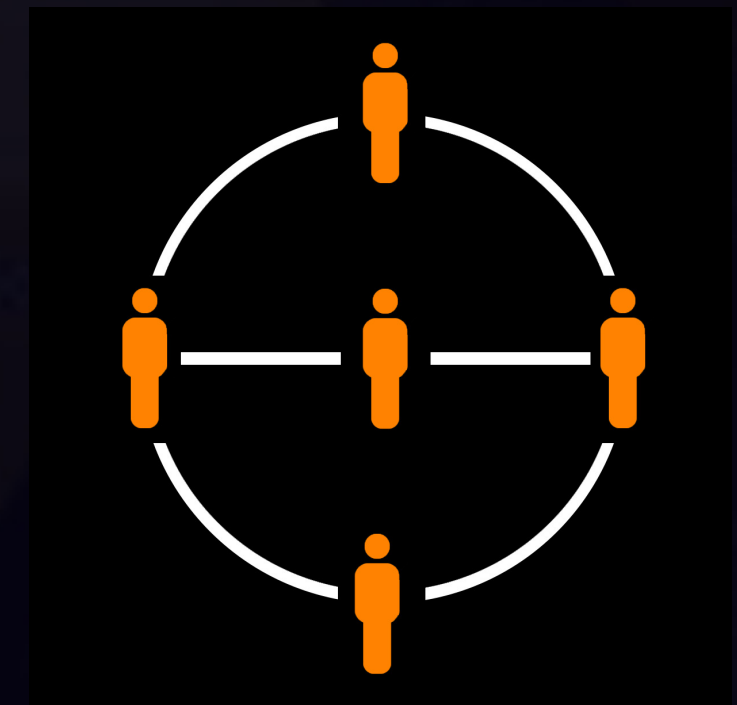
“...installing a ramp at the entrance of your newsroom. Once it’s there, it’s there and you don’t have to spend too much money on it.” – *journalist*

Example of mimetic isomorphism

RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



Security Champion: “an individual who cares about information security and engages in knowledge sharing about security (Henrichsen, 2022).”



Security Champion

RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



“We need to find a couple people to buy into what we’re doing on that specific desk before we can make real progress with that team when they don’t already have that culture of security-mindedness on their team.” – information security trainer

Example of normative isomorphism

RESOLVING JOURNALISM'S RESISTANCE TO INFORMATION SECURITY



“IT and data journalists are not information security experts. But in your average news organization they're the closest thing. That's what people believe. But it's not the right shape to go through that hole. It's not correct mapping at all. But, you know, it's like the best they have right now.” -information security technologist and former journalist





IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY

- Information security resistance is emblematic of institutional intransigence
- Journalism construed as a pillar of democratic governance
- Democracies are declining; constitutional rot (Balkin, 2017)
- Press protection is weakening
- Trust in democracies and journalism is decreasing
- Reduced trust is contributing to a more hostile environment toward the press



IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Digital threats have consequences for journalism's role in democracy

- Journalists may retreat from public sphere, contributing to limited digital publicity (Waisbord, 2019)
- Sources may not come forward
- Censorship may occur



SECURITIZATION AS A PATH FORWARD



Securitization: a discursive process that reveals the motivating factors and obstacles facing the introduction, integration and resolution of information security within journalism

--(Henrichsen, *The Darkening Tide of Digital Repression and the Risks of Journalistic Reluctance*, under review)



INFORMATION SECURITY AS AN UMBRELLA CONDITION



Knowledge of information security can help maintain legitimacy, improve credibility, and enhance autonomy

Solving indifference to information security can act as an exemplar for journalism's adaptation to change more broadly, a challenge made urgent by current threats to the modern political project of liberal democracy



THANK YOU



Jennifer.Henrichsen@wsu.edu

Bluesky: [@drjennhenrichsen.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/profile/drjennhenrichsen)