



RSF Index 2019: Institutional attacks on the press in the US and Canada

The 2019 Reporter Without Borders (RSF) Index shows continued deterioration of press freedom in the United States, while its northern neighbor remains ranked close to the top of the Index. Though both nations have historically respected the press, journalists in these countries are being challenged by the very institutions on which they report.

Marred by the effects of President Donald Trump's second year in office, the United States has dropped three places to 48th out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom Index, moving into the ranks of "orange color" countries with a noticeably problematic press freedom environment just a few months after it was [classified as one of the five deadliest countries](#) in the world for journalists. And though Canada remains ranked at 18th for a second year, this can be attributed less to any perceived improvements in the nation's situation and more so to the worldwide deterioration of press freedom elsewhere.

Rhetoric escalates to violence

While the journalism community grew increasingly wary of the climate of hate targeting the American press since President Trump's 2016 election, the worst case scenario unfolded on June 28, 2018, when [a gunman entered the Capital Gazette newsroom in Annapolis, Maryland](#), killing four journalists and one other staff member in a targeted attack on a local newspaper the shooter had long held a grudge against.

Amid one of the American journalism community's darkest moments, President Trump continued to spout his notorious anti-press rhetoric, disparaging and attacking the media at a national level. Simultaneously, journalists across the country reported terrifying harassment and death threats, online and in person, that were [particularly abusive toward women and journalists of color](#). Journalists reporting on Trump rallies continued to be harangued and even physically accosted by attendees. Local and national newsrooms received bomb threats, and others were sent "suspicious packages" that prompted police to evacuate their buildings. A [former Coast Guard lieutenant planned a widespread terrorist attack that targeted prominent media figures and Democratic politicians](#). Some journalists said they [hired private security](#) in response to harassment and threats, and [newsrooms nationwide began to reconsider their security measures](#).

A shrinking space for journalists

The physical threats to American media were compounded by financial challenges, access denials and legal battles. Newspapers and media outlets across the country closed or significantly cut down their staffs due to the industry's financial insecurities, creating "news deserts" that affect both rural and urban communities. Journalists covering the Trump administration were denied access to information and events of public interest. The White House repeatedly broke records for the longest spans of time without a press briefing, at one point going 42 days without an opportunity for reporters to ask Press Secretary Sarah Sanders any questions. In November 2018, the [White House temporarily revoked the press pass of CNN's Jim Acosta](#) less than three months after [CNN correspondent Kaitlan Collins was denied access to an open-press White House event](#) in a retaliatory measure. Attempted access denials extended to local politics too, as journalists across the country were [refused entry to midterm election events and even polling stations](#).

Despite its high ranking in this year's World Press Freedom Index, Canadian journalists are not immune to attempts from government officials to deny them access to events of public interest, and the relationship shared between authorities and journalists is particularly tense. In January 2019, [the Royal Canadian Mounted Police \(RCMP\) blocked journalists from a protest](#) against the construction of a gas pipeline on Native land. [The Canadian Supreme Court ruled against VICE reporter Ben Makuch](#) in a case that could compel him to hand over all his communications with a source to the RCMP, and Radio-Canada reporter Marie-Maude Denis will be the first case to challenge in the Supreme Court the application of Canada's federal "shield law," which was signed into law in 2017. [Radio-Canada appealed a Quebec Superior Court's March 2018 decision](#) that would have forced Denis to reveal her confidential sources in an ongoing corruption case.

US press problems defy borders

Throughout the year, journalists recounted their experiences being stopped for secondary screenings and even electronic device searches when crossing the US border. While this has been an issue since before the Trump administration, it intensified in November 2018 on the US-Mexico border when reports of a "migrant caravan" traveling from Central America grew increasingly polarized. Meanwhile, foreign journalists continue to have issues obtaining US visas to travel to the United States, likely as a consequence of their reporting on US-designated terrorist groups, or even for their travels to countries like Syria and Iran.

Concerns about the international impact and global repercussions of the Trump administration's attitude toward the press intensified after the murder of Virginia resident, Washington Post writer and Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's Turkish consulate in October 2018. While overwhelming evidence suggests senior Saudi officials were likely directly involved in Khashoggi's death, President Trump has refused to condemn Saudi Arabia, which he considers a "great ally."

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