

RSF 2021 Index: Nearly all indicators flashing red in Latin America

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2021 World Press Freedom Index shows decline across the board in Latin America. With a few exceptions, the coronavirus crisis has exacerbated an already complex and hostile environment for journalists.

The pandemic has fuelled censorship in Latin America and reporters have had major problems finding out how the region's governments have handled the public health crisis. These constraints have been reflected in a spectacular worsening in the indicator that measures how hard it is for journalists to access state-held information. Latin America has also registered the biggest deterioration in its overall press freedom violations score (+2,5%).

In **Brazil** (down 4 at 111th), access to official pandemic figures was complicated by a lack of transparency on the part of the government led by President Jair Bolsonaro, who has tried by every means possible to [minimise the scale of the crisis](#), creating a great deal of tension between authorities and national media (see box below). In **El Salvador** (down 8 at 82nd), one of the 2021 Index's biggest falls, coverage of the pandemic was [seriously hampered](#) by police seizures of journalistic material, denial of access to public spaces, a lack of transparent access to state-held information, presidential aides refusing to answer pandemic-related questions at press conferences, and a ban on interviews with officials about the pandemic.

Denying reality, desire to quarantine media

Similarly obstructive practices were seen in **Guatemala** (116th), where President Alejandro Giammattei said he would like to [put the media in quarantine](#)," and in **Ecuador** (up 2 at 96th). Coverage of the pandemic was made particularly difficult by the attitude of denial adopted by some authoritarian leaders, including Daniel Ortega in **Nicaragua** (down 4 at 121st), Juan Orlando Hernández in **Honduras** (down 3 at 151st) and Nicolás Maduro in **Venezuela** (down 1 at 148th). They used the shockwave caused by the crisis to reinforce their censorship arsenal and make it even harder for independent media to operate. Journalists were publicly accused of exaggerating the gravity of the health crisis and spreading panic. Those who dared question the authorities' handling of the pandemic were arrested, accused of "disinformation terrorism" and in some cases jailed. They included Venezuelan freelancer [Darvinson Rojas](#) when he simply questioned the credibility of the government's figures in a tweet.

Brazil (down 4 at 111th)

Toxic environment for the media

After falling two places last year, Brazil has fallen another four places and is now marked red on the World Press Freedom map because its situation is classified as “bad”. The fall is due above all to the toxicity of the environment for Brazilian journalists since Jair Bolsonaro’s election as president in October 2018 and, in particular, the insults, vilification and orchestrated public humiliations of journalists that have become the trademark of the president, his family and closest allies.

These attacks have redoubled in intensity since the start of the pandemic. To evade responsibility for his disastrous handling of the crisis, with a death toll now standing at more than 318,000*, Bolsonaro has blamed the media for the chaotic situation. He has also helped to spread false information (recommending, for example, the [antiparasitic drug ivermectin](#) as a treatment for Covid-19 although its efficacy has never been proved and the WHO discourages its use). He has criticised social isolation measures. And he has prompted gatherings at which social isolation norms were flouted, resulting in both Facebook and Twitter censoring him.

In reaction to the president’s compulsive lying and the lack of transparency regarding the government’s handling of the pandemic, Brazil’s leading media outlets forged an unprecedented alliance in June 2020, pooling the information they obtained from the country’s 26 states and Brasilia federal district and publishing their own public health bulletins.

*On 31 March 2021

Anti-media rhetoric from politicians

The reporting environment is becoming increasingly toxic in most of Latin America. Mistrust of the press is encouraged by the increasingly virulent anti-media rhetoric used by politicians. Journalists are branded as “enemies of the people” in Brazil and El Salvador and even more in Nicaragua and Venezuela, where the independent media are close to death. **Cuba** (171st) continues to fester near the bottom of the Index, with the constitution still banning privately-owned media, resulting in independent media outlets having no legal recognition and only managing to exist online. **Mexico** (143rd) is still one of the world’s deadliest countries for the media and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador continues to vilify journalists at his morning press conferences if they publish stories that are not to his liking.

Varied threats

The increasing frequency of vilification is undermining journalism and spurring an ever-greater variety of violent attacks on the media. RSF has seen a surge in abusive lawsuits, usually by politicians and officials, in countries such as **Peru** (down 1 at 91st) and **Argentina**

(down 5 at 69th) as well as Brazil and Nicaragua. Online campaigns designed to smear, harass and intimidate journalists, whether conducted openly by well-known figures or orchestrated from behind the scenes, are increasingly common, especially in **Colombia** (down 4 at 134th) and Brazil. And the targets of these coordinated attacks are often women journalists.

Physical attacks against journalists and “comunicadores” – the Latin American term for bloggers, freelancers and other journalists not working for the mainstream media – have contributed to a further 15% deterioration in the region’s “abuses” indicator. Covering demonstrations has become extremely dangerous in **Haiti** (down 4 at 87th) and **Chile** (down 3 at 54th). A total of 13 journalists were killed in connection with their work in Mexico, Honduras and Colombia in 2020. Most of them had been investigating corruption or organised crime. Impunity for murders of journalists continues to feed the vicious cycle of violence.

With legislation that affords them little protection and an economic crisis resulting from the pandemic, independent media are facing huge challenges and need to restore public trust in quality journalism. Despite the difficulties of this environment, journalistic reporting succeeded in countering the false information that some Latin American leaders peddled about the pandemic’s origins and how to address it. Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro used social media and official campaigns to promote remedies for Covid-19 (Carvativir and Chloroquine) whose efficacy has never been demonstrated in medical research. In-depth investigative reporting by [Agência Pública](#) in Brazil and by [El Estímulo](#) and [Efecto Cocuyo](#) in Venezuela, where they are among the few remaining independent publications, pointed out the dangers that these campaigns pose to the public and, implicitly, the importance of reliable journalism in combatting the pandemic.