

North America: a mixed prognosis for press freedom

The 2021 Index points to worrying vital signs for press freedom in North America despite slight improvements -- notably in Canada, which climbed two spots from 16 in 2020 to 14 this year, and in the US, which moved up one place from 45th in 2020 to 44th this year.

Each country in the region has faced its own challenges, but the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that no nation is immune to the viral threat of disinformation. Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in the US, where falsehoods about the virus were picked up by some media and debunked by others as infection rates soared into the tens of millions and the country's 2020 Coronavirus death toll surpassed 350,000 -- the highest in the world.

No inherent immunity to disinformation

As highlighted by [RSF's Tracker 19](#) online tool, the daily televised coronavirus briefings that were held at the White House - ostensibly to update journalists and the public alike on issues ranging from the pace of testing to hospitalisations - often devolved into a political circus with former President Donald Trump hurling insults at reporters and contradicting the recommendations of his own administration's medical experts.

Even in Canada, which deserves praise for its press freedom leadership both at home and abroad, some media outlets were called out for promoting stereotypes and tropes about Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy among aboriginal groups. This type of cliched and sensational reporting only serves to fuel historically negative and false narratives about indigenous peoples - in Canada but also in the US. As such, the Coronavirus exposed an ongoing issue in North America in terms of how the media influences perceptions and creates biases towards native populations.

Elsewhere, the authorities in Jamaica were accused of using lockdown restrictions to limit journalists' ability to do their work. There was also lingering unease over comments made by Jamaican Prime Minister, Andrew Holness in late 2019 that reporters did not have to stick to the facts. Meanwhile, members of the Organization of East Caribbean States and Guyana saw political influence as jeopardising editorial integrity. Meanwhile, Trinidad and Tobago made the most progress among North American nations, going from 36th position in 2020 to 31st in 2021. This is mainly attributed to an important decision by the Supreme Court in favour of the protection of journalists' sources, which could have far-reaching implications across the Caribbean.

A violent year for journalists in the US

North America's most alarming vital sign was arguably the unprecedented number of arrests, aggressions and assaults against members of the media during the racial justice protests that followed the death of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, while in police custody in mid-2020. The violence was so staggering, it prompted the US Press Freedom Tracker - an RSF partner organisation - to [declare that press freedom in the US was "in crisis"](#). The aggressions were carried out by law enforcement officials, members of self-declared militia groups and counter-protesters alike, and they included a wide range of tactics -- from firing rubber bullets and spraying journalists in the face with chemical irritants, to verbal threats and harassment or the destruction and confiscation of media equipment.

The violence that characterized so much of 2020 culminated in the deadly insurrection at the Capitol Building on 6 January 2021, resulted in the "deplatforming" of Trump from Twitter and other social media sites. Having ignored the former president's vitriol and gross misrepresentation of the facts for nearly four years, this development raised serious concerns over the outsized role of big tech corporations to act as the unelected arbiters of the truth. This [led RSF to call for the imposition of democratic obligations](#) on the leading digital players, including a framework of checks and balances predicated on transparency and the ability to appeal decisions, such as the suspension of public figures from social media platforms, rather than the status quo, which is subject to market forces and individual interests.

Treating symptoms won't remedy underlying conditions

Under the Biden Administration, there have been welcome changes to how journalists are treated in the US. For example, they are no longer publicly vilified by the White House or relentlessly accused of peddling "fake news." As with any patient, however, while the most obvious symptoms of an ailing democracy may have cleared up, many chronic, underlying conditions affecting press freedom remain. For example, the majority of Republicans continue to believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and, therefore, invalid.

In fact, in the wake of the Capitol insurrection, for the first time ever, fewer than half of all Americans polled said they trusted traditional media, according to the [21st annual Edelman Trust Barometer](#), with 56% agreeing with the statement that "journalists and reporters are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations."

The perceived - and sometimes very real - politicization and polarization of the news along ideological lines is one reason for this growing distrust. If a prerequisite for a functioning democracy is an informed electorate, these trends do not bode well for the long-term health and longevity of trustworthy journalism in America.