

Opinion: Journalism got more dangerous in 2020 — including in the United States

Opinion by **Editorial Board**

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JOURNALISM IS becoming a steadily more dangerous profession around the world, including in the United States. The year 2020, with its global pandemic and widespread social unrest, continued the trend. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists' annual survey, more journalists were in prison on Dec. 1 — 274 — than in any previous year.

Covid-19 was a large factor in the increased repression. A number of journalists were arrested for reporting on the pandemic, and at least two died after contracting the disease while in detention, according to the CPJ's report. Meanwhile, political upheavals led to the jailing of at least 10 journalists in Belarus and at least seven in Ethiopia. In the United States, an unprecedented 110 were arrested or criminally charged and about 300 were assaulted. In many cases, reporters and photographers were attacked by police while covering Black Lives Matter protests, according to the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker. Though no American journalists were imprisoned at the time of the survey, a dozen still face criminal charges.

The biggest jailers of journalists in the world were familiar from previous surveys: China, with 47, led the way, followed by Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Three of those imprisoned in China were arrested for coverage that undermined the official narrative about the emergence of the novel coronavirus. One, video journalist Zhang Zhan, posted reports from Wuhan, where the virus first began to spread, on Twitter and YouTube in early February. Instead of being honored for groundbreaking work, as she should have been, she was arrested on May 14.

A more tragic victim of repression was veteran Egyptian journalist Mohamed Monir, who criticized the handling of the epidemic by the regime of Abdel Fatah al-Sissi. Monir was arrested June 15 on charges of spreading false news, misusing social media and joining a terrorist group. After contracting covid-19 in the Tora prison outside Cairo, Monir was released, but he died on July 13. According to CPJ, at least two other Egyptian journalists were arrested for their reporting on the virus. A frequent charge for authorities there and elsewhere was spreading false news — a line of attack encouraged by President Trump's "fake news" rhetoric. Thirty-four journalists were jailed for "false news" this year, CPJ said, compared with 31 in 2019.

Turkey, which used to lead the world in imprisoned journalists, is now second to China, with 37 behind bars in December. That's less than half the total CPJ found in 2016, but the reasons for the decline are discouraging: "As outlet shutdowns, takeovers by pro-government businesspeople, and judicial hostility have effectively eradicated mainstream media," the CPJ report said, "Turkey has allowed more journalists to await trial outside prison." One still jailed is Fevzi Yazici, the former design director of the Zaman newspaper, who was arrested in July 2016. According to a report in

May by The Post's Greg Manifold, Mr. Yazici was being kept in solitary confinement, where he dedicated himself to drawing. He now has been in solitary for more than three years, Mr. Manifold reports.

CPJ argues that the incoming Biden administration has an opportunity to shift the global climate on press freedom by reasserting U.S. leadership. It could do that, the report says, by “ensuring accountability for the domestic attacks on journalists as well as instructing diplomats abroad to attend trials of journalists and speak out in support of independent media.” President-elect Joe Biden has said he will restore human rights as a priority of U.S. foreign policy; advocating for imprisoned journalists should be a prime part of that initiative.

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