DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 07.05.2025 | Jodie Ginsberg

It starts with us — the media

The truth is that attacks on the press are always a precursor to further restrictions on civil society

The harassment, detention, torture and eventual murder in 2006 of Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian investigative journalist who exposed government corruption, the horrors of the Second Chechen War and the increasingly autocratic regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is the subject of a new film, *Words of War*. This tribute to Politkovskaya's courage was released in the United States on the eve of World Press Freedom Day — a day intended to celebrate a pillar of democracy. But for me, the day has increasingly become one of mourning rather than celebration, because what happened to Politkovskaya is becoming the norm.

My organisation, the Committee to Protect Journalists, found that 2024 was the profession's deadliest year since the CPJ began collecting data in 1992: at least 124 journalists and media workers were killed, two-thirds of them Palestinians killed by Israel. Moreover, 361 journalists were in jail, a near-record high that reflects the growing efforts to criminalise journalism and journalists not only in autocracies but also in supposed democracies, or those that – until very recently – enjoyed a relatively free press.

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In Hong Kong, the 77-year-old British media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai languishes in prison on national-security charges. Lai, the founder of the pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily*, has been largely held in solitary confinement for the past four years and, if convicted, will almost certainly die behind bars. His foreign lawyers have been harassed, intimidated and threatened with sanctions — tactics used against lawyers representing other wrongfully detained journalists and media leaders, such as Guatemalan editor and journalist José Rubén Zamora.

Such intimidation becomes rampant when crimes against reporters go unpunished. For example, Israel is responsible for a record number of journalist killings, yet a report published by the CPJ in May 2023 found that, over the course of 22 years, no one had been held accountable. Nor has the international community responded to demands for accountability in Israel's war in Gaza, where foreign media have been denied access.

Sounding the alarm

This matters because journalists everywhere play an essential role in investigating official wrongdoing, reporting the adverse effects of war and environmental devastation, and identifying risks to people's health, well-being and freedom. Politkovskaya, for her part, brought attention to the human rights abuses being committed in Chechnya, including the disappearance and torture of civilians, and the Kremlin's lies about the war.

But she is only one of many journalists whose work cost them their lives. Daphne Caruana Galizia, who relentlessly exposed government corruption in Malta, was killed by a car bomb in 2017. Martinez Zogo, who highlighted allegations of public graft in Cameroon, was brutally tortured and murdered in 2023. Dom Phillips, a British freelance journalist who reported on the devastating effects of illegal drug trafficking, mining and logging on indigenous communities in Brazil, was shot dead while on a 2022 reporting trip in the Amazon. And earlier this year, Mukesh Chandrakar's mutilated body was found floating in a septic tank soon after he published an investigation into corruption related to a major road project in central India.

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Everyone should care about these horrific deaths, because there is a direct link between the type of corruption exposed by Caruana Galizia, Zogo, Phillips and Chandrakar and the amount governments spend on citizens. In other words, without reporters willing to hold those in power accountable, we will remain ignorant of the myriad ways governments, businesses and cartels are abusing the system, thereby leaving us worse off. That's as true at the local level, where decisions about issues like public education, eldercare and infrastructure investment are made, as it is at the national and international levels.

When those in power start to restrict the press, we must sound the alarm. Last week, the CPJ published a report on press freedom in the US during the first 100 days of President Donald Trump's second term. The findings are troubling. The White House has barred the Associated Press from official events for refusing to refer to the Gulf of Mexico – the body of water's internationally recognised name – as the Gulf of America. Trump has continued to pursue meritless lawsuits against media outlets and threatened legal action against *The New York Times* for reporting on the matter. The administration has slashed millions of dollars in federal funding for independent media outlets worldwide and effectively shuttered Voice of America, an independent but government-funded news organisation that broadcasts reports to and about countries where freedom of speech is severely curtailed.

For years, many people have shrugged when powerful people belittle the work of journalists, jail them under false pretences, or murder them with no consequence. Many bought into the comforting narrative that these were exceptions or, as many have smugly assured themselves in the West, that this couldn't possibly happen here. The truth is that attacks on the press are always a precursor to further restrictions on civil society. Politkovskaya's murder came long before Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the killings of his political opponents Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny, and the torture and murder of Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna. We must stop thinking – and acting – as if the safety of journalists is a concern only for the media. Every journalist's murder is an attack on our first line of defence against repressive regimes.

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