

SECURITY AND PRESS FREEDOM

Threats to Journalists in Brazil



Editors:

Elizabeth Saad
Daniela Osvald
Aianne Amado

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Introduction

Freedom of the press, expression, and democracy under tension: a study of recent cases in Brazil

Elizabeth Saad, Daniela Osvald and Aianne Amado

Brazilian insecurity towards journalists has a long history. There are records of incidents dating back to the colonial period, and events have continued to evolve to the present day. In Brazil, the 2024 report issued by the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) highlights that attacks continue, but have become “more sophisticated and dangerous.” The document warns of a shift from physical violence to “structural forms of silencing, such as judicial harassment and censorship.”

According to a longitudinal analysis from 1982 to 2024, drawn from the open database created by OBCOM – the Observatory of Communication, Freedom of Expression, and Censorship at the University of São Paulo (USP) – and based on FENAJ reports, there have been nearly 300 attacks against journalists in the state of São Paulo alone, the largest in Brazil. When considering all Brazilian states, this number multiplies more than tenfold. In 2024, for instance, 144 attacks were recorded.

In recent decades, there has been a global increase in attacks on democratic regimes and, specifically, on journalistic coverage of these situations. Both in conflict zones and in areas marked by territorial and power disputes, there are continuous reports of killings, kidnappings, censorship, harassment, and various forms of persecution. In the current decade, the Brazilian context of insecurity toward the media, journalists, and representatives of democratic institutions has grown significantly, due to major transformations in our society – such as political

polarization, disinformation, economic crisis, and the dominant role of social media platforms.

At the same time, academic training in undergraduate and graduate journalism programs reveals that most are not fully prepared to address these complexities. The majority of Brazil's 327 undergraduate and 54 graduate programs in Communication — the field to which journalism belongs — lack specific courses dealing with the broad spectrum of insecurities, such as physical safety, conflict coverage, journalist protection, and gender- or race-based violence. Most initiatives in these areas are conducted by NGOs or professional associations rather than universities, and are offered as short training courses.

This scenario has led us to formulate a set of strategies and activities aimed at bridging academic gaps with the Brazilian reality of journalistic practices under tension, especially concerning issues of safety, violence, and harassment. Thus, we have organized a long-term plan to develop and consolidate these actions within the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences at USP.

Two initial and parallel steps have been successfully completed.

The first and most fruitful was the establishment of an international academic partnership led by Oslo Metropolitan University (Norway) and funded by the Research Council of Norway.

This is a five-year program that also includes the University of Tulsa (USA) and Wits University (South Africa). The main goal of this academic initiative is to contribute to the safety of journalists by training doctoral-level journalism researchers in the analytical and practical tools needed to investigate, understand, and improve journalist safety in a transnational and constantly changing landscape, marked by political and physical insecurities.

This e-book is one of the outcomes of that project and will be detailed below.

The second initiative is related to the construction of a common theoretical foundation encompassing the broad themes of the project, while also seeking to

identify the specificities of the Brazilian context. The first stage consisted of conducting a systematic literature review, which remains an ongoing task.

From this process, we revisited the concepts of Johan Galtung (1969; 1990) and his proposal of the layers of violence — direct, cultural, and structural — and incorporated Taylor O'Connor's (2020) perspective, which expands Galtung's typology into a more detailed mapping, correlating it with aspects of broader social forces such as wars, poverty, dominant social actors, and community actions.

According to O'Connor (2020), these occurrences reflect the effects of the levels of latent visibility defined by Galtung within societies — rather than cultural and structural violence itself.

O'Connor (2020) then subdivides direct violence into personal, interpersonal, and community occurrences. Structural violence is more difficult for ordinary citizens to identify, as it is embedded in political and economic structures, organizations, and social groups. Thus, the author classifies the effects of structural violence through events (such as wars and inequalities) and their perpetrators. Cultural violence, also difficult to perceive, manifests itself in symbolic elements such as literature, monuments, linguistic specificities, and civic celebrations.

We combined the approaches of both authors to reach a shared concept:

"Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung: 1969, p. 168). Thus, to encompass the objectives of this paper, the term violence includes, but is not limited to, verbal and digital acts and actions, physical assaults, obstructions and obstacles to journalists' work, judicial and law enforcement practices, and restrictions on freedom of expression and, consequently, freedom of the press, which prevent journalists from fully exercising their ability to investigate and report facts following appropriate journalistic methods (Ramos & Saad, 2022, p. 3).

Next, we compared and adapted these concepts to Brazilian studies. To this end, in 2022, we created an annual course in the Graduate Program in Communication at USP, with the goal of disseminating and consolidating concepts

and practices related to safety in journalism. The course, "*New Paradigms and Dimensions of Violence in the Field of Communication: Harassment and Threats Against Journalists and Communicators*," has already trained 43 graduate students and specialists.

In parallel with the course, we provided training for 13 PhD candidates from PPGCOM-USP who spent a research period at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), developing academic projects within multicultural research groups. The proposal for these group activities, in addition to providing exchange among different contexts and realities, adds to our field by bringing together a network of journalist-researchers who are now actively disseminating knowledge and awareness about violence and harassment in the field.

Lastly, all the mobilization carried out since the first contacts and invitations from OsloMet has resulted in the creation and availability of an open, interactive public database hosted by OBCOM-USP (obcom.net.br/vis/), in partnership with FENAJ. This platform enables different correlations of information — such as types of violence and harassment, perpetrators, locations of incidents, gender, among other variables.

We hope that the continuation of these activities, now consolidated within the scope of our graduate program, can foster collective awareness in the fields of Journalism and Communication Sciences regarding an issue that affects us on a daily basis.

About the book

The chapters gathered in this e-book are the result of academic work by graduate students from the University of São Paulo, presented as final papers for the course "*New Paradigms and Dimensions of Violence in the Field of Communication*:

*Harassment and Threats Against Journalists and Communicators*⁵, taught by Prof. Dr. Daniela Osvald Ramos and Prof. Dr. Elizabeth Nicolau Saad-Correa.

The proposal presented to the students consisted of articulating the theoretical framework discussed throughout the course with concrete cases from the contemporary Brazilian context. The book, therefore, presents case studies that, while reflecting on the conditions of (in)security and vulnerability of journalists in the country, also function as a documentary record of recent democratic violations of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Brazil.

Although it is situated within a well-established body of literature on journalistic safety, press freedom, and violence against communicators, this work stands out for its specifically and profoundly Brazilian character. The thematic breadth of the studies gathered here reflects the complexity of the threats faced by journalists and communicators in Brazil. Therefore, each chapter begins with events that not only occurred in Brazil, but could only have emerged from the country's particular circumstances — marked by structural inequalities, systemic violence, tensions between the State and civil society, and the intersection of political, economic, and symbolic power. In doing so, this work goes beyond being merely a description of isolated episodes of violence, also consisting in an effort to understand the structural dynamics that make the practice of journalism in Brazil an act of democratic resistance.

In several Latin American countries, it is not uncommon to find territories where the formal power of the State is replaced or overlapped by mechanisms of control exercised by criminal organizations, a phenomenon known as *criminal governance*. However this configuration reaches a distinct and extensive level in Brazil — according to data published by Cambridge University Press (Uribe et al., 2025), the country has the highest percentage of its population living under power regimes imposed by criminal groups in the entire subcontinent: it is estimated that

⁵The course syllabus can be accessed at:
<https://uspdigital.usp.br/janus/componente/disciplinasOferecidasInicial.jsf?action=3&sgldis=CJE5041>.

about 26% of Brazilians (between 50.6 and 61.6 million people) are, in some way, subjected to this kind of parallel rule. It is within this context that the first chapter of the book is situated, authored by Natália de Sena Carneiro and Edgar Wilfford Miranda Alvino, and dedicated to the analysis of two paradigmatic episodes of violence against Brazilian journalists who, in fulfilling their duty to inform, jeopardized the interests of organized factions. The first case dates back to 2006, when reporter Guilherme Portanova, from TV Globo, was kidnapped and held hostage by the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) in São Paulo (SP). The second, which occurred fourteen years later, in 2020, concerns the assassination of journalist Léo Veras in Ponta Porã (MS), executed inside his home after publishing a series of investigative reports on drug trafficking along the Brazil-Paraguay border. The joint analysis of these cases reveals the scale and sophistication of criminal governance in Brazil, which, in addition to imposing its own logic of territorial control, establishes silencing mechanisms that directly affect investigative journalism.

The second chapter addresses structural inequalities deeply rooted in Brazilian society: racism and gender-based violence. Racial discrimination in Brazil is a direct legacy of a long and brutal slaveholding period, responsible for the abduction and trafficking of more than four million Africans to Brazilian lands – a key historical fact for understanding our social formation, given that, since our colonization, there were 388 years of legally established slavery and a mere 137 years outside of that regime. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1888, the Brazilian State remained negligent regarding the social, economic, and political integration of the Black population, denying them minimum conditions of citizenship and perpetuating a system of exclusion – so that the consequences of this tragic “past” remain profoundly present in our society: in 2025, 84% of Black Brazilians report having experienced racial discrimination at some point (Moura, 2025).

Brazilian sexism, although not rooted in a single historical event, echoes the gender roles historically imposed on society, those that associate men with leadership and the public sphere, and women with domestic and family care. Brazilian women won the right to vote in 1932, formal equality of rights in the 1988 Constitution, and only in 2022 gained reproductive autonomy to undergo tubal ligation without spousal consent⁶. With such rights achieved at a sluggish pace, gender inequality persists alarmingly: around 84.5% of people in the country, regardless of gender, express some form of prejudice against women. The most severe indicators concern physical integrity: every six minutes, a woman is the victim of sexual violence, and every six hours, a woman is murdered in cases of femicide (UN, 2023; Nossa Causa, 2025).

The statistics become even more dramatic when intersecting with gender and sexual dissidence: in 2022, over 11,000 LGBTQIA+ people were victims of some form of aggression motivated by their sexual orientation or gender identity, with transgender and cross-dressing individuals being the most affected (38.5%) (Barbosa, 2025). For the 16th consecutive year, Brazil leads the world ranking in murders of trans people (Narcisa & Bonets, 2025).

Riza Amaral Lemos and Rafael Rodrigues Pereira address these wounds by shedding light on the violence suffered by journalists Joyce Ribeiro, a Black woman; Alana Rocha, a trans woman; and Sara York, a travesti woman. All were victims of attacks motivated by the exercise of their professions, but intensified by their social markers. By portraying these cases, the authors highlight the symbolic dimension of aggression against journalists, and, more specifically, the multiple layers of vulnerability that overlap certain bodies and identities within the field of communication.

⁶ See:

<https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2023/03/03/entra-em-vigor-lei-que-dispensa-aval-do-conjuge-em-procedimentos-de-esterilizacao>.

Despite being considered a digitally connected country, Brazil also faces low levels of digital literacy, given that, among our population, there is a stark contrast between access to technology and the critical capacity to use it: only 24.4% of the economically active population have mastery of basic digital skills (Amaral, 2023). This low digital literacy is worsened by regional inequalities, low education levels, and the insufficient digital education provided in schools. It can also be explained by the rapid expansion of digital devices and connectivity, which was not accompanied by structured public policies for digital education. Thus, although over 89% of the population has internet access and Brazil ranks among the world's largest consumers of digital media, much of this use remains superficial, focused mainly on entertainment and personal communication, without fostering the ability to critically evaluate, interpret, and produce information: studies from 2024 reveal that 9 out of 10 Brazilians have believed in fake news (Mello, 2024), making the country's population the least able to identify misinformation (Cozman, 2024).

The low level of digital literacy among Brazilians became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which the population became heavily dependent on the internet and the political context was centered on the government of Jair Bolsonaro, who not only failed to combat misinformation but, on several occasions, *spread* false news about the health crisis himself. Users thus became easy targets for fake news, conspiracy theories, and misleading health advice, which spread rapidly through social media. This is the backdrop of the third chapter, written by Letícia Assis Almeida da Silva and Vitória Paschoal Baldin, which analyzes the legal violence experienced by communicators and scientists Ana Bonassa and Laura Marise, who were judicially prosecuted – and convicted in the first instance – for publicly opposing misinformation and correcting false claims. The case illustrates how judicial mechanisms can be weaponized to intimidate and threaten critical voices committed to truth and the public interest.

We are a country widely recognized for our cultural effervescence, which reaches its peak during the month of February, when the entire country mobilizes to

celebrate Carnival, considered the largest popular festival in the world. Across all states, the holiday takes different forms: from the samba schools in Rio de Janeiro to the floats in Salvador, passing through the street parties that take over the hillsides of Olinda. In 2025 alone, it is estimated that Carnival generated around R\$ 12 billion in the national economy, consolidating itself as one of Brazil's main revenue engines (Alves, 2025), while also attracting approximately 287,000 international tourists (Embratur, 2025). However, behind the costumes and joyful music, Carnival also exposes deep social contradictions, which often lead to increased violence and hostility during the festivities. The cases reported in the fourth chapter – experienced by journalists Marcelo Rubens Paiva, Bruno Santos, Josué Amador, Bianka Carvalho, and Fabrício Lobel – describe different forms of aggression faced by media professionals during event coverage (sometimes while broadcasting live!) or even after being recognized off duty. By highlighting these episodes, authors Aianne Amado and Mario Sergio Assumpção de Andrada e Silva draw attention to desks that are rarely addressed in the debate on safety in journalism, specifically culture and entertainment – whose risks are not as explicit as investigative journalism, for example, but are nonetheless relevant.

Brazil, once inhabited exclusively by Indigenous peoples, is now home to about 1.7 million individuals – equivalent to 0.83% of the national population – belonging to 305 distinct Indigenous groups and speaking 274 languages (National Geographic Brazil, 2025). In recent years, the country has advanced in developing new public and private initiatives aimed at protecting this population, culminating in the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples (MPI), established at the beginning of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's third term. Led by Minister Sônia Guajajara, the first Indigenous woman ever to hold a ministerial position in Brazil, the MPI's core mission is to defend the territorial, cultural, and physical security rights of Indigenous communities. These actions, however, respond to a persistent and alarming reality of violence: despite the legal guarantees of demarcated lands, Indigenous peoples continue to suffer systematic invasions by land grabbers,

farmers, hunters, loggers, and miners, driven by the economic exploitation of legally protected territories. In 2024 alone, 1,241 cases of violence against Indigenous property were recorded across the country (Cimi, 2024), revealing the continuity of colonial practices and the weakening of the state's presence in land conflict zones.

The fifth chapter focuses on one such episode, which occurred in 2023 in the Guarani-Kaiowá reoccupation area in Iguatemi (MS). The case involved Canadian journalist Renaud Philippe and his team, who were threatened, assaulted, and robbed while investigating the struggle of Indigenous peoples to reclaim their ancestral lands. Beyond the physical violence, the episode exposes deeper structural and symbolic dimensions – the normalization of violence against both communicators and Indigenous peoples, as well as the slowness of institutions to deliver effective and just responses.

The cases presented here give names and faces to journalists affected by insecurity and violence tied to their profession – not to victimize them, but to highlight their commitment to the duty of informing and their courage to persist despite adversity. Moreover, each chapter includes a map marking the Brazilian states where the incidents occurred, locating the episodes. By doing this, we do not aim to delineate or restrict supposed “hotspots” of violence but to situate the reader, emphasizing that, while regional differences exist and must be acknowledged, the safety of journalists is a topic that needs to be widely debated throughout Brazil.

May the reading of this book serve as an invitation to action – academic, political, and professional. Freedom of the press remains one of the vital pillars of democracy, and this work is, above all, a manifesto in its defense.

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