

RSF Index 2018: US falls as Canada rises

Despite having strong constitutional protections to the contrary, the latest World Press Freedom Index findings on the US and Canada reveal two countries whose journalists and media workers face constant challenges to the very freedom to exercise their profession.

The United States' ranking fell from 43 to 45 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2018 World Press Freedom Index, continuing its downward trend in the first year of Donald J. Trump's presidency. In contrast, its northern neighbor Canada gained 4 places due to steps taken to safeguard the confidentiality of journalists' sources.

Donald Trump furthers First Amendment decline

In 2017, the 45th President of the United States helped sink the country to 45th place by labeling the press an "enemy of the American people" in a series of verbal attacks toward journalists, attempts to block White House access to multiple media outlets, routine use of the term "fake news" in retaliation for critical reporting, and calling for media outlets' broadcasting licenses to be revoked. President Trump has routinely singled out news outlets and individual journalists for their coverage of him, and [retweeted several violent memes](#) targeting *CNN*.

The violent anti-press rhetoric from the White House has been coupled with an increase in the number of press freedom violations at the local level as journalists [run the risk of arrest for covering protests](#) or simply attempting to [ask public officials questions](#). Reporters have even been subject to [physical assault](#) while on the job.

Press freedom violations in the country of the First Amendment in fact have become so frequent of late that RSF joined a coalition of more than two dozen press freedom organizations to launch the [US Press Freedom Tracker](#) in August, which [documented](#) 34 arrests of journalists in 2017, the majority while covering protests (find out more on the [tracker](#)).

However, the Trump effect has only served to amplify the disappointing press freedom climate that predated his presidency. Whistleblowers [face prosecution](#) under the Espionage Act if they leak information of public interest to the press, while there is still no federal "shield law" guaranteeing reporters' right to protect their sources. Journalists and their devices continue to be searched at the US border, while some foreign journalists are [still denied entry into the US](#) after covering sensitive topics like Colombia's FARC or Kurdistan.

The US' decline in press freedom is not simply bad news for journalists working inside the country; the downward trend has drastic consequences at the international level. "Fake

news” is now a trademark excuse for media repression, in both democratic and [authoritarian regimes](#). Democratic governments from several countries in the Organisation of East Caribbean States (OECS), have adopted Trump’s favorite phrase when criticizing the work of journalists. Given that criminal defamation still remains on the books in many Caribbean countries, the spread of Trump’s anti-media rhetoric could have very serious consequences for the local press.

Canada back in top 20, but concerns remain

In 2016, the outlook for Canada’s press freedom was bleak, as various branches of government seemed to blatantly disregard the fundamental principle that [journalists’ sources must remain confidential](#). In 2017 this trend continued, and then some: [criminal and civil charges](#) were brought against *The Independent’s* **Justin Brake** after he covered environmental protests, and the Ontario Court of Appeal [upheld a production order](#) against *VICE News’* **Ben Makuch**, compelling him to hand over communications with a source to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Yet governmental bodies at both the provincial and the federal level responded with concrete action to right the course. A federal press “shield law,” the Journalistic Source Protection Act, was [adopted unanimously](#) in October 2017 by Canada’s parliament, and two months later, a Commission of Inquiry tasked with investigating Quebec police surveillance of journalists [recommended Quebec adopt legislation](#) to better protect journalistic sources. These improvements are the cause of Canada’s 4-point gain in 2017.

Despite this progress, the fact remains that Canada has much work to accomplish ahead. Ben Makuch will defend the confidentiality of his conversations with a source before the Supreme Court of Canada in May. Justin Brake is still facing charges, and it remains to be seen how the new shield law will be implemented as *Radio-Canada* investigative reporter **Marie-Maude Denis** was [ordered](#) in March to reveal her sources in Quebec Superior Court.

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