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2019 RSF Index: Authoritarianism and disinformation worsen the situation in Latin America

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has seen a disturbing decline in press freedom in Latin America in 2018. The problems for the media have increased in most of the region's countries, with journalists often exposed to violence, harassment and governmental censorship.

The [slight improvement](#) that Latin America registered in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index did not last. The environment for journalists is more and more hostile and coverage of sensitive subjects increasingly triggers violence, intimidation and harassment of every kind.

Elections in Mexico (up three at 144th), Brazil (down three at 105th), Venezuela (down five at 148th), Paraguay (up eight at 99th), Colombia (up one at 129th), El Salvador (down 15 at 81st) and Cuba (up three at 169th) prompted an increase in attacks on journalists, especially by politicians, government officials and cyber-activists, and reinforced a climate of mistrust and animosity towards the media.

State censorship and authoritarian excesses

Nicaragua's 24-place fall in the Index to 114th position was the region's steepest. The crackdown on independent media by President Daniel Ortega's government intensified in April 2018 as a result of massive opposition protests and a deepening political crisis. [Journalists are subjected to incessant stigmatization](#), harassment campaigns, death threats and arbitrary arrest. At demonstrations, they are treated as members of the opposition and often attacked. Some [have been jailed](#) on terrorism charges and others have fled abroad to avoid the same fate.

The situation is equally worrying in Venezuela (148th), which fell five places and is close to joining the countries coloured black on the World Press Freedom map. The descent into authoritarianism by President Nicolás Maduro's government continues. As the crackdown on independent media intensified in 2018, RSF registered a record number of arbitrary arrests and cases of violence by the Venezuelan police and intelligence services. At the same time,

the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) stripped critical radio and TV stations of their broadcast frequencies, while several [foreign journalists were arrested](#), interrogated, and in some cases deported. The worsening situation drove many Venezuelan journalists to flee the country to escape retribution, including threats to their physical safety.

Cuban journalists regarded as overly-critical also often opt for exile in order to escape the constant harassment and control of news and information. Despite a three-place rise to 169th place in the Index, due mainly to a gradual improvement in Internet service that allows independent journalists and bloggers to make their voices heard, the one-party regime founded by the Castro brothers and led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel is Latin America's lowest ranked country for the 22nd year in a row.

Although Bolivia (down three at 113th) has a significantly better position in the Index, the situation there is no less worrying. Following the Cuban model, the government led by Evo Morales, Bolivia's president since 2006, controls information and manages to [censor](#) and [silence](#) those who are overly critical, encouraging self-censorship among the country's journalists.

Fear and self-censorship

Self-censorship is to be found in many of the region's countries with extremely high levels of violence and corruption. This is the case in El Salvador, which saw the region's second steepest fall (15 places) and is now ranked 81st. With armed attacks, harassment and intimidation by politicians, conditions for journalists worsened significantly in 2018. The situation is similar in neighbouring Honduras (down five at 146th) and Guatemala (116th), which are beset by corruption and organized crime. Journalists working for opposition or community media who dare to expose political or administrative corruption are often attacked, threatened, murdered, or forced to flee abroad.

Mexico (144th) is still Latin America's most dangerous country for the media with [at least 10 journalists murdered](#) in 2018. Collusion between organized crime, corrupt officials and politicians, especially at the local level, poses a grave threat to journalists' safety and cripples the judicial system at all levels. Andrés Manuel López Obrador's installation as president in December 2018 after an election campaign marked by countless attacks on journalists throughout the country (see the [#AlertaPrensa project](#) by RSF and Propuesta Cívica) has reduced some of the tension between the authorities and media. This political transition, combined with a small decrease in the number of murdered journalists (down from [11 in 2017](#)), explains Mexico's modest three-place rise in the Index.

Disinformation and cyber-harassment

Brazil has fallen three places in the Index to 105th position and is getting close to joining the countries coloured red on the World Press Freedom map. The past year has been particularly turbulent, with [four journalists murdered](#) and more attacks on independent journalists who cover subjects involving corruption, public policy or organized crime in small or mid-sized cities. Above all, Jair Bolsonaro's election as president in October 2018 after [a campaign marked by hate speech](#), disinformation, violence against journalists and contempt for human rights forebodes a dark era for democracy and press freedom in Brazil.

In Brazil, [two-thirds](#) of the population get their news on social networks. The messaging service WhatsApp played a key role in Bolsonaro's campaign. It usurped the traditional news outlets and was [the preferred source of information](#) for 61% of Bolsonaro voters, who are distrustful of the mainstream media. WhatsApp was used to organize and circulate false information – designed above all to discredit journalists whose reporting was critical of Bolsonaro – together with [smear campaigns and conspiracy theories](#). In this tense climate, journalists were [the favourite targets](#) of Bolsonaro supporters and hate groups, especially on social networks.

Online attacks against journalists are on the rise throughout Latin America, and were virulent in Honduras, Nicaragua and above all in Colombia (up one at 129th), where journalists are still often the [targets of death threats](#) (especially on Twitter), physical violence, and abduction. The election of a new conservative president, Ivan Duque, in August 2018 was a disappointment for any hopes of improving the press freedom climate.

Noteworthy changes in this year's Index also include Chile's eight-place fall to 46th position. The confidentiality of journalists' sources was often violated in Chile in 2018 and there were many cases of abusive judicial proceedings against journalists who tackled sensitive subjects such as political corruption and the demands of Chile's Mapuche communities.

The situation has also deteriorated in Argentina (down five at 57th) and Ecuador (down five at 97th). Lenin Moreno's election as Ecuador's president in May 2017 diffused tension between the government and privately-owned media. However, this was eclipsed in 2018 when two reporters and a driver from the newspaper El Comercio were [abducted in a remote area on the Colombian border and murdered](#). It raised many questions about security and work methods when journalists operate in conflict zones not under the state's control.

At 10th place, Costa Rica meanwhile continues to be Latin America's best ranked country by far and stands out more than ever from this sombre regional picture.