



Testimony of Dr. Courtney C. Radsch
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Hearing on “Human Rights at Home: Media, Politics, and the Safety of Journalists”
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker, and other distinguished Commissioners, I want to thank you for organizing this important hearing and for inviting the Committee to Protect Journalists to testify.

My name is Courtney Radsch and I serve as CPJ’s director of advocacy and communications. At CPJ, we recognize that the United States has a unique historical and legal commitment to protecting a free and independent press at home and abroad.

But the hundreds of attacks by law enforcement against journalists covering anti-police brutality protests, the politicized shakeup in the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and persistent denigration and verbal assaults on journalists by President Trump and other elected leaders have created perilous conditions for media at home with ramifications for journalists around the world.

Protests

Covering civil unrest is already a challenge for journalists and, when coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists are presented with an extraordinary risky situation in trying to protect their health and safety.

Recent attacks on journalists covering demonstrations against police brutality across the country following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, are unprecedented, particularly in light of the fact that law enforcement officers with an obligation to uphold the First Amendment appear to have been responsible for a majority of the attacks on journalists.

The nonpartisan U.S. Press Freedom Tracker database, which CPJ and Freedom of the Press Foundation founded in 2017, is currently researching [more than 500 reported aggressions](#) against journalists covering demonstrations.



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CPJ research shows that protests are often dangerous for journalists, but the scale here is unparalleled. And some of the attacks against journalists appear to have been racially motivated.

Since the protests broke out there have been reports of 68 arrests of journalists, compared to a total of 58 since 2017.¹ The Tracker is investigating 114 physical assaults on media covering the protests, more than the number of all physical assaults the previous three years, and 69 tear gassings of journalists.

Law enforcement was responsible for most of the 106 reported instances of rubber bullets or projectiles being shot at journalists. In one particularly gruesome instance, freelance photographer Linda Tirado was permanently blinded in her left eye after being struck by a rubber bullet in Minnesota. CPJ is disturbed by reports of federal law enforcement agents, who were not clearly identified with badges or names, attacking journalists. The lack of identifying information prevents officers from being held responsible.

These shocking statistics are indicative of the increased militarization of the police, a concern we raised with Congress following the unprecedented 2017 international press freedom mission we led to the U.S. that [found](#) journalists were regularly kettled, removed, detained, and even charged with offenses for covering protests.

In response to the recent attacks, CPJ and scores of press freedom and media groups [wrote letters](#) to elected officials at all levels of government. We urged officials to provide data about incidents involving attacks on journalists, investigate any reported attacks, and hold perpetrators to account.

Aside from a response from a single mayor's office, Muriel Bowser, our letters to President Trump and state governors have been largely ignored.

Trump and his administration

In April, CPJ published a report on the [Trump administration and press freedom](#) which found that the administration has regularly attacked the role of an independent press, stepped up

¹ 9 in 2019, 11 in 2018, 38 in 2017



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prosecutions of news sources, interfered in the business of media owners, and empowered foreign leaders to restrict their own media.

Other issues identified as press freedom threats emanating from the White House started under the previous administration—which CPJ identified in a special report on the [Obama administration and press freedom](#)—and have worsened under the current one. These include curbing routine disclosures of information, aggressively prosecuting leakers of classified information, and using surveillance programs that deter government sources from speaking to journalists. We saw this most recently with restrictions placed on Centers for Disease Control speaking to Voice of America journalists.

Relatedly, the shakeup at U.S. Agency for Global Media following the confirmation of its new chief executive officer, Michael Pack, and reports that the agency will review the visas of journalists working for Voice of America also raise deep concerns.

USAGM outlets provide independent, fact-based news reporting to millions of listeners, viewers, and online readers living in restricted information environments. That is now in peril after the USAGM's recently confirmed chief executive dismissed senior staff at these networks without cause, and dissolved their bipartisan advisory boards.

These U.S.-Congress funded outlets are one of the few alternatives to state-controlled media available in local languages, and technologies supported by the Open Technology Fund (OTF) have helped journalists and their sources stay safe while helping residents of repressive and closed environments gain access to reporting on their countries that would otherwise be blocked.

Journalists working for USAGM often face [repression in-country](#), and if they lose their visas, repatriated journalists could face retribution for their critical reporting. CPJ research shows that VOA journalists have been harassed and detained in China, charged with treason in Ethiopia, imprisoned in Eritrea and Vietnam, and killed on assignment in Somalia.

Pack's initial moves [raise](#) serious questions about the future of the networks' editorial independence and his potential changes could have far-reaching consequences. We urge you to hold a hearing on this matter and ensure that the statutory independence of these outlets is ensured in practice.



I must add that the president's ongoing rhetorical attacks on the press are not helpful in dealing with these persistent issues. His routine attacks on journalists verbally and on Twitter have serious repercussions for the online harassment and the safety of journalists, especially women and minorities.² The president's ploy to destroy the credibility of the press also poses serious risks to Americans trying to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, fundamental challenges to human rights at home are worsened by the lack of action from the administration to hold Saudi Arabia's leaders accountable for the murder of U.S. resident and *Washington Post* columnist [Jamal Khashoggi](#). The administration has ignored Congressional requests and did not comply with a law signed by the president to release information on the murder. Because of the administration's refusal to be transparent, CPJ is currently leading a [lawsuit](#) to force the release of documents on whether the U.S. intelligence community was aware of threats to Khashoggi's life prior to his murder.

Closing

Despite a less-than-stellar press freedom record at home, the world still looks to the U.S. for leadership on this issue. Given that the current administration has not been a forceful advocate for press freedom, the burden falls on Congress and the international community to increase their efforts.

Hearings like this one are certainly helpful to help illuminate important issues. But more must be done.

In response to recent attacks on journalists covering demonstrations in the U.S., CPJ has joined press freedom organizations in issuing [policy recommendations](#). We urge serious consideration of these recommendations and submit copies of the letters we have written to public authorities that outline the specifics.

More broadly, we urge all public officials to make clear the crucial role that journalists and independent media play in helping to ensure democracy stays alive.

Thank you again, and I welcome your questions.

² An analysis by the Tracker [found](#) that Trump has Tweeted more than 2,000 attacks on media since he took office.