

ABR  JI

ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE
JORNALISMO INVESTIGATIVO

*Input for the Special Rapporteur on Freedom
of Opinion and Expression*

Defending journalism and the sustainable development

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Introduction

The Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (**Abraji**) is a civil society organization that has been operating for **20 years** and is committed to the protection and defense of freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information, acting to influence public policies that guarantee these rights. In addition, over the last two decades, Abraji has helped reshape investigative journalism in Brazil, offering a wide range of training grounds for new storytellers, providing data and innovative tools in order to stand for in-depth stories, fostering accountability and promoting a more independent and diverse media landscape.

Abraji's principles see Journalism as a pillar of contemporary democratic societies for its role as a watchdog of public power and a defender of citizens' interests. Journalism is a prerequisite for an open and an equitable society, and in Brazil this role is even more crucial to show the lack of resources and opportunities to reach a fair and equal outcome, with racial and economic justice.

However, the political turmoil that has taken over Brazil in recent years undoubtedly affected the freedom and the credibility of the press in the country. As Brazilian politics is more and more polarized, press professionals and media outlets face aggression and harassment – with different levels of severity – in their daily work.

An outcome of this scenario is the exponential upsurge of registered cases of violence against journalists: since 2020, this number has increased 248%. Along 2021, Abraji registered **453** cases, of which 69% of the aggressors were public agents. **In 2022**, Abraji identified **557** cases, a rise of around 23% compared to 2021. After the presidential runoff election, **70** media crews were attacked by Bolsonaro supporters while covering roadblock protests on highways or camps in front of army headquarters, in which they called for a military intervention.

The political (and economical) instability, coupled with conspiratorial far-right narratives, attacks on voting system, media and Brazilian institutions, will help to feed a hostile environment against media practitioners. It is also clear that Brazil will continue to see high levels of misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, digital and physical violence, “troll farms” building a wave of gender attacks, and judicial harassment (routinely named as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation - SLAPPs).

On the other hand, as seen in other countries, the collapse of business-model and the world-wide newsroom unemployment, have paved the way for the rise of self-funded, independent nonprofit news media organizations. In any case, we see that journalism has assumed a central role in promoting sustainable development. This submission aims to provide information on how journalism and access to public information have been threatened in Brazil over the last few years, and how it affects the SDGs.

Violence against journalists and the threats to SDG 16

The first step to tackling violence against press professionals is to know it more deeply. Since 2013, Abraji has been monitoring attacks on journalists in Brazil, and in 2019 it joined the Latin American and Caribbean network Voces del Sur, carrying out the monitoring according to a shared regional methodology adopted by other 15 countries, and developed from SDG 16.10.01.

Journalism is established as a pillar of contemporary democratic societies for its role as a watchdog of public power and a defender of citizens' interests. Taking in consideration the above said political turmoil that affected the freedom and the credibility of the press in the country, **an outcome of this scenario is the exponential upsurge of registered cases of violence against journalists.**

In 2021, there were **453 attacks** aiming at communicators, media companies, or the Brazilian press in general. In 2022, this number increased to **557** attacks. The data collected and analyzed by Abraji shows that in 2021, 69% of the aggression were carried out by individuals connected to the Brazilian State. **President Jair Bolsonaro (PL) alone was involved in 89 episodes of aggression and stigmatization** – or 19.6% of all the attacks. If we sum it to the attacks perpetrated by its ministers of State, political allies, advisers, and supporters, we reach 271 cases – 60% of the total registered throughout the year.

In general, the most common type of aggression is **stigmatizing speech**, and this is a pattern consolidated since 2019, when Bolsonaro took office. Stigmatizing speech is a form of verbal violence used to intimidate and discredit the press and its professionals, usually accompanied by derogatory terms that question the work of journalists. About 60% of the attacks recorded in 2020 and 2021 were classified as such. In 2022, stigmatizing speech constituted 61.2% of all aggressions, almost one verbal attack per day. And in **75.7% of these cases, the perpetrator was a state agent.**

It is possible to say that this outlook is, to some extent, a product of the **political and social polarization** that pervades the Brazilian scenario. Many political figures have been spreading and supporting anti-media discourses as a way to counter criticism against the government. The plan of “attacking the messenger” takes advantage of a context of low institutional trust among the Brazilian population. As the data already pointed out, this is a strategy adopted by the former president himself.

On the other hand, stigmatizing discourses serve as a boost and an authorization for citizens, followers of public authorities, and protesters to engage in more direct and serious forms of violence against journalists. Other episodes of violence against journalists in 2021 involved **physical aggression**, threats, and destruction of equipment (19%); legal proceedings (4.2%); restrictions on the internet, such as doxxing and hacking (2.6%); restrictions on access to information (2.4%); and abusive use of State power (0.6%). In February 2022, **journalist Givanildo Oliveira, 46, was murdered** hours after publishing an article on the arrest of a homicide suspect. Oliveira was one of the founders of the Pirambu News website in the city of Fortaleza, Northeast of Brazil. Evidence indicates that he had been threatened,

warned to not publish information about criminals in the area¹. A suspect was arrested days later and the investigation is ongoing.

The data gathered by Abraji indicates that, in general, 2022 has been a more violent year for Brazilian journalists than 2021. In 2022, **557 aggressions** against journalists, media, and press in general were registered - 23% more than in 2021. Political violence against journalists characterized the year, with **31.6% of the cases directly connected to electoral coverage**. In 56.7% of the episodes, one or more aggressors were state agents, such as members of parliament, governors, and public employees.

Some emblematic cases registered in the past few years show **that journalists working on public interests investigations, involving corruption, social and environmental issues, as well as politics and elections, are more likely to become targets of attempts to silence them.**

For example, May 2021 held 63.1% more cases of attacks than May 2022 because of the discussions on the Pandemic Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI), a prominent subject at the time. **Health and politics** have been the main topics that generate attacks on the press and press professionals in the country, especially when the pandemic and the performance of the government of Jair Bolsonaro emerge as correlated themes.

The beginning of June 2022 has been strongly marked by episodes of violence against journalists. A reporter, an editor and the very media outlet they work for, called Congresso em Foco, have been target of several attacks such as **death and rape threats**, and online attacks that have taken down the vehicle's website. In the same year, after weeks of being missing, **British journalist Dom Phillips** accompanied by Indigenous expert **Bruno Pereira** were killed in the Brazilian Amazon. They were traveling through an indigenous territory in the Javari valley, interviewing and investigating the lives of indigenous people in the region. Bruno has long received threats from the loggers and miners seeking to invade those lands, and they are the key suspects of the crime.

Although they did not stand out in terms of quantity considering the data for 2021 and 2022, **legal proceedings aimed at censoring journalists** need to be placed under the spotlight when the subject is the safety of communicators and the freedom of the press. The main targets are large Brazilian media companies, such as the newspaper O Globo² and the magazine piauí³, and investigative reporters who have been pressed to not do their work. It is the case of **Malu Gaspar**, a journalist who was judicially prohibited from citing the name of a medical group after reporting on ethical violations and evidence of fraud in the conduct of a clinical trial with covid-19 patients, using a drug of unproven efficacy⁴. Or the situation of **Thiago Herdy**, from the UOL portal, who was sued by an Attorney General because of an article published about him⁵.

¹ <https://abraji.org.br/noticias/abraji-condena-assassinato-de-jornalista-no-ceara>

² <https://abraji.org.br/noticias/abraji-repudia-censura-ao-jornal-o-globo>;

<https://www.abraji.org.br/noticias/abraji-repudia-censura-de-juiz-do-amazonas-ao-jornal-o-globo>

³ <http://www.vocesdelsurunidas.org/incidentes/abraji-repudia-la-censura-a-la-revista-piau/>

⁴ <https://abraji.org.br/noticias/abraji-repudia-nova-medida-da-justica-do-amazonas-contr-jornal>

⁵ <https://www.abraji.org.br/noticias/abraji-repudia-tentativa-do-chefe-do-mp-de-minas-de-criminalizar-atividade-jornalistica>

Furthermore, there is a growing trend of **legal harassment of journalists** in the country. **Rubens Valente**, one of the most respected investigative journalists in Brazil, was sentenced to pay more than 310,000 Brazilian reais (USD 63,421.94) for the publication of a book that in a small part reported the professional performance of one of Supreme Court's ministers, Gilmar Mendes. In 2020, journalist and writer **J.P. Cuenca** was the target of more than 130 lawsuits filed by members of the Universal Church (one of the main evangelical institutions in the country) due to the publication of a tweet with a parody. The actions were distributed in the most diverse cities, far from the state capitals, in order to make it impossible for Cuenca to exercise his right of defense.

Social networks also stood out as important tools in the dynamics of aggression against journalists, since 62.5% of the total cases registered in 2021 and **63,4%** of the episodes categorized in 2022 originated or had repercussions on the internet. Digital media take on even more relevance when gender is at stake: in 2021, 71.4% of attacks on women journalists and gender attacks in general – including cases of homophobia and transphobia – took place on social media platforms.

This brief summary of key cases helps us to **understand the unsafe situation of journalists in the country, especially when they write and disseminate information about powerful groups and politicians**. Indeed, it proves that the protection of journalists has an important practical effect in ensuring that this information reaches the population, and that a democratic environment with public scrutiny of the state depends on press freedom.

Gender perspective on right to expression and information

With support from **UNESCO**, Abraji has been monitoring attacks against women journalists and gender attacks in journalism since **2021**, through the project **Gender Violence against Journalists**⁶. The results of this monitoring help us understand that women journalists, in addition to the obstacles of exercising their profession due to violations of freedom of expression, also suffer with another layer of violence for being women. These attacks are based on a misogynistic thought of silencing women because the public sphere has no space for them. The result of women self-censorship is the decrease of feminine and feminist narratives in wide dissemination in the public debate.

Women were victims of 43% of attacks aimed at journalists in both 2021 and 2022. The violence directed at female communicators was often loaded with misogyny and sexism. Traits of **gender violence were spotted in 45 attacks** throughout 2022. These episodes mainly included attacks on the morals and reputation of female journalists (64%). Adding up general attacks against women journalists and gender attacks in 2022, we have a **total of 145 cases**; an increase of 13,1% compared to 2021. An example of gender aggression is what happened to journalist **Mariana Morais**, who received an unsolicited photo of a source's private parts during an interview attempt⁷.

Abraji's data has shown how frequent online **smear campaigns** against journalists – especially women journalists – have become in the latest years. In Brazil, tactics range from accusations of political bias and professional misconduct, attacks on the journalist's

⁶ <https://violenciagenerojornalismo.org.br/>

⁷ <https://emoff.ig.com.br/colunas/fabia-oliveira/marcos-harter-assedia-jornalista/>

character and reputation, and attacks on gender. These maneuvers usually have pernicious purposes: undermining the credibility of communicators, questioning the reliability of professional journalism, and diverting attention from news content. Instead of discussing the reported facts, the journalist's legitimacy and authority to investigate and disseminate stories are discussed. Therefore, it is no coincidence that a large part of the stigmatizing speeches made against press professionals contained words related to gender – slut, whore, gossip – and supposed ideological biases – militant, leftist, and communist, among others.

In 2022, political coverage was connected to **62.7%** of the alerts, followed by public security (**9%**) and sports (**7.6%**). The elections have had a special effect in increasing these attacks. The post-election period has been paradoxical: even though this period comes in the wake of the ultimate expression of democracy, it has been marked by threats to the democratic system itself, from opposing the election results, to harsh attacks against the press – especially women journalists. Between October 30, date of the presidential second round election, and December 8, there were **39** aggressions against female communicators, **79.5%** related to political coverage.

In this context, explicit expressions of gender violence stand out. Through a special survey, Abraji found out that the use of “vaca”, “vadia”, and “vagabunda” (“cow”, “bitch”, and “slut”, in Portuguese) to offend female journalists grew by 300% on Twitter, in comparison to the 40 days before the beginning of the electoral campaign, which began on August 16. The data clearly shows a marked link that exists between the Brazilian political context and misogyny against members of the press.

The numbers are worrying, but not surprising. They reflect the violent scenario that has taken hold since the election campaign period when this type of misogynistic attack reached its peak. In the 40 days leading up to the second round, the “three V’s” were used 65 times against female communicators, 983% more than in the pre-election period. This time frame includes the date of the first round of the elections, on October 2, 2022.

Although most smear campaigns take place on social media platforms, the repercussions of online violence go beyond the limits of the internet and **affect media professionals in offline spaces** as well. This is especially true for women journalists. Verbal attacks affect the professional and personal lives of women communicators, and sometimes intimidation involves threats to victims' families, friends, and colleagues. Children and life partners are common targets.

Conclusion

To sum up, Abraji has been involved in monitoring the SGD 16, developing studies based on methodologies focused on violence against journalists, inspired by an understanding that this is a fundamental indicator to measure the situation of “Peace, Justice and Efficient Institutions”. The data and cases presented here highlight the importance of journalism and how these fundamental rights, of freedom of expression and access to information, are, besides being rights in themselves, a way to access and make other sustainable development rights possible. Attached are Abraji's reports and publications on the subject, which are intended to help understand how giving a voice to journalists means increasing

public participation, building more democratic societies and enhancing sustainable development.