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# NO LOCKDOWN ON VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALIST DURING PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of the pandemic on violence against journalists, starting from the proposition that the pandemic might have influenced the frequency or nature of attacks. While reports indicate a decline in the overall number of violent incidents against journalists over the years, the cases remain alarmingly high. The research aims to map the patterns of violence against journalists using two primary concepts: violence against journalists and press freedom. Employing qualitative content analysis, the study analyzed news articles from several leading outlets, classifying incidents based on perpetrators, types of violence, and their underlying motives. The findings reveal that during the pandemic and the transitional period in 2022, journalists continued to face various forms of violence, ranging from intimidation and suppression of their reporting to outright murder. Perpetrators included civilians, public security officers, military personnel, and government officials. The motives behind these acts primarily fall into two categories: preventing journalists from covering specific events or issues, and retaliating against negative coverage. The study highlights that press freedom should

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not only be understood as freedom from government intervention but also freedom from threats, intimidation, and all other forms of violence. Additionally, the research underscores the importance of implementing safety training programs to better equip journalists to navigate these challenges.

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## INTRODUCTION

While many employees work remotely during the pandemic, many journalists still must go out on a limb. The pace of the work might be changed, but the risk has never faded. Recently two journalists based in Karawang, West Java, became victims of abduction and violence by a group of people after posting on their social media, criticizing a football club.

“I only wrote a status on Facebook criticizing one of the football clubs in Karawang. I was accused of provocation. Personally, I think something needed to be straightened out regarding the launching, I was highlighting on Persija,” Gusti said as quoted by media recently (*Wartawan & Warga Karawang Diduga Dianiaya Pejabat Pemkab Akibat Status Facebook*, 2023). Not very long afterward, he was called to meet a government official in Karawang district to discuss the Facebook post. He was taken to a room in Singaperbangsa stadium, got his phone confiscated, was beaten by some people using bottles, and was forced to drink his urine. He could not stand the torture and fainted a few hours later.

This was not the only case this year. A journalist of an online media in Sukabumi, Ilham Nugraha, was beaten when covering a victim of an accident in a hospital in Sukabumi. Earlier, the family of the victim asked him not to take pictures. Ilham decided to go out of the room, but he was intimidated. The request to show his phone photo gallery was fulfilled, but he was still beaten by some people (Hadi, 2022).

During the pandemic years, stretching from early 2020 to date, dozens of attacks against journalists in Indonesia have been recorded. Data from the Indonesian Journalist Alliance, known as AJI, shows that in the first year of the pandemic, there were 84 violent cases, which halved to 43 in 2021 (Manan, 2020; Ningtyas, 2021).

Physical threats and attacks on journalists are a global problem. A study claims that attacks and abuse of the press are increasing worldwide (Miller, 2023). One of them was an attack on a prominent Pakistani investigative journalist in October 2022. This journalist, Arshad Shafir, was shot dead in Kenya by police. The incident happened after Pakistani security agencies charged him with sedition and spreading an anti-state narrative. Shafir was a passenger in a car traveling from Nairobi when Kenyan police mistakenly identified the car as a stolen vehicle. The officer fired the cars and killed Sharif in the process (Igunza, 2022). Also in the same month, two men on a motorcycle gunned down a Colombian journalist Rafael Emiro Moreno. He was the director of Voces De Cordoba, an independent local news media. He received numerous threats for his reports on corruption and drug-trafficking groups (Havana Times, 2022).

In several countries, particularly categorized “Not Free” or “Partly Free”, media workers are facing constant threats. Of 195 countries listed in the Index of Freedom of the World 2022, 83 are under “Free”, 56 “Partly Free”, and the rest 56 are under “Not Free”. Indonesia ranked among the countries where freedom is partly free. In a suffocating economy and business environment, a threat to press freedom in Indonesia comes from several directions, both internal and external. Internal threats to press freedom come from the fact that most of the Indonesian media are owned by a small number of media moguls and some of them are affiliated with political parties. External threats are numerous, from individuals to civil groups and government, as well as the laws. Journalists were often criminalized with the 2008 Law on Electronic Information and Transactions that stipulate libel on online media and the Criminal Code Law. Such laws or regulations, both intentional and not, influence media content (Graber, 2015).

Another threat to press freedom is the hostile environment of the media in which many journalists suffer from physical attacks. After the fall of the authoritarian regime, the government issued a Press Law in 1999 that some of its articles stipulate the protection of journalists in performing their duties. It has been more than a decade since it was issued, but up to date, cases of violence against journalists is still high.

Most of the studies on press freedom mostly focus on the connection between the repression by the states and the freedom of expression (Dorff et al., 2023). Lacking

in this field is attention to the growing threat to press freedom by violence against journalists, both performed by state and non-state actors. Thus, the objectives of this article are to synthesize literature on violence against journalists in Indonesia, and develop a model of threat to press freedom from this perspective.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The existence of a law that stipulates journalist protection does not guarantee that the press would be free to carry out their work. This paper argues that such a law might have been issued to promote a good environment for media workers' freedom and safety. However, whether such a law can be implemented highly depends on the law enforcers and related authorities. This view is in line with the thesis claiming that the murder of journalists, which can be extended to other types of violence, seems to be worse in a transitional society. In this kind of society, press freedom may be high, but high corruption and other type of crimes combined with a weak implementation of the legal system led to assaults on journalists (Høiby, 2020).

Therefore, two main concepts will be discussed here: press freedom and violence against journalists that potentially affect press freedom.

### *Violence Against Journalist*

Violence against journalists can be defined as physical attacks on media workers as well as their facilities. This research uses the definition of violence against journalists as issued by the Press Council. It is defined as physical attacks (abuse, abduction, murder), nonphysical violence (degrading, verbal harassment), destroying work equipment such as cameras and recorders, and efforts to hamper journalists from finding, storing, analyzing, and distributing information. Attacks on journalists are common, making them have to work in a constantly hostile environment.

The actors of such attacks against journalists can be broadly categorized as two, state actors and non-state actors. Reporting sensitive information about the government, such as colluding with government officials, can result in threats to journalists (Dorff et al., 2023). Even when the violence was carried out by non-state actors, it is proven that

the state also has an influential role in this. Studies point out that such attacks are sustained in conditions where the government fails or has no intention to prevent people from assaulting media workers (Mazzaro, 2023). Recent research shows that journalists can also be targeted by civilian. Mazzaro (2023) claims that civilians tend to attack media workers who incline toward certain political groups.

A study (Miller, 2023) points out that attacks or harassment of journalists happens for three related reasons. The first, political motivation, is related to the rise of populist leadership that often encourages people to attack the media. For instance, US President Trump discredits the media as the enemy of the people and produces fake news. Such demonization against media reportedly increases the number of attacks on journalists globally and erodes media trust. Another reason behind the assaults of journalists is accessibility to the press. The specific term of anti-media discourse has been used to define such trend of disseminating information that discredits media or media workers by government officials (Mazzaro, 2023). The media can be delegitimized by labeling them as manipulative and having a corrupt establishment, as well as media involvement in unethical behavior. Anti-media discourse, usually containing hateful information, is repeatedly disseminated. As in general, there is little to no serious effort in solving violence to media, such discourse get bigger.

The second reason is the visibility of journalists in the digital world. Easy access to media workers through social media negatively also paves the way for attacks. Online visibility puts journalists in vulnerable positions, not only for doxing or online attacks but also as a source of information that can be used for physical attacks. The last reason for the assault on media workers is identity, particularly if the identity is visible. A study reveals that people of color, ethnicity, as well as gender preferences, can be the factor behind attacks (Miller, 2021).

Another study (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018) points out four situations that encourage attacks on media. The first one is government corruption and human rights abuse. This particularly happens in countries with low press freedom. Another threat to media is criminal organizations, which mostly found in countries like Mexico where criminal gangs often harass journalists to prevent information about their activities from

leaking outside their groups or to seek revenge for being exposed by the media (Charles, 2022).

Certain news beats also put media workers at higher risk, such as politics and crime. The last one is gender, in which males are mostly the target of assassination while women journalists are often targeted for nonlethal threats (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018).

Journalists can also be targeted for producing news about groups who have been repressed, such as certain races, religious groups, feminist groups, and LGBT movement. Journalists who voice out these groups' demand for recognition and rights are often targeted for attacks (Waisbord, 2020).

The impact of such violence can be very detrimental to the freedom of the press. As part of the prevention efforts, some journalists have to use different names at work and ask others to accompany them to places unsafe. Some even fully go by avoiding certain issues that potentially lead them to harassment. After experiencing harassment, some journalists changed their profession or considered leaving the media. Some turn to alcohol use as part of a coping strategy. Overall, such abuse destroys the confidence and self-esteem of the media workers, makes them stressed, and suffers emotional unrest (Miller, 2021).

Dorff et al. (2022) performed research that points out that violence against journalists decreases story specificity, particularly the use of precise actors' names in stories about violent events, and the use of anonymous bylines.

The worst impact is the chilling effect, as many journalists silenced themselves by stopping publishing risky stories. The journalists understand the risk that covering such stories might have psychological or physical risks, such as imprisonment and assaults. This increase in self-censorship mostly happens in countries where legal enforcement is weak (Graber, 2015; Miller, 2021). Related to this type of censorship is mob censorship, a new type of censorship, that threatens journalists and their rights to work freely.

A systematic effort is needed to prevent violence against journalists. In order to do so, a comprehensive map of the violence is needed. Therefore, this study seeks to reveal the actors, types, as well as motives of the violence but limited in the context

of the pandemic, by answering these questions below.

*RQ1: Who performed violence against journalists in Indonesia during the pandemic?*

*RQ2: What is the type of violence against journalists in Indonesia during the pandemic?*

*RQ3: What was the causes of violence against journalists in Indonesia during pandemic?*

### ***Press Freedom***

Journalism serves as a political, social, and economic institution which means they have to be free to perform their works (Jamil, 2018). A free press that provides various and contrasting views and claims is required for a sound government. It protects the right of the people to express ideas and share them (Graber, 2015).

Such freedom, commonly known as press freedom, is defined as the right to publish and distribute information and views without restraint as guaranteed by the Constitution. Commonly, press freedom definition focuses on the absence of censorship from the government (Høiby, 2020b). Another definition points out that press freedom is the extent to which legal and political environment, circumstances, and institutions allow media as well as journalists' work in collecting and disseminating information without having to feel threatened by later attacks and harassment (Graber, 2015). The later definition expands the limiting focus on freedom from the government's control. A broader definition also points out that freedom should not only from the government restraint on the media but also the relative absence of restraint from nongovernment institutions (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021).

Opposed to the concept of press freedom is press repression, which is defined as restraint by any parties on the media and an uncondusive situation to disseminate various information and opinions to the audience. Repression, which is a constant problem for media workers, occurs only if the perpetrators are more powerful than the victims (Van de Vliert, 2011).

The level of press freedom is influenced by the system of the countries in which the media operate. Under an authoritarian regime, the media aim to promote the state



and government. On the other hand, the press under a libertarian or social responsibility system focuses on the public welfare, rather than the interest of the government. However, the government system is not the only factor. A study confirms that threats to press freedom also happen in Western democracies, not only in authoritarian states (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021)

The degree of press freedom can be a result of governmental regulations and threats from activists (Van de Vliert, 2011). This paper extends this view to the threat of physical violence against journalists by any actors, both government and nongovernment. The study is put in the context of the pandemic, as the virus is considered to amplify threats to press freedom (Palmer, 2022). Such context leads to the question as follows:

*RQ4: How does violence against journalists limit press freedom in the context of the pandemic?*

## METHODOLOGY

The method of qualitative content analysis was used for this study to map the actors, the types, and the motives of the violence. Such a method focuses on finding the text's meaning and analyzing communicative content with the purpose of understanding and interpreting the text (Kuckartz, 2014). The text would be analyzed in a systematic way to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Schreier, 2012).

The data on cases of violence against journalists were gathered from news published between April 2020 to March 2023 from prominent online media and data from the Indonesian Journalist Alliance (AJI). The researchers searched for the stories with the help of Google Advance Search and Media Cloud and built a data corpus. The phrases used to gather the news are “journalist violence” and “journalist abuse”. To ensure the validity of the information, the researchers used only violence cases that were reported by at least two sources. Data screening is then performed to ensure only relevant news is put into the data. A total of 61 cases were analyzed.

All news would then be coded, with three coding frames: the actors, the type of violence, and the cause or the motive of the violence. The coding unit is text segments.



To ensure the validity of the analysis, double coding is performed by the same coders at two different times.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The result discusses three main focuses of the research: the actors, the types of violence, and the motives behind attacks. This mapping then will be connected to the press freedom, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

### *The Actors*

Assaults on journalists in Indonesia during the pandemic were carried out by various parties, including government officials, civilians, security officers, news sources, business owners, and public order agencies. For government officials, security officers, and news sources in general, the violence was carried out mainly to prevent journalists from covering certain events or issues.

Preventing coverage was also the reason behind civilians trying to stop journalists from reporting the accident of a family member and beating the journalist in the process. The main assaulters claimed that he just wanted the reporter not to take the photo of his relatives who were in the hospital after a motorcycle accident. Another case of a civilian attack on journalists happened in Papua this year. Some people living in Papua stopped journalists from covering road closures. Other cases of the involvement of family members in violence against journalists were found in North Maluku and West Sumatra provinces. The brother-in-law of Dharmasraya district head reportedly kicked the belly of a journalist named Arpaliadi with his knee and threatened to kill him with a scissor. In North Maluku, the brother of the deputy district head of Tidore Islands hit a journalist for his report on the rejection a coal power plant.

Public Order Agencies, locally known as Satpol PP, were frequently cited as the actors performing violence against journalists. A journalist working for Tribun Palu got her phone damaged after an officer of the agency hit her hands. The incident happened when she was requesting approval to do live streaming during the Independent Day celebration. A similar case happened to a journalist working for JPNN. He was hit and

got his phone damaged in the process when covering a rally rejecting the appointment of the governor's family member as the head of the Indonesian Young Entrepreneurs Association. In Gorontalo province, two journalists were abused by the Public Order Agency when they were about to interview Governor Hamka Hendra Noer. Local media reported that the agency stepped on the feet of the journalists and pushed them from behind.

Attacks can also relate to business. In North Sumatra, a business owner was allegedly behind the murder of a chief editor of a local online media. He claimed that his business was often covered from a negative angle. He also claimed that the victim extorted him by asking millions of rupiah for monthly allowance in return for positive coverage. In this case, four army officers were involved. Three of them were responsible for buying the gun, and one of them executed the victim. Another violence in which the perpetrator was a business owner was experienced by a journalist named Faisal who worked for *Amperanews* in Lampung. He was stabbed to bleed with a machete by the owner of illegal mining in Pesawaran district, Lampung.

Other actors reported to use violence against journalists were the security officers in their attempts to prevent coverage of the government ministers' visits. Ajang Nurdin, a journalist working for *Liputan6.com* was hit by the security of Transportation Ministry Budi Karya Sumadi in Batam, in 2021. Nurdin wore his press card but did not prevent the violence. Two journalists, Adhe Junaedi Sholat and Abdul Rahman, were prevented from covering an event attended by the Agrarian Reform and Spatial Planning Minister Hadi Tjahjanto in West Sulawesi. The journalists were dragged and pushed to leave the scene.

### ***The Type of Violence***

Violence against journalists can be classified as physical attacks and verbal attacks. In one case where the victim was verbally abused, the story written by the victim was forcefully taken down. The types of non-physical violence range from intimidation to requesting media to drop stories.

Two journalists were reportedly abducted, beaten until they fainted and forced to

drink their own urine after posting on their social media timeline criticizing a football club. Three people have been charged responsible for the attack. The incident happened after they posted on their social media timeline, criticizing a football group. When confronted with the violation, the perpetrator claimed that the journalists were exaggerating the incident.

In the cases of attacks on Nurhadi in Surabaya and a journalist in Batam, the perpetrators dragged the journalists away by their necks. The purpose was to prevent journalists from covering or interviewing a source. Instead of asking them to leave, the explanation of why the perpetrators had to drag them out of the scene came later.

Confiscating or damaging work equipment is another type of violence. In the case of the Lampung football riot and the Nurhadi case in Surabaya, the journalists' equipment was confiscated to prevent them from reporting certain issues. In other cases, their equipments, such as cameras or mobile phones, was damaged.

A growing type of violence is doxing or online harassment. In the case of a *Detik* journalist, his identity, such as his home address, was made public. The journalist reported receiving a murder threat after writing a story about the president. A journalist, working at *Liputan6.com* also experienced a similar case of doxing. The journalist, Cakrayuri Nuralam, got his private data leaked to the internet after writing a fact-checking article about a politician from the ruling party. His photos were spread on Instagram. Nuralam was reportedly suffering from mental shock. *Liputan6* reported the case to Jakarta Police.

The use of weapons led to dangerous attacks against journalists. Besides the case of Faisal, a journalist of *Amperanews* who was stabbed to bleed with a machete, a journalist named Farhat Rettob was wounded on his right chest after being shot with an airgun during fights between resident groups.

Verbal threats, including murder threats, were not rare in cases of violence against journalists. Besides doxing and unwanted food order deliveries, a journalist of online media *Detik.com* received a murder threat after writing unfavorable coverage about the plan of President Joko Widodo's visit to Bekasi during the pandemic. Amuri, a journalist working at an online media in Lampung, received a murder threat through his phone.

Amuri thought the intimidation was related to the news he wrote concerning the high budget for road maintenance. Another type of threat was to set the journalist's house on fire, as experienced by Mugni Ilma, a journalist in West Nusa Tenggara.

Sexual abuse was one of the types of violence against journalists. An unidentified man threatened to rape Elfira Halifah, a journalist of *Cendrawasih Pos*, in Jayapura district court. Halifah was attending an indictment trial against the speaker of pro-independence Papuan activist Victor Yeimo. The Jayapura branch of the Indonesian Journalist Alliance reported the case to the police, but the case was dropped due to lacking evidence and no witness was presented.

### *The Motives*

In general, there are two big motives for violence against journalists. The first one is to prevent journalists from doing their work, covering an issue or event. One of the cases happened in Lampung. The journalist was about to request an interview to clarify an issue about the riot in a football club when the committee of the celebration came and hit his face. This motive is usually accompanied by the request of the media to delete the files. Another case is a journalist prevented from covering an illegal parking raid by the Transportation agency in which one of the cars was owned by a military member. There were also cases in which journalists were attacked to prevent coverage of demonstrations. In such cases, the perpetrators were the protesters and police officers. The latter hampered coverage of demonstrations, particularly those that showed the use of violence against the protesters. In some cases, the perpetrators had this motive because they had prior experience of getting unfavorable coverage.

The second motive, which is equally significant, is a type of revenge or punishment for negative coverage by journalists. The attackers sometimes ask for the story to be taken down, or simply as revenge for the unfavorable coverage. The deputy mayor of Tidore district reportedly asked a journalist to take down a story about coal mining's impact of pollution, alleging the journalist of voicing opinion instead of fact. In the case of the chief editor of a local media murder, the violence was performed to stop negative coverage of a company.

**Table 1 Mapping of Violence Against Journalists**

Type of Violence	Actors	Motive
Physical attacks:	Bystander	Coverage prevention
Murder	Legal enforcers	Post-coverage attacks
Beating	Business Owners	Intimidating
Hair Pulling	Family members of district heads	
Headlock	Protesters	
Shooting	Thugs	
Stabbing	Members of civil society organizations	
-----	Residents	
Verbal attacks:		
Murder threat		
Imprisonment threat		
Harsh words		
Attack threat		
-----		
Doxing		
Spreading photos, address, personal and family identities		
Encouraging online attacks		

### ***Discussion: Violence and Press Freedom***

While many studies on press freedom focus on freedom from government intervention or repression, violence against journalists might have a direct or indirect impact. Most of the violence was carried out to prevent journalists from covering a story, which meant they didn't have the freedom to perform their work. Though some of the journalists returned to work not long after the attacks, having such an experience could lead to trauma.

In many cases, their freedom to cover important stories for the public was seized by public order agency officers, civilians, and government employees. In preventing them from covering stories, numerous efforts were made including confiscating equipment, and damaging equipment to scare them away from the event by dragging them out of the scene.

Many of the cases were taken to the police and later to the court, but regardless of the result, such cases have an indirect impact to the freedom of journalists. Such violence can lead to self-censorship in which journalists prevent themselves from certain topics or issues that are considered dangerous. In some cases, journalists were also forced to use anonymous identity to prevent direct attacks at them.

Another problem is media support for the journalists who experience violence

related to their work. Not all media have the system to “heal” journalists who have been the target of attack. Considering that the job is risky, many media ignore that these journalists might need psychological assistance. This is worse in the case of freelance journalists who have limited access for support thus causing journalists to suffer the emotional impact (Claesson, 2022).

Direct impact or indirect impact of the violence contributes to limited freedom in covering stories. Indonesia is indeed a country categorized as “partly free” by the Freedom House, however, the government has issued a Law on the Press which stipulates the protection of journalists’ freedom. However, the weak implementation of the law has led to emerging cases of violence.

## CONCLUSION

The pandemic has not managed to curb, let alone halt, violence against journalists. Many journalists continue to work offline, thereby exposing themselves not only to the risks of virus transmission but also to persistent threats of physical violence. While online harassment has become a growing concern, evidence shows that physical violence against journalists remains alarmingly high, ranging from verbal abuse to deadly assaults, including the tragic murder of a journalist in Medan. Various perpetrators, both governmental and non-governmental, have been involved in these acts of violence, employing tactics such as intimidation, threats, demands to retract stories, physical beatings, and, in extreme cases, murder.

The rising levels of violence against journalists are deeply troubling and could potentially discourage journalists from carrying out their crucial roles in society. This issue warrants serious attention, as it poses a significant threat to press freedom. The study suggests that future research on press freedom should place greater emphasis on how acts of violence, whether by state or non-state actors, impact journalists and their capacity to function independently. Additionally, the findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive safety training for journalists. Many practitioners lack the proper preparation to navigate and mitigate the risks of violence, underscoring the necessity of introducing robust safety measures and training programs to better protect journalists

in the field.

By addressing these concerns, stakeholders in media, government, and civil society can work collaboratively to safeguard press freedom and the well-being of journalists.

## LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study is not without limitations. While there were dozens of data on violence against journalists, some of the data were screened out because no other sources of information could be found, particularly on the incidents happening in the regions. Another study might gather more comprehensive data, combining archival records and interviews with local media. Future studies might also investigate the effectiveness of the Press Law implementation in protecting journalists.

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