

What's in a Number?

The figure stands at 1122 and counting. You will have heard mention of this before, but it bears repeating. At the time of publication, 1122 represents the number of journalists recorded killed in the line of duty since 1992.

Over the last 23 years, an average of nearly one colleague per-week has died.

Behind the statistics are stories of friends and colleagues lost. But these deaths also provide crucial insight into what motivates those who kill journalists.

For one thing, it is clear that the killers of journalists don't worry too much about getting caught. Data shows that in the vast majority of murder cases -- which comprise 740 out of 1122 recorded deaths -- almost 90 per cent remain unsolved. The perpetrators of over 660 deaths remain at large.

These figures come from our colleagues at the New York City-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). I encourage you to take a closer look at their data (<https://cpj.org/killed/>). It gives a detailed picture of the individuals, their assignments, the environment they were working in, and who their killers may have been. It also serves as the historical record, not simply chronicling lives lost but spelling out how they lived their final moments in the service of our profession. It is a poignant resource for the living, a reminder of how little we should take our freedom for granted.

Importantly, however, such raw data encourages wider investigation. How we interpret it helps shape solutions that will, one day, better protect media. In the meantime, it provides clear focus to our demands on those in power who have the capacity to halt these deadly attacks and reverse the trend.

Quite beyond the possibility that criminals who target journalists will repeat their acts, as is likely under a climate of impunity, who can say they – or the people hired to commit murder on their behalf - are not also responsible for other serious crimes, other killings? With authorities in impunity crisis spots such as Iraq, Somalia, the Philippines, etc., impotent to protect the lives of journalists, the statistics offer a warning to entire societies that crime is riding roughshod over law and order.

Fertile ground for any journalist to explore but again, with rampant impunity, self-censorship is often the only way to protect against becoming the next target.

Let's examine some of the figures.

46% of recorded deaths involved journalists working the political beat.

Corruption and crime beats account for a further 35%.

For those investigating at the highest levels of society, the implications are clear.

In the most challenged countries for impunity, the capacity to investigate thoroughly and fairly may be severely limited by any number of internal pressures, while guarantees of independence between those in charge of the nation, and those in charge of the law, can often be extremely weak. Under these conditions, are judicial systems even capable of pursuing crimes against journalists?

The data would suggest not.

More sinisterly, could there be complicity in the security forces, the very people meant to protect?

Again, the numbers provide cause for concern. In 35% of cases, government or military officials are the suspected perpetrators. As a result, journalism falls victim to a chilling-effect that silences critical opinion throughout society. In such an environment, is justice possible?

Ultimately, it places the orchestrators -- those who gave the order, paid the blood money or targeted an individual journalist -- even further from justice.

87% (976) of those who have died since 1992 were local journalists. On their own, these numbers reveal little, but when we overlay the deadliest countries from the period – among them Iraq (166 deaths since 1992), Syria (80), Somalia (56), Pakistan (56) and Mexico (32) – we begin to understand that local journalists, likely less well trained, financed, and supported, are covering beats foreign journalists can either no longer access, or to which their news companies are no longer willing to send them.

A solution must be found to better protect and better equip all journalists at risk, but particularly those local reporters providing news to foreign organisations. This is an achievable goal that is well within the power of the industry to accomplish. If their content is being used, there is a moral obligation to contribute to the safekeeping of those who place their lives in danger to deliver it.

Conflict and war still account for a large proportion of the total number of recorded deaths. Where identifying as 'Press' might once have provided an element of protection, in the years since records began the dangers of doing so have become significant. Overall, 426 journalists have died covering war while an estimated 224 have lost their lives in combat or crossfire situations. A further 146 journalists were killed on dangerous assignments.

One final statistic that bears particular consideration for WAN-IFRA and its community: 51% of all deaths recorded since 1992 have involved journalists working in print media.

I believe that is one statistic connected with the print industry we wouldn't object to seeing drop.

Andrew Heslop

Director, Press Freedom

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity aims to create a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers, both in conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy and development worldwide. The Plan recommends working in cooperation with governments, media houses, professional associations and NGOs to conduct awareness raising campaigns on a wide range of issues such as existing international instruments and conventions, the growing dangers posed by emerging threats to media professionals, including non-state actors, as well as various existing practical guides on the safety of journalists.

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists/un-plan-of-action/>

Visit www.cpj.org for more on the data quoted in this article.