Editorial Autonomy and Media Freedom

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Journalistic autonomy refers to the freedom of journalists and news organizations to perform their democratic functions without undue interference from external actors, such as governments, corporations, or other societal institutions (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2019). In the Worlds of Journalism Study 3 (WJS3), the focus is on editorial autonomy, defined as the degree to which journalists can make independent decisions regarding the selection, framing, and presentation of news content. Closely related to the broader concept of media freedom, editorial autonomy has long been a key focus for scholars and experts assessing the state of press freedom across countries. These country-level assessments often reflect structural, legal, and political conditions and provide essential context for understanding the constraints under which journalists operate.

The Worlds of Journalism Study examines editorial autonomy from the perspective of journalists themselves. Assessing media freedom through journalists' own perceptions offers unique insight into their lived professional realities. Accordingly, WJS includes questions that measure both journalists' overall perceptions of media freedom in their countries and their personal experiences regarding the freedom to select stories and emphasize particular aspects of these stories. These measures complement institutional metrics by capturing the day-to-day limitations affecting professional autonomy.

OVERVIEW OF GLOBAL PATTERNS

European countries consistently rank highest across the three measures of editorial autonomy: perceived freedom in selecting stories, perceived freedom in emphasizing story aspects, and overall perceived media freedom (see Table 8). Journalists in Lithuania, Portugal, and Latvia—countries that have historically scored highly in global media freedom indices, such as Reporters Without Borders—report some of the highest levels of perceived autonomy in story selection and framing. Sweden and the Netherlands rank highest in overall perceived media freedom.

Countries in the Americas also perform well. Chile and Costa Rica lead the region in freedom to select and frame stories, while Canada ranks highest in perceived media freedom. New Zealand and Australia achieve moderately high scores across all three measures. In contrast, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East display greater variability. Some countries report moderate freedom, whereas others face significant constraints, often linked to political instability and governance challenges. In Asia, the Philippines ranks highest in editorial autonomy, while Nepal scores highest in perceived media freedom. In the Middle East, Israel ranks high in both editorial autonomy and media freedom, whereas Yemen ranks lowest across all measures, including freedom to select stories, freedom to emphasize story aspects, and perceived media freedom. In Africa, South Africa leads the region across all measures, while Zambia ranks moderately high in story selection and framing but low in perceived media freedom.

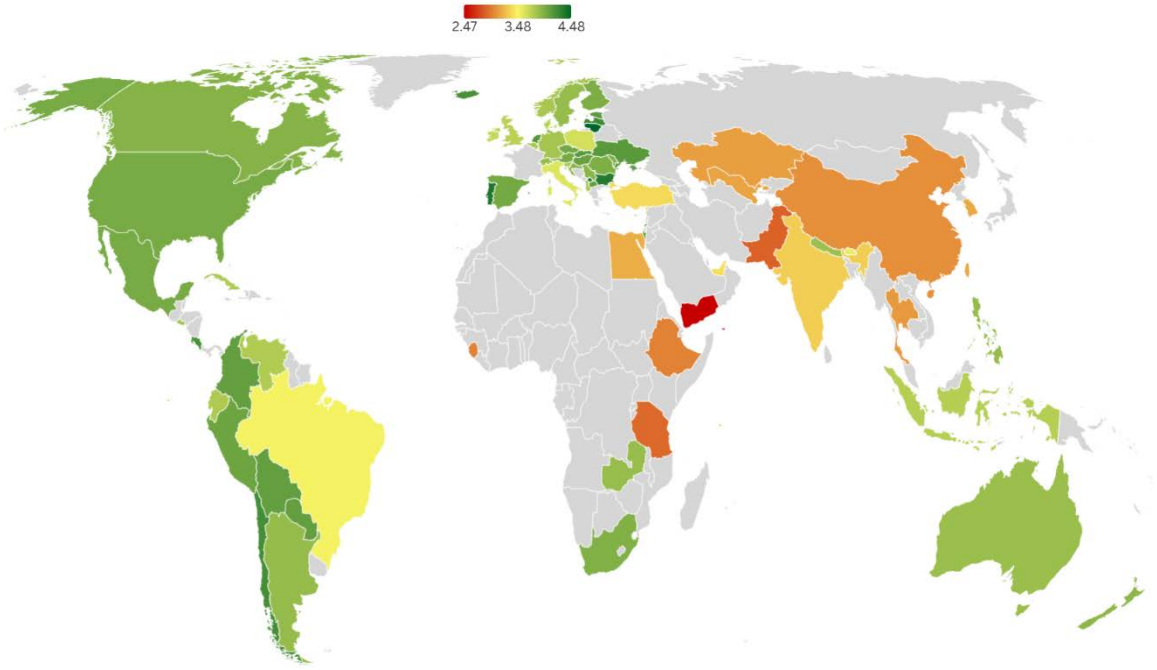

FIGURE 4: PERCEIVED EDITORIAL AUTONOMY
Average index scores (Scale: 5 = complete freedom … 1 = no freedom at all)

NOTABLE CASES

While many countries in Europe and the Americas consistently score strongly across all dimensions of perceived media freedom, some countries in Asia, such as Yemen and Pakistan, sit at the opposite end of the spectrum. Journalists in these contexts report substantially lower levels of perceived freedom, often citing limited editorial autonomy and external pressures that constrain their ability to report freely. Countries where journalists perceive lower media freedom are also those where symbolic forms of aggression—such as demeaning speech and public discrediting—are more common, further undermining autonomy and professional legitimacy. This highlights a clear connection between autonomy and safety. Gender also makes a difference in perceptions of editorial autonomy. In some countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, women journalists report significantly lower levels of perceived autonomy in their reporting than male journalists. These findings align with broader concerns about media repression, inequalities, and political interference in these countries.

Although journalists' perceptions of media freedom generally align with global indices, such as the World Media Freedom (WMF) index by Reporters Without Borders, notable discrepancies exist. For example, Singapore, which ranked 123 out of 180 countries in the WMF 2024 index, reports moderate levels of perceived autonomy among its journalists. Similarly, the Philippines (rank 116) and Cuba (rank 168) report higher perceived media freedom than expected, both scoring slightly above the WJS global mean.

These results underscore the importance of comparing journalists' day-to-day experiences with macrolevel assessments of media freedom based on structural, legal, and political aspects. Indeed, journalists in the WJS survey seem to be aware of such discrepancies, as in most countries, journalists perceive overall media freedom as lower than their individual freedom to select stories or emphasize certain aspects of coverage. Hungary provides a striking example: the country's journalists rate overall media freedom at 2.56, whereas freedom to select stories is rated 4.01 and freedom to emphasize aspects of stories is 4.12. This suggests that while journalists feel relatively free in performing their immediate tasks, they remain acutely aware of systemic pressures—such as political influence, ownership structures, legal constraints, and threats to colleagues—that shape, if not constrain, other aspects of their work and the media landscape where they operate. These external factors may not directly interfere with daily routines but contribute to a climate of restricted media freedom, influencing journalistic practices and professional well-being.

CONCLUSION

While global indices, such as those from Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, provide essential macrolevel assessments grounded in legal, political, and structural conditions, they may not fully capture the day-to-day realities experienced by journalists, including the pressures and routines inherent in different work environments and employment contexts. By asking journalists directly about their autonomy in selecting stories, deciding which aspects of stories to emphasize, and their overall sense of media freedom, the WJS provides a bottom-up perspective that complements these top-down evaluations. These perceptions not only reveal how free journalists feel in their professional roles, but they also help explain how journalists navigate constraints that may not be visible in institutional metrics.

The findings show broad alignment with global indices, reinforcing the validity of both approaches. However, some discrepancies underscore the nuanced and context-dependent nature of media freedom. Such gaps suggest that perceived freedom is shaped by cultural norms, professional expectations, or even adaptive strategies, as individual journalists learn to work around structural restrictions to fulfill their professional responsibilities.

TABLE 8: PERCEIVED EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Country	Freedom in selecting stories WJS3	Freedom in emphasizing story aspect WJS3	Perceived media freedom WJS3	Editorial autonomy (index) WJS2	Editorial autonomy (index) WJS3
Albania	3.81	3.71	2.84	3.74	3.78
Argentina	3.90	3.86	3.06	3.98	3.88
Australia	3.81	3.92	3.55	3.99	3.86
Austria	3.82	4.19	3.21	4.06	4.00
Belgium	3.67	3.94	3.76	3.84	3.81
Bhutan	3.48	3.61	2.94	3.51	3.54
Bolivia	4.13	4.03	2.77		4.08
Brazil	3.44	3.56	2.73	3.55	3.50
Bulgaria	4.26	4.40	2.75	4.22	4.33
Canada	3.89	3.98	3.83	4.08	3.94
Chile	4.18	4.23	3.13	3.75	4.20
China	3.02	3.11	2.88	3.09	3.06
Colombia	4.07	4.08	2.82	4.18	4.08
Costa Rica	4.22	4.16	3.67		4.19
Croatia	3.94	3.92	2.83	4.15	3.93
Cuba	3.74	3.79	2.65		3.77
Czech Republic	3.96	4.08	3.67	3.95	4.02
Denmark	3.60	3.88	3.97	3.85	3.74
Ecuador	3.82	3.74	2.87	3.86	3.78
Egypt	3.19	3.17	2.62	3.38	3.18
El Salvador	3.90	3.76	2.59	3.63	3.83
Estonia	3.99	4.26	4.06	4.27	4.12
Ethiopia	2.96	3.04	2.29	3.44	3.00
Finland	3.91	4.05	3.88	3.88	3.98
Germany	3.71	3.92	3.90	4.06	3.82
Hong Kong	3.16	3.24	2.46	3.14	3.20
Hungary	4.01	4.12	2.56	3.68	4.06
Iceland	4.15	4.24	3.70	4.2	4.19
India	3.31	3.31	2.92	3.92	3.31
Indonesia	3.72	3.78	3.14	3.49	3.75
Ireland	3.63	3.75	3.65	3.78	3.69
Israel	3.97	4.11	3.33	4.32	4.04
Italy	3.53	3.65	2.88	3.6	3.59
Kazakhstan	3.09	3.15	2.85		3.12
Kosovo	4.40	4.39	3.64	3.95	4.39
Latvia	4.15	4.29	3.24	4.30	4.22
Lithuania	4.43	4.53	3.85		4.48
Mexico	4.02	3.99	2.83	4.07	4.00
Moldova	3.99	3.93	3.14	4.04	3.96
Nepal	3.79	3.90	3.52		3.85
Netherlands	4.15	4.13	4.16	4.34	4.14
New Zealand	3.87	3.95	3.85	4.01	3.91
North Cyprus	3.61	3.80	2.93		3.70
North Macedonia	4.05	4.10	2.81		4.08
Norway	3.75	3.86	3.99	3.72	3.80
Pakistan	2.86	2.88	2.48		2.87
Paraguay	4.14	4.03	2.75		4.08
Peru	4.07	4.00	3.06		4.04
Philippines	3.81	3.95	3.32	4.02	3.88
Poland	3.66	3.60	2.94		3.63
Portugal	4.13	4.59	3.33	4.11	4.36
Romania	4.03	3.94	3.05	4.08	3.97
Serbia	3.90	3.97	2.38	3.87	3.93
Seychelles	3.45	3.66	3.12		3.56
Sierra Leone	3.45	2.55	2.92	3.75	3.00
Singapore	3.29	3.46	2.71	3.61	3.37
Slovakia	4.12	4.14	3.58		4.13
Slovenia	3.70	3.87	3.31		3.79
South Africa	3.95	3.97	3.80	3.82	3.96
South Korea	3.19	3.14	3.16	3.33	3.16
Spain	3.93	4.08	2.80	4.03	4.01
Sweden	3.85	3.90	4.19	4.02	3.87
Switzerland	3.80	3.97	3.68	3.97	3.88
Taiwan	3.18	3.16	3.15		3.16
Tanzania	2.93	2.87	3.01	2.44	2.90
Thailand	3.09	3.10	3.21	3.78	3.10
Turkey	3.34	3.39	1.88	3.95	3.36
UAE	3.47	3.40		3.44	3.39
UK	3.67	3.78	3.54	3.97	3.73
Ukraine	4.06	4.18	3.47		4.12
USA	3.96	4.05	3.71	4.29	4.00
Uzbekistan	3.13	3.16	2.91		3.14
Venezuela	3.81	3.73	2.23		3.77
Yemen	2.25	2.68	1.64		2.47
Zambia	3.88	3.87	2.94		3.87
Average[1]	**3.72**	**3.78**	**3.15**	**3.84**	**3.75**

[1]Average across the countries listed in the table (the original WJS2 sample included 67 countries)
Question: "Thinking of your work overall, how much freedom do you personally have in selecting the news stories you work on?" / "And how much freedom do you personally have in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized?" / "In your view, how much freedom do the news media have in [country]?". Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.