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Editorial: Press freedom, journalism practice, and professionalization in times of uncertainty

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Press freedom, journalism practice, and professionalization in times of uncertainty

Press freedom is considered as one of the most significant prerequisites for every healthy democracy (e.g., [De Smaele, 2006](#); [Besley and Prat, 2006](#); [Norris, 2006](#)). However, it seems to remain a rather vague concept with blurred boundaries even in western democratic societies. This is so both as a normative concept (e.g., [Graber, 2017](#); [Hallin, 2020](#)) and as an empirical one ([Freedom House, 2019](#); [RSF, 2024](#)). In addition, press freedom seems to remain quite “sensitive” by nature, as it is constantly, either directly or indirectly, influenced by a series of factors which affect its dynamics and impact overall journalism practice ([Clark and Grech, 2017](#); [Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021](#); [Maniou, 2023](#)). Following [Graber \(2017\)](#) and [Papadopoulou and Maniou \(2021\)](#), these factors have generated several challenges, especially after the onset of the global pandemic crisis, and can be mainly categorized as legal, psychological, economic, physical, technological and political threats to press freedom.

Indeed, in recent years, the onset of the global pandemic crisis seems to have exacerbated existing threats to press freedom around the world. The measures introduced affected journalism practice and, in several cases, were interpreted as a direct attack on the media as well as a worldwide trend that has been evident for several years before the pandemic crisis, not only in authoritarian media systems but also in established democracies ([Holtz-Bacha, 2022](#)). As such, press freedom appears as the primary victim rather than a collateral damage of the global crisis.

This Research Topic seeks to explore the changing parameters of journalistic practice and its relationship to concepts of press freedom, media accountability, and professionalization.

The studies selected for this Research Topic illustrate a broad and inclusive range of research interests and methodologies demonstrating the diversity and richness within the field of media studies. Each article in this Research Topic contributes to a richer understanding of how media operate in different contexts and under different influences. By examining these multiple interactions, the studies illuminate how technological advances, societal expectations, and political frameworks collectively shape the practice

and perception of journalism. This comprehensive perspective not only highlights current challenges facing the press but also underscores the resilience and adaptability of journalistic practices in response to these pressures.

Darge and Woldearegay examine the judicial system's influence on press freedom shedding light on journalists' lived experiences as they navigate the challenges of securing fair court trials. Focusing on Ethiopia, their research offers critical insights into the systemic barriers and legal pressures faced by media workers.

Zhou explores the intersection of virtual reality (VR) technology and journalism, assessing how VR affects storytelling, news values and the evolving journalistic roles. Focusing on China, this study also provides practical insights for media professionals who seek to incorporate VR technology into their work, ensuring that they can more effectively engage audiences while maintaining high journalistic standards.

Guided by **Lippmann's (1922)** seminal work, which underscores the critical importance of understanding public opinion and its far-reaching implications for democratic societies, **Skana and Gjerazi** build on this foundational work by exploring public perceptions of media social responsibility in contemporary contexts. Focusing on Albania, their work identifies key principles considered essential by the public and documents how these principles can strengthen the media's contributions to society.

dos Santos delves into the effectiveness of fact-checkers in countering myths and misinformation related to COVID-19. Focusing on two online media initiatives established in the Democratic Republic of Congo that combine fact-checking efforts with civil society engagement initiatives to improve information literacy, this study provides a broad overview of the role

that independent, voluntary initiatives play in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Taken together, these studies underscore the dynamic and multidimensional nature of contemporary media research on press freedom, journalism practice, and professionalization. Ultimately, this body of work highlights the interplay between media practices, technological advancements, legal frameworks, and the evolving needs of the public, and underscores the critical role of press freedom in times of crisis and uncertainty.

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TM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LP: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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