



State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of

MEDIA AND FREE EXPRESSION RIGHTS

in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea



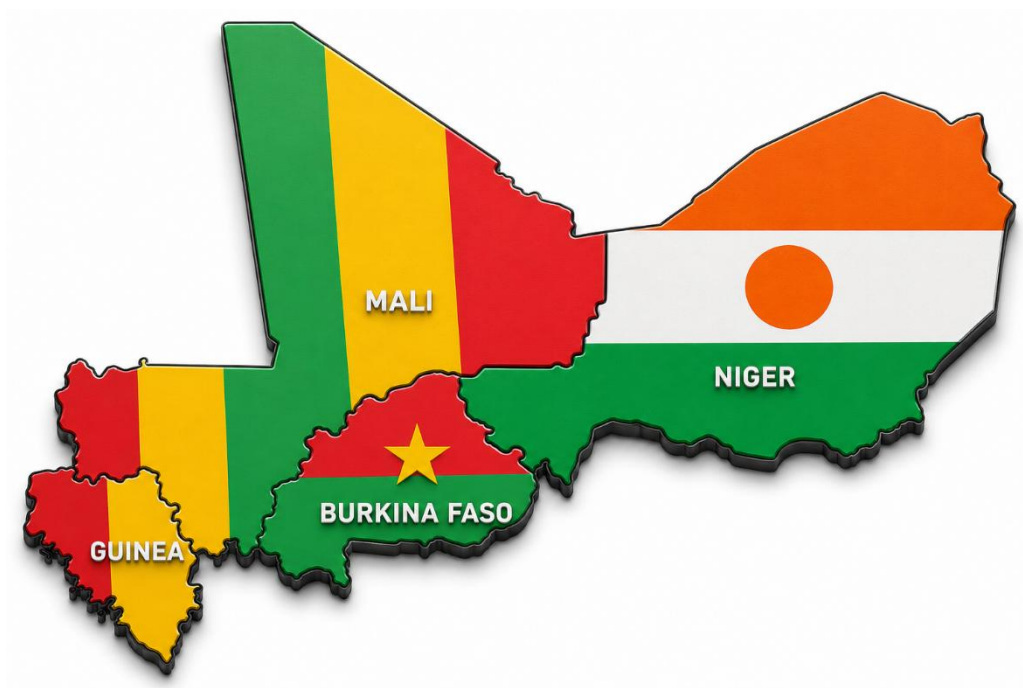
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State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of **MEDIA AND FREE EXPRESSION RIGHTS** in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea



Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA 2026)

Acknowledgement

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Executive Summary

Context and Scope

This report synthesizes findings from field studies and documentary analyses examining the state, determinants, dynamics, and trajectory of media freedom and freedom of expression across four West African countries under military-led governments: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea. All four countries have experienced coups since 2021; all have curtailed democratic institutions to varying degrees; and all exhibit a documented and observable deterioration of conditions for independent journalism and civic expression. The study draws on key informant interviews (KIs), representative surveys of media professionals, and documentary reviews of legislation, regulatory decisions, news reports or monitoring data from 2021 to 2026.

Principal Findings

Law as instrument of repression. All four countries formally guarantee freedom of expression in their constitutions or transitional charters. In every case, these guarantees are systematically undermined by emergency decrees and cybercrime laws weaponized against journalists, vaguely defined security provisions enabling arbitrary prosecution, and the deliberate displacement of press offenses from protective media legislation into criminal jurisdiction. In Burkina Faso, the 2023 decree on general mobilization and public warning is used to “requisition” and forcibly deploy critical journalists to active military frontlines in the fight against terrorism. In Niger, the 2024 amendment to the cybercrime law reinstated mandatory custodial sentences and explicitly removed judicial discretion on sentencing; thus, reversing hard-won decriminalization gains. In Guinea, the 2016 cybersecurity law is routinely applied to journalists in place of the more protective 2010 press law. In Mali, 59% of respondents describe laws as applied selectively.

Self-censorship as systemic outcome. Self-censorship is the dominant coping strategy and the primary evidence of a repressive political environment. In Mali, 70% of respondents report that self-censorship has become the norm, and 87% report that media outlets systematically avoid sensitive topics. In Niger, 81% of journalists practice self-censorship; 71.8% avoid covering security and defence, 41% avoid government criticism, and 23.1% avoid corruption. In Guinea, 87% self-censor and 81% have avoided topics for security reasons. Across all four countries, investigative journalism is described as virtually extinct: replaced by factual coverage of official events and institutional communications. In Burkina Faso, the so-called pact of media for wartime communication establishes a form of institutionalised (self-)censorship.

Regulatory capture and media closure. Regulatory bodies across all four countries – including Mali’s High Authority for Communication, Niger’s National Communication Observatory, and Guinea’s High Authority of Communication (HAC) – are widely

perceived as having been instrumentalized by executive power. In Guinea, Order No. 686 of May 21, 2024, simultaneously withdrew the broadcasting licences of three major private media groups (Hadafo Médias, Djoma Médias, Fréquence Média), eliminating over 700 jobs and the primary sources of critical political coverage, without any effective appeal mechanism. A total of four private radio stations and two television channels have been permanently closed since May 2024.

Digital repression at scale. The digital space has become a primary site of surveillance, harassment, and criminalization. In Niger, 67% of journalists have changed their communication methods due to fear of surveillance; 56% have faced at least one digital threat. In Guinea, internet shutdowns in 2023 caused estimated economic losses of USD\$47.4 million and affected 6.98 million mobile internet users. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok were blocked during political protests and in the days before the September 2025 constitutional referendum. As of April 2026, major platforms remain intermittently inaccessible in Guinea without VPNs.

Impunity and accountability failure. Accountability mechanisms such as judiciary, regulatory bodies, and professional associations exist in principle and purpose; but they are in operation and outcome ineffectual. In Niger, 56% of journalists do not report violations they have experienced, primarily due to distrust of available mechanisms. In Guinea, 54% of journalists lack access to legal support in cases of arrest or harassment; 52% have received no cybersecurity training. The enforced disappearance of Guinean journalist Habib Marouane Camara in December 2024, still unresolved more than 600 days later at the time of publication, is emblematic of the impunity gap that pervades the region.

Gender as a compounding vulnerability. Women journalists face both the general climate of repression and gender-specific forms of online harassment, physical intimidation, sexual pressure within newsrooms, and structural exclusion from leadership. In Guinea, more than 70% of women journalists avoid certain sensitive topics for security reasons. Across all four countries, gender-disaggregated data remain insufficient and gender-specific protections are absent from existing frameworks.

Overarching Assessment

All four countries exhibit a recognizable common architecture of media control: a formally protective legal framework systematically undermined in application; security and cybercrime legislation weaponized to criminalize journalistic work; the capture or instrumentalization of regulatory bodies; a pattern of direct, legal, and economic pressure that produces self-censorship as its primary systemic outcome; and accountability mechanisms that are nominally present but practically hollow.

Despite being at different formal stages of transition, the four countries converge on a common trajectory of democratic recession in which freedom of expression is both an indicator and a casualty. Guinea's completion of a formal democratic transition in January 2026 – recognised by ECOWAS without fulfilling normative conditions on press freedom or accountability for disappeared journalists – illustrates that formal electoral

processes do not, on their own, reverse the structural erosion of media freedom. The AES states (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso), having withdrawn from ECOWAS, effectively also exclude themselves from any regional mechanism for democratic accountability.

The economic dimension of this repression is critically underappreciated. Media across all four countries operate in acute economic precarity, which functions simultaneously as an effective instrument and consequence of repression. The denial or withdrawal of advertising revenue from critical media, the manipulation of state subsidies, and the direct destruction of editorial capacity through closures have the effect of silencing of independent voices; with far less international visibility than arrests.

Key Recommendations

Governments:

- Revise cybercrime laws to restore press law primacy for journalistic work; decriminalize online press offenses; and reinstate judicial discretion in sentencing.
- End arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances; guarantee legal access from point of detention; publicly account for all missing journalists and activists.
- Reform regulatory bodies to ensure genuine independence from the executive and effective appeal rights for affected media.
- Cease internet shutdowns and platform blockings; restore judicial oversight of electronic surveillance

Media sector and civil society:

- Systematically document violations in internationally verifiable formats; build cross-sector coalitions to resist fragmentation and isolation.
- Invest in digital security training and secure communication infrastructure; extend legal assistance to journalists facing prosecution.
- Integrate gender-specific risks into all protection frameworks; collect and publish gender-disaggregated data on violations.

International and regional partners:

- Make press freedom a substantive, monitored condition in transition recognition, sanctions decisions, and development cooperation frameworks; rather than a rhetorical afterthought.
- Provide sustained multi-year support to independent media, exile outlets, and civil society organizations facing resource constraints and operational restrictions.
- Engage ECOWAS and the African Union to develop enforceable press freedom commitments and monitoring mechanisms that go beyond formal electoral compliance.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	iii
Context and Scope	iii
Principal Findings	iii
Overarching Assessment	iv
Key Recommendations	v
Abbreviations and Acronyms	vii
Introduction.....	- 1 -
Political and Governance Context.....	- 1 -
Media and Information Environment.....	- 4 -
Problem and Purpose	- 6 -
Objectives of Study	- 7 -
Methodology and Design	- 8 -
Data Collection Methods.....	- 8 -
Scope, Approach and Composition of Samples	- 11 -
Findings and Discussion	- 13 -
Legal/Regulatory, and Political/Governance Frameworks	- 13 -
Landscape of Repression and (Self-)Censorship	- 21 -
Role of State and Security Actors	- 27 -
Implications of Digital Technologies on Fundamental Freedoms	- 29 -
Gender-Specific Risks and Structural Barriers.....	- 33 -
Resilience and Adaptation Strategies.....	- 35 -
Democratic Prospects and Role of the Media	- 39 -
Synthesis and Conclusion	- 42 -
Recommendations	- 44 -
References.....	- 48 -

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AGP	Guinean Press Agency
ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
AIGE	Independent Election Management Authority
AJB	Burkina Journalists Association
CADE	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
CDE	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CDEF	Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women
CERD	International Convention on Elimination of All Racial Discrimination
CFPJ	Center for Training and Professional Development of Journalists
CNDHLF	National Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
CNRD	National Committee of Rally and Development
CNSP	National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
CSC	High Council for Communication
DDDH	Declaration on Human Rights Defenders
FDS	Defence and Security Forces (Forces de Défense et de Sécurité)
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
FILEP	International Festival of Freedom of Expression and the Press
FPGE	File of Persons, Groups of Persons or Entities Involved in Terrorist Acts
HAC	High Authority of Communication
HAPDP	High Authority for the Protection of Personal Data
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
MCNTI	Ministry of Communication and New Information Technologies

NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGO/D	Non-Governmental Development Organization
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OGP	Guinean Advertising Office
ONC	National Communication Observatory
ONDH/LF	National Observatory for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
ONIMED	Independent Media Observatory for Ethics and Professional Conduct
OONI	Open Observatory of Network Interference
PIDCP	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
PIDESC	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
PTF	Technical and Financial Partners
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
RPG	Rally of the Guinean People
RTG	Guinean Radio Television Broadcasting
SDS	Defence and Security Forces
SPPG	Union of Press Professionals of Guinea
SVI	Stat View International
UEMOA	West African Economic and Monetary Union
UFR	Union of Republican Forces
UFDG	Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie).

Introduction



Political and Governance Context

The late 1990s to mid 2010s marked the effervescence of West Africa's embrace of the global wave of democratization within the last century (Tietaah & Braimah, 2019). By 2015, practically all 15 member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had transitioned into democratic regimes of varying degrees (MFWA, 2022); with the attendant practices of electoral politics in free and open competition. This idea of political participation and choice is the basis on which media and free expression rights have become proxy indicators of democratic efficacy. It flows from the idea that legitimacy of democratic authority derives from free and open discourse, deliberation, and decision.

Over the past decade, a coincidence of mutually reinforcing factors has combined to derail this democratic governance trajectory. First, the region has become the site of protracted geopolitical tension, violent extremism, and concerns over state sovereignty and national security. Related to this are the malign effects of conflict disinformation and FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference); reflected in narratives fostering disillusionment with democracy for failing to deliver dividends, and in propaganda portraying military coups as liberation movements (Baldaro, 2021; EEAS, 2025; Horak et al., 2024).

The junta regimes of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that formed themselves into the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) seem to have spawned a coup contagion within the ECOWAS region; with Guinea, and lately Guinea-Bissau witnessing military takeovers of governance, while in Benin a reported coup attempt was foiled.

In such event of a usurpation of the democratic order, media freedom and freedom of expression become first-line casualty. Journalists, social commentators, and civil society activists experience various forms of victimization and rights violations; including censorship and arbitrary restrictions on independent media outlets; surveillance, intimidation and arrest of critical journalists and political commentators; and legislative instruments for closure and control of internet and social media platforms.

The following paragraphs present brief insights into the political trajectories, conditions and constraints on media freedom and freedom of expression in each of four countries studied for this report; namely, the three AES countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) and Guinea. While thus drawing out their individual peculiarities, the collective portrait also illustrates the particular and overlapping political, security and governance challenges that characterize them.

Mali entered the post-Cold War era with a democratic transition widely regarded as a regional model; featuring a pluralistic media landscape and an active civic society. The 1991 revolution opened the door to multiparty competition, liberal constitutional arrangements, and a comparatively vibrant press. That democratic trajectory, however, eroded steadily under the combined pressure of recurring political crises, the spread of jihadist armed groups across the north and center of the country, and the institutional fragility of the state. The coups d'état of August 2020 and May 2021 marked a decisive rupture. Under the current transitional military government, executive power has become heavily concentrated, political parties and associations have been dissolved or suspended, public demonstrations have been banned, and independent public accountability systems such as the press and civil society have been progressively weakened. Bodies such as the High Authority for Communication (HAC) nominally remain in place, but their operational independence is routinely questioned given the radical measures they have taken against media outlets; measures widely seen as reflecting directives from the executive or the national intelligence services. Security imperatives linked to the ongoing jihadist insurgency are frequently invoked to justify these restrictions, though the evidence of this study suggest that such justifications serve more to avoid accountability.

In Niger the historic Sovereign National Conference of 1991 had produced a pluralistic democratic dispensation; along with a significant liberalization of the media sector, codified in Ordinance No. 93-31 on press freedom and later reinforced by Ordinance No. 2010-035, which decriminalized press offences. These advances enabled a comparatively progressive legal foundation for journalistic activity in Niger. However, advances in, and availability of, social and digital media technologies introduced new regulatory dilemmas: cyberspace became simultaneously the primary arena for public engagement and exchange and a source of anxiety for authorities over public morality, national security, and the spread of disinformation. A cybercrime law enacted in 2019 quickly became a tool of repression, its provisions sitting in sharp tension with both national and international human rights standards. Following advocacy by Nigerien civil society, custodial sentences were removed from the law in 2022. But the coup of July 26, 2023, reversed this progress. By 2024, the transitional authorities had, in addition to fines, reinstated prison sentences for cybercrime offences; this time, without granting judges any discretionary latitude. The security context of asymmetric warfare affecting Niger and its neighbours, and the establishment of the unified AES defence force, has further entrenched the official rationale for controlling digital space. This regulatory framework has led to the curtailment of media rights and the space for civic expression.

Guinea presents a somewhat different geopolitical perspective of the current governance crisis. Guinea is a coastal country of approximately 17.5 million inhabitants, rich in bauxite, gold, diamonds, and iron ore yet remains classified among low-income countries, with persistent deficits in human development and governance. On September 5, 2021, Lieutenant Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya overthrew President Alpha Condé, dissolved the constitution, suspended all institutions, and imposed a national curfew. The National Committee of Rally and Development (CNRD) pledged a swift return to constitutional order, free elections, and respect for fundamental freedoms. Five years on, as of March 2026, none of these commitments had been honoured within the originally announced timelines. While Guinea did organize multiparty elections, these were essentially notional, as they excluded the major opposition political parties; notably the RPG, the UFR, and the UFDG. Within the period, dozens of journalists have been arrested, detained, or assaulted; six media outlets have been closed by administrative decree; and one journalist, Habib Marouane Camara of *Le Révélateur* 224, has been missing since December 3, 2024, after being abducted by unidentified masked men. These facts, documented by international organizations such as RSF (RSF, Jun. 2025) and Human Rights Watch (HRW, Dec. 2024), demonstrate a significant deterioration of the media and free expression environment.

In Burkina Faso, the military coup of 24 January 2022 led by Lt Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba abruptly ended the second term of elected President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. The military justified their action by citing the ousted government's failure to effectively counter the terrorist attacks that Burkina Faso has endured since 2015. Eight months later, on 30 September, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, one of Damiba's subordinates, overthrew him, accusing him of having betrayed the transition's initial objective of restoring security and territorial integrity "in favor of an ill-fated political venture." Since the sudden and brutal disruption of constitutional order, press freedom and freedom of expression have deteriorated significantly, with critical voices accused of being "local lackeys of imperialism", "unpatriotic citizens" and "enemies of the people." Authorities have justified observed current controls, increased censorship, and suspension of independent outlets as necessary for national security amid escalating jihadist violence. Several foreign correspondents have faced expulsion, while local reporters operate under self-censorship due to intimidation and legal uncertainty. State media has expanded its role in disseminating official narratives, often emphasizing patriotic mobilization and counterterrorism efforts. Digital spaces have also experienced monitoring and occasional restrictions. Despite these constraints, some independent and online platforms continue to function, though cautiously. The overall trajectory suggests a contraction of press freedom, with the media increasingly shaped by security priorities and political consolidation. Debate persists over long-term implications for democratic governance and civic rights.

Together, the four countries form a coherent analytical case defined by shared structural conditions and constraints: governance crises, security pressures, legal restrictions on expression. Within each country, however, the data collection mirrors the unique perspectives of actors and peculiarities of factors characterizing their media and civic space ecosystems. In Niger, for example, 36% respondents were based in

Niamey, the national capital; 60% were drawn from other cities, and 4% in rural areas. A similar pattern is observed in Mali, where the geographic reach of data collection was further constrained by the security situation and fuel shortages arising from the terrorist blockade affecting movement, including within the capital, Bamako.

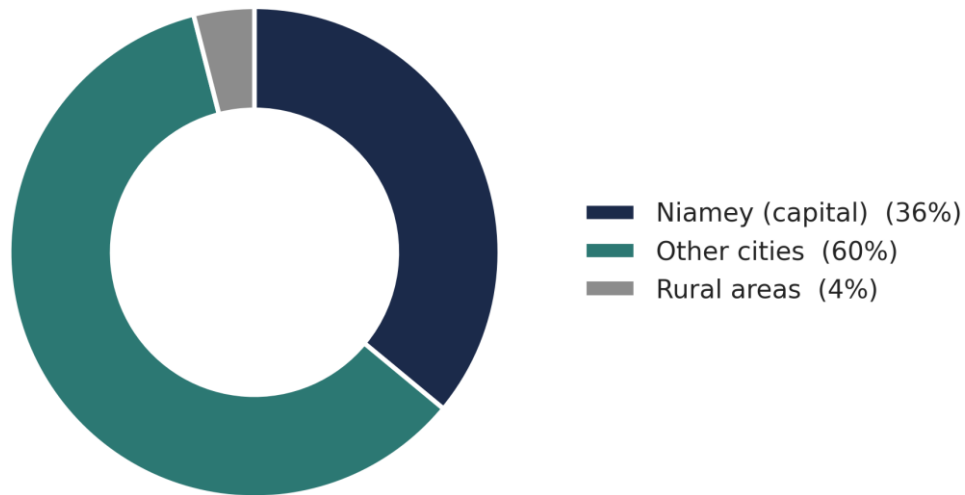


Figure 1: Geographic distribution of survey respondents in Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

Media and Information Environment



Institutional reforms that began in the 2000s in tandem with the political pluralism processes enabled private participation in, and engendered a proliferation of, media

products and platforms for public participation in national discourse. While the democratic regimes have been overthrown, there remain the legacies of notionally pluralistic media systems; comprising public, private, community and, increasingly, digital media outlets and operations in each of the four countries. An inventory of the media sector in Mali, for instance, shows: two state and 14 private television channels, one national public and over 600 private (especially, community) radio stations, more than 250 print publications, and a rapidly growing digital and online media sector. Yet this apparent pluralism belies the persistence of structural fissures that render the media fragile in practice; including heavy dependence on political patronage or external funding, the near absence of viable advertising markets, and an information economy that is increasingly dominated by social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp that function outside the frameworks regulating traditional media operations.

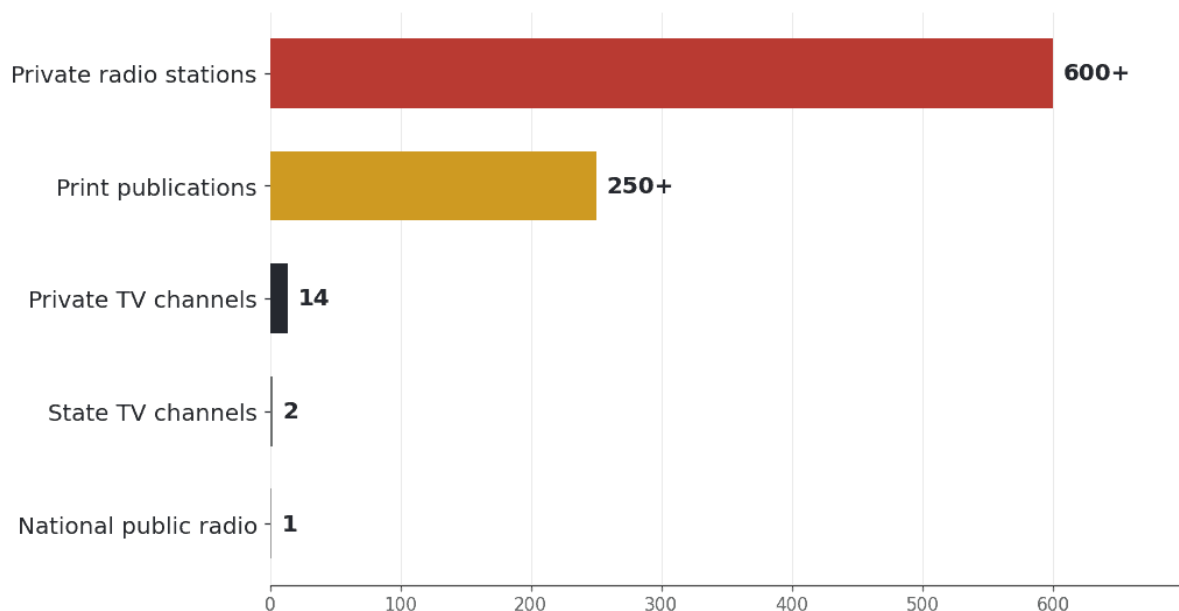


Figure 2: Inventory of Mali's media sector

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

These constraints undermine editorial independence and increase susceptibility to political and commercial influence. Journalists frequently work in environments characterized by legal uncertainty, inadequate professional protection, limited access to training, and heightened exposure to intimidation, censorship, arbitrary detention, physical violence, and other forms of repression.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media has further transformed the information ecosystem. While digital platforms have facilitated greater access to information and civic engagement, they have also amplified concerns regarding professional training and media literacy, the rise of disinformation and information

manipulation, and the use of digital surveillance tools by both state and non-state actors. Women journalists face particular, disproportionate, and highly gendered digital risks; such as body and honour shaming, doxxing and cyberstalking.

The regulatory responses to this rise in social and digital media affordances have been broadly repressive. In all four countries, legislation governing cybercrime and digital communications has been adopted and applied in ways that criminalize legitimate journalistic work and threaten freedom of expression and media freedom generally. The result is a chilling effect on public debate at precisely the times that democratic participation and accountability advocacy are most needed.

Problem and Purpose

Given the clearly coordinated propaganda promoting pro-military and antidemocratic ideologies within the Sahel (Baldaro, 2021; EEAS, 2025), the political and security dilemmas/challenges in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea are an important bellwether of the state and fate of democracy in West Africa. As democratic institutions weaken and civic spaces shrink, the effects extend beyond media rights to implications on the broader governance questions of public accountability and citizen participation, social cohesion and conflict prevention. Over the last six years, the MFWA has recounted multiple accounts of the progressive remission of media and free expression rights associated with the twin challenges of political instability and democratic recessions in West Africa and the Sahel in particular. These include abductions of journalists who resurface as conscripts deployed to conflict zones (Burkina Faso); suspensions of international broadcasters over alleged bias (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger); arrests of citizens criticizing regional governors in WhatsApp groups (Niger); arbitrary and discriminatory suspensions of critical media outlets (Burkina Faso, Guinea). There are also reports on the increasing use of legal, administrative, and digital surveillance tools and mechanisms to impose restraints on dissent. These developments and dynamics, while country-specific in their incidence, have the potential to become regional in scale and scope if normalized.

However, while the media have thus been front line casualty of the democratic recession within the region, they are also pivotal to any prospects for a democratic renaissance and resilience. This outcome would require context sensitive and systematically documented data on the determinants, manifestations and consequences of restrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression; and of adaptive strategies for navigating the constraints on civic spaces and professional practices. Specifically, the study sought to provide media freedom and civic rights actors with the requisite empirical evidence to effectively:

- (a) strengthen advocacy for media freedom, accountability and regulatory reforms;
- (b) support protection and emergency response mechanisms for journalists and activists;
- (c) guide regional and international assistance agencies on engagement options; and
- (d) contribute to long-term efforts towards restoring democratic norms and freedoms.

The four countries examined are not isolated cases but part of an emerging pattern within the subregion in which military governance, security emergencies, and the enablement of digital communication technologies are interacting in ways that are simultaneously creating new risks for journalists and renew the imperative of their work. Understanding these dynamics is essential for supporting local actors, informing the interventions of national and international organizations, and contributing to the longer-term restoration of democratic norms and institutional accountability within the Sahel and across West Africa.

Objectives of Study

This study pursued eight interconnected objectives; in order to offer evidence-based insights into the state, dynamics, and determinants of media freedom and freedom of expression across the four country cases. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Analyse the key legal/regulatory and political/governance factors affecting media freedom and free expression.
2. Document patterns of violations, restrictions, and repression experienced by journalists, media professionals, and other civic actors.
3. Examine the role of state and non-state actors in perpetrating or preventing media and free expression rights violations.
4. Assess the implications of digital technologies, cyber-regulation, and information disorder on the exercise of fundamental freedoms.
5. Identify the specific risks and vulnerabilities faced by journalists, including gender-related challenges affecting women media practitioners.
6. Examine the resilience and adaptation strategies available to/used by media and rights activists in navigating existing threats.
7. Explore the implications of current threats for the role of the media in democratic governance, civic participation, and institutional accountability.
8. Formulate evidence-based recommendations to strengthen media freedom, promote independent journalism, and expand civic spaces.

Addressing these objectives enabled the study to adduce robust empirical evidence for informing advocacy initiatives, strengthening protection mechanisms, and supporting policy reforms. In the long term, it should also contribute to broader efforts at restoring democratic norms and safeguarding civic space in the Sahel and wider ECOWAS region.

Methodology and Design



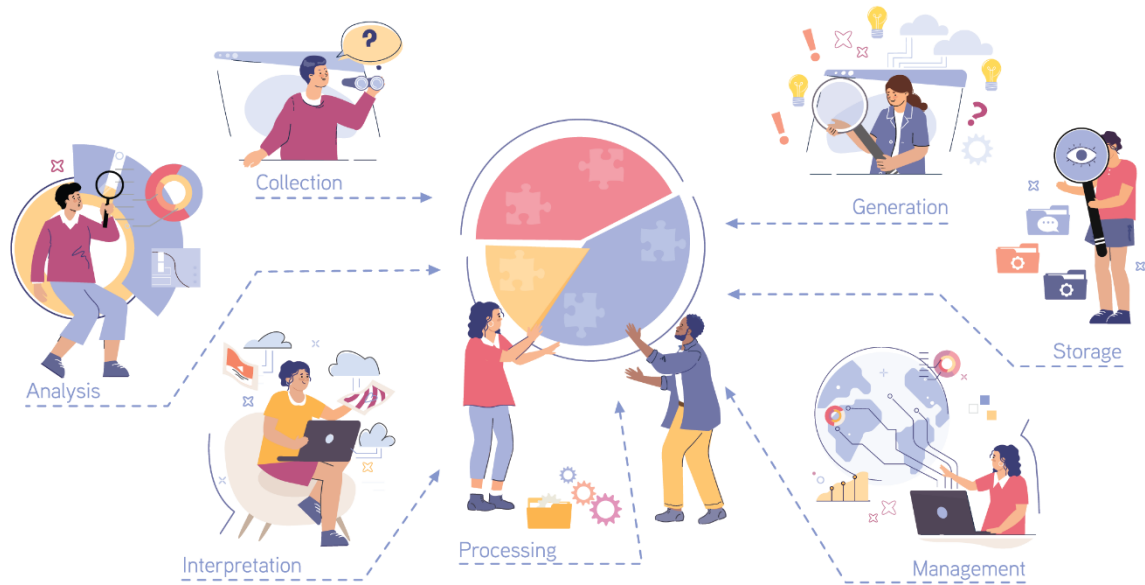
The study combined qualitative depth with quantitative robustness in a mixed-methods design; involving semi-structured interviews with key informants, document and media landscape reviews, and structured quantitative surveys. This approach was adopted primarily for epistemological reasons; but also, for the purpose of practical prudence.

First, a mixed-methods approach to enlisting the views and making observations of the diversity of actors and factors from across the media and human rights sectors enabled a nuanced understanding of the state and stakes for media and free expression rights in each country. Deploying the three complementary techniques in tandem helped capture the texture and complexity of national experiences while also enabling comparisons across the four country contexts.

Secondly, as the individual profiles show, each of the four countries reflects a distinct, though related, trajectory of regression in democratic norms, contraction of the civic space, and constraints on media freedom. The options of methods enabled the deployment of only those tools and techniques that it would be possible or prudent to deploy without undue safety risks. The two considerations in combination enabled the study to situate the synthesized findings within the broader regional dynamic; even where the imperatives of safety disabled the application of particular tools in a context of particular risk.

Data Collection Methods

Individual interviews were conducted with key informants engaged in, or directly affected by, the media and civic ecosystems. These included: mainstream journalists and news editors, media owners/managers and professional association leaders; freelance practitioners and citizen journalists, bloggers, digital activists and influencers; human rights advocates, lawyers, and digital rights experts; civil society/NGO actors and political (party) activists; media industry analysts and academics with knowledge of the normative environment. The interviews were conducted in semi-structured format, allowing for both comparability across responses and the in-depth exploration of context-specific experiences.



Given the security and political sensitivity of the research context, interviews were conducted using flexible modalities. In Niger, these included online, telephone, and in-person formats depending on contextual conditions and respondent preferences. In Mali, where reservations about face-to-face interaction were particularly strong, interviews were administered remotely via WhatsApp or regular phone calls. This adaptation was a response to the imperatives of context: preserved the safety of participants while enabling the collection of substantive first-hand testimony. In all cases, strict protocols of anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

Data analysis employed thematic coding, beginning with an initial deductive framework informed by the research objectives stated above, and refined through inductive coding as new patterns emerge. This analytical approach supported a nuanced understanding of the structural, legal, political, and technological forces shaping media repression within the AES states and Guinea.

The document and media landscape review involved a systematic examination of primary and secondary documentation; to situate each country case within its historical and political-economy context, and relative to broader regional and international norms. Sources consulted included national legislative and regulatory texts: media laws and statutes, criminal codes, cyber legislation, public order provisions and emergency decrees, regulatory body mandates and directives, assessments and reports produced by national and international organizations specializing in media freedom, human rights, and democratic governance.

Specifically, it examined regulations related to licensing, compliance obligations, and sanctions. It also assessed digital surveillance and platform-level restriction practices; thereby tracking both online censorship and the broader architecture of digital repression. This included mapping the frequency and nature of internet disruptions, assessing platform governance decisions, and reviewing recorded incidents of online harassment targeting journalists, activists, and other public-interest commentators.

These helped deepen contextual understanding of the presence and patterns of state power over expression.

The document review was useful in assessing how the prevailing legal and institutional architecture shape media and free expression practices. In Mali, for instance, the review identified the suspension or expulsion of multiple international media outlets (including *Radio France Internationale*, *TV5 Monde*, *France 2*, *TF1* and *LCI*) together with Malian channel Joliba TV News; thus, providing concrete reference points against which interview testimonies of a contracting civic space could be calibrated. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the review revealed the suspensions of *France 24*, *TV5 Monde-Afrique*, and *LCI*. But more importantly, the option of a desk review was particularly expedient in circumstances in which risk mitigation considerations disrecommended or disabled a use of the more contemporaneous, but also intrusive, approaches of interviews and surveys. This was the specific case with Burkina Faso where it was difficult to get any field researchers willing to take the risk of in-country and in-person, engagements. Accordingly, the data for Burkina Faso was based primarily on desk reviews of three source documents: (a) decrees and directives and acts of repression, whether official or unofficial, targeting media outlets and practitioners; (b) changes to the legal and regulatory framework affecting media freedom and freedom of expression; (c) an analysis of content published by a cross section of media outlets.

The data was analysed using content analysis techniques; involving coding documents according to thematic categories – such as legal restrictions, regulatory actions, censorship practices, digital repression mechanisms, and protections for media freedom – and then interpreting these codes to identify trends, patterns, and relationships across the media environment.

The survey component of the study relied on a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of media practitioners broadly defined. They included journalists, reporters, editors, investigative journalists, fact-checkers, freelancers, citizen journalists, bloggers, digital activists, influencers, photojournalists, and videographers. The questionnaire covered experiences of respondents with the conditions and constraints of free expression in each country. The questions were structured to enable comparable data across countries while allowing for context-specific adaptations to reflect local regulatory frameworks and political dynamics.

In both Mali and Niger, the questionnaire was distributed via web-based Google Forms. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics techniques; enabling the identification of trends in types of threats to media freedom and civic expression in the four countries; and in West Africa by extrapolation.

The evidence would guide actionable recommendations and practical interventions to protect journalists, strengthen civic spaces, and renew efforts towards stemming the spread of a Sahel effect within the ECOWAS region.



Scope, Approach and Composition of Samples

Fieldwork was commissioned simultaneously in late February in all four countries and concluded early April; except for Burkina Faso where participant safety considerations affected commencement and a revision of data collection options.

Sampling across all three data collection methods was purposive. The selection criteria prioritised respondents with direct professional experience in or with proximity to the media sector, demonstrable familiarity with the regulatory and security environment in their country, and diversity and relevance of roles and organisational affiliations. The objective was to capture the richness and variety of perspectives among those most directly implicated in, and affected by, the conditions under study; and as safety conditions would permit.

Across all four countries, the study engaged approximately 200 media professionals, with country-specific distributions reflecting operational constraints and security concerns. In Guinea, the combination of online and in-person questionnaire administration yielded 100 responses across the range of media types and locations. In Niger, the study was conducted with 50 media professionals, of whom 48 provided usable responses. The sample is characterised by a strong male predominance (88%), a majority of experienced professionals, and a concentration in urban areas. In Mali, a comparable sample of approximately 48 respondents was achieved through the remote survey format. In all 3 cases, purposive sampling was supplemented by snowball referrals within professional networks, given the restricted access to certain

institutional actors and umbrella organisations whose representatives cited scheduling constraints or declined to participate. As indicated earlier, the Burkina Faso findings exclude surveys or interviews data for risk-mitigation reasons.

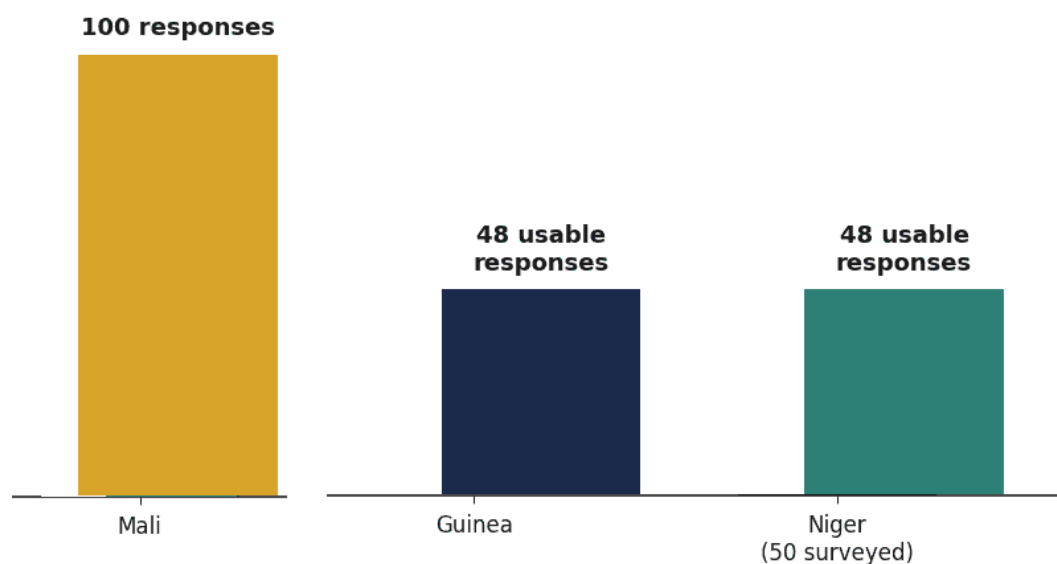


Figure 3: Survey sample sizes, Mali, Guinea, Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026)

Findings and Discussion



The findings are integrated and synthesized and presented below under subthemes that broadly reflect and respond to the objectives set for the study earlier.

Legal/Regulatory, and Political/Governance Frameworks

The rights to media freedom, freedom of expression, and access to information are formally and firmly guaranteed in the constitutions, charters, and other legal instruments of each of the four countries. In Mali, these guarantees flow from the democratic transition of the 1990s and are embedded in a legal tradition that enshrines the freedoms to hold, seek and share opinions; within an open and pluralistic media milieu. In Niger, the Charter of Refoundation, which has constitutional status, explicitly provides in Article 34 that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, opinion, expression, conscience, religion and worship,” and in Article 35 that “everyone has the right to be informed and to access information held by public services.” In Guinea, Organic Law L/002/CNT of 2010 on freedom of the press is widely regarded by practitioners as among the most progressive media laws in West Africa, particularly for its decriminalization of press offenses.

In Burkina Faso, formal media laws were similarly progressive and protective before the coup; though the militarization of public institutions has rendered these protections largely nominal. On 21 November 2023, the Transitional Legislative Assembly adopted Organic Law No. 041 governing the powers, composition, the organization, and functioning of the High Council for Communication (CSC). This reform of the media regulatory body has been in effect since 2024. While the law has expanded the CSC’s jurisdiction to include social media platforms, which had previously existed in a legal grey area owing to the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech, it has introduced provisions that raise serious concerns for press freedom. First, Article 33 places the CSC under the direct authority and responsibility of the President of Burkina Faso, granting him the discretionary power to appoint the institution’s president, a position previously filled by election from among fellow council members. Article 34 states that the “vice-president shall be appointed by decree of the Council of Ministers

upon the proposal of the president of the High Council for Communication." Furthermore, the law confers upon the CSC powers it did not previously possess. Under Article 55, it may suspend any radio or television broadcasting activities if it considers that there has been "a breach of the law or of ethical standards by a journalist or presenter." Finally, Article 63 states that its officers 'responsible for verification and monitoring, may seize equipment, search premises, and order the closure of premises belonging to targeted media outlets.

The Niger legal framework additionally benefits from Ordinance No. 2010-35, which affirms that "the written press, electronic media, and audiovisual communication, as well as printing and distribution, are free," and that "the right to information is an inalienable human right." Ordinance No. 2011-22 on access to public information further stipulates that "access to public information is free" and that "no discrimination may be made against users under any pretext whatsoever."

Yet across all four countries, these normative protections are consistently undermined by the enactment of countervailing legal instruments under the guise of national security, and the control and use of state and other pliant media to shape the public narrative and silence dissent. Journalists, activists, and media professionals repeatedly report that freedom of expression is fragile, conditional, and under sustained threat. In Burkina Faso, the junta has introduced the concept of "patriotic" reporting; a mandatory editorial line requiring all media outlets and online activists to disseminate only information consistent with the regime's official communications. During an interview broadcast on national television on 6 September 2023, the head of state explicitly warn of the consequences for any media that would fail to comply:

“

All Western and local radio stations that align themselves with imperialism will be shut down. We are at war, and in wartime, there is a communication strategy to be followed. We want people who will communicate, who will encourage our forces and encourage our very resilient people to hold on. All Western and local radio stations that align themselves with imperialism and propaganda aimed at portraying this conflict in a different light will be shut down.

”

Prime Minister Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, a former national television journalist, insisted that a free press was an illusion in a country at war. At the closing ceremony of the 10th International Festival of Freedom of Expression and the Press (FILEP) on 21 October 2023, he firmly asserted the existence of "red lines" that cannot be crossed when it comes to press freedom. He argued it was unrealistic to envisage "detached journalism" being practiced freely in a country fighting for its own freedom and for the lives of its citizens. This position by the then Minister of Communication and chair of the event appeared to have been a direct response to comments made by the chair of the organizing committee, Inoussa Ouédraogo, who had urged media professionals to resist attempts by political authorities in Africa to

silence the press. Furthermore, the government accused critical media outlets of

contributing to the demoralization of the Defence and Security Forces (Forces de Défense et de Sécurité – FDS) and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie – VDP).

In keeping with this “patriotic” approach to journalism, numerous media executives signed, on 14 May 2024 in Ouagadougou, the “Pact of the Burkinabè Media for Wartime Communication in the Fight Against Terrorism and for the Recovery of National Territory” under the auspices of the High Council for Communication (CSC), chaired by Wendingoudi Louis Modeste Ouédraogo. This agreement requires media outlets to align their reporting with the interests of the defence and security forces, as well as the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland.

In Mali, where the military transition began in 2021, interview respondents generally acknowledge that the country historically had a remarkably well-crafted regulatory regime. In practice the seams of this regulatory fabric are routinely strained to the point of snapping. As a result, “self-censorship has become a professional reflex and an unspoken norm” as a respondent in the Mali report noted.

The single most significant and cross-cutting finding across all four countries is the systematic weaponization of cybercrime and digital communications legislation against journalists, bloggers, and civil society actors. Cybercrime laws, ostensibly designed to combat digital crime, have been redeployed as mechanisms for criminalizing expression. In Mali, a majority of respondents (59%) identified the cybercrime law as being applied selectively; primarily as an instrument for restricting freedom of expression rather than addressing genuine cybercrime. The law has been routinely used to prosecute journalists and activists for online publications. Respondents describe a process whereby press law is progressively displaced by criminal law. The consequence is legal uncertainty, self-censorship, and the systematic criminalization of expression. One Malian respondent summarizes the structural effect as follows:

There is legal ambiguity between press offences, digital crimes, and the gradual replacement of press law by criminal law. And you do not know what is permitted and what is not.

In Niger, the weaponization of cybercrime law illustrates the deliberate rollback of gains made in decriminalizing press offenses. Law No. 2019-33, initially designed to combat technology offenses, was amended in 2022, and again in 2024 through Ordinance 2024-28 of June 7. The 2024 amendments introduced mandatory custodial sentences for online defamation (Article 29), insult by electronic means (Article 30), and the dissemination of data “likely to disturb public order” or infringe upon human dignity (Article 31). Critically, the ordinance explicitly prohibits the application of mitigating circumstances or suspended sentences, stripping judges of any discretionary authority and making custodial detention the default response to expression-related offenses. The Niger Young Lawyers Association condemned these provisions as disproportionate relative to Articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), and 19.2 of

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); all instruments ratified by Niger.

Particularly alarming is the provision of Article 31 that the offence is established “even if the facts are proven,” meaning that truth is not a defence against charges of disturbing public order. In practice, cybercrime laws (62.5%) emerged as the dominant legal constraint on journalists in Niger’s survey data, well ahead of defamation laws (33.3%) and anti-terrorism laws (14.6%).

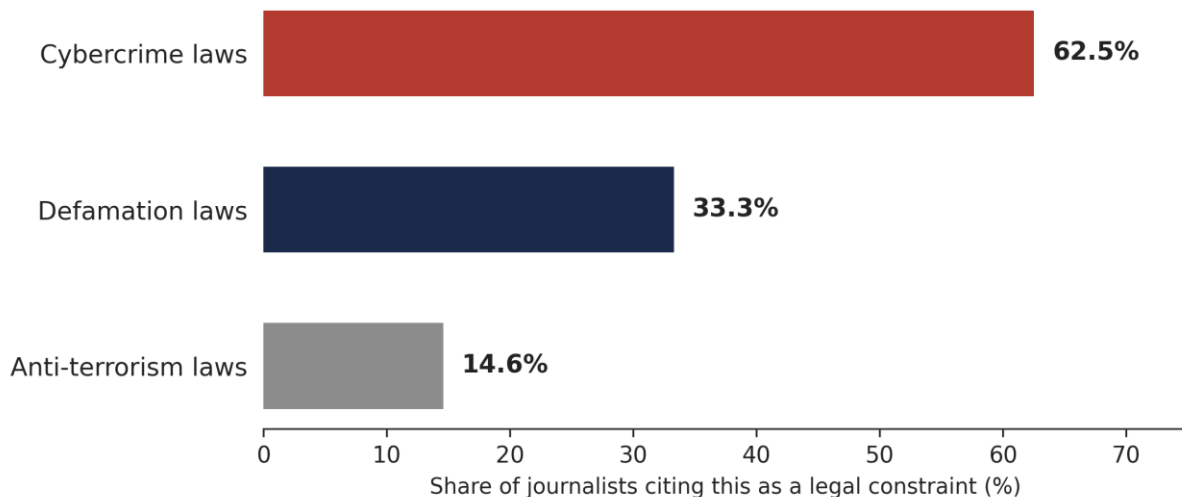


Figure4: Legal constraints most cited by journalists in Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

The effect is that while media practice in Niger is nominally governed by Ordinance No. 2010-35, which decriminalizes press offenses, the 2019 cybercrime law and its subsequent amendments effectively derogate from those protections. As a Nigerien legal expert observed, “Today there is a significant risk that the cybercrime ordinance will cover all cases.”

In Guinea, the cybersecurity law (Law L/2016/037/AN) is regularly applied as an indirect but significant instrument of control; particularly to prosecute journalists working online, on radio, or on television. Respondents observed that these are contexts that should fall exclusively under the jurisdiction of the 2010 Organic Law on press freedom. The 2025 Constitution adopted by referendum formally guarantees freedom of expression but contains a broadly defined national security clause that legal observers assess as likely to serve as a basis for arbitrary prosecutions of journalists under the guise of state security.

Niger’s 2020 Law on the interception of electronic communications (Law No. 2020-19) adds a further dimension of concern. The law creates a National Commission for the Control of Security Interceptions (CNCIS) whose membership is drawn exclusively from

the executive and legislative branches; effectively excluding the judiciary. As one Nigerien legal analysis notes:

"Before the adoption of this law, wiretapping was solely within the jurisdiction of judges. Since its adoption, the power of the executive branch has become predominant."

This structural displacement of judicial oversight transforms surveillance from a constrained legal procedure into an executive instrument.

Security legislation across all four countries has been deployed in ways that restrict media work either directly or by engendering a climate of pervasive legal uncertainty. In Mali, restrictions tied to the jihadist insurgency have been invoked to curtail media coverage of large swaths of the national territory. Emergency decrees specific to the media remain, in the words of a Malian respondent, "poorly formalized or little known," with application that is "often informal or indirect." The Malian army has launched its own web TV and radio station; a development respondents identify as both a counter-narrative strategy and a further complication for independent journalists seeking to cover military affairs.

In Niger, Ordinance 2024-43, which establishes a register of persons linked to terrorist acts or acts threatening "the strategic and/or fundamental interests of the Nation or likely to seriously disturb public peace and security" explicitly provides in Article 11 that the right to information and objection "is not applicable" to the register. Only executive-authorized bodies may access information contained within it. This provision conflicts directly with Article 35 of the Charter of Refoundation and calls into question Niger's international legal commitments. Furthermore, the dissolution of political parties by Ordinance 2025-06, the dissolution of magistrates' unions by Ordinance 2025-27, and the dissolution of three defence and security force unions by administrative order in April 2025 collectively demonstrate the breadth of the state's use of administrative instruments to compress civic and political space.

The Nigerien NGO regulatory framework compounds these pressures. A 2022 decree governing associations requires prior state approval for all NGO projects and activities, effectively subjecting civil society organizations to government oversight of their programs. A collective of civil society organizations responded to the decree's adoption by stating that "Article 41 provides for total control of the actions of NGOs by the Nigerien authorities, and this is in clear contradiction with the principle of the autonomy of NGOs from the State." The decree also introduces retroactive compliance obligations and ties NGO accreditation to a determination of consistency with "national development guidelines and priorities."

In Guinea, increased acts of administrative repression in the form of license withdrawals by the High Authority of Communication (HAC) has targeted critical media, with neither procedural transparency nor effective appeal mechanisms. The most consequential action was the simultaneous permanent withdrawal of broadcasting licenses for *Hadafo Médias*, *Djoma Médias*, and *Fréquence Média* on 21 May 2024; eliminating by the

stroke of a single decree, three of the country's most-listened-to private broadcasters. As RSF noted, "The banned radio and television stations, unlawfully prohibited, have left behind a deep media void, depriving the country of real pluralism and silencing critical voices in a once rich and dynamic media landscape."

In all four countries, the independence and effectiveness of regulatory bodies have been substantially compromised. In Mali, the High Authority for Communication is variously characterized by respondents as being "under influence," too "close to those in power," and "ineffective" at protecting media freedom. A key structural outcome is the implicit transfer of sanctioning power from traditional media regulators to cybercrime-related governing bodies, further weakening the regulatory authority of traditional media institutions by bypassing them altogether.

In Niger, the National Communication Observatory (ONC), which replaced the former High Council for Communication National Communication Observatory (ONC) following the 2023 coup, operates under an order of 1 September 2025 that explicitly includes the obligation to "formulate proposals, opinions and recommendations on matters within its competence to the Government and the National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP)." This formulation effectively subordinates the regulatory body to the military junta, rather than any independent authority. The suspension of the Press House in January 2024 "until further notice" further stripped the media sector of one of its few institutional anchors. Meanwhile, the Ombudsman, responsible under Ordinance 2011-22 for ensuring access to public information, was dissolved along with other independent institutions.

The CSC in Burkina Faso has been used as a political tool by the authorities. It is thus becoming a tool of coercion against media outlets and journalists whose professional work upsets those in power. This abuse of power is evident in several acts that have undermined media freedom, including the one-month suspension of the bi-monthly magazine *L'Événement* on 19 June 2024. The decision to suspend *L'Événement* came following articles on a case of embezzlement of 400 million CFA francs intended for the equipment of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland by a captain in the Burkinabè armed forces. Furthermore, the CSC's decision, signed on 7 October 2024, to ban national broadcasters from synchronizing their programming with international broadcasters illustrates the authorities' determination to control the media environment.

In Guinea, the Haute Autorité de la Communication (HAC) emerges across both quantitative and qualitative data as the most obvious case example of regulatory capture. Key informants unanimously identified the HAC as the primary mechanism through which press freedom is constrained:

“ *It is mainly the HAC that plays a leading role in this area, because it has issued many sanctions that have become deterrent. Before writing or speaking, you are now required to think several times, to turn your tongue at least 3 to 7 times in your mouth, knowing that there is pressure* **”**
- KII 2, Guinea

“The HAC is a central actor. Its suspension and sanction decisions are frequent, almost routine” (KII 9, Guinea).

In May 2024, the HAC permanently withdrew the licenses of four major radio stations and two television channels, resulting in the loss of more than 700 jobs in the media sector. International organizations like RSF were bluntly critical in observing that the HAC’s “license withdrawal procedures do not respect any appeal guarantees for affected media and systematically target outlets with a critical tone.”

In Burkina Faso, between December 2022 and June 2024, the Ministry of Communication and the High Council for Communication (CSC) imposed a series of suspensions on various international media outlets. Among the organizations targeted by these sanctions were *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, whose frequencies were permanently suspended, as well as the television channels *France 24*, *TV5 Monde-Afrique* and *LCI*. Print and online media outlets were not spared. Sanctions were imposed on *Jeune Afrique*, *Le Monde*, *Ouest-France*, *The Guardian*, *l’Agence Ecofin* and *ApaNews*. *BBC*, *VOA* and *Deutsche Welle* radio services were also suspended during this period.

Beyond formal law, executive dominance over the media environment is a defining feature of all four political landscapes. Decision-making is centralized, editorial lines are managed politically, and content critical of military authorities carries significant risk. In Burkina Faso, the wartime communication framework of 14 Jay 2024, overseen by the CSC, contains provisions that undermine the editorial independence of journalists. It establishes a form of institutionalized censorship by effectively prohibiting journalists from investigating potential abuses perpetrated by the armed forces. Any journalistic output deviating from the “patriotic journalism” editorial line could be construed as complicity with the enemy, thereby exposing those responsible to punitive measures or reprisals. Political interference is described by Malian respondents as “frequent and multifaceted,” encompassing direct pressure on media outlets, targeted legal action against individual journalists, and influence over regulatory bodies. The cumulative result is a reduction in editorial independence and the reinforcement, even automation, of self-censorship.

In Guinea, the governing CNRD deployed what RSF describes as a three-pronged strategy of managed favour toward compliant media. First, was a substantial doubling of state subsidies to private media in 2022 from 2.5 billion to nearly 6 billion Guinean francs, without transparent distribution criteria. Second, was the appointment of several journalists and media figures to senior positions within the HAC and the Ministry of Communication (including as head of the Guinean Advertising Office (OGP), which distributes state advertising); placing media figures at the centre of the control mechanism and thus blurring the line between regulatory independence and state co-optation. And third, was the use of the OGP's institutional advertising budget as an indirect control lever, directing state advertising toward compliant media and depriving critical outlets of essential revenue. The Union of Press Professionals of Guinea (SPPG) criticized the structural flaw of the subsidy mechanism in the following terms:

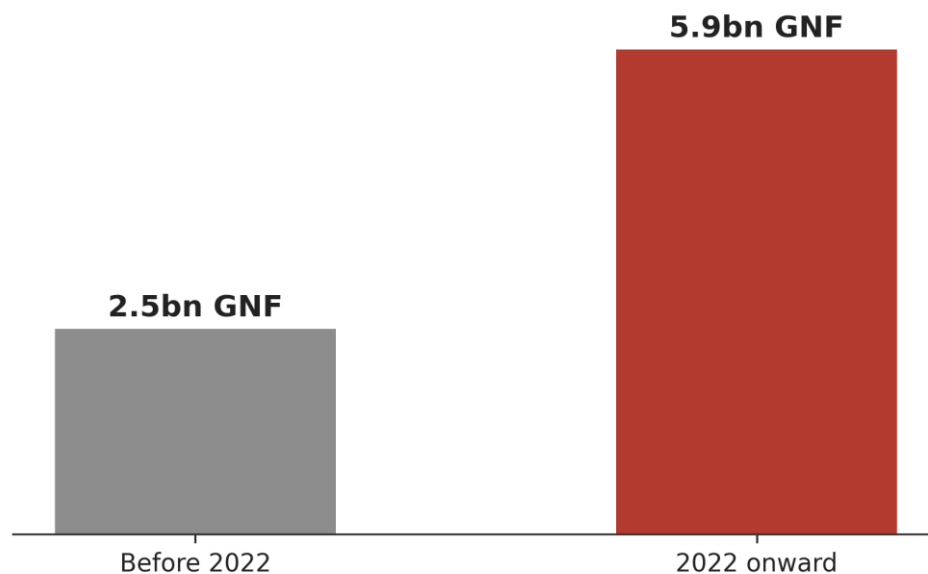


Figure5: State subsidies to private media in Guinea, before and after 2022

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

"The State cannot claim to help the journalists' corporation while ignoring the concerns of 85% of this profession."

Informal restrictions in the forms of implicit pressure, veiled threats, and the deliberate cultivation of a climate of anticipatory fear are extensively documented across all four countries. These controls are not codified in law, but are widely internalized. In Mali, 70% of respondents report that self-censorship has become the norm; 87% report that media outlets routinely avoid sensitive topics. In Guinea, 87% of surveyed journalists

practice self-censorship, and 81% have already avoided certain topics for security reasons. As one Malian respondent observed,

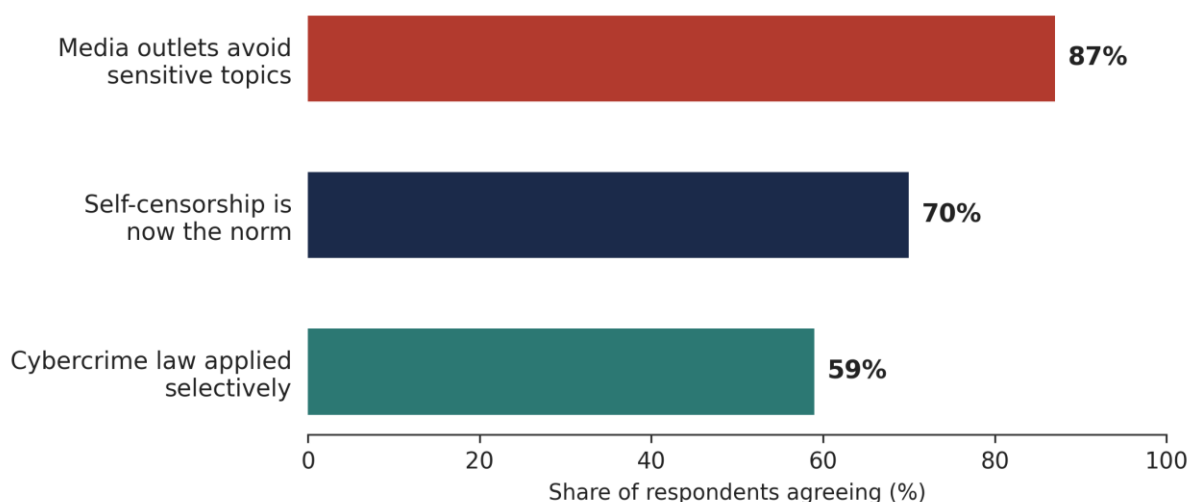


Figure6: Self-censorship indicators in Mali

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

“Journalists prefer to remain silent on certain information or align with the dominant narrative; not because they are told to, but because they have learned what happens to those who do not.”

A common thread across all four countries is the perception among media practitioners that law and regulation are applied selectively. This selectivity produces legal uncertainty and reinforces the chilling effect on expression.

Landscape of Repression and (Self-)Censorship

Journalists, bloggers, and civil society actors face similar, cumulative, and mutually reinforcing forms of repression; including direct physical violence, legal harassment, economic pressures, and digital coercion. These violations are frequently perpetrated in tandem; creating a climate of pervasive insecurity for independent media practice and civic activism.

Arbitrary arrests and prolonged pretrial detentions are among the most visible forms of repression. In Mali, journalists and opinion leaders are prosecuted on charges related to defamation, disturbing public order, and online publications. Some journalists “may routinely spend months in pre-trial custody without being tried or even brought before a judge.” These practices have a “significant deterrent effect and instill a pervasive and very real fear” among media practitioners.

In Burkina Faso, critical journalists and civil society activists are conscripted and forcefully embedded with military units under the guise of the decree on general

mobilization and restructuring of the High Council for Communication (*Coneil Supérieur de la Communication*, CSC). Adopted on 13 April 2023, the decree was initially intended to provide the State with the necessary tools to combat terrorism. However, this regulatory framework was soon used as a means of repression against those who criticized the government's governance and actions. Journalists such as Yacouba Ladji Bama and Issaka Lingani, as well as civil society activists such as Rasmané Zinaba and Bassirou Badjo of Balai Citoyen, and Daouda Diallo of the Coalition Against Impunity and the Stigmatisation of Communities (Collectif Contre l'Impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communautés, CISC), were forcibly conscripted into the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) and deployed to active military front lines in the fight against terrorism. They were all conscripted by the National Theatre of Operations Command in November 2023. A ruling by the Ouagadougou Administrative Court on 6 December 2023 had ordered the suspension of their conscription and an end to their deployment.

On 31 March 2023, Sophie Douce and Agnès Faivre, correspondents for the French newspapers *Le Monde* and *Libération* respectively, were expelled following the publication of an investigation into the alleged execution of children at a military barracks. Between 2024 and 2025, intelligence services carried out a wave of abductions targeting journalists and national commentators. While no official statement has specified the grounds or locations of their detention, several factors suggest these detentions are linked to their professional activities or expressed views.

Atiana Serge Oulon, editor and publication director of *L'Événement*, was abducted on 24 June 2024, shortly after publishing an investigation into the alleged embezzlement of 400 million CFA francs intended for the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), involving an army officer. He appeared before a military court prior to his abduction, and an order compelling him to disclose his sources had been issued, according to the CSC's public report. Marcel Zongo, Director-General for Human Rights at the Ministry of Justice, told RSF that the journalist had been "conscripted" into counter-terrorism efforts, in accordance with the decree on general mobilization and warning. Kalifara Séré, a commentator on the program "7 Info" on the *BF1* channel, was abducted on 19 June 2024 following a court hearing. He had been accused of questioning the authenticity of images showing President Ibrahim Traoré donating blood on 14 June 2024. He was eventually released and returned home on 11 July 2025. Adama Bayala, a commentator on the *BF1* show 'Presse Échos', was abducted on 28 June 2024 and released on 17 September 2025. Alain Traoré, editor-in-chief of the "Local Languages" desk at the privately-owned media group Oméga Médias and author of the satirical column "Le Défouloir," was abducted on 13 July 2024 and released on 16 September 2025. Guézouma Sanogo, a journalist with the national radio station and President of the Burkina Journalists' Association (AJB), Boukari Ouoba, a journalist, co-founder of the monthly magazine *Mutations* and former reporter for *L'Événement*, Vice-President of the AJB and Acting Coordinator of the Norbert Zongo National Press Centre, Luc Pagbelguem, a journalist with *BF1* television, and Phil Roland Zongo, a journalist with *Fémina FM* radio, were abducted in late March 2025 and forcibly conscripted into the armed forces. Three days earlier, during the closing session of its

extraordinary congress, the AJB had denounced the “unprecedented” violations of freedom of expression and of the press since the military’s return to power. Luc Pagbelguem was one of the journalists covering the event, while Phil Roland Zongo read out the appeal calling for the release of his abducted colleagues. On 25 March 2025, the Minister of Territorial Administration and Mobility, Magistrate Emile Zerbo, issued a communiqué declaring the AJB “dissolved or non-existent” for alleged non-compliance with Law No. 064-2015/CNT of 20 October 2015, governing associations and similar organizations. The four journalists were released in late July 2025.

Niger provides a case record that is emblematic of the use of arrest as a tool of repression of media and restriction on civic expression. Soumana Maiga, editor of *L’Enquêteur*, was arrested in April 2024 for “undermining national defence” after publishing an article about the alleged installation of listening devices by Russian agents in official state buildings. He faced up to ten years in prison before being released after three months. Ali Soumana, editor of *Le Courrier*, was arrested on 8 September 2025 for “defamation” and “complicity in the dissemination of data electronically” after reporting on an alleged cigarette-smuggling case involving the Prime Minister. He was held at Say prison, approximately 50 kilometers from Niamey, and released on 22 January 2026; more than four months later. Three journalists from *Sahara FM* in Agadez – Hamid Mahmoud, Massaouda Jaharou, and Mahaman Sani – were arrested twice in May 2025 within days of each other after reporting on an alleged breakdown in security cooperation between Niger and Russia, transferred to Niamey, and held without due process. Samira Sabou, a journalist and blogger, was arrested on 30 September 2023, hooded, forcibly taken without warrant, and held incommunicado for eight days. She was charged with “colluding with a foreign power” and “disseminating information likely to disturb public order” before being released on bail. The charges remain pending. Moussa Tchangari, Secretary General of civil society group Alternatives Espaces Citoyens, was arrested on 3 December 2024 by plainclothes men without a warrant and held at an anti-terrorism unit. He was charged with “undermining national security,” “association with a terrorist organization,” and “conspiracy against the state.” He remains in detention at Filingué prison.

In Guinea, the documented record of judicial violations includes custodial sentences issued in direct breach of the 2010 Organic Law, which prohibits imprisonment for press offenses. A 2024 case saw a journalist held in pretrial detention for one month and two weeks before being sentenced to six months in prison with a suspended sentence. The abduction of journalist Habib Marouane Camara in December 2024 by unidentified individuals wearing balaclavas represents a harrowing escalation. As of the time of this report, he remains missing, with no conclusive investigation conducted by the authorities. His disappearance has had a profound chilling effect on independent practice:

“Self-censorship has reached a level never seen in the history of independent media in our country. People say: ‘I don’t want to be the next Habib Marouane. I don’t want my father to be treated like Babila’s father.’ So, they remain silent” (KII 9, Guinea).

Also documented in Guinea are the cases of investigative journalists Abdoulatif and Coumba Diallo, both forced into exile, and the arrest of the Secretary General of the private press journalists' union in early 2025 for “disturbing public order.”

RSF and over 105 African journalists have formally demanded accountability. The SPPG's 2024 annual report documents a total of 70 serious violations during that year: a 204% increase compared to 2023.

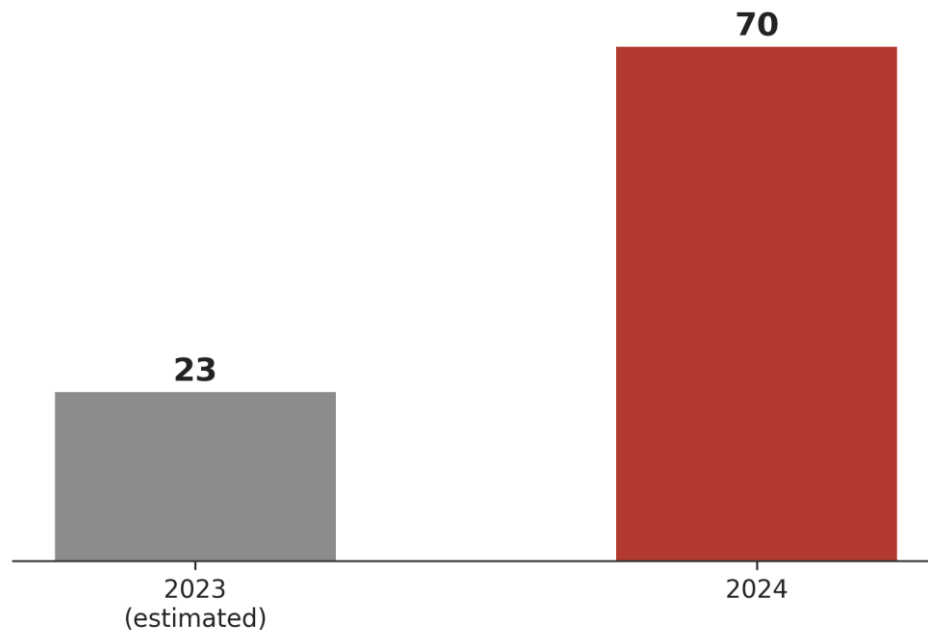


Figure7: Documented press freedom violations in Guinea, 2023 vs 2024

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026). SPPG 2024 annual report; the 2023 figure is estimated from the reported percentage increase

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the repressive climate has forced many journalists and civil society figures into exile. This list includes prominent figures such as Newton Ahmed Barry, former editor-in-chief of *L'Événement* and former president of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI).

Other exiles include media managers and publishing directors, including: Inoussa Ouédraogo, former president of the Society of Private Press Publishers (Société des éditeurs de la presse privée, SEP); Boureima Ouédraogo, his predecessor at the SEP and editor-in-chief of the bi-monthly *Le Reporter*; Abdoulaye Diallo, coordinator of the Norbert Zongo National Press Centre; Ladji Bama, a leading figure at *Le Reporter* and *Le Courrier Confidentiel*, and founder of the media outlet *Bam Yinga*; Issaka Lingani, founder of *L'Opinion*.

Beyond the use of formal legal instruments, journalists face systematic informal pressure: repeated summonses, smear campaigns, targeted online harassment, and physical threats or assaults. In Mali, respondents describe an environment where

pressure occurs “online as well as in newsrooms and during interactions with authorities,” generating “constant psychological pressure and a climate of mistrust.”

In Guinea, physical violence during demonstrations has been repeatedly documented. In May 2023, journalists Aliou Maci Diallo and Mamadou Macka Diallo were physically assaulted by soldiers while reporting in Bambéto, Conakry. No accountability followed. In October 2023, 13 journalists were arbitrarily arrested during a peaceful demonstration against the censorship of *Guineematin*. Several were injured, tear gas was deployed, and equipment was confiscated. In January 2024, security forces surrounded the Press House before a demonstration against radio jamming, and nine or more journalists were arrested. Sékou Jamal Pendessa, Secretary General of the SPPG, was detained for over a month for organizing a press demonstration. As a Guinean KII reflects on the climate of intimidation:

“Since the 2021 coup, journalists have been living with a sword of Damocles over their heads. If they are not arbitrarily arrested, journalists critical of the authorities are assaulted, threatened, or disappeared” (KII Respondent, Guinea).

All four countries have also employed economic and administrative tools of repression to control the public narrative. In Burkina Faso, the media regulator ordered *TV5 Monde Afrique* to pay a fine of 50 million CFA francs. This followed the broadcast, during its news program on 14 June 2024, of an interview with the Burkinabè journalist Newton Ahmed Barry, whom the CSC had accused of glorifying terrorism. It also imposed a fine of 25 million CFA francs on VOA radio for “terrorist propaganda.” The sanction related to the 20 September 2024 broadcast of “Washington Forum,” during which a guest claimed, without official evidence, that the Barsalogho attack had resulted in more than 400 deaths. Several local media outlets have also been sanctioned by the CSC. The bi-monthly investigative magazine *L'Événement*, was suspended for a month. The talk show “7 Info” on the private television channel *BF1* was banned for two weeks, and the radio station *Oméga FM* was suspended for three months.

In Guinea, the HAC's withdrawal in May 2024 of the licenses of *Djoma TV*, *Espace FM*, *FIM FM*, and other outlets resulted in the closure of some of Guinea's highest audience share media and the loss of over 800 jobs. These closures occurred precisely as the trial of the 28 September 2009 stadium massacre was concluding, reducing prospects for independent reporting on an issue of historic human rights reckoning.

In Mali, the expulsion of international media removed critical news sources from the national media landscape while creating a climate of apprehension for critical domestic voices. In Niger, the suspension of the Press House in January 2024 was emblematic of a pattern of dissolving independent institutional anchors within the media sector. Survey data from Niger showed that 45.83% of respondents considered the media environment ‘relatively free,’ while 35.42% described it as restrictive, 8.33% as dangerous, and 4.17% as very restrictive. This picture is consistent with an environment where formal spaces of expression persist but are subject to sudden, unpredictable closure.

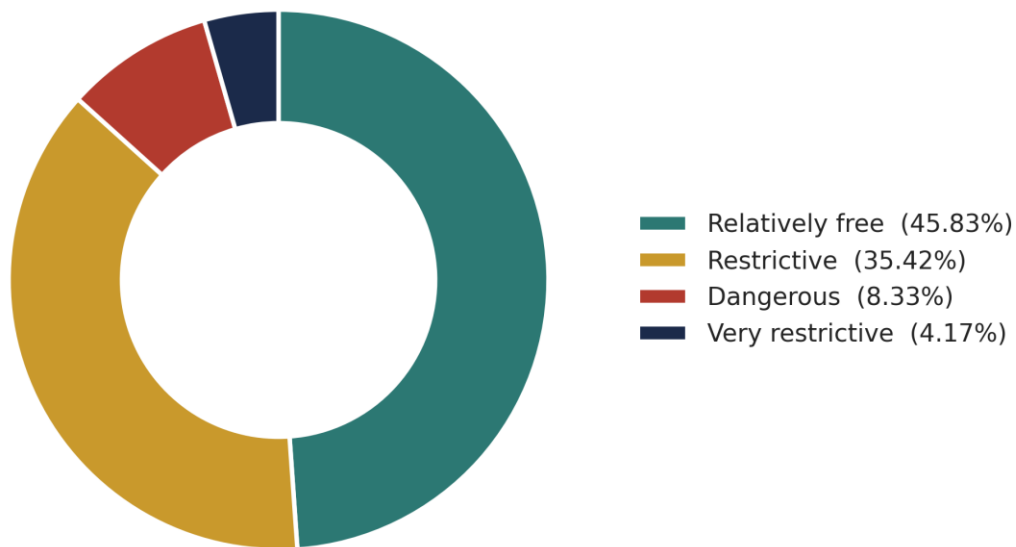


Figure8: How journalists in Niger perceive the media environment

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

In Burkina Faso, neither the abductions nor whereabouts of journalists Bienvenue Apiou, Mamadou Ali Compaoré and Moussa Sareba have been the subject of any official statement. Bienvenue Apiou, who worked for *Bagrépole FM* and had previously worked for *Radio Oméga*, was abducted on 17 July 2024 in Bagré. Mamadou Ali Compaoré, news anchor on national television channels, columnist on *BF1*, and former adviser to the CSC, was abducted on 24 December 2024, he was arrested on 10 August 2025. RSF notes that the disappearance on 10 August 2025 of Moussa Sareba, journalist at *Fil Infos* and administrator of *Radio Oméga's* Facebook page occurred 10 days after the publication of a short news item on Facebook that used the term "junta" to refer to the ruling regime, in connection with the death in detention of the activist Alino Faso in Ivory Coast.

The repression extends beyond the journalistic community to encompass civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and civic activists. In Guinea, the dissolution in August 2022 of the Front National pour la Défense de la Constitution (FNDC), the main coalition demanding a return to constitutional order, and the disappearances since July 2024 of FNDC leaders Foniké Menguè and Mamadou Billo Bah, illustrate how civic space has been systematically tightened. In Niger, Moussa Tchangari's arrest and the restrictions imposed on civil society organizations through Decree No. 2022-182 have effectively paralyzed organized civil advocacy. As noted earlier, Decree 2022-182 subjects NGO activities to prior state approval and prohibits projects not "consistent with national development guidelines and priorities" In Mali, the arrest of civilian actors and the tightening of the political space following each successive coup have similarly weakened the civic ecosystem.

All these repressive measures, which indicate a significant decline in press freedom, are based on official narratives of safeguarding national security. The state authorities justify these sanctions on national security justifications.

Role of State and Security Actors

A key objective of the study was to understand the role of state and security actors as arbiters or architects of the erosion of media freedoms and civic rights across the four countries. The findings reveal a systematic pattern of direct and indirect use of state power to coopt or coerce the media and free expression advocates.

In Mali, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) exercises decisive influence through direct management of security-related information, and the operation of its own web TV and radio station; creating an institutionalized mechanism for active narrative control while expanding their direct presence in the information space. Journalists report restrictions on access to conflict zones, suppression of casualty figures from military operations, and an implicit prohibition on critical coverage of security sector performance. In Burkina Faso, the embedding of journalists with military units through formal "requisition" mechanisms and the expulsion of international media (RFI and France 24) reflect an openly authoritarian approach to information control and the elimination of independent coverage of the counter-insurgency. In Niger, as in Guinea, military authority shapes the parameters of permissible expression without always being the direct agent of repression.

Police and gendarmerie are the frontline actors in arrests and detentions. Intelligence services, while more opaque, are widely described as conducting systematic surveillance of journalists and activists and their communications. In Mali, they are "particularly involved in cases related to digital publications and the summons of journalists... Abductions are a common *modus operandi* for these agencies." In Niger, the Law on the Interception of Electronic Communications (Law 2020-019) transferred wiretapping authority from the judiciary to the executive, creating the National Commission for the Control of Security Interceptions (CNCIS), whose members are exclusively executive and legislative appointees. This development has effectively institutionalized surveillance as an executive prerogative with no judicial check.

In Guinea, the direct attribution of violence to specific state actors is complicated by the extensive use of unidentified masked men, usually arriving in pickup trucks, often described as resembling special forces or gendarmerie, and obviously intended to enable deniability:

"We sometimes talk about masked men. It is difficult to know whether they are real soldiers, gendarmes, or police officers, it is difficult to say" (KII 2, Guinea).

"Hooded individuals, sometimes in outfits resembling special forces or gendarmerie, have been mentioned. In several documented cases, defense and security forces are mentioned" (KII 5, Guinea).

Regulatory mechanisms nominally exist to shield media against such arbitrary acts of state repression. In reality, however, they serve more as instruments of executive control. In Mali, the regulatory bodies and judicial systems are “all subject to the executive branch.” The judiciary, theoretically the primary guarantor of fundamental rights, has seen its role restricted in practice. In Niger, the judiciary’s regulatory role is explicitly constrained by Ordinance 2024-28, which removes the possibility of mitigating circumstances or suspended sentences for expression-related offences, eliminating judicial discretion. In Guinea, courts are identified as a formal avenue of redress but ones whose effectiveness “largely depends on the functioning of the judicial system and the ability of victims to provide evidence,” both of which conditions are compromised in the current context. In Guinea, only 43% of respondents report having access to legal support in case of arrest or harassment.

Professional organizations and unions play meaningful but limited roles. They engage in advocacy, public denunciation, and legal follow-up, but face coordination problems, resource deficits, and limited political leverage. In Guinea, one KII observes bluntly:

“No, journalists are not really protected; on the contrary, they are exposed. I have always asked professional media associations to act in anticipation. Today, the Press House is no longer useful.”

The suspension, without stated reasons, of Niger’s Maison de la Presse in January 2024 by ministerial order eliminates even this institutional gathering space for media association members. Across all four countries, low trust in institutional mechanisms compounds these structural weaknesses. Survey data from Niger shows that only 23% of journalists who experienced incidents reported them to unions or professional associations, and only 4% to NGOs. In Guinea, 56% of journalists indicate not reporting violations they have experienced; primarily due to “a lack of trust in existing mechanisms and fear of reprisals.”

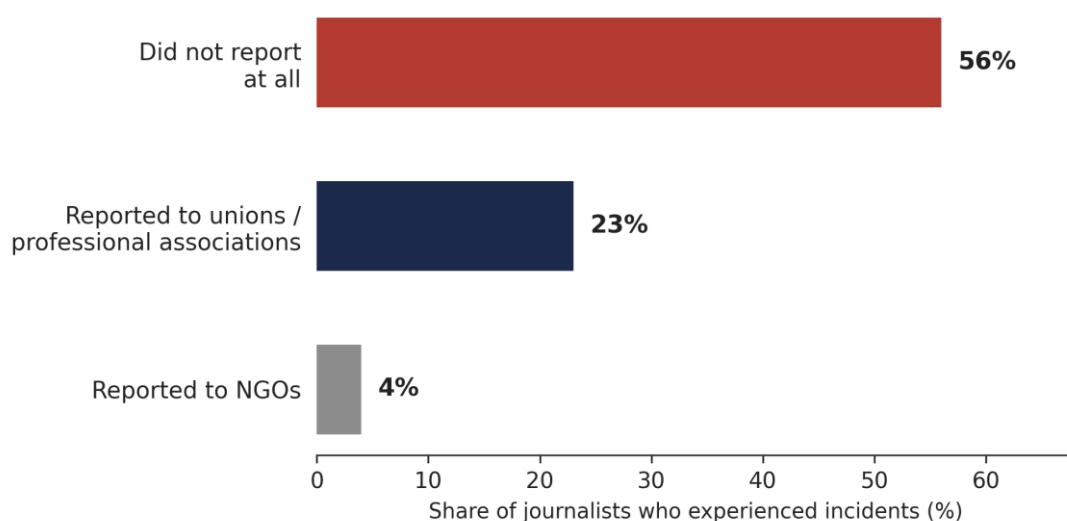


Figure: How journalists in Niger report violations they experience

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

This accountability vacuum has a mutually reinforcing relationship with state security repression. The evident immunity enjoyed by perpetrators of violations against journalists and activists removes the deterrence that might otherwise moderate state behaviour and perpetuates impunity.

Implications of Digital Technologies on Fundamental Freedoms

A recurrent finding across all four countries is the paradoxical character of the digital environment. Social media and online platforms have provided citizens and journalists with spaces of expression beyond the reach of formal broadcast regulation. But authorities have correspondingly intensified efforts to monitor, restrict, and criminalise digital expression.

In Guinea, key informants consistently described online platforms, particularly social media, as “much freer than radio or television platforms” (KII 2), enabling citizens to express views that would be unspeakable in formal media. In Niger, the dominance of social media as information channels has provided alternative circuits for news distribution that bypass licensed media. In Mali, the “growth of digital media” enables “rapid dissemination of information, a diversification of voices, and even broader access to expression.”

However, this openness is qualified and contingent. Critical online voices face targeted harassment; bloggers based abroad may be safer, but their activities can expose family members and contacts remaining in-country to intimidation; and the technical accessibility of digital expression is increasingly offset by the growing capacity and willingness of authorities to monitor, intercept, and prosecute digital content.

In Niger, survey data show that 56% of journalists report having faced at least one digital threat. Hacking attempts are the most frequently reported form (31%), followed by communications monitoring (23%), online harassment (19%), and internet outages (19%). Device confiscation, while less common (2%), is also documented. The chilling effect of this threat landscape is severe: 67% of Nigerien journalists report having changed their communication methods due to fear of surveillance, compared to only 25% who have not.

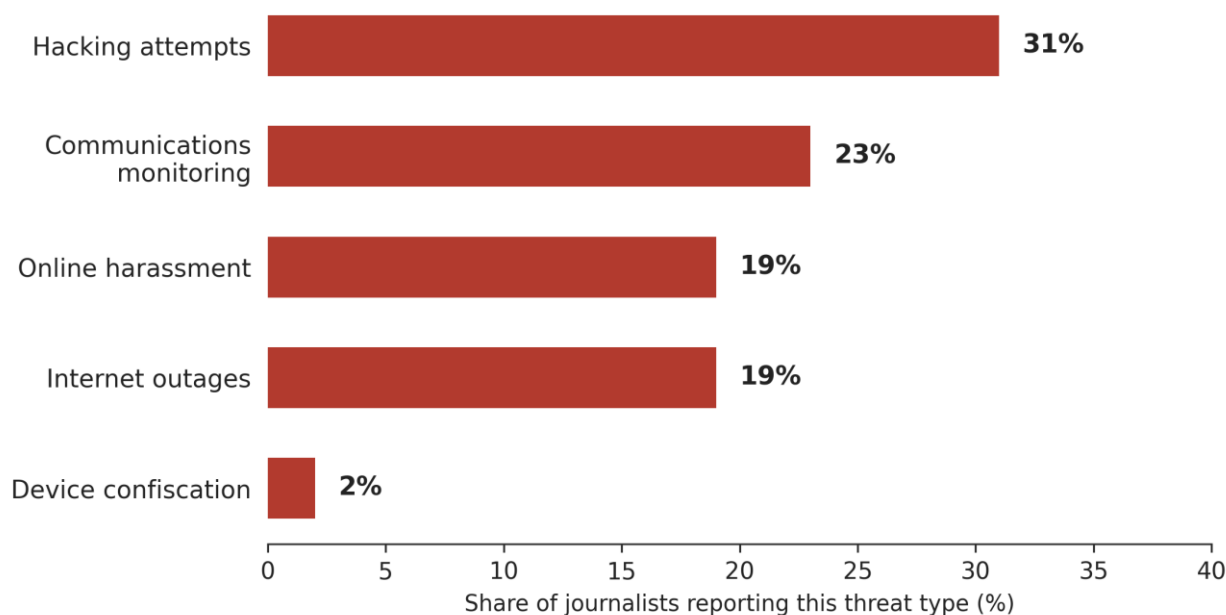


Figure10: Types of digital threats faced by journalists in Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026). 56% of Nigerien journalists report facing at least one digital threat.

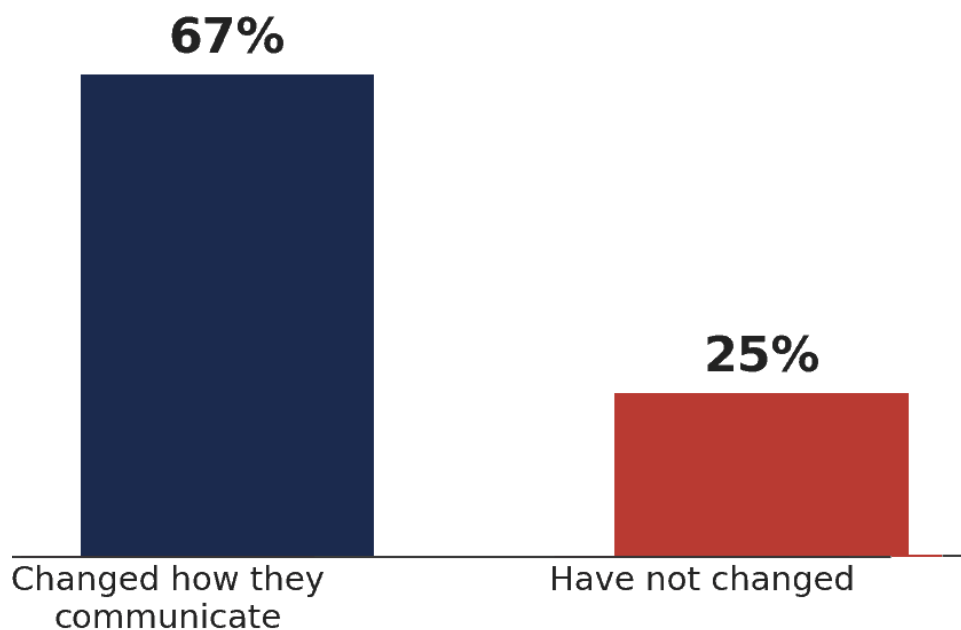


Figure11: Share of journalists who changed how they communicate due to fear of surveillance

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

In Mali, “the digital space is emerging as a new area of risk,” with surveillance of communications, wiretapping, account hacking, and online harassment campaigns noted as common occurrences. Arrests related to social media posts are described as frequent. In Burkina Faso, digital surveillance and online harassment have accompanied the broader militarisation of the information environment, with critical voices on social media subject to legal action.

In Guinea, internet shutdowns have been deployed during politically sensitive moments, including elections, the constitutional referendum, and periods of social unrest, with documented restrictions on Facebook and Twitter connectivity, particularly affecting online media outlets:

“Without internet, many media, especially television stations and websites, can no longer function properly. The consequences are therefore enormous. I think authorities should reflect more on these decisions, because their impacts go far beyond what is intended” (KII 1, Guinea).

“These restrictions limit citizens’ access to information, which constitutes an attack on freedom of expression, not to mention the major economic consequences that follow” (KII 5, Guinea).

Between August and November 2023, Guineematin’s website was completely blocked nationwide for 81 days without any official justification or published decision. In November 2023, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and other platforms were blocked during political protests. The economic cost of these shutdowns is substantial. The UK-based platform Top10VPN estimates that internet and social media restrictions cost Guinea USD47.4 million in 2023, affecting approximately 6.98 million mobile internet users across 3,720 hours of cumulative shutdown. As late as April 2026, Guinean users reported major difficulties accessing YouTube and Facebook without VPNs. RSF quantifies the audience impact of signal jamming on critical broadcasters at 80% audience loss for jammed radio stations, and 70% web traffic reduction on blocked websites.

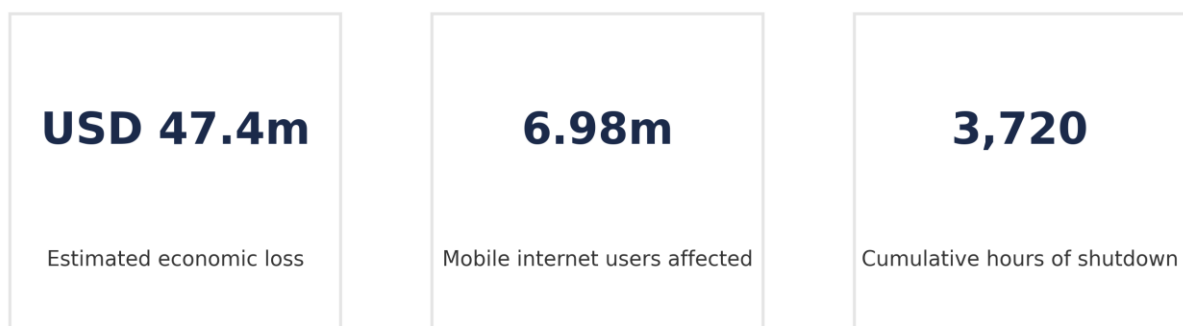


Figure12: The cost of internet shutdowns and disruptions in Guinea, 2023

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

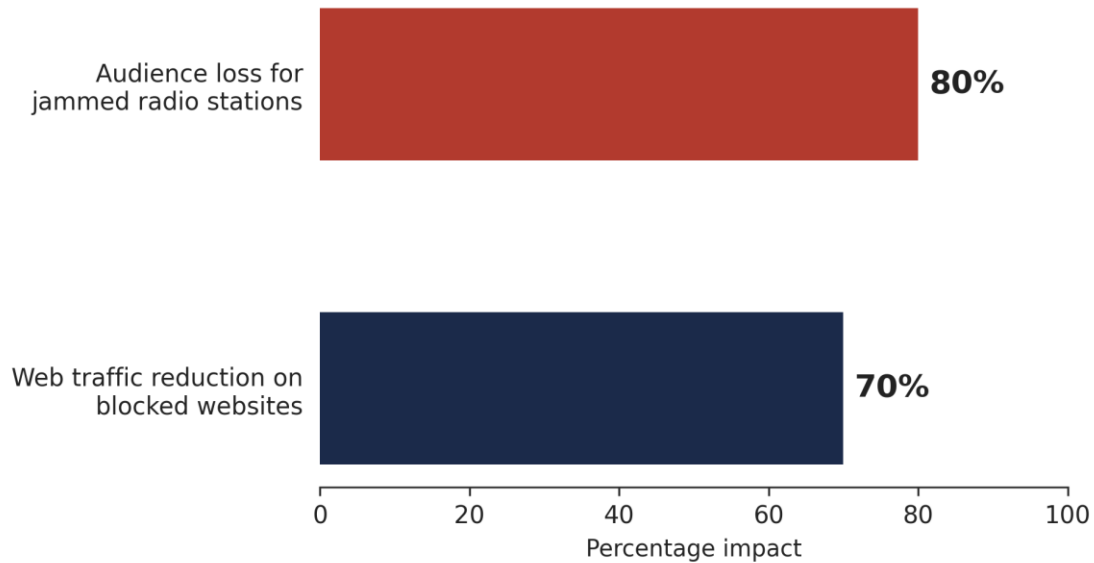


Figure13: Audience impact of signal jamming and website blocking in Guinea

Source: MFWA, *State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026)*.

The threat of surveillance directly shapes professional behaviour. One Guinean KII describes the paralyzing effect of pervasive monitoring:

“*Journalists know they are under surveillance, especially through their phones. Personally, sometimes when you call me, I cannot discuss certain topics on the phone. If we meet in person, it is possible; but remotely it is risky. We are all under surveillance. When I was working in international media, I was surprised that people I did not know called me. They had obtained my number, probably because I was being tapped*
(KII respondent, Guinea).”

The impact on information sources is equally damaging. In Niger, 92% of surveyed respondents believe that news sources fear reprisals — a finding that fundamentally compromises the conditions for independent reporting on public affairs. In Guinea, 54% of

respondents report that journalists do not have significant access to public information. The OHCHR, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have all stated that Guinea's internet blockings and signal jamming do not meet the criteria of legality, necessity, and proportionality required under international law, and constitute violations of the right to freedom of expression protected by Article 19 of the ICCPR.

In Niger, the law governing the interception of electronic communications has been critically assessed as fundamentally undermining press freedom. The establishment of the CNCIS institutionalises electronic surveillance as an executive prerogative. This, as has been noted already, is principally because it is composed exclusively of executive and legislative appointees to the exclusion of the judiciary. Furthermore, the Law's vague definition of “necessity in the public interest” as a ground for intercepting

communications, without further specification, creates an unlimited legal basis for monitoring journalists and activists.

Gender-Specific Risks and Structural Barriers

Women journalists across all four countries face a double burden: the generic climate of insecurity experienced by all media professionals in these contexts, compounded by gender-specific forms of violence, harassment, and structural exclusion. The findings indicate that gender constitutes an additional axis of vulnerability that interacts with professional, economic, and political pressures.

The digital space is the primary arena of gender-specific risk for women journalists. Forms of gender-based online violence documented across the four countries include targeted harassment with sexist undertones, smear campaigns aimed at discrediting professional credibility, and threats linked specifically to women's participation in the public sphere. In Mali, women face "insults and personal attacks, smear campaigns, and targeted threats" online, "often linked to gender and to more personal and stigmatising factors." The consequences include "partial withdrawal from the digital public sphere, increased self-censorship, and significant psychological pressure." In Guinea, more than 70% of women respondents report avoiding certain sensitive topics for security reasons; a higher rate than that observed in the overall sample.

Sexual harassment emerges as a latent but systematically underreported risk embedded in power dynamics within newsrooms and in field reporting contexts. Multiple Guinean KII describe the dimension directly:

"Women are very, very vulnerable. Because they are affected by harassment, whether from media owners, colleagues, but also when they are in the field for reporting. They become even more vulnerable because of predators. Some make advances to them and ask: why are you in this profession?" (KII respondent, Guinea).

Another Guinean KII adds a dimension that speaks to the symbolic dimension of gender-based professional marginalization:

"Women do their work professionally. They are very competent. But they can be victims because of their condition because they are women. When I go into the field as a man, I am respected. But when a woman is seen, people first think about what a woman represents. Many do not see her as a professional, but as an 'accessible' woman. So women face many more difficulties than men" (KII respondent, Guinea).

In Niger, the strong male predominance in the survey sample (88% male) itself reflects a structural imbalance that "partially renders women's experiences in the media sector invisible." The under-documentation of gender-specific violations is itself a finding: if women's experiences are not systematically captured, they cannot be adequately addressed by protection mechanisms.

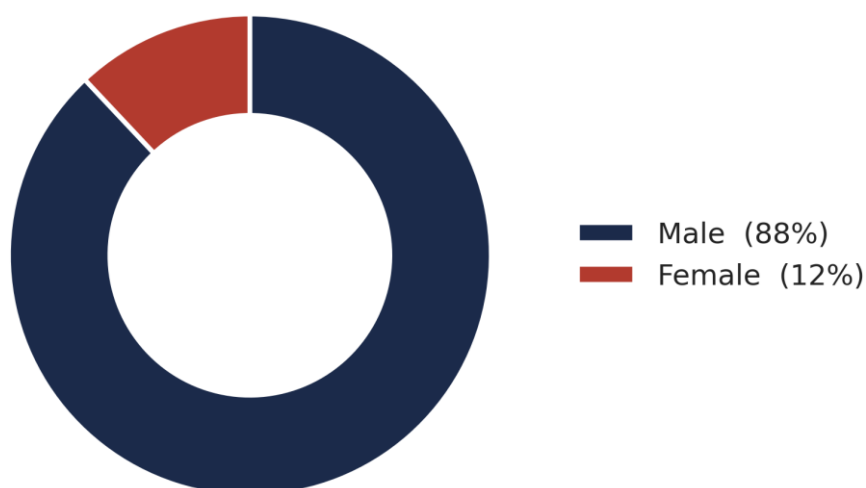


Figure14: Gender composition of the survey sample in Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

Physical violence during demonstrations has also been documented as disproportionately affecting women journalists. One Guinean KII notes: “During journalists’ demonstrations in Kaloum, women journalists suffered more violence than men.”

Beyond direct risk, women journalists face deep-seated structural constraints that limit their full and equal participation in the media landscape. In all four contexts, social expectations, restrictive cultural norms, and limited mobility particularly in high-risk or remote areas, reduce women’s presence in the field. In Mali, respondents highlight that women are less present in conflict zones or when covering sensitive topics, “due to their vulnerability in certain situations.” The concentration of media professionals in urban centres (documented at 96% in Niger) reflects inequalities in professional opportunity that particularly disadvantage women in rural areas.

Access to leadership and decision-making positions remains limited despite growing female presence in the profession. In Mali, “despite an increasing presence of women in the sector, their access to decision-making positions remains limited” due to professional inequalities, a lack of opportunities, and the perpetuation of existing hierarchies. Women are underrepresented in editorial governance and have limited influence over editorial direction.

The legal and digital constraints affecting the sector as a whole also have differentiated effects by gender. In Guinea, cultural norms and “differing perceptions of women’s roles, restrictive social expectations, and limitations on their mobility, particularly in high-risk areas” compound their professional vulnerability. The findings further indicate

that the extreme economic precarity of the sector, with many journalists earning less than USD20 per month, bears disproportionately on women, who are typically less protected institutionally and who have “more limited professional networks.” As already noted, even the gender data, which shows that 88% of respondents were male, is a reflection of the structural and systemic imbalances that disable women’s potential.

Similarly, in Niger, the legal and regulatory constraints affecting the entire sector have:

“... differentiated effects depending on gender. Women journalists, often less protected institutionally and with more limited professional networks, may be more vulnerable to these pressures, which exacerbates self-censorship.”

The intersection of gender and geography further compounds vulnerability, as women in rural areas face additional barriers to professional participation and career advancement. These realities highlight the urgency of gender-disaggregated analysis and affirmative interventions in the interest of equity.

Resilience and Adaptation Strategies

Faced with an environment of multidimensional pressures, journalists and activists have developed a range of coping strategies that condition and constrain their professional choices.

Self-censorship is the most consequential coping response and indicator of the erosion of democratic space; because it both feeds and frames what is published and publicly discussed. As indicated earlier, security concerns advised against conducting a survey in Burkina Faso. Across the three other countries, however, the data show remarkable consistency in the topics that journalists systematically avoid. Security and defence consistently rank first: 71.8% of Nigerien journalists avoid security/defence topics, while 39% of Guinean journalists avoid security and the military. Government criticism and political issues rank second in all three countries (Niger: 41%, Guinea: 56%, Mali: near-universal avoidance of content ‘related to security, governance, or corruption’). Corruption (Guinea: 34%; Niger: 23.1%), ethnic issues (Niger: 33.3%; Guinea: 31%), and religion (Niger: 28.2%; Guinea: 22%) round out the landscape of systematically avoided themes.

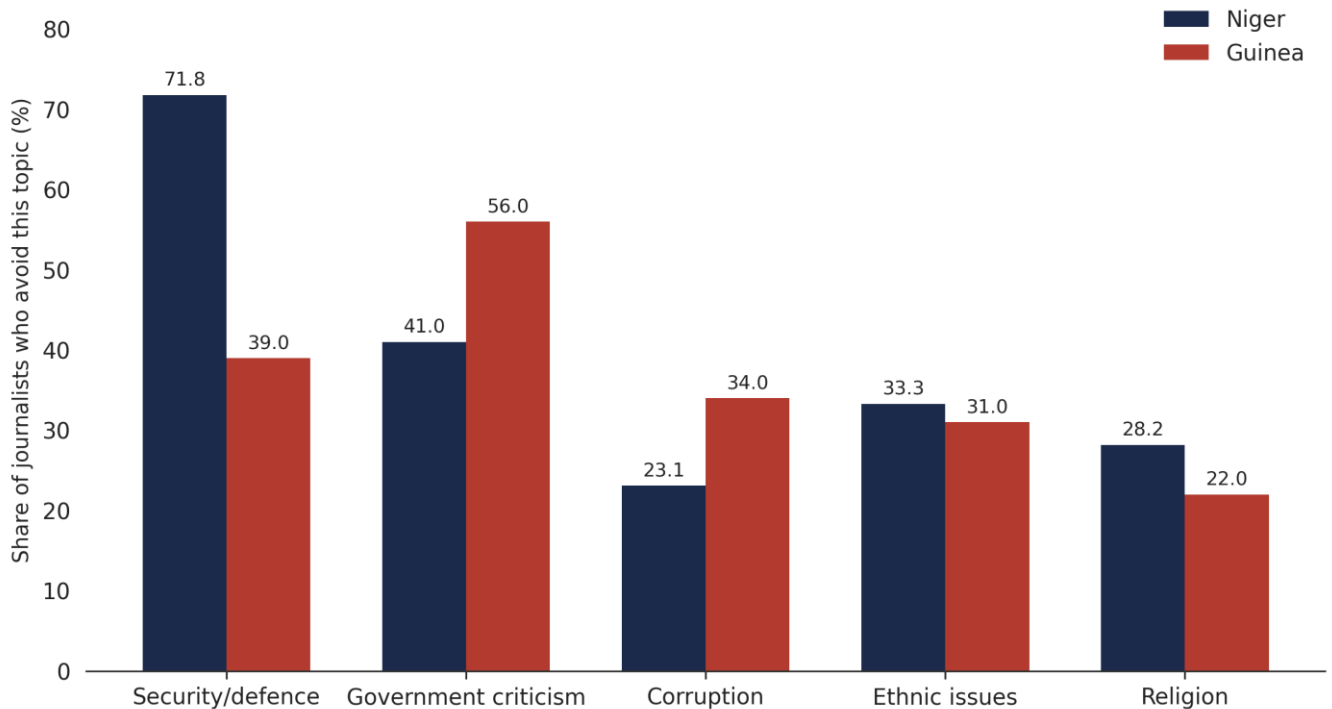


Figure15: Topics journalists systematically avoid, by country

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

Beyond topic avoidance, journalists have adopted specific communication and security practices. In Guinea, 65% of respondents report that fear of surveillance has changed the way they communicate; favouring secure messaging applications (Signal, Telegram), avoiding sensitive discussions by phone in favour of in-person conversations, and limiting personal digital exposure. Key informants described deliberate practices of communication hygiene:

“Journalists know they are under surveillance, especially through their phones. Personally, sometimes when you call me, I can clearly tell you that I cannot discuss certain topics on the phone. If we meet in person, it is possible, but remotely it is risky” (KII 4, Guinea).

In Niger, 52% of journalists report never having received digital security training. As one Guinean KII observes, adaptation is driven more by individual instinct than by structured support: “It is survival instinct; they adapt very poorly, but well enough to survive.” These revelations highlight the critical vulnerability of journalists to digital surveillance, and the imperative of prioritizing interventions for addressing them.

A particularly telling indicator of vulnerability is the widespread failure to report violations. In Niger, 56% of journalists report not disclosing violations they have experienced, primarily due to distrust of existing mechanisms and fear of reprisals. This pattern makes abuses invisible, reinforces impunity, and prevents the accumulation of documented evidence that could serve as the basis for accountability.

Journalists also avoid conflict zones and high-risk areas as a pre-emptive, survival reflex. In Mali, “this situation results in restricted movement, the abandonment of certain reporting areas, and a constant sense of insecurity.” In Guinea, some investigative journalists have gone into self-exile in order to remove themselves from the physical risks associated with critical on-site reporting. Their diaspora position provides a degree of personal security, although it exposes contacts and family members remaining in-country.

Professional organizations, journalists' unions, and media associations play meaningful but structurally limited roles. In Niger, journalists cite associations of journalists (73%) and human rights groups (50%) as the primary structures they would turn to in case of violations. In Guinea, 97% of respondents know organizations to which they could report violations, indicating strong awareness of support actors. However, only 43% have actual access to legal support in the event of arrest or harassment, and 27% are unsure whether such support exists for them; revealing a significant gap between knowledge and access.

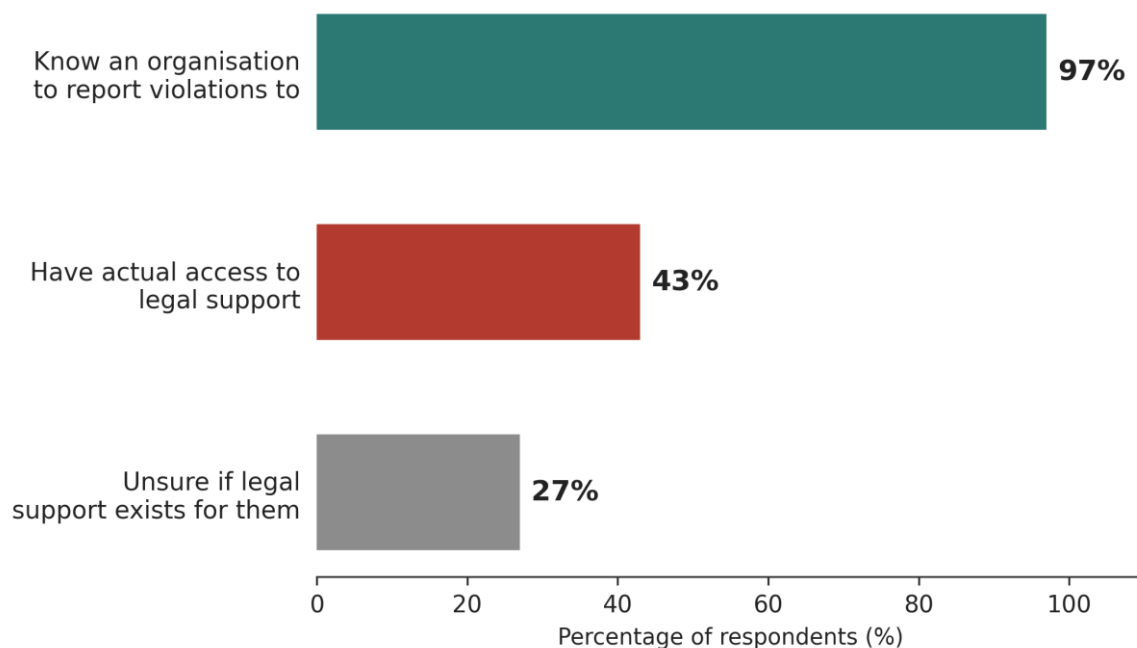


Figure16: The gap between awareness and real access to support in Guinea

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

In Niger, the data capture this gap precisely: while 69% of journalists express confidence in certain organizations to report violations, 31% do not trust these organizations at all. The most-cited support needs are legal protection (67%), training and capacity building (67%), and digital security support (37%).

Most-cited support needs

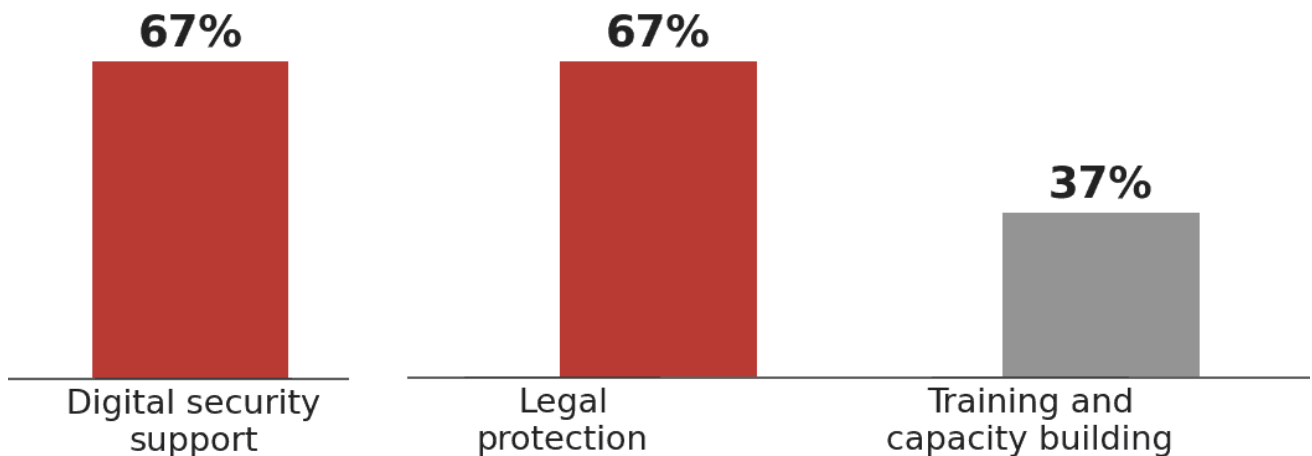


Figure17: Most-cited support needs by journalists in Niger

Source: MFWA, State, Determinants, Dynamics, and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea (2026).

The SPPG union in Guinea stands out as one of the very few organizations consistently producing verifiable annual data on press freedom violations. Nonetheless, “some journalists do not trust certain professional organizations” (KII 3), and the assertion that they “do not really manage to protect journalists” (KII 10) reflects a significant credibility challenge.

Civil society organizations also face increasing constraints. In Niger, the 2022 NGO decree requiring prior state approval for all activities has made genuine operational independence precarious. In Mali and Niger, civil society actors have faced arrests; the case of Moussa Tchangari in Niger being the clearest example.

Under these circumstances, international actors (including RSF, MFWA, FIDH, CPJ, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the OHCHR) have been instrumental in providing essential support in documenting violations, amplifying cases internationally, and exerting external pressure on authorities. The ECOWAS Court of Justice's December 2023 condemnation of Guinea for violating freedom of expression and access to information rights demonstrates that regional judicial bodies can and do act. The OHCHR's public statement describing Guinea's internet blockings and signal jamming as violations of international law that “must be promptly halted” provides normative grounding for advocacy.

However, the study also documents the limits of external support. the reported reduction in operational presence of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in Guinea underscores the fragility of this support ecosystem:

“MFWA played a key role in terms of logistical, material, and financial support for the protection of journalists. However, it closed its office in Guinea, leaving Guinean media without a major shield” (KII 10, Guinea).

ECOWAS's progressive accommodation of Guinea's military-led transition, culminating in the total lifting of all sanctions on 28 January 2026 without requiring the reopening of banned media or guarantees regarding missing journalists, illustrates how geopolitical imperatives can override press freedom commitments. For Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (which, as indicated earlier, withdrew from ECOWAS to form the AES) the regional diplomatic leverage is even more constrained.

On the whole, therefore, media actors demonstrate significant adaptive resourcefulness; allowing for survival in a restricted environment. However, the most important strategic challenge is in moving from survival strategies to the construction of a more robust, coordinated, and sustainable protection architecture.

Democratic Prospects and Role of the Media

The findings present an ambivalent picture of democratic prospects across the four countries. While the structural conditions for media freedom and democratic governance have significantly deteriorated, the data also reveal the persistence of engaged media practitioners, active civil society networks, and a public that remains attentive to violations of press freedom and capable of expressing indignation.

The prospects for democratic transition in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are significantly constrained. Niger has no clear electoral timetable; Mali's transition continues to be prolonged; and Burkina Faso's junta has extended its transition timeline to 2029. All three countries have withdrawn from ECOWAS and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a development that represents an institutional commitment to a political order outside the framework of democratic norms; and which has significantly reduced the leverage of regional diplomatic mechanisms.

Malian respondents describe the political outlook as “uncertain, ambivalent, and heavily influenced by the political and security context,” with the possibility of a return to democratic order conditional on “the organisation of credible elections, the restoration of security stability, and the opening of political dialogue.” These conditions do not seem likely to be met in the short to medium term.

Guinea represents the most advanced case of formal democratic transition among the four states. It completed a transition with the inauguration of Mamadi Doumbouya as elected president on 17 January 2026, following a constitutional referendum on 21 September 2025 and a presidential election on 28 December 2025. ECOWAS lifted all remaining sanctions on 28 January 2026. However, the substance of this transition is deeply contested. Key informants in Guinea express scepticism about whether the formal transition has translated into meaningful expansion of press freedom:

"The closed media outlets remain closed. Exiled journalists do not dare to return for lack of security guarantees. Journalist Habib Marouane has still not been found. We are therefore still in a status quo" (KII 9, Guinea).

"We have just entered the Fifth Republic, and media freedom is enshrined in the new Constitution. I think we must seize this opportunity to prevent such practices from recurring" (KII 8, Guinea).

The 2025 Constitution extends the presidential term to seven years, renewable once; it removes the restriction on junta members running for election, enabling Doumbouya's candidacy; and it contains a broadly-worded national security clause that RSF identifies as a vehicle for future press prosecutions. FNDC leaders Foniké Menguè and Mamadou Billo Bah remain missing after more than 600 days. On 7 March 2026, a presidential decree dissolved 40 political parties, effectively erasing institutional opposition. RSF, FIDH, and Africivistes have criticized ECOWAS's reintegration of Guinea as a normalization that legitimizes the model without securing its democratic content.

In this context, the prospects for democratic restoration are perceived with substantial scepticism across all four countries. Respondents in Mali acknowledge that a return to democratic order remains possible but only under conditions of credible elections, restored security stability, and genuine political dialogue. However, a significant portion believes the political will for return to democracy is absent or insufficient. The reasons for this pessimistic prospect, in the short term at least, include: the consolidation of undemocratic power, enduring restriction of freedoms, normalization of self-censorship, and the weakening of institutions.

The capacity of the media to fulfil their democratic accountability function is severely constrained in the current environment. In Mali, "journalists report being unable to freely cover certain topics or being limited in their critical capacity." In Guinea, investigative journalism is "almost non-existent," with media largely confined to factual reporting and institutional content. The consequence is a journalism that is unable to exercise its democratic function of holding power accountable.

In Niger, the fear of reprisal makes it difficult for journalists to obtain information from sources. In Burkina Faso, the junta has used digital media to promote anti-democratic ideologies.

Journalists report being unable to freely cover certain categories of public affairs. Investigative journalism, as one Guinean KII states, "...is dead. We limit ourselves to factual content: workshops, seminars, support meetings for people in power."

Nevertheless, the findings also identify spaces of resilience and opportunity; particularly with the growth of digital and social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Youth engagement in content creation and public debate through social media offers a potential vector of civic mobilization. In Guinea, there are over 200 news websites operating as alternative information sources, reflecting significant popular demand for independent reporting. In Mali, "growing awareness of democratic issues,

the potential for citizen mobilization, and the presence of committed actors like the media and civil society" suggest some capacity for future change.

But these platforms are simultaneously surveillance sites, subject to blocking and shutdown, associated with misinformation risks, and targeted by cybercrime legislation. The paradox is captured well by a Guinean KII:

"It is freer on social media. You are alone, on your phone, with your connection, and you write what you want. People are much more autonomous. But it is not easy to trace them, and this is actually one of the major dilemmas posed by social media. People can express themselves freely online, sometimes even committing offenses, without being worried" (KII respondent, Guinea).

Another KII offers the counterpoint:

"On social networks, it is a bit of a mess. Those who do not master these tools well can easily make mistakes or mislead others. It is freer, but it is also chaos" (KII respondent, Guinea).

The resilience of journalists operating under extraordinary pressure, the continued production of critical content by diaspora journalists and digital activists, and the active monitoring role of organizations such as the SPPG in Guinea, the MFWA at the regional level, and Reporters Without Borders internationally provide the infrastructural basis for a recovery of media freedom when political conditions improve. The ECOWAS Court of Justice's condemnation of the Guinean state in December 2023 for violating freedom of expression and access to information rights (FIDH, 2024) demonstrates that regional accountability mechanisms remain operative, even if their enforcement capacity is limited.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Discounting the notable variations in national context, political history, and specific instruments of control, the four countries share sufficiently similar characteristics to constitute a pattern of media repression. These include:

- A normatively protective legal framework that is systematically undermined in application;
- The weaponization of cybercrime legislation against journalists and activists, displacing more protective media freedom and civic expression frameworks;
- The capture or neutralization of regulatory institutions, transforming nominally independent bodies into instruments of executive control;
- The progressive internalization of self-censorship as a journalistic norm, eliminating the need for direct censorship and producing a form of “anticipatory compliance;”
- The targeting of civil society organizations, removing the social infrastructure of organized advocacy for media freedom and freedom of expression;
- The use of economic pressure as a mechanism of control, exploiting the financial vulnerability of media professionals to shape editorial behaviour;
- The emergence of the digital domain as both an expanded space of expression and a new frontier of surveillance and repression;
- A systematic accountability deficit, in which impunity for perpetrators of violations reinforces the deterrent effect of each act of repression.

Within this shared framework, each country exhibits observable peculiarities. The nature of repression in Guinea is primarily of economic and administrative asphyxiation, rather than overt physical violence or expulsion of international media. The repression in Mali features targeted legal action, the expulsion of international media (RFI, France 24), and the increasing agenda setting power of the military's own information channels. In Niger the repression is particularly notable for the intensification of legislative overreach and the deployment of anti-terrorism laws against civil society leaders. Repression in Burkina Faso is the most overtly militarized, with requisitions of “patriotic” journalists for propagating propaganda, and the co-optation of media for promoting a narrative of youth disillusionment with democracy.

The continued membership of Guinea in ECOWAS and the formal conclusion of its military transition in January 2026 represent a potentially significant divergence from the AES states. Whether this transition translates into promotion of media and free expression rights will depend on the political will of the Doumbouya administration, the

fate of investigations into journalist disappearances, the reopening of closed media outlets, and the implementation of promised legal reforms.

Digital technology occupies a paradoxical position across all four contexts. It simultaneously extends the reach of independent expression and serves as the primary site of new forms of control, criminalization, and surveillance. The expansion of cybercrime laws across all four countries has effectively extended the censorship reach of the state into the digital sphere, enabling prosecutions for social media posts, blog content, and online commentary that would previously have been outside the scope of media law jurisdiction. At the same time, digital platforms remain the most accessible space for citizens and journalists who cannot find voice or visibility in traditional media platforms.

The deterioration of media rights and freedom across the four countries has occurred in a context of weakened regional accountability mechanisms. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS eliminates the primary regional forum in which media and free expression commitments could be enforced. Furthermore, the formal reintegration of Guinea into ECOWAS in January 2026 without demonstrated commitments to promoting a media and free expression regime suggests a minimalist path to regional legitimacy. The consequence is that it removes the primary external lever available to journalists, civil society organizations, and international press freedom bodies for ensuring that normative democratic commitments translate into practical outcomes.

These findings paint a picture of a poor state and pessimistic fate of media freedom that is correlated with the recessions in democratic governance of the countries studied. Across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea, the period 2021 to 2026 has witnessed the steady disintegration of the democratic pillars of a free media ecosystem.

The most consequential effect is not the individual incidents of arrests of journalists, closure of media outlets, or deployment of cybercrime laws, but the insidious routinization of these aberrations as normative. Taken together, the findings show that the erosion of media freedom and freedom of expression within the Sahel and Guinea is multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Remedial responses must correspondingly be coordinated, comprehensive and channelled at the conditions enabling repression, rather than its manifestations.

To this end, the presence and persistence of engaged individual journalists, active professional networks, expanding digital information ecosystems, and an adamant civil society offer grounds for optimism about the ultimate endurance of media rights. Accelerating this outcome will require multi-stakeholder action across all the dimensions identified in this study: legal reform, institutional independence, economic sustainability for media, enhanced protection mechanisms, digital security capacity, and the sustained engagement of regional and international partners.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded in the synthesized key findings from the mixed-methods design deployed across the four countries.

Transitional and Constitutional Governments

- Revise and harmonize legal frameworks governing the media, establishing a clear and protected distinction between press law and cybercrime legislation, and ensuring that journalistic work is governed exclusively by media law frameworks that reflect normative rights and standards
- Repeal or fundamentally revise provisions in cybercrime laws that enable the criminalization of expression, or define offenses in vague terms such as “disturbing public order” or “infringing human dignity;” language that, as the Niger study demonstrates, can be applied arbitrarily or used to punish even truthful reporting
- Restore or guarantee judicial discretion in cases involving expression-related offences, reversing provisions such as Niger’s Ordinance 2024-28 that eliminate mitigating circumstances and suspended sentences
- End arbitrary arrests and prolonged pretrial detention of journalists and civil society actors, and immediately clarify the whereabouts and legal status of all persons detained in connection with the exercise of expression rights
- Strengthen access to public information obligations, including by implementing existing but dormant access to information laws, and creating practical mechanisms for journalists to access public records without harassment or retribution
- Reform regulatory bodies to guarantee genuine independence from executive control through transparent, multi-stakeholder selection mechanisms, security of tenure, and legally binding procedural requirements for any licensing action, including effective appeal mechanisms for affected media.
- Establish transparent, criteria-based state media support funds, insulated from political discretion; distribute institutional advertising through independent, audience-based criteria and not as a mechanism of editorial reward or punishment.
- End internet shutdowns and the blocking of social media platforms. Cease the use of electronic surveillance and communications interception against journalists, activists, and civil society organizations in the exercise of their professional or civic functions.
- Investigate and ensure accountability for attacks on journalists, including enforced disappearances. Specifically, conduct credible, independent, and transparent investigations into the cases of Habib Marouane Camara (Guinea), Foniké Menguè, and Mamadou Billo Bah (Guinea), and all documented cases of enforced disappearance across the four countries.

- Guarantee the effective implementation of the Organic Law on press freedom in Guinea and equivalent protective provisions elsewhere, ensuring that these laws prevail over cybercrime and general criminal provisions in cases involving journalistic work.

Regulatory Bodies

- Ensure transparent, reasoned, and independently appealable decisions on licenses, accreditations, and sanctions; ending the practice of indefinite suspensions without stated grounds or timelines
- Refrain from deploying licensing and suspension powers as tools of editorial control, and publicly commit to regulatory decisions grounded exclusively in professional and technical standards
- Develop and publish clear regulatory standards on permissible restrictions on expression, ensuring that journalists can predict with reasonable certainty what is and is not permitted
- Establish formal mechanisms for journalists and media organizations to report threats and violations and receive prompt regulatory response

Media organizations and professional bodies

- Diversify funding sources to reduce dependence on state advertising and politically connected patrons, including through reader-supported models, international solidarity networks, and philanthropic partnerships as forms of revenue diversification that protect editorial independence.
- Implement physical and digital security protocols; provide systematic training for all journalists in risk assessment, digital security, source protection, and secure communications; treating security training as a professional standard, not an optional benefit.
- Develop and enforce internal editorial policies that protect journalists from owner-imposed censorship; strengthen professional standards, editorial accountability, and commitment to journalism ethics as both a public service commitment and a defence against delegitimization.
- Strengthen journalists' unions as collective bargaining and protection mechanisms, including editorial solidarity mechanisms through cross-outlet support, joint documentation of threats, and shared legal resources to resist the isolation of individual media outlets and journalists.
- Build coalitions with civil society organizations, legal aid providers, and international partners to create more robust, coordinated protection ecosystems.

Civil Society Organizations

- Systematically document and publicly report violations of press freedom, including arrests, legal harassment, digital threats, license withdrawals, economic coercion, and enforced disappearances, using standardized methodologies that enable comparative analysis and trend identification.
- Build coalitions between media organizations, civil society bodies, professional associations, and human rights defenders, creating unified advocacy fronts that are harder for authorities to fragment or co-opt.
- Develop accessible legal assistance mechanisms for journalists facing prosecution, including emergency legal response capacities, pre-agreed relationships with human rights lawyers, and mechanisms to secure bail and prevent prolonged pretrial detention.
- Address gender dimensions of media repression specifically; by collecting and publishing gender-disaggregated data on violations, developing targeted protection mechanisms for women journalists facing gender-based harassment; and advocate for structural changes in newsroom culture, governance, and professional norms.
- Conduct regular media literacy and civic education campaigns on the principles and importance of media freedom and freedom of expression as conditions for democratic governance.
- Support journalists and civil society actors who have been forced into exile while maintaining their connection to domestic audiences and their capacity to report on their home countries.

International and Regional Partners

- Embed media freedom and journalist protection as substantive conditions in diplomatic and development engagements with the four governments, including in the context of transition timetables, sanctions review processes, and post-transition normalization.
- Provide sustained, multi-year financial and technical support to independent media and civil society organizations, including for digital security training, legal assistance, investigative journalism capacity, and newsroom management. Emergency support should be supplemented by structural investment.
- Engage ECOWAS, the African Union, and sub-regional bodies to develop explicit, enforceable commitments on media freedom as a component of democratic governance norms.
- Engage ECOWAS mechanisms, including the ECOWAS Court of Justice, to systematically and consistently document and pursue accountability for violations

of freedom of expression in all four countries; building on the precedent of the December 2023 judgment against Guinea

- Support and fund exile media and journalists from the diaspora who continue to report on their home countries; provide legal protection for journalists working abroad under threat of targeting by their home authorities.
- Support the development and maintenance of early-warning and rapid-response mechanisms for journalists at risk, including the provision of emergency evacuation support, legal assistance, and temporary relocation where necessary.

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