Press Freedom Index 2015:
Regimes seeking ever more information control

You might have thought that the world's most despotic and closed states would be satisfied with keeping news and information under control. Instead, they have continued to reinforce and improve their methods of censorship and repression. Despite apparently stagnating at the bottom of the press freedom index, 15 of the 20 worst-ranked countries have actually seen their scores fall in the past year. How do they manage to keep getting worse?

Reinforcing news monopolies

In **North Korea** (179th), **Eritrea** (180th), **Turkmenistan** (178th) and **Uzbekistan** (166th), the government's absolute control of news and information is challenged by just a handful of reporters, who risk everything to pass snippets of information to media based abroad. Although relatively rare, such "information black holes" seem to be a model that many other governments would like to copy.

In **Djibouti** (170th), the employees of the only independent news outlet, *La Voix de Djibouti*, are systematically hounded. In **Equatorial Guinea** (167th), the few privately-owned newspapers are nowadays published only sporadically. In **Sudan** (174th), 2014 was marked by arbitrary arrests of journalists and the seizures of around 50 newspaper issues, even issues of pro-government newspapers.

Not content with such draconian measures, the Sudanese government has introduced prior censorship, creating a special commission under the information ministry's supervision with the job of examining all proposed articles about corruption to decide whether or not they can be published.

Prior censorship is also back in **Kazakhstan** (160th), where it takes effect for all the media in cases of riots, strikes or major demonstrations. After banning all the main opposition media two years ago, the Kazakh authorities seemed bent on preventing any reemergence in 2014, closing three new newspapers critical of the government one by one within months of their launch.

Azerbaijan (162nd) has also managed to eliminate almost all traces of pluralism, forcing the few remaining independent newspapers to close one by one by throttling their sources of income, prosecuting them on trumped-up charges and hounding their employees. In **China** (176th), the Communist Party has published a new list of prohibitions that include a ban on journalists making "unauthorized criticisms."

Reining in the Internet

With complete control of the traditional media assured, reining in the Internet is the next big task. Initially unprepared for dealing with the Internet, an excellent tool for circumventing censorship, the most despotic regimes are now quickly making up for lost time and, with the help of surveillance technology sold by leading western companies, are realizing all of the Internet's potential for state control.

Thanks to its "Great Firewall," **China** continues to be one of the pioneers of online censorship. Hong Kong's "Occupy Central" pro-democracy movement and commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre were the targets of skilfully-orchestrated information blackouts. All terms relating to the anniversary were censored on search engines at the start of June and microblogging sites were regularly "cleaned." All Google services including Gmail were subjected to massive blocking to a level of around 90 percent.

Despite technical difficulties and a certain reluctance due to the economic benefits expected from the digital sector, **Iran** (173rd) has not abandoned the idea of creating a "national Internet." And the Islamic Republic's cyber-police showed it had access to messages exchanged on certain mobile apps when it arrested 12 people in connection with their messaging on WhatsApp, Viber and Tango.

Although the ALBA-1 fibre-optic cable linking **Cuba** (169th) to Venezuela (137th) is now operational, Internet access in Cuba is still very limited and the cost is prohibitive. The Internet continues to be closely controlled and independent news sites based abroad are still inaccessible except in a few hotels for foreign tourists.

Blocking websites without a court order is becoming routine in many countries, and most cyber-police forces now know how to block sites that change their IP addresses and sites that offer censorship circumvention tools such as Virtual Private Network software. After cracking down in an arbitrary manner, most authoritarian regimes are now legislating with a vengeance in order to impose ever-tighter legal constraints on online activity.

In **Kazakhstan**, the government has given itself the power to disconnect any network or means of communication whenever it feels the need. Following Russia's example, the Uzbek authorities have imposed draconian criminal constraints on bloggers, while the Belarusian authorities have given the information ministry control over social networks and microblogging platforms. "Cyber-crime" charges are often used in **Saudi Arabia** (164th) and **Bahrain** (163rd) to pass long jail sentences on netizens who criticize the authorities.

A readiness to legislate does not stop the most repressive regimes from acting outside the law to wage a cyber-war. *Uznews*, a leadingnews site in **Uzbekistan** (166th), had to cease operating after hackers broke into the editor's email account and posted documents online that put its network of correspondents in danger. Independent news sites such as *64 Tianwang* in **China** and *Nuba Reports* in **Sudan** are often the victims of cyber-attacks. The **North Korean** regime is said to have doubled the size of its army of hackers in the space of two years.

Jailing all outspoken dissidents

Highly repressive regimes feel obliged to imprison the few leading dissidents still at large. In **China**, for example, the famous journalist Gao Yu, the website editor Huang Qi, the cyber-dissident Xu Zhiyong and the leading Uyghur blogger Ilham Tohti joined the hundred or so other news and information providers already in detention.

The imprisonment of Khadija Ismayilova, one of the pioneers of investigative journalism in **Azerbaijan** (162nd), showed that Ilham Aliyev's autocratic regime has reached the point of no-return. Arbitrary arrests, which drove dozens of journalists into exile in 2014, turned the country into Europe's biggest prison for news providers. Arrests of citizen-journalists and bloggers continued in **Vietnam** (175th), **Bahrain** and **Saudi Arabia**.

In **Iran**, **China** and **Eritrea**, the world's biggest prisons for journalists and bloggers, why they are arrested and where they are being held often remain unknown. Many detainees are ill and are denied treatment in Iran's jails. Held in an unknown location on unclear charges and subjected to long spells in solitary, Jason Rezaian has lost around 30 kg since his arrest in July.

Dawit Isaac and most of the other journalists detained in **Eritrea** have never been tried. Instead of cells, they are sometimes locked up in shipping containers in the middle of the desert in which the overcrowding and lack of hygiene are appalling. Islamic State's atrocities should not make us forget that at least 30 journalists and netizens languish in **Syrian** (177th) government jails where torture is systematic. They include Mazen Darwish, the winner of the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize in 2012, now in his fourth year in detention.

Criminal violence by police

Police violence is very worrying in **Vietnam**. Independent journalist Truong Minh Duc was still in an intensive care unit three weeks after being attacked by eight policemen on 2 November.

Extreme violence is one of the methods used against critical journalists and bloggers in **Azerbaijan**. Ilgar Nasibov, one of the few independent journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, was the target of a brutal attack while working in his office on 21 August. In both Vietnam and Azerbaijan, the police increasingly use criminal thugs to do their dirty work and sometimes coordinate operations with them.

In **Iran**, dozens of detainees, including journalists and bloggers, were badly beaten and placed in solitary confinement when they objected to a major search operation that was being conducted in an irregular manner in Section 350 of Tehran's Evin prison.

Stopping at nothing, archaic or sophisticated

Repression is happy to take medieval forms in **Saudi Arabia** and **Iran**. Raif Badawi, one of the founders of an online discussion group called the Liberal Saudi Network and winner of the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize in 2014, was [sentenced](#) to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for suggesting that the Saudi authorities should respect fundamental freedoms.

Flogging is just as common in the Islamic Republic, where more than 50 journalists and netizens have been subjected to this form of punishment in the past five years. The latest victims include photojournalists Khalil Emami and Abass Alipour, who were [sentenced](#) to 25 and 50 lashes respectively in August at the request of a local official they had criticized. In **China**, TV stations are broadcasting forced "confessions" again. Following Chen Yongzhou in November 2013, independent journalists [Gao Yu](#) and [Xiang Nanfu](#) were forced to make televised "self-criticisms" in May 2014.

In **Sri Lanka** (165th), [hundreds of soldiers surrounded the newspaper *Uthayan*](#) on 18 May when it published a supplement to mark the army's massacre of Tamil civilians in 2009. The newspaper *Thinakkural* was also surrounded. Sri Lanka's government also attacks the foundations of journalism by systematically [obstructing](#) the activities of NGOs that support the media. The Azerbaijani authorities went one step further this past summer, completely disbanding the main media-support NGOs.