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Media Suppression in Africa and the Balkans - How Economic Distribution Impacts Freedom of the Press on an International Level

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Media Suppression in Africa and the Balkans - How Economic Distribution Impacts Freedom of the Press on an International Level

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Abstract

Freedom of intellectual expression and media are human rights that the United Nations argues should be available to all people on Earth. However, we continue to see suppression of the media by various states across the globe. There is plenty of research that examines abuse of human rights, but there is a significant gap in the literature regarding what role economic distribution within a state plays. One of the most common measures of economic dispersion within states is the Gini Coefficient. This places states on a scale from 0, perfect income equality, to 1, perfect income inequality where all of the wealth is in one person’s hands. In this research, data from Reporters Without Borders and the World Bank will be used to help analyze correlations between eight countries, four from both Africa and the Balkans: Angola, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, and Zimbabwe. By doing research into how Gini Coefficients are correlated with freedom of the press, we can more fully understand how economic conditions impact citizen’s freedom of expression in the press on a macro level. The research hypothesis was that there will be a positive correlation between Gini Coefficient and freedom of the press on an international level. This research produced a statistically significant Pearson’s Correlation of 0.808, showing that the independent variable of Gini Coefficient is positively correlated with the dependent variable of Press Freedom Index. This could be used as the foundation for further research with a larger sample size to apply this regional analysis to the global scale.

Literature Review and Data

Human rights has been pushed to the forefront of global politics within recent history, and is regularly addressed and discussed by hegemonic states and global actors. Article 19 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to freedom of
opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 1948). This document outlines the things necessary to ensure the inherent dignity of humans is protected across the globe, and is widely referenced and respected in the field of human rights. However, abuses of these human rights are still prevalent nearly 80 years after its publishing, which necessitates further action and research on how to ensure each human being has access to those rights. There are various organizations and foundations around the world which work to study and protect freedom of expression and freedom of the press, however for the purposes of this research the NGO Reporters Without Borders will be referenced most prominently.

Reporters Without Borders is an international NGO that has annually published the World Press Freedom Index since 2002. According to Reporters Without Borders, “the Index ranks 180 countries and regions according to the level of freedom available to journalists. It is a snapshot of the media freedom situation based on an evaluation of pluralism, independence of the media, quality of legislative framework and safety of journalists in each country and region.” (Presentation). Each country is assigned a score based on their current status of freedom of the press, and that score is later used to rank that country. The eight countries being analyzed in this research, which are Angola, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, and Zimbabwe, have all had zero imprisonments or deaths for journalists, civilians journalists, or media assistants in the year 2022 according to Reporters Without Borders. Furthermore, Reporters Without Borders’ Violations of Press Freedom Barometer shows that there have been no deaths for journalists, civilian journalists, or media assistants within the last
five year period (Presentation). This NGO has also compiled brief summaries of the history of freedom of the press in each country.

Angola is described as having “press freedom still fragile despite the old dictator’s departure” by Reporters Without Borders. Though there is a new executive in Angola, there are still existing laws that threaten journalists with criminal defamation suits and require media stations to broadcast presidential addresses (Angola). Though there have been victories recently for journalists in Angola, such as the acquittal of two journalists in 2018 due to journalistic freedom of expression, there are still areas of concern for the country’s media population (Angola). Pluralism is difficult due to the high costs of media production in the country, and there is still a large amount of governmental supervision or control for many media outlets. Angola’s Press Freedom Index score for 2021 is 34.06, ranking at 103rd internationally; this ranking is three placements higher than the previous year, when Angola ranked 106th.

Bulgaria is noted for having their press freedom “trapped”, according to Reporters Without Borders. Though there are no recorded deaths for journalists or media assistants within Bulgaria’s recent history, there are significant dangers associated with being involved in the Press in Bulgaria. “The few outspoken journalists are constantly subjected not only to smear campaigns and harassment by the state, but also to intimidation and violence” (Bulgaria). The past few years have seen Bulgarian journalists beaten and assaulted for their work, oligarch Delyan Peevski controlling and manipulating media outlets, and fear tactics being levied against journalists by police forces (Bulgarian). The situation for media in Bulgaria is dismal, with a Press Freedom Index score of 37.29 and a ranking of 112th, which is the highest ranking for a Balkan country in this research study.
According to Reporters Without Borders, Czech Republic’s freedom of the press is currently under some strain. “Unrestrained verbal attacks by President Miloš Zeman and other senior officials have helped foster a climate of widespread mistrust of journalists and acts of violence against them” (Czech Republic). Press conferences are becoming increasingly limited within the Czech Republic government, with questions being unable to be raised or answered during the pandemic due to government restrictions and regulations of journalistic freedom or expression. There are also concerns of smear campaigns towards journalists that have created a tense atmosphere for the media in the country (Czech Republic). The Press Freedom Index score for Czech Republic is 23.38 with a ranking of 40th.

Romania is noted by Reporters Without Borders for having difficulty with transparency with their media policies. “The government’s vision of journalism and freedom of expression encourages censorship and self-censorship. The mechanisms for funding the media are, in many cases, opaque or even corrupt, and editorial policies are subordinated to the interests of owners, who often use them as propaganda tools” (Romania). The pandemic facilitated blurred communication between the Romanian government and the media, which led to a lack of clarity with how the pandemic was going to be handled. That being said, there has been push within the government to help fight back against “fake news” and misinformation, which is currently being implemented and studied within the country. Romania has a Press Freedom Index of 24.91, and is currently ranked at 48th in the world.

Reporters Without Borders describes Seychelles’ media situation as both free and varied. Pluralism and government funding of media is difficult due to the country’s small size, however there have been recent positive developments in the industry. Generational trauma due to years of oppression by regimes is slowly lessening its hold on the media in Seychelles. “The
self-censorship reflexes inherited from decades of communist single-party rule and close control of the media are gradually dissipating and giving way to a broader range of opinion and more editorial freedom” (Seychelles). It is rare for penalties to be levied against journalists or media outlets in Seychelles, and Seychelles’ Press Freedom Index score for 2021 is 25.66 with a ranking of 52nd.

Sierra Leone has seen immense progress for their freedom of the press within recent years, according to Reporters Without Borders. “The 1965 public order law criminalizing defamation and press offenses, under which journalists were often arrested arbitrarily, was repealed in August 2020, while the Independent Media Commission law was revised” (Sierra Leone). Many media outlets are able to broadcast without censorship or restriction. However, a journalist in Sierra Leone was detained for 24 hours on libel claims in November of 2019, and the story that the journalist was working on was never published (Sierra Leone). Currently the country of Sierra Leone has a Press Freedom Index score for 2021 of 29.61 and a ranking of 75th.

Though Reporters WithoutBorders notes that Slovenia has a “dangerous path for press freedom” (Slovenia), it has the lowest Press Freedom Index ranking of the Balkan region and the lowest ranking of this research’s sample. This dismal statement regarding press freedom in Slovenia is due to the rise in smear campaigns levied against journalists by government officials, as well as diminished funding for the national press agency (Slovenia). Though there have been no deaths or attacks of journalists in Slovenia to decrease their Press Freedom Index ranking, there are dangers of government overreach when it comes to press freedom in the area. Slovenia has a Press Freedom Index score of 23.10, which ranks them 36th internationally in 2021.
Zimbabwe is still haunted by the history of media oppression under former president Robert Mugabe, according to Reporters Without Borders. Their summary of the situation within Zimbabwe shows how the situation for journalists and reporters in the country are still dealing with the ramifications of a restrictive leader:

Installed as president in November 2017 and then elected to the position in July 2018, Emmerson Mnangagwa, Robert Mugabe’s former vice-president, pledged to reinforce the pillars of democracy including the media, which were harassed and gagged for 37 years under his dictatorial predecessor. However, Mnangagwa was notorious for suppressing dissent when he was national security minister and his first steps with regard to press freedom have been marked more by promises than anything like the concrete progress for which that journalists had hoped. Access to information has improved and self-censorship has declined, but journalists are still often attacked or arrested. (Zimbabwe)

There are increasing improvements for journalists in the country, but there are still many concerns for reporters in Zimbabwe. The current army chief has referred to social media as a threat to national security. Currently Zimbabwe has a Press Freedom Index score of 31.61 and a ranking of 130th in the world for 2021, which is both the highest ranking for an African country in this research but also the overall highest ranking for any country in this research.

The eight states were chosen because of their region, Africa and the Balkans respectively, as well as their status as the highest and lowest Gini Coefficient states within those regions. Furthermore, all four African countries are former colonies, while the Balkan states are not, which can allow for controls to be put in place to ensure the effects of colonization do not impact this data. For the purposes of this research, “former colony” will refer to any country where a foreign Western European power asserted control over the indigenous people of that area during
the years 1500 to 1900, in an attempt to direct attention to the Colonial Era. Though Africa is a
continent and the Balkans is only a region, many African countries experienced similar
consequences of colonization during the Colonial Era, where the Balkans did not. This
distinction is necessary for this research, as long lasting effects of colonization may impact
current levels of freedom of the press regardless of that state’s Gini Coefficient. Furthermore,
this research limited itself to Sub-Saharan Africa to further isolate a specific region. Picking two
vastly different regions for this research will allow the results to show whether there are macro
level trends between Gini Coefficients and freedom of the press.

The World Bank is an IGO which focuses on a shared goal of reducing poverty and other
such development projects. “With 189 member countries, staff from more than 170 countries,
and offices in over 130 locations, the World Bank Group is a unique global partnership: five
institutions working for sustainable solutions that reduce poverty and build shared prosperity in
developing countries” (Organization). It supplies grants, loans, and other such investments to
developing countries. They also help supply the public with data on various factors for
countries’, which ranges from gross domestic product to CO2 emissions to school enrollment.
The data that World Bank supplies that is most relevant for this research is Gini Coefficient,
which is a reference for economic inequality within a state. This coefficient places states on a
scale from 0, perfect income equality, to 1, perfect income inequality where all of the wealth is in
one person’s hands. The Gini Coefficient is regularly used to assess economic distribution within
countries, and the Gini Coefficient World Bank estimate is considered a fairly accurate measure
(Gini Index).

Research has been done that has discussed economic inequality in relation to human
rights within the Balkan and Sub-Saharan African regions that has hinted at a connection with
freedom of the press. The Journal of Balkan & Near Eastern Studies found that unlimited economic freedom resulted in poverty and threats to human rights within the Balkan states (Dokmanović et al., 2020). Current research conducted for the journal Postmodern Openings found that not only were Gini Coefficients rising within some African states, but that concerns about compromised media control were also becoming more prevalent (Muko et al., 2013). With existing literature already observing rises in press freedom abusers in states with high or rising Gini Coefficients, it is increasingly important to continue research into the subject. While literature shows connections between economic distribution and human rights violations in these areas, there is a gap in the literature regarding the human right to freedom of expression and press. This research was designed to attempt to fill that gap.

**Methodology**

This research utilizes a data analysis focus by using Gini Coefficient as the independent variable and freedom of the press as the dependent variable and assessing the correlations between the two. The main variables for this research are Gini Coefficient, obtained from the World Bank, and Press Freedom Index, obtained from Reporters Without Borders. States were grouped as high Gini Coefficient or low Gini Coefficient, as well as taking into account their regional status. Only countries with Gini Coefficients recorded within the last five years were considered for sampling to ensure that outdated information did not skew the data.

Angola and Zimbabwe were chosen as the high Gini Coefficient countries for the Sub-Saharan Africa region, with the low Gini Coefficient countries Seychelles and Sierra Leone chosen for the same region. Bulgaria and Romania were chosen as the high Gini Coefficient countries for the Balkans, with the low Gini Coefficient countries Czech Republic and Slovenia being chosen for the same reason. Each country’s Gini Coefficient was recorded from the World
Bank, as well as their Press Freedom Index score from Reporters Without Borders. This data was plotted on a line graph to see if there was a visual trend in the data (Appendix B). At that point, the statistical formula for Pearson’s Correlation was used in order to determine if any existing correlations were statistically significant (Appendix A). By doing a data analysis methodology, this research will supplement existing literature regarding modern human rights violations.

Results and Limitations

This research experienced limitations regarding the availability of data for the various countries in both Sub-Saharan Africa and the Balkans. Some countries with high Gini Coefficients, like Sao Tome and Principe, did not have available data in Reporters Without Borders. Additionally, multiple countries in both regions were either missing their Gini Coefficient data on the World Bank’s database, or the data was over five years old and therefore not considered for this research. Therefore, there is the possibility that lack of available data for all countries may have impacted the results of this research.

The first step in obtaining the results was isolating the independent variable, Gini Coefficient, and the dependent variable, Press Freedom Index, for each country. The eight independent variables for this study were 51.3 (Angola), 41.3 (Bulgaria), 25.0 (Czech Republic), 35.8 (Romania), 32.1 (Seychelles), 35.7 (Sierra Leone), 24.6 (Slovenia), and 50.3 (Zimbabwe), while the eight dependent variables for this study were 34.06 (Angola), 37.29 (Bulgaria), 24.91 (Romania), 25.66 (Seychelles), 29.61 (Sierra Leone), 23.10 (Slovenia), and 31.61 (Zimbabwe). The independent variable was abbreviated as X for this research, and the dependent variable was abbreviated as Y. The X mean for this sample was 37.01, and the Y mean for this sample was 28.70. Using the Pearson’s Correlation statistical formula, these data points produced a Pearson correlation of 0.808 (Appendix A). In order to be significant, the sample’s
correlation must have been greater than or equal to critical value. Using the formula for degrees of freedom \( df = n - 2 \), where \( n \) is the number of pairs, the degree of freedom for this sample was 6. At the 0.05 level of significance for two-tailed tests, that would make the critical value 0.707 (Appendix A). Because 0.808, the correlation, is greater than 0.707, the critical value, this research is able to reject the null hypothesis. This means that it is statistically significant, therefore it can be put outside the realm of possibility that these numbers were acquired by chance.

There is a statistically significant positive correlation between Gini Coefficient and Press Freedom Index for these countries. Plotting these eight countries on a line graph where the vertical axis represents the Press Freedom Index and the horizontal axis represents Gini Coefficient shows a positive slope (Appendix B). The \( r^2 \), which represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that can be predicted by the independent variable, was 0.6529 for this data. These data points are promising, and necessitate further research with a larger sample size. Though this research has succeeded in establishing a statistically significant correlation between economic inequality and freedom of the press, further research may help to clarify if this research can be applied to other regions of the world.

**Conclusion**

This research has succeeded in establishing that there is a statistically significant relationship between economic inequality, measured using Gini Coefficient, and freedom of the press, measured using Press Freedom Index. The Pearson’s Correlation for this research is 0.808 with a critical value at the 0.05 level of 0.707, which shows a statistically significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The \( r^2 \) of 0.6529 leads the researcher to believe that this strong relationship warrants further research using more regions of the world.
The data produced from this research will be used in further research with larger sample sizes to attempt to find a statistically significant correlation between economic inequality, measured by Gini Coefficient, and freedom of the press, measured by the Press Freedom Index for other regions of the world.
References


[https://rsf.org/en/ranking](https://rsf.org/en/ranking)


[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI)

Appendix A

Table of research results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Gini Coefficient</th>
<th>Press Freedom Index</th>
<th>Pearson's R</th>
<th>Critical Value at .05 Level of Significance</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
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<td>Angola</td>
<td>51.30</td>
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<td>0.8080</td>
<td>0.7070</td>
<td>0.6529</td>
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<td>Bulgaria</td>
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<td>37.29</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
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<td>23.38</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Zimbabwe</td>
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</table>
Appendix B

Graph of research results