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Review

A Scoping Review of Press Freedom in Transitional Democracies

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Abstract

Press freedom can be used as one of the indicators of a country's democratic quality, as journalists often bear the brunt of authoritarian backlash. Several studies have already examined the impact of political regime transitions on the media. However, most of those studies frequently focus on a specific country or region. A comprehensive synthesis of fragmented research findings was lacking. Therefore, we conducted a scoping review of the literature indexed in Scopus, resulting in a total sample of 44 papers with a primary focus on press freedom in transitional democracies. A close reading and comparison of the articles revealed that the three most frequently mentioned threats to press freedom are state control and censorship, economic and financial pressures, and political influence and parallelism. Findings also suggest that while Global South contexts are well represented, particularly Latin America, Africa, and Asia, there is a disproportionate focus on post-socialist and transitional societies in Eastern Europe. Additionally, the role of digital media in promoting press freedom in fragile states remains under-researched. This study also provides recommendations for journalists and policymakers, while identifying areas for future inquiry.

Keywords: press freedom; journalistic independence; transitional political regimes; emergent democracies; scoping literature review

1. Introduction

A democratic transition assigns responsibilities to different entities, mainly the country's government and its media. In transitional democracies, the media are often expected to perform specific roles, particularly as a watchdog and a platform for civic engagement (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2017). These roles are vital for promoting transparency, revealing abuses of power, and enabling citizens to take part in democratic processes. However, the state of the media itself—including its structures, freedoms, and professional practices—before and during the transition significantly influences whether these expectations can be fulfilled. The process of liberalisation, marked by the introduction of pluralistic and independent media, often begins in the pre-transition phase, where the press may adopt a proactive stance to advocate for reform. Nonetheless, this process is far from straightforward, with setbacks often stemming from fragile institutions, informal power networks, and deep-rooted authoritarian legacies (Voltmer, 2013). Neither press freedom nor democratisation necessarily develops in a linear fashion from not free or not democratic to free and democratic. The process is much more complex and nuanced.

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Therefore, Cohen and Hopkinson (2023) sustain that instead of viewing media freedom as a simple, step-by-step path toward democracy, we need a more flexible framework that captures how press freedom operates in different real-world settings. Similarly, Marques and Vos (2023) point out that transformations do not always happen at the same pace in specific social systems. By drawing on the concept of 'critical junctures,' the authors demonstrate how seemingly minor or isolated changes in media systems can yield far-reaching, unexpected consequences.

Still, historical and contemporary examples highlight the media's vital yet fragile role in that process of democratic transition. In many regions undergoing political change, the rise of independent media has often been crucial in advocating reforms and promoting greater transparency. However, recent setbacks in media freedoms demonstrate the fragility of these advancements. Similarly, in regions like the Middle East and North Africa, the Arab Spring showed the power of media to mobilise public opinion and challenge autocratic regimes. Nevertheless, the aftermath revealed ongoing issues, including state repression and media co-optation.

Press or media freedom is often used as an indicator of a country's democratic quality, with various organisations, such as Reporters Without Borders (2025) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (2025), gathering and analysing data on press freedom worldwide. The criteria of the indices provided by these organisations vary, but are often related to threats to press freedom. "Press freedom, also referred to as the freedom of the press, refers to the ability of producers of both electronic and printed material to publish said material without interference from external agencies or outside centres of power" (Anderson, 2016, p. 1).

The significance of press or media freedom becomes especially evident during a democracy's consolidation phase, when democratic progress may encounter subtle yet vital challenges. While the early stages of transition often draw widespread attention and scrutiny, the consolidation period demands ongoing effort to reinforce democratic norms and practices (Bernhard et al., 2003). This is a time when legal protections for press and media freedom and institutional safeguards are put to the test, as transitional governments may introduce laws, regulations, or practices that restrict journalistic work. Without strong protections, the media's role as a watchdog can be compromised, leaving democracies susceptible to regression.

Supporters of press and media freedom emphasise its fundamental role in establishing stable democratic institutions. Based on normative theories of a free press, scholars contend that press freedom is not just a convenience but essential for democratic resilience (Piontek, 2016). Many also endorse the liberalisation theory of media, which suggests that political and media liberalisation are interconnected processes that drive and reinforce each other (Jebril et al., 2013). However, this interdependence also highlights the fragility of the press in transitional contexts, where political instability and weak institutional frameworks worsen challenges such as self-censorship, media capture, and clientelism.

Voltmer's (2013) work offers valuable insights into these dynamics, especially through her analysis of non-Western democracies. By exploring the interaction of media and politics in countries with different cultural, political, and historical backgrounds, the author emphasises the importance of upholding democratic norms—particularly independence and diversity—for the media to operate effectively. Her research highlights the challenges faced by journalists and media outlets, including professionalisation, financial limitations, and political pressures, all of which influence their capacity to support democratic transitions.

Theoretical frameworks such as Hallin and Mancini's (2004) models of media systems—polarised pluralist, democratic corporatist, and liberal—offer a lens to understand the relationship between media and politics in different contexts. These models classify media

systems based on characteristics such as journalistic practices, political parallelism, and the level of state intervention. They have been valuable in analysing media systems in established democracies; however, their relevance to younger or transitioning democracies has faced criticism (Marques & Vos, 2023). For instance, Herrero et al. (2017) propose that incorporating press freedom and foreign ownership alongside political parallelism and public service enhances understanding of differences among Eastern European countries. More recently, Labio-Bernal et al. (2024) discussed the need to revisit and update Hallin and Mancini's models to reflect contemporary changes in media environments, highlighting the importance of considering new variables and contexts. In certain contexts, media systems often demonstrate notable deviations from patterns observed in stable democracies, mirroring the unique political, social, and economic challenges encountered during transitions.

Furthermore, transitioning democracies may encounter high levels of media politicisation, weak regulatory frameworks, and a lack of professionalism within the journalistic sector, all of which disrupt the anticipated alignment with Hallin and Mancini's models. The homogenisation thesis offers an additional viewpoint by suggesting that during political transitions, media systems might start to converge towards a uniform model. This convergence is often characterised by a shift in journalistic allegiance from elite interests to a focus on the general population (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2017).

However, such convergence is not guaranteed and raises important questions about the factors that enable or hinder it. For instance, does the presence of press freedom or external support from international organisations help promote this alignment? Conversely, do deeply rooted power structures, such as state capture or oligarchic control, prevent the potential for media systems to act as independent watchdogs? Furthermore, while convergence might seem advantageous, its consequences for democratic consolidation are complex. A media system aligned with popular sentiment might boost civic participation, but it could also risk becoming populist or excessively partisan in polarised political contexts.

Although the media plays a crucial role in promoting accountability and supporting democratic development, transitional democracies often place significant restrictions on press freedom. These issues frequently appear as legal limitations, such as strict regulations or laws targeting journalists, and government intimidation tactics, including restrictions on access to information, defamation lawsuits, harassment, surveillance, and arbitrary detention (Stremlau & Gagliardone, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Moreover, the financial fragility of media organisations, worsened by limited resources and dependence on elite funding, further weakens their independence and ability to serve as effective watchdogs (Stremlau & Gagliardone, 2018).

Transitional democracies have often been described as the political systems that occupy the interval between one political system and another, with fluid, uncertain or hybrid institutions (O'Donnell et al., 2013). Nevertheless, as already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that process is often a complex one.

Therefore, tackling these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that recognises the mutual relationship between democracy and the press. A strong and independent journalism sector is vital for scrutinising authority and informing the public, which, in turn, bolsters democratic institutions. At the same time, democratic reforms such as protecting press freedoms, providing legal safeguards for journalists, and promoting diverse media ownership help create an environment where the press can flourish. This interaction emphasises the importance of viewing press freedom not as an isolated issue but as a key part of democratic strengthening.

The existing literature offers valuable insights into these dynamics but also uncovers significant gaps, especially in providing a comprehensive view of the unique challenges faced by the press in transitional democracies. On the one hand, much of the research

focuses on well-established democracies, with a limited focus on emerging or fragile democratic contexts. On the other hand, although some studies specifically investigate political regimes in transition, they often concentrate on a particular country or region. Therefore, the following research questions are proposed to facilitate a more structured understanding of threats to press freedom in transitional democracies.

RQ1: How is the geographical distribution of studies on threats to press freedom in transitional democracies depicted in the current literature?

RQ2: What is the tone and the main topics that predominate in the current literature about press freedom in transitional democracies?

RQ3: How does the literature depict the main threats to press freedom in emerging or transitional democracies?

RQ4: What overarching recommendations for journalists and policymakers from countries in political transition can we extract from the literature?

2. Materials and Methods

To examine how researchers have studied press and media freedom in transitional democracies worldwide, we conducted a scoping literature review. We focused on identifying the main threats to press and media freedom that have emerged over the past decade. To achieve this, we began by searching for potentially relevant articles in the SCOPUS database. This database was selected based on its perceived prestige, multidisciplinary coverage and relevance to the fields represented in the review.

The search was conducted within the title, abstract, and keywords using the following query: [("press freedom" OR "media freedom") AND ("emergent democrac*" OR "transition* democrac*" OR "transition* regime")]. The search was limited to journal articles published between the years >2012 and <2023. However, because the search was completed on 20 November 2023, articles published after that date and before the end of the year were not included. We also excluded books, conference articles, book chapters, and dissertations. Only articles written in English were considered. This database search yielded 62 potentially eligible articles. There were no duplicate entries.

Next, as shown in Figure 1, we screened all titles and abstracts for their relevance. To do so, we applied three exclusion criteria, which led to the removal of 15 articles deemed not sufficiently relevant. The exclusion criteria were: (1) the article is not focused on press freedom or journalism; (2) the article is focused on a Western democracy (given the assumption that, at that time, most Western democracies were generally perceived as consolidated democracies); (3) the article is not written in English. The second criterion was more challenging to apply in one case, which concerned an article on non-democratic media in the USA. We decided to include that one, given that, although it was grounded in a Western democracy, it could provide valuable information for our research questions. Following this screening process, we were left with a sample of 47 articles for full content review. That close reading began with a second screening approach under the same three criteria, which excluded three more articles. We then had a final sample of 44 articles for further analysis.

The final review involved a close coding process performed by one of the researchers, who extracted data on dimensions such as methods used, sample size and origin, types of threats to press freedom, overall tone, analysed countries, and recommendations. The other researcher checked the close reading of 4 random articles just to ensure consistency in the coding process. However, no formal inter-coder reliability measure was calculated. Next, a generative large language model (ChatGPT 5) supported the frequency count of themes. To do that, we uploaded our primary dataset table to the LLM and not the full articles. That allowed us to preserve the authenticity of human interpretation and extraction, as well as

the protection of the article's copyright. We had to exchange several prompts asking the LLM, first, to conduct a frequency count for each theme and, then, to adjust the wording of the different extracted categories. The LLM outputs were then verified by one of the researchers by cross-comparison with the primary dataset table. At that point, some of the counts had to be manually corrected to improve their precision. To finalise the deductive thematic analysis, we also conducted an open and qualitative analysis of the texts through constant comparison to better understand the context of the studies and their main findings.

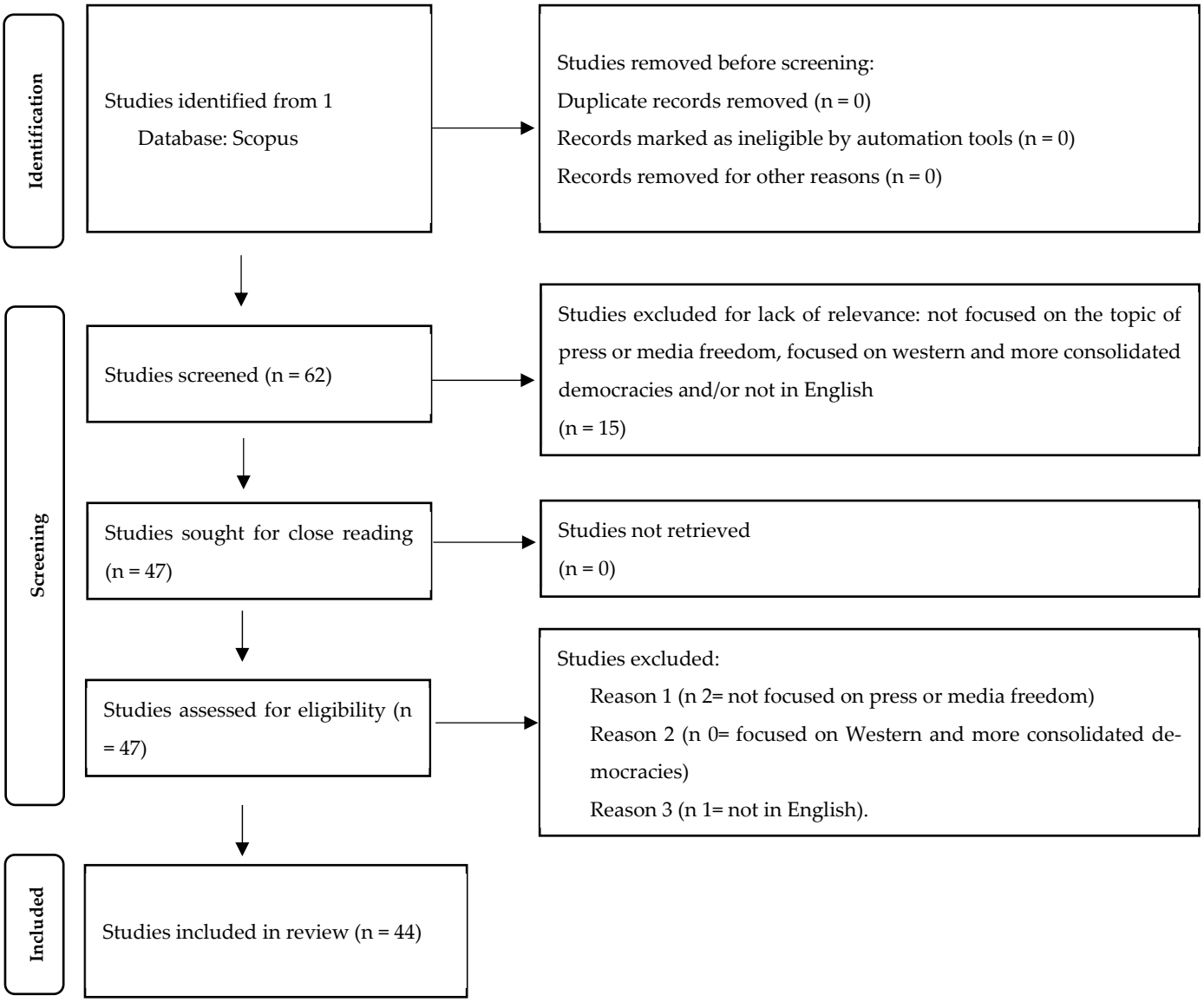


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Although the mentioned review protocol was followed in accordance with PRISMA's main principles, it was not previously registered.

Sample Description

Although the article retrieval was completed before the end of 2023, this was the year with the highest number of published articles fitting the search criteria. Most were published in Journalism (8), followed by the International Journal of Press Politics (7). Other journals with more than one article included Global Media and Communication (3), International

Journal of Communication (3), Journalism Practice (2), Media and Communication (2), Media, War and Conflict (2), and Problems of Post Communism (2).

According to the automatically generated report by Scopus, produced prior to the second screening, the vast majority of the articles originated from the social sciences field (47). There was only one article from business, management, and accounting, and none from law, although 15 were also identified by Scopus as originating from arts and humanities (n = 47). Most of the 47 articles were published by American (9) or British journals (7), and were declared to have received funding from some European body, notably from the British Academy (3), the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung or BMBF (2), and the European Commission (2).

One of the authors' names—Giannone—appeared in three articles; five researchers authored at least two articles, while all the other authors published only one of the analysed articles. The total number of citations for all articles combined (excluding self-citations) was 534, with an h-index of 13. It is worth noting that three out of the five most cited articles shown in Table 1 adopt a comparative approach that includes the study of more than one country.

Table 1. Top 5 most cited articles about threats to press freedom indexed in Scopus (n = 47).

Article's Title	Total Number of Citations Until 20 November 2023
Protecting democracy or conspiring against it? Media and politics in Latin America: A glimpse from Brazil (de Albuquerque, 2019)	50
Rethinking Hallin and Mancini beyond the West: An analysis of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe (Herrero et al., 2017)	50
Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era (Yeşil, 2018)	48
Silencing Critics: Why and How Presidents Restrict Media Freedom in Democracies (Kellam & Stein, 2016)	46
Detached or Interventionist? Comparing the Performance of Watchdog Journalism in Transitional, Advanced and Non-democratic Countries (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020)	44

The close reading after the second screening (listed in Appendix A Table A1) revealed that the vast majority of the articles presented empirical studies (43 out of 44). Only one was a literature review. Furthermore, most articles employed qualitative methods (37 out of 44). There were seven quantitative studies. The most commonly used technique to collect data was an interview (16 out of 44). Eight studies utilised content or document analysis (either qualitative or quantitative); five presented a case study or multi-case studies; three employed a historical approach; and only one conducted a survey.

3. Findings and Discussion

Examining the research questions, the scoping review of articles on threats to press freedom assessed the research's geographical focus, the articles' tone, and the main topics; identified the primary threats; extracted recommendations for journalists and policymakers; and highlighted gaps in the literature for further exploration by other researchers.

3.1. Geographical Focus

The analysis of country and regional focus mentioned in the selected articles reveals notable patterns in the geographical distribution of research on threats to press freedom

(Table 2). The most commonly studied region was Eastern Europe and the Balkans, with 15 articles examining media systems in countries such as Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, and others. These studies often focused on the post-socialist legacy and the ongoing challenges to media independence, political parallelism, and institutional fragility. For example, Herrero et al. (2017) conducted a comparative analysis of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe, highlighting the persistence of high political parallelism.

Table 2. Regional focus in the multiple coded instances of all studies (n = 44).

Region	Countries Included	Frequency
Eastern Europe, Russia & Balkans	Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, Ukraine	15
Central and South America	Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Cuba	6
East Asia	China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan	5
Middle East & North Africa (MENA)	Egypt, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Iraq	5
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria, Ghana, Namibia, South Africa, Burundi	5
Western Europe	Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, Spain, Greece	5
Southeast Asia	The Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam	5
South Asia	Pakistan, Afghanistan	3
No Specific Country (N/A)	Not applicable or unspecified in the article	3
Cross-regional/Global	Comparative studies covering multiple continents or global in scope	2
Northern America	USA	1
Oceania	Fiji	1

Latin America also emerged as a significant focus, with six articles analysing countries including Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Cuba. These contributions often addressed issues such as media capture, economic precarity, and political polarisation. Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020), for example, analysed Latin American contexts as part of a wider cross-national dataset.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, five articles explored national contexts such as Nigeria, Ghana, Burundi, Namibia, and South Africa. These studies mainly focused on the impacts of state intervention, violence against journalists, and economic difficulties. Abubakre's (2021) analysis of Nigeria highlighted the role of power structures in weakening formal legal protections for the press. Likewise, Salih (2023) studied Iraq and Afghanistan, emphasising the strategic ambivalence of media governance.

Eight studies also concentrated on Southeast and East Asia, including countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, South Korea, and China. These regions were often associated with state censorship, self-censorship, and the impact of digital regulation. Chan and Lee's (2014) work on Hong Kong highlighted partisan selective exposure. Meanwhile, Burrett's (2017) analysis of Myanmar looks into political parallelism and media tensions.

Finally, although Western Europe was excluded, a small number of studies still mentioned countries from Western Europe, often as part of cross-regional comparisons that included countries from the inclusion criteria. Three articles did not specify a particular country focus and were excluded from the regional mapping. Although 10 studies com-

pared more than one country, only two did so across continents. Overall, the results suggest that while Global South contexts are well represented, especially in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, there is a disproportionate focus on post-socialist and transitional societies in Eastern Europe, reflecting broader scholarly interests in democratisation, media capture, and institutional vulnerability.

These geographical findings suggest a possible gap in research focus on press freedom challenges within this geopolitical landscape. The reasons for this may be related to various factors, such as (1) limited access to information, which might be affected by political repression or others, (2) academic focus: studies may concentrate on broader topics like war or terrorism, (3) resource limitations: the limited political and economic prominence of some countries may be overshadowed by others with greater focus, reducing research opportunities, (4) scholarly independence: countries where democracy is now stabilised may offer more academic freedom to explore such topics, or (5) language constraints: since we only examined studies in English, scholars in certain regions might use other languages.

3.2. Tone and Main Topics of Study

A notable framing bias emerged, with 38 studies adopting a negative perspective, four a positive one, and two a balanced approach. By a negative frame, we considered studies more focused on threats, and by a positive one, studies more focused on solutions or innovations. This bias underscores the typical external constraints, such as legislative and governmental hurdles, in discussions about press freedom. The finding indicates a gap in the literature regarding studies that explore overcoming threats, emphasising positive outcomes, strategies for achieving them, and lessons learned.

The main areas of study on press freedom in emergent and transitional democracies identified through the analysis were (1) roles and functions of the media in transitional democracies; (2) contextual and structural influences; and (3) internal journalism challenges.

(1) Beyond identifying threats to press freedom, the studies extensively examine the media's role in fragile or emerging democracies. In such contexts, the media serve as a vital mechanism of accountability, particularly during periods of weak institutional stability. The fulfilment of the watchdog role is considered essential for advancing democratic transitions. However, the state of the media before and during these transitions is crucial for the realisation of democratic consolidation.

The way the effects of these threats are depicted in the analysed studies emphasises the press as more often a victim of, rather than a contributor to, flawed media institutions. Even in cases of media corruption, as noted in Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia (Georgieva et al., 2015) and Russia (Jackson, 2016), the financial dependency of media workers and institutions on elite figures frequently drives them towards ethical compromises. This dynamic was evident in discussions of clientelism and coercive strategies in studies on Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro (Camaj, 2016), Turkey (Yeşil, 2018), and Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017). While the press plays a vital role in promoting democratic change, its capacity to do so is often limited by the resources and support it receives, particularly during periods of significant political upheaval.

(2) The historical and political contexts of transitional democracies greatly influence press freedom. As Voltmer (2013) argued, a country's political history influences the development of its media system. Studies on Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017), Nigeria (Abubakre, 2021), and Turkey (Yeşil, 2018) highlighted how informal and formal power structures often override formal ones, limiting media autonomy.

(3) A recurring internal challenge to press freedom, identified across more than 20 analysed countries (e.g., Mellado & Van Dalen, 2017; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020), is the state of newsroom practices and the overall professionalism of the journalism sector. The

studies highlight professional responses to crises, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria (Trifonova Price & Antonova, 2022) and Nigeria (Abubakre, 2021) to structural changes within political institutions and economic instability. These crises often exposed a lack of preparedness within newsrooms, a shortcoming worsened by the weak foundations of the media landscape (Georgieva et al., 2015).

3.3. Main Threats to Press Freedom

These studies identified a wide range of external threats to press freedom, as shown in Table 3, sometimes with overlapping categories, including state capture, media capture, state control, government censorship, and intimidation tactics.

Table 3. Identified threats to press freedom in the multiple coded instances of all studies (n = 44).

Category	Common Descriptors	Frequency
State Control & Censorship	Direct government control, censorship of content, and political interference in editorial decisions	17
Economic & Financial Pressures	Financial constraints, dependency on advertising, market pressures, and pandemic-related economic impact	15
Political Influence & Parallelism	Political alignment of media, government propaganda, and partisan framing	13
Media Ownership & Capture	Ownership concentration, elite or foreign control, clientelism, donor or corporate capture	10
Violence & Intimidation	Threats, harassment, arrests, physical violence, and killings of journalists	9
Self-Censorship	Journalistic silence or avoidance of sensitive topics due to fear or pressure	8
Legal & Regulatory Constraints	Restrictive laws, ambiguous media regulations, and judicial limitations	7
Institutional Weakness & Corruption	Informal power structures, lack of rule of law, political or bureaucratic capture	6
Social & Cultural Factors	Misinformation, ethnic tensions, inherited practices, and anti-media discourse	6
Technological & Digital Threats	Internet surveillance, data access limitations, and risks from automated journalism	5
Professional Challenges	Lack of training, weakened solidarity, professional misconduct, loss of watchdog function	5

State capture—defined as the manipulation of institutions by elites—was observed in over 17 countries. Media capture, which occurs through both ownership structures and financial influence, was particularly discussed in the cases of Egypt (Allam & El Gody, 2023; Leihs, 2021), Tunisia (Bassil & Kassem, 2021), Iraq (Faris et al., 2021, 2023), Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017), and Turkey (Yeşil, 2018). These studies highlighted how media outlets align with government interests under direct or indirect pressure.

Government censorship, both overt and covert, remains a recurring theme. Government intimidation is prominent, with several key issues such as red tagging in Burundi (Frère, 2017); legislative restrictions in Kurdistan, Iraq (Faris et al., 2023), UAE (Gibbs, 2021), Indonesia and Malaysia (Hidayat et al., 2023), Pakistan (Jamil, 2023), Afghanistan and Iraq (Salih, 2023), and Fiji (Singh, 2021); detentions and trials of journalists in Ghana (Kwode et al., 2023); and domestic street-level bureaucracy 'capture' in Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017). This analysis reveals that transitional governments often lack both legislative and

rhetorical support for the press. The adverse effect on public opinion and internal media practices hampers the functioning of the press. Both direct and indirect measures employed by governments undermine journalistic autonomy, creating a media environment prone to censorship and manipulation.

Another significant threat identified in the data analysis is economic instability (15 mentions). Economic instability in transitional democracies has a profound impact on journalistic practices (Georgieva et al., 2015). Media organisations often lack sustainable funding, rendering them vulnerable to financial pressures from powerful elites or state actors. Consequently, journalists face insecure employment conditions, inadequate pay, and limited resources for conducting thorough investigations. This economic fragility frequently endangers editorial independence, as media outlets are compelled to rely on sponsorships or advertisements from influential figures, which may lead to self-censorship or biased reporting.

The focus on external constraints overshadowed discussions of internal factors, such as self-censorship, which more often reflect an internalised fear rather than formal regulation. Fear of retribution, including threats to personal safety and professional livelihoods, limits the scope and depth of reporting. Self-censorship was mainly discussed in eight articles (Gibbs, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2023; Kellam & Stein, 2016; Kwode et al., 2023; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Wu, 2023). For instance, Afghan journalists have reported self-censoring sensitive topics to avoid violent backlash, a trend worsened by weak legal protections and widespread insecurity (Relly & Zanger, 2017). Self-censorship often results from systemic external pressures, such as violence and intimidation, indicating a cyclical relationship that undermines press freedom.

Journalists, especially investigative journalists, in countries such as the Philippines (Aguilar et al., 2014) and Afghanistan (Relly & Zanger, 2017) are frequently targeted for exposing corruption, human rights violations, and abuses of power. These attacks vary from physical violence and imprisonment to digital harassment and doxing. The ruling governments in these regions often employ intimidation tactics, including public vilification and judicial harassment, to discredit journalists and discourage further investigations. For example, in the Philippines, the vilification of journalists by political leaders has fostered a hostile environment, with fear of retaliation suppressing the reporting of sensitive issues (Aguilar et al., 2014).

The threats identified by these studies reveal that in transitional democracies, the media frequently struggle to fulfil their watchdog role due to a mix of systemic and contextual constraints.

3.4. Recommendations for Journalists and Policymakers

Addressing our final research question, lessons learned were extracted from the analysed studies; then, from that list, several key recommendations for journalists and policymakers were also extracted.

Most lessons learned were centred on political constraints and contexts (12 mentions). Another prominent theme was the reaffirmation of journalism's watchdog and civic roles (10 mentions).

Recommendations extracted from the lessons learned offer valuable guidance for both individual journalists and news outlets. The thematic analysis identified six main categories of recommendations for journalists (Table 4), with the most common concerning professional adaptation (8 mentions) and structural and political awareness (7 mentions). Authors like Leihs (2021) and Voltmer and Wasserman (2014) highlight that journalists should modify their practices to survive and remain impactful under transitional or authoritarian regimes. Concerning practical conditions, calls for safer working conditions and

greater support appeared in six cases, emphasising the vulnerability faced by journalists in volatile political climates. Improving ethics and professional standards was discussed in five studies, including Hidayat et al. (2023). Additionally, rethinking funding models emerged in five contributions, such as Faris et al. (2021) and Trifonova Price and Antonova (2022), urging journalists to explore alternatives to advertising-dependent models and advocating for closer scrutiny of funding sources to resist corruptive influences. In this way, transparency is promoted across the news organisation, strengthening public trust and improving its credibility in a politically delicate environment. Lastly, another prominent theme is related to the reaffirmation of journalism's watchdog and civic roles (4 mentions), particularly in transitional democracies, where these roles are not only feasible but sometimes more robust than in more established democracies (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2017). Furthermore, an unwavering commitment to maintaining media pluralism is recommended so that marginalised voices can be heard and balanced reporting is encouraged. These findings clearly underscore the multifaceted pressures faced by journalists in transitional democracies and the pressing need for both structural adaptation and normative reaffirmation of journalism's vital role.

Table 4. Recommendations for journalists in transitional democracies extracted from the multiple coded instances of all studies (n = 44).

Category	Description	Frequency
Professional Adaptation	Adapting to repressive environments through strategic newsroom practices, learning from resilient models (e.g., Mada Masr), and contextualising practices to fit local constraints.	8
Structural and Political Awareness	Encouraging journalists to understand broader political structures, informal power dynamics, and historical patterns influencing media landscapes.	7
Working Conditions & Safety	Improving journalists' working conditions, ensuring safety from violence or repression, and supporting independent journalism under political pressure.	6
Ethical Standards & Research Culture	Enhancing research culture, ethical journalism practices, international collaboration, and promoting a deeper understanding of journalistic responsibilities.	5
Funding Models	Reviewing funding independence and rethinking methods to get advertisements as funding	5
Watchdog & Civic Role	Strengthening the media's role as watchdogs and civic educators, especially in transitional democracies where such roles may be heightened.	4

Furthermore, it was also possible to extract specific recommendations for policymakers from the analysed studies (shown in Table 5), with the most notable advocating for institutional and legal reforms to safeguard media freedom (10 mentions). For instance, Kwode et al. (2023) suggest establishing politically autonomous oversight bodies or enacting enabling legislation. Addressing media capture and elite influence was also a prominent concern (7 mentions), with studies urging policymakers to pass legislation that actively promotes journalists' safety and proper working conditions, while strengthening their credibility and independence.

Table 5. Recommendations for policymakers in transition democracies extracted from the multiple coded instances of all studies (n = 44).

Category	Descriptors	Frequency
Legal and Institutional Reform	Recommending the creation or reform of laws to guarantee press freedom, establish autonomous oversight bodies, and curb censorship.	10
Protection Against Media Capture	Identifying and mitigating threats from media/state capture, foreign intervention, or monopolistic ownership to protect media integrity.	7
Media Freedom Safeguards	Promoting systems that enable editorial independence, prevent authoritarian interference, and encourage structural media reform.	6
Transparency & Accountability	Encouraging mechanisms for transparency in media regulation, clear oversight structures, and democratic accountability to limit informal influence.	5
Pluralism & Decentralization	Supporting pluralistic media environments, decentralisation through community media, and ensuring inclusion of marginal voices.	4
Innovation and Technological Regulation	Creating AI frameworks for journalists	2

Additionally, proactive measures to address anti-press discourse and laws safeguarding journalistic integrity must be implemented. These recommendations collectively promote a comprehensive approach that considers both the internal functioning of news organisations and the external pressures from political and economic forces, ultimately nurturing a more constructive environment for press freedom in transitional democracies. For instance, four articles called for enhancing media pluralism and decentralisation, including Bassil and Kassem (2021) and Masduki (2022). A smaller group of five studies concentrated on ensuring transparency and accountability, especially in regulatory bodies and information dissemination tools (Giannone & de Frutos, 2016). Finally, two studies discussed support for media innovation and technological regulation (Jamil, 2023; Leihs, 2021). These themes reflect a broad yet cohesive appeal for democratic infrastructure, transparency, and accountability to bolster independent media ecosystems in transitional contexts.

Summing up, the findings demonstrate the limitations of relying solely on internal reorganisation within news organisations to protect press freedom; without supportive policy frameworks, these efforts may fall short. Furthermore, the widespread issue of media capture across many countries emphasises the urgent need for systemic measures to address this problem. The impact of policy on press freedom shows that the character of the press and institutional powers are closely linked, so enhancing one can also strengthen the other.

4. Conclusions

This scoping review accomplishes two primary goals—assessing current research on press freedom and exposing how knowledge in this domain is produced and published. The findings confirm that a complex interplay of political, structural, and economic pressures shapes press freedom in transitional democracies. While journalists are urged to adapt to local constraints and develop resilient, context-specific strategies, the analysis of the broader ecosystem also offers valuable lessons. Drawing on the analysed data, we conclude that most authors consider structural reforms necessary to ensure safer working conditions and uphold professional ethics, alongside diversifying funding sources

to reduce dependence on political or commercial actors. Policy recommendations focus on strengthening legal protections, maintaining regulatory independence, and improving institutional accountability mechanisms to safeguard media integrity. The literature emphasises that meaningful progress depends not only on journalistic innovation but also on political will and civil society support. Although the studies analysed differ in regional focus and methodological approach, they consistently highlight that democratic media reform is neither straightforward nor uniform, and that safeguarding press freedom requires sustained, multisectoral commitment.

Accordingly, this review identified several gaps in the existing body of literature on press freedom in transitional democracies. Some of these gaps, worthy of future research, include the limited focus on positive frames or examples of opposition strategies. Additionally, although the Global South is somewhat well-represented in our sample, further research is needed in regions such as Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, given that they remain underrepresented compared to Eastern European countries.

It is also worth noting that few studies have examined the influence and role of digital media in promoting press freedom in fragile states. Exploring new technologies and methods could be crucial in developing innovative strategies to counter threats against press freedom.

Moving forward, several key initiatives can improve our understanding of threats to press freedom in transitional democracies. Firstly, to ensure consistency and comparability of findings, longitudinal studies will be essential in capturing the evolving nature of transitional democracies, tracking changes in press freedom dynamics over time and identifying ongoing challenges. Collaboration between researchers, journalists, and policymakers is also vital for gaining a deeper understanding of the interaction between press freedom threats and democratic status, and for transforming findings into concrete actions. Furthermore, exploring contextual differences among transitional democracies is crucial to recognising the unique challenges faced by different regions and applying appropriate measures. Additionally, since most studies have employed qualitative methods, future researchers should also focus on quantitative approaches. Ultimately, there remains a pressing need to systematically identify and compare both internal and external factors that influence press freedom, thereby highlighting patterns that can inform effective intervention strategies. By adopting these future steps, scholars and policymakers alike can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of press freedom dynamics and bolster collaborative efforts to defend journalists and their profession in transitional democracies.

As with all studies, this one also has certain limitations. Firstly, although we undertook a systematic search for studies, the coding and qualitative analysis followed interpretative processes that may be biased. Secondly, while the search terms “emergent” and “transition” were useful in providing valuable results, they may have overlooked the scholarly literature that deals with press freedom in the more nuanced and complicated way that we mentioned at the beginning. Thirdly, because we retrieved articles from only a single database, there is a chance that we may have missed other relevant studies, and we cannot exclude the risk entailed by a certain selective bias. Lastly, due to the evolving nature of transitional democracies, research on this subject does not permit a definitive framework of analysis, which makes its research patterns less certain.

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Appendix A

Table A1. List of articles screened for close reading and thematic analysis (n = 44).

Author(s)	Article
Abubakre (2021)	Nigerian Newsrooms Under COVID-19 Lockdown
Aguilar et al. (2014)	Keeping the State at Bay: The Killing of Journalists in the Philippines, 1998–2012
Allam and El Gody (2023)	Diffusion of Development Journalism Inside Egyptian Newsrooms
Bassil and Kassem (2021)	The subtle dynamics of power struggles in Tunisia: Local media since the Arab uprisings
Burrett (2017)	Mixed signals: Democratisation and the Myanmar media
Cain (2014)	Kill One to Warn One Hundred: The Politics of Press Censorship in Vietnam
Camaj (2016)	Between a rock and a hard place: Consequences of media clientelism for journalist-politician power relationships in the Western Balkans
Chan and Lee (2014)	Selective exposure and agenda setting: exploring the impact of partisan media exposure on agenda diversity and political participation
de Albuquerque (2019)	Protecting democracy or conspiring against it? Media and politics in Latin America: A glimpse from Brazil
Echeverria et al. (2022)	Bringing History back into Media Systems Theory. Multiple Modernities and Institutional Legacies in Latin America
Faris et al. (2023)	Regulatory Capture in a Transitional Democracy: Media Laws in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Faris et al. (2021)	Newspaper Advertising in a Nontransparent Media Market: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan (2014–2018)
Frère (2017)	'I wish I could be the journalist I was, but I currently cannot': Experiencing the impossibility of journalism in Burundi
Georgieva et al. (2015)	Media systems of South-Eastern Europe in the condition of democratic transition: The example of Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia
Giannone and de Frutos (2016)	Measuring freedom of information: Issues and opportunities from an expert survey
Giannone (2014)	The political and ideological dimension of the measurement of freedom of information. Assessing the interplay between neoliberalism and the freedom of the press index
Gibbs (2021)	Business news in a Loyalist Press environment
Gong and Rawnsley (2018)	Media freedom and responsibility in South Korea: The perceptions of journalists and politicians during the Roh Moo-Hyun presidency
Hamada et al. (2019)	Press freedom and corruption: An examination of the relationship

Table A1. *Cont.*

Author(s)	Article
Hidayat et al. (2023)	Discovering Future Research Trends of Journalism Studies in Southeast Asia: Comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia using Bibliometric Approach
Herrero et al. (2017)	Rethinking Hallin and Mancini beyond the West: An analysis of media systems in Central and Eastern Europe
Huszka and Körtvélyesi (2017)	Conditional changes: Europeanization in the Western Balkans and the example of media freedom
Jackson (2016)	Legislation as an Indicator of Free Press in Russia: Patterns of Change from Yeltsin to Putin
Jamil (2023)	Automated Journalism and the Freedom of Media: Understanding Legal and Ethical Implications in Competitive Authoritarian Regime
Kellam and Stein (2016)	Silencing Critics: Why and How Presidents Restrict Media Freedom in Democracies
Kwode et al. (2023)	The erosion of media freedom in Ghana: A signal democratic backsliding?
Leihs (2021)	A Case Study: Mada Masr—A Progressive Voice in Egypt and Beyond
Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020)	Detached or Interventionist? Comparing the Performance of Watchdog Journalism in Transitional, Advanced and Non-democratic Countries
Masduki (2022)	Between Post-Autocratic and Post-War Broadcasters: Comparing Public Radio in Indonesia and Germany
Mazzaro (2023)	Anti-Media Discourse and Violence Against Journalists: Evidence From Chávez's Venezuela
Mellado and Van Dalen (2017)	Changing Times, Changing Journalism: A Content Analysis of Journalistic Role Performances in a Transitional Democracy
Pintak et al. (2018)	Mediatization in Pakistan: Perceptions of media influence on a fragile democracy
Radu (2016)	Sanctioning journalistic misconduct: An application of cumulative prospect theory to journalistic self-regulation issues
Relly and Zanger (2017)	The enigma of news media development with multi-pronged 'capture': The Afghanistan case
Ryabinska (2014)	Media capture in post-communist Ukraine
Salih (2023)	Post-regime-change Afghan and Iraqi media systems: Strategic ambivalence as technology of media governance
Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020)	Post-socialist self-censorship: Russia, Hungary and Latvia
Singh (2021)	A year in the life of Fiji's beleaguered national news media: Insights from the 2016 state of the media report and some potential implications of 'development journalism'
Steele (2023)	What can we learn from the short history of independent media in Serbia? Radio B92, George Soros, and new models of media development
Trifonova Price (2019)	Media corruption and issues of journalistic and institutional integrity in post-communist countries: The case of Bulgaria
Trifonova Price and Antonova (2022)	Challenges and Opportunities for Journalism in the Bulgarian COVID-19 Communication Ecology
Voltmer and Wasserman (2014)	Journalistic norms between universality and domestication: Journalists' interpretations of press freedom in six new democracies
Wu (2023)	Evaluating "exemplary data journalism" from Asia: An exploration into South China Morning Post's data stories on China and the world
Yeşil (2018)	Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era

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