

Executive Summary

Community Journalism in Guatemala: A report by the Observation Group of Press Freedom in Central America.

More than a year into the administration of President Bernardo Arévalo, an international mission comprising ARTICLE 19 Mexico and Central America, Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP), Free Press Unlimited, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Protection International Mesoamérica, and DEMOS conducted an in-depth assessment of the situation facing community journalism in Guatemala. From October 2024 to January 2025, the mission interviewed community journalists and media outlets across nine departments and Guatemala City, documenting patterns of violence, criminalization, exclusion, and censorship affecting this essential sector.

1. Historical and Political Context

Community journalism in Guatemala has long amplified the voices of indigenous and marginalized populations, particularly during the Internal Armed Conflict (1960–1996), when it faced brutal repression. While the 1996 Peace Accords raised hopes for democratization, the dismantling of key anti-corruption bodies like CICIG and the co-optation of justice institutions reversed progress.

President Arévalo's 2023 electoral victory, supported largely by ancestral communities, signaled potential for change. However, despite rhetorical commitments to press freedom, structural impunity and insufficient institutional reform continue to leave community journalists exposed.

2. Defining Community Journalism

Grounded in collective purpose, cultural identity, and social accountability, community journalism in Guatemala encompasses both organized media—such as indigenous radio stations—and individuals sharing information through digital platforms. Its legitimacy is rooted in community trust, multilingual communication, and local embeddedness.

Key characteristics identified in the report include:

- Deep trust and legitimacy within communities
- A collective mission focused on land, identity, and rights
- Access to stories and territories unreachable by traditional media
- Strong cultural belonging through indigenous languages and oral traditions

3. Key Threats to Community Journalism

A. Criminalization and Legal Exclusion

Lack of legal recognition leaves community radio stations vulnerable to raids, confiscation, and prosecution. Journalists face trumped-up charges—such as “theft of fluids” or sedition—as seen in the cases of Radio Ixchel, Radio Nakoj, Anastasia Mejía, and Carlos Choc.

B. Violence and Intimidation by Local Power Structures

Political actors, security forces, and private interests routinely target community journalists with threats, surveillance, and physical attacks. These aggressions often go unpunished. The killing of journalist Ismael Carmen Alonzo González in 2024 and the forced broadcast by José Sian highlight this risk.

C. Censorship and Political Retaliation

Community media are often excluded from cable networks, denied access to official events, or replaced by pro-government outlets. Canal Red TV 25 was removed from local cable systems following political pressure.

D. Structural Discrimination and Stigmatization

Indigenous community journalists, especially women, face layered discrimination. Many are denied institutional access, labeled as “activists,” or targeted for their language or traditional dress.

E. Lack of Protection and Institutional Distrust

In the face of persistent threats, Guatemala lacks any functioning protection mechanism for journalists. Widespread mistrust in the justice system deters many from reporting violence or harassment.

F. Precarity and Limited Sustainability

Most community journalists work without pay, legal support, or basic equipment. They rely on donations and side jobs, which undermines their safety and long-term viability.

4. Gender-Based and Differentiated Violence

Indigenous women journalists are especially vulnerable to violence and exclusion. They face hostility not only for being reporters, but for defying gender and cultural norms. Their presence challenges patriarchal systems, prompting institutional pushback and social backlash.

5. Structural Inequality and Language Barriers

Indigenous regions remain disproportionately affected by poverty, institutional neglect, and linguistic discrimination. Spanish-language dominance in media and government limits access to information and reinforces inequality. Community media are among the few platforms that provide information in indigenous languages, yet they remain systematically excluded from state support.

6. Social Role and Political Impact

Community journalism plays a vital role in cultural preservation, public accountability, and

grassroots development. In many rural areas, these outlets are the only reliable source of news. Yet despite this, they remain sidelined and vulnerable to repression.

7. Recommendations

Some of the recommendations included in this report are:

To the Guatemalan State:

- Publicly acknowledge and protect community journalism
- Implement the Inter-American Court's ruling on indigenous radio
- End judicial harassment and fabricated prosecutions
- Establish a culturally sensitive and differentiated protection mechanism
- Allocate public funding to support community media infrastructure

To the International Community:

- Monitor Guatemala's compliance with press freedom commitments
- Offer technical and financial support to community journalists and outlets
- Apply diplomatic pressure to end the criminalization of community media

To Civil Society and the Public:

- Recognize community journalism as essential to democracy and pluralism
- Counter misinformation and stigmatization campaigns
- Support initiatives led by community media and amplify their voices in policymaking