How Unsafe Contexts and Overlapping Risks Influence Journalism Practice: Evidence from a Survey of Mexican Journalists

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How Unsafe Contexts and Overlapping Risks Influence Journalism Practice

Evidence from a survey of Mexican journalists

Sallie Hughes and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez

Abstract

Journalists in many countries work in contexts of continuous risk, but few empirical studies identify how these conditions influence practice or measure the relative influence of different kinds of risk. This study asks a national sample of Mexican journalists to report use of several measures to ameliorate risk as violence and anti-press threat intensified over the last decade. It then identifies conditions that increased the likelihood of engaging in these practices. Findings reveal diverse tactics to remain safe and how those seeking to disseminate news through less-risky channels are less common than individual or outlet-based censorship. The study shows that physical insecurity overlaps with economic pressures to shut down important public-interest functions and that support for change agent roles, youth, ethnic minority status and working in smaller cities are important predictors of precautionary practices. The chapter ends with policy recommendations for international organizations, the Mexican government and press rights activists.

Keywords: Mexico, journalism safety, risk, protective practice

As in numerous countries around the world, journalists in many parts of Mexico work in contexts of physical, political and economic risk on a daily basis. Especially after Mexico's president launched a "war on drugs" in 2006, press association reports and qualitative studies have denounced pervasive self-censorship and other problematic changes in journalists' reporting routines and publication practices that were undertaken to reduce risk (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014; Lauría and O'Connor 2010; Article 19 2015; Del Palacio 2015). To date no study has measured the magnitude of these changes nationally nor identified predictors of these behaviors. This study begins to fill the gap using a national survey of journalists (n=377) working in 136 media outlets randomly selected to reflect the national news media landscape. The survey asked whether in the last five years respondents had engaged in protective or precautionary practices because of threat or to reduce risk. This chapter reports findings about the prevalence of these practices. It also identifies the conditions that increase the likelihood of engaging in a precautionary or protective practice through logistic regression analysis.

While survey findings are unique to Mexico, the country is one of several contemporary democracies where levels of non-combat violence and anti-press violence are

pervasive and unrelenting (Dunham, Nelson and Aghekyan 2015; Waisbord 2002, 2007; Arias and Goldstein 2010). Most studies on journalism practice in contexts of physical insecurity have focused on war correspondents rather than national journalists even though recent studies confirm that local, domestic journalists are most at risk (Cottle et al. 2016; Relly et al. 2015 is a rare exception in English). This study thus contributes to particular knowledge about the impact of violence on journalism in Mexico and contributes to knowledge about the general condition of journalists working in unsafe contexts globally.

Physical, political and economic risk to Mexico's journalists

In the past decade, societal and anti-press violence have made Mexico one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism. The monitoring program of Article 19's Mexico chapter has documented 92 journalist deaths in possible relation to their work between 2000 and March 2016 and 23 disappearances between July 2003 and January 2016.[1] Attacks include not only murders, but less-grave physical assaults, threats, intimidation, detentions, abductions, and attacks on media installations. In areas with high levels of organized crime or gang turf wars, risk to journalists is related to drug cartel violence and the government's militarized response (Gutiérrez Leyton et al. 2014; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Salazar 2012; Lemini 2015). However, drug violence maximizes journalists' vulnerability vis-a-vis a wider range of political actors and state institutions that not only fail to protect them, but also can be actively hostile. Abuses by elements of the state occur in a number of regions where governors and local officials use discretionary powers to pressure journalists. Article 19 reported that 41 per cent of aggressions against journalists in 2015 were perpetrated by public officials, a fairly consistent percentage since 2009 that includes attacks from police officers, soldiers, and state or local government officials (Article 19 2016:141; see also del Palacio 2015).

Violent threats overlay economic vulnerabilities, especially in smaller cities and towns. Local advertising markets are small and clientelistic ties between government officials and outlets condition media coverage to the needs of politicians who control advertising and other perks (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez 2014). At the same time, pay is precariously low for rank-and-file journalists, especially in smaller cities (De León Vázquez 2012; González Macías 2013; Márquez Ramírez 2015; Reyna 2015).

Despite these challenges, majorities of Mexican journalists have expressed strong support for positively contributing to a democratic, peaceful and economically developed society. In our survey of 377 journalists around the country, the percent who believed institutional roles associated with these goals were "extremely" or "very" important aspects of their work were the following: report "things as they are" (95.5%), promote tolerance and cultural diversity (92.8%), advocate for social change (89.7%), promote and defend legality and human rights (89.4%), let people "express their views" (88.8%), monitor political actors and business owners and businesses (86.9%, 60.2%), help maintain peace and stability (84.6%), promote economic development and community wellbeing (84.5%), provide information so people can make political decisions

(84.3%) and motivate people to participate politically (62.9%). However, the survey found that to monitor criminal organizations was not considered an extremely or very important component of journalists' work; only 24.3 per cent expressed this goal. While journalists appear to highly embrace these roles, there is clearly a political, criminal and social environment that may limit their ability to put such roles into practice.

Because of the intrinsic importance of the subject and gaps in the research literature, this chapter addresses two questions: 1) How do journalists respond to sometimes extreme levels of physical, political and economic risk found in Mexico? 2) Which types of risk change the likelihood journalists will engage in these practices? By identifying conditions that predict a greater likelihood of using these practices, the study provides information that national and international actors can use as they seek better solutions for safeguarding journalists and the positive contributions of journalism to society.

Methodology

To answer these questions, the authors and a team of graduate students surveyed a national sample of professional journalists in Mexico between January 24, 2013 and March 17, 2015. The survey population was defined as those who have at least some editorial responsibility within domestic news organizations (Johnstone et al. 1976; Weaver et al. 2007), including daily press, non-daily press, radio, television and online news media. Survey participants had to receive at least half their income from journalistic work. They were asked them a series of eight yes/no reports on changes in professional practice to reduce risk as well as an open-ended question about other measures they undertook within the last 5 years. The authors ran logistic regressions to identify conditions that would increase or decrease the odds of engaging in one of the yes-no practices. They also categorized 147 responses to an open-ended question into 12 types of risk-reduction practice. The categories were created by the second author using the constant comparison method. The first author independently reviewed the practices and categorization as a form of peer-checking.

Sample and measures

Due to a lack of a complete list of practicing journalists or news media outlets, the authors first created a comprehensive national list of news media organizations and secondly drew a simple random sample of outlets stratified by media type and nine geo-cultural sub-regions informants identified as clusters of Mexican states where journalism practices were similar. The third step was to select participants from sampled outlets to vary by level of authority and gender taking care to ensure every journalist in the outlet had a greater than zero chance of being selected. Journalists came from radio outlets (43.2%), television stations (9.5%), daily press outlets (34.5%), non-daily press (8.0%) and online outlets (4.8%). Their average age was 38 and about 32 per cent were female. Most respondents worked in privately owned media, 87.8 per cent, while 8.5 per cent worked in state-owned media, and 3.7 per cent worked in university media outlets.

Keeping in mind free press advocacy reports and qualitative studies, interviewers asked respondents to answer whether they had used each of the following practices in the last five years to diminish threat or risk:

- "Self censor potentially sensitive topics or information."

- "Submit to media organization policies of censorship of potentially sensitive topics or information."

- "Withdraw from a news scene but continue reporting."

- "Publish anonymously and without credit in own media outlet."

- "Use social networks to publish information or stories anonymously."

- "Filter information or ideas for certain stories to international news agencies."

- "Publish stories abroad."

- "Hide information from untrustworthy colleagues or suspicious persons in your newsroom."

Predictor variables were created from items developed by an international research consortium for the second round of the Worlds of Journalism Study.[2] The authors also added contextual and direct threat measures that may be important for understanding the press environment in Mexico and possibly other countries where journalist safety is problematic. Keeping in mind previous research on influences on journalism practice (Weaver et al 2007; Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Hanitzsch 2011), independent variables in the logistic regressions included personal, work-related, organizational and environmental characteristics that may drive journalists to engage differently in practices to reduce risk, including:

- personal traits, including age, gender and self-identification as an ethnic minority (being indigenous, in Mexico's case);

- work-related traits, including salary level, newsbeat covered where applicable, and rank of authority in the organization;

- level of support for varying occupational roles;[3]

- level of importance attributed to perceived influences on work from political, economic, organizational or reference group origins;

- characteristics of outlets where the journalist works, including media type and form of outlet ownership;

- aspects of the environment that are potentially related to physical insecurity, including crime levels, anti-press attacks, or city size; and

- having received a direct work-related threat.

Reported changes in practice due to risk were examined using a statistical procedure known as logistic regression analysis, which is used to predict an outcome from a set of independent variables. The analysis also identifies statistically significant predictors

and produces coefficients that when exponentiated are interpreted as changes in the odds (or likelihood) that an outcome will occur. Separate regression models were run on each of the yes/no behavioral change reports independently since the behaviors were not mutually exclusive.

Results and discussion
How do journalists respond to risk?

Table 1 reports responses to whether journalists engaged in a precautionary or protective practice in the last five years. While almost all journalists reported paying greater attention to accuracy when a story was potentially sensitive, about two-thirds of journalists (67.4%) reported having engaged in self-censorship as a precaution to reduce risk. Retiring from street reporting was the next most prevalent measure (64% had engaged in this behavior), followed by adherence to company censorship policies (57.3%). Two more precautionary measures followed in frequency: hiding information from suspicious or untrustworthy people in the respondent's own newsroom (50%) and publishing without byline or credit in one's own media outlet (41%). Less frequently, journalists reported filtering ideas or information to international media (23%), publishing stories abroad (22%) or publishing anonymously on social media (19%). The results from this battery of questions clearly show that the most-common precautionary practices prevent news stories from being disseminated or even being developed. Precautions taken while developing or disseminating stories follow. Least common are practices that actively seek to disseminate stories that already exist through alternative, less risky channels.

While the aforementioned practices reflect either the avoidance of dangerous news topics or efforts to safely develop and disseminate risky news, the open-ended responses illuminate precautions journalists take during routine operations in unsafe environments, as well as steps to safeguard families. A total of 89 responses mentioning 126 different practices were categorized in 12 types:

1) Safeguarding technology to avoid being monitored (n=15).

2) Changing work transport routines and being more aware to prevent being followed (n=15).

3) Changing work routines to limit street exposure at night or in dangerous areas (n=9).

4) Establishing communication networks with friends and colleagues to regularly update location in case of detention or disappearance (n=8).

5) Reporting in packs or as teams to cover breaking news, instead of working alone (n=8).

6) Removing press IDs to avoid identification (n=7).

7) Seeking legal protections or help from government officials (n=7).

8) Establishing personal security protocols and getting safety training (n=6).

9) Acquiring safety equipment or security personnel (n=4).

10) Changing personal routines and curtailing social life to protect self and families (n=11).

11) Safeguarding personal information (n=4).

12) Leaving the country temporarily or abandoning the area of origin of a threat (n=3).

Table 1.   Measures to ameliorate risk

Yes/no reports	%
Pay greater attention to accuracy of facts	91.2
Self-censor	67.4
Follow company censorship policy	57.3
Retire from news scene but keep reporting	64.2
Hide information	50.3
Publish anonymously in media outlet	41
Filter ideas/information to intl. Media	22.8
Publish stories abroad	21.7
Publish anonymously on social media	18.7
Open-ended categories	**#**
Safeguard technology, precaution with digital communication	15.0
Change work transport routines	15.0
Limit, change times in streets or dangerous areas	9.0
Establish communication networks for security	8.0
Work in teams	8.0
Remove, hide press Ids	7.0
Seek government or legal protection	7.0
Safety training or protocols	6.0
Safety equipment	4.0
Change personal routines	11.0
Leave country or area	3.0
Safeguard personal information	4.0

n=377
Closed-ended are affirmative responses to the question: "In the last five years, have you engaged in any of the following measures to protect yourself from possible attacks from criminals or mobs?"
Open-ended categories were constructed from qualitative responses to the "other measures - please describe" option.

What changes the likelihood of engaging in a protective or precautionary practice?

Table 2 reports odds ratios only for the statistically significant predictors for each logistic regression, as well as the power and level of significance for each regression model. Odds ratios are interpreted as changes in the odds (or likelihood) that an outcome will occur. Odds above 1.0 are interpreted as increasing the likelihood of having engaged in a risk-reduction practice, whereas odds below 1.0 are interpreted as decreasing the

Table 2. Odds ratios and sources of risk for individually significant predictors

Predictors and Origins of Risk	Practice					
	Self-censor	Adhere to company censorship policy	Abandon news scene	Hide info. in newsroom	Publish anon. on social media	Publish abroad
Physical Risk						
Have been threatened due to work	2.313*					
# anti-press attacks in state where journalist works	1.009*					
Police/Courts/Security beat compared to Gen. Assign			1.830*	3.222*		
Political Risk						
Political influences	1.790*		--			
Level of support "interpretive change agent" roles			--			.547**
Economic Risk						
Economic influences	1.587**	1.351*	--		1.632**	
Works in university outlet compared to private	0.023**					
Risks from Isolation and Impunity						
Pop. of city where journalist works	.9999995***	0.9999998***				
Socio-demographic Risk						
Age of journalist	0.909***	0.960*			.936**	.939**
Identifies as indigenous					3.150*	2.983*
Compensatory conditions						
Experience: 0-5 years compared to >10 years	0.282*		--	--		
Senior manager compared to rank-and-file journalist		0.728*	--		--	3.340*
Level of important of reference groups						
Model R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.43	0.29	0.10	0.16	0.20	0.23
Model χ2	(31)=115.80***	(31)=76.78***	(15)=25.77*	(29)=43.15*	(27)=40.98*	(28)=51.62*

Notes: OR = exp(b); *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 for b; -- = removed

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likelihood. Odds ratios can also be read as a percentage change in the likelihood of engaging in a practice. For the index variables, the odds ratio represents change in the likelihood for each step on a five-point scale. For the city population variable, the odds ratio represents the change in the likelihood per person difference in the population of a city.

Looking across the columns, the odds ratios reveal how different types of risk predict varying forms of risk reduction. Physical risks, including direct threat, a repressive context or risks associated with working on a dangerous newsbeat, increase the likelihood of self-censorship, abandoning a dangerous news scene or hiding information from untrustworthy colleagues or suspicious characters in the newsroom. However, physical risks do not influence the likelihood of adhering to company censorship policies, publishing abroad or publishing anonymously on social media. Physical risks are thus important predictors of practices constricting the mediated public sphere, but they do not explain all risk-reduction practices. In contrast, perceiving economic influences on work as more important increases the likelihood of both individual self-censorship decisions and adhering to outlet censorship policies. The economic influences index is comprised of the level of importance journalists attribute to company profit expectations and advertisers. Self-censorship thus responds to both physical risk and economic risk, but adhering to company censorship policies is motivated by risks associated with a firm's financial position.

Political risk becomes important for self-censorship when journalists believe journalism should be used for social change. The survey items that grouped on the interpretive change agent dimension are related to politics and policy, including: providing analysis of current affairs, influencing public opinion, fomenting social change and promoting national development. Journalists who support change agent roles at higher levels were much more likely to report having self-censored to reduce risk than ones who did not support these roles.

On the other hand, viewing influences from politics as more important for work predicted journalists typically were less likely to publish abroad as a risk-reduction measure. Statistical tests confirm that officials, politicians, business owners and censorship belong to the same political influences dimension, suggesting all these influences converge in the minds of journalists. Journalists who feel stronger pressures from officials, politicians, business owners and censorship do not seem to consider publishing abroad a safe way to disseminate a sensitive story, in fact stronger political pressures seem to inhibit them from using this measure.

City size was also a strong predictor of censorship. The smaller the city, the more likely on average the journalist was to report having self-censored or adhered to a company censorship policy to reduce risk. This supports ethnographic and qualitative evidence that smaller cities beyond state capitals or the Federal District can be especially difficult places to practice journalism (Del Palacio 2015) because journalists face physical, economic and political pressures from unrestrained local officials, usually in relative obscurity. This risk may thus originate in the journalist's relative isolation as well as poor checks on local official's abusive behavior.

A final source of risk involves the ascriptive characteristics of the journalist. Identifying as indigenous was the strongest individual predictor of publishing abroad or anonymously on social media to reduce risk.[4] Both findings provide evidence of the solidarity networks that have become important mechanisms of resistance for Mexico's indigenous groups in recent years, especially since the 1994 Zapatista rebellion launched internet social activism (Cleaver 1998). Since Mexican mainstream media sparsely cover rural and indigenous affairs, digital platforms and international networks seem to offer an especially useful tool for getting sensitive news from indigenous communities to the rest of Mexico and the world.

Youth also appears to put journalists at greater risk, above and beyond low wages or inexperience, which were controlled for in the regressions. The younger the journalist, the more likely to report having self-censored and adhered to a company censorship policy to ameliorate risk. However, youth also gives journalists knowledge about digital tools that are not as widely assessable to older journalists. Youth predicted greater likelihood of publishing anonymously on social media or publishing abroad as a way to reduce risk.

Regression analysis also revealed traits that may compensate for risk. Senior managers were more likely than rank-and-file journalists to publish abroad to reduce risk, suggesting this safer way to disseminate news is more accessible to newsroom leaders. Another compensation for risk may be stronger social connections. Journalists who perceived colleagues in other media and family, friends and other personal relationships as more important influences on work were less likely to have followed a company censorship policy to reduce risk. This may be because the outlets where policies are needed more, are also more likely to be located in unsafe contexts where violence has worn the social fabric. The average homicide rate per 100,000 in states where journalists reported adhering to an outlet censorship policy to reduce risk was 22.4, compared to 16.7 in states where they did not.[5] Finally, on average journalists with less than five years on the job reported having self-censored to reduce risk less than those with more than 10 years experience. This may occur simply because they have had less time to face work-related threats.

Conclusion

Using survey research methodology, this study documents the prevalence of a number of practices that journalists in Mexico – a democracy with pockets of extreme violence – use to lower the enormous risks they face daily. The most-frequent risk-reduction practices remove sensitive news topics from the public sphere. Less-frequent are practices that help journalists report or distribute risky information more safely. The study also found that risks take a personal toll, prompting changes in personal and family life.

The study additionally identifies the multi-layered nature of journalistic risk and how different forms of risk prompt journalists to employ different kinds of safety measures. Physical threat is most closely associated with measures causing the greatest harm to democracy. Rather than motivating journalists to seek less-risky ways to dis-

seminate information, physical risk disrupts or completely shuts down news production. The deleterious effects of working in smaller cities, where invisibility and isolation are comparatively higher, were also quite clear in the findings. Above and beyond economic, political and physical pressures, journalists working in smaller cities were more likely on average to self-censor.

Economic risks stemming from the financial position of the media firm also short-circuit public-interest journalism by increasing the likelihood of self-censorship and adhering to company censorship policies, but in contrast to physical risk economic risks leave open enough space for some journalists to distribute sensitive stories anonymously on social media. Publishing abroad or anonymously on social media as alternatives to more risky traditional methods of dissemination were disproportionately available to younger journalists and, in the case of publishing abroad, newsroom leaders. Indigenous journalists, who were much more likely on average to use these distribution channels, perhaps used digital tools and international solidarity networks to circumvent discrimination embedded in newsroom culture.

Policy recommendations

Policy recommendations based on the study's empirical findings are given in the Mexican context, but could be considered in a wider swath of democracies that suffer from high levels of violence, corruption and financial pressure on media and journalists. The study empirically demonstrates that physical risk and work-related threats curtail the monitoring function of the press, with self-censorship acting as a prior restraint on even developing news for dissemination. Findings thus offer empirical support for demands for greater protections and an end to the impunity for anti-press crimes based on the harm caused to democracy. Beyond routinized self-censorship, silencing those journalists who most strongly believe journalism should promote social change is one of the most-troubling findings for Mexico's democratic future. Both in theory and empirical study, a freer press supports greater democratic quality (Islam 2003; Norris 2010).

Few journalists turn to legal protections or state agencies for support, instead protecting themselves pragmatically in ways that harm the public sphere, the study found. Mistrust reported towards key institutions in charge of safeguarding journalists' safety and prosecuting their attackers was very high – only 6 per cent of journalists voiced high levels of trust in police and 10 per cent in judiciary. For the Mexican government, policy implications are therefore quite clear. Guaranteeing the correct functioning of the existing legislation and agencies created in recent years to protect journalists and prosecute anti-press crime is crucial to the protection of journalists' individual human rights and additionally for wider free expression to support democracy.

For international organizations and press advocates, another clear implication of findings about the impact of physical risk are to increase investment in digital safety training, which is a practice open-ended responses suggest should be much more widespread. However, few journalists also reported receiving traditional safety training, suggesting the availability of traditional courses also must increase.

The study also found that economic risk stemming from the financial position of a media firm compounds physical risk and promotes censorship. These findings should raise the priority of Mexican initiatives to strengthen public and non-profit media and make government advertising transactions more transparent. Allocation of governmental advertisement contracts has long been a key instrument for press-state collusion when contracts are of mutual benefit, and of blackmailing and censoring when they are not. Additionally, non-profit media have long requested viable legal means of financing and state-owned media continue to suffer from political control. A long-term solution to reduce economic pressures on news is implementation of legislation correcting these structural weaknesses.

Political risk did not directly predict increased use of any measures restricting coverage. This may be due to two overlapping conditions. First, political and economic pressures could merge through state clientelism, and so show up in our findings through economic pressures. Secondly, qualitative studies and emerging international research have found that state actors have an ambiguous relationship to journalistic risk (Hughes et al. 2016). This underscores the recommendation to strengthen protection of journalists and prosecution of anti-press crimes, but also to strengthen anti-corruption measures for government.

There are limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. As a pilot study it has shown that journalists' protective and precautionary measures are more diverse than the initial battery of questions contemplated. Future research should consider this during questionnaire development and also attempt to gauge the ambiguous relationship of the state to better operationalize political risk. Secondly, the battery of risk-reduction items should be incorporated in cross-national surveys so comparison to a wider range of contexts may illuminate more general causal mechanisms. Finally, the survey method has strengths but also drawbacks. It operates in the realm of perceptions and, despite the survey team's security precautions and trust-building measures, it cannot be assured that everyone responded with complete candor. Thus, while qualitative research on journalism safety helped enormously with survey development and interpretation, systematic mixed method approaches combining surveys, qualitative interviews and where possible observation would support better data interpretation and overall understanding of a complex and increasingly common phenomenon.

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Notes

1. Data available at http://articulo19.org/category/libertad-bajo-ataque/infografias/. Last accessed April 16, 2016.

2. More information about the study is available at www.worldsofjournalism.org.

3. The makeup of indexes and how they were created are explained in the Appendix page 316.

4. To identify ethnic identity, respondents were asked if they identified with an ethnic group. If they said yes, they were asked which group in an open-ended question. Forty journalists in 18 different states identified as indigenous and mentioned more than a dozen different groups. The authors then created a dichotomous variable for self-identification as indigenous from this information and used it as a predictor in logistic regressions

5. A one-way Anova confirmed differences were due to more than chance. The test confirmed a statistically significant difference in the mean levels of homicide in states where journalists reported adhering to outlet censorship policies to reduce risk and states where they did not $(F(2931.2,69309.7) = 15.48, p < .01)$.