Occupational safety amongst journalists in Mexico

A qualitative study of journalists' perceived occupational safety in Mexico

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Mexico has become known as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Previous studies have largely focused on physical violence, while occupational safety has rarely been examined from a holistic perspective, one that also considers digital, financial, and psychological safety. This study explores occupational safety and the effects of threats to occupational safety using a comprehensive approach, based on ten long-form qualitative interviews with journalists working in Mexico. It also examines the impact of occupational threats on professional practice and emotional well-being. Through thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews, five key themes emerged: A) Physical threat: Regional differences, gendered violence, and safety equipment as a double-edged sword, B) Digital threat: Digital surveillance: a vague but common problem, C) Financial threat: Precarity and inequality D) Psychological threats and the effects of threat on emotional well-being: Psychological distress resulting from exposure to threats, coverage of traumatic events, and strained relationships with editors, and E) Coping and the effects of threats to occupational safety on professional practice: Self-censorship, distancing, support networks, and collective collaboration. The results of this study show that different forms of threats to occupational safety are interconnected, making certain groups such as freelancers and investigative journalists particularly vulnerable. The findings also demonstrate that threats affect journalists' professional practice at every stage, from idea development to publication, and that exposure to threats negatively impacts their emotional well-being, regardless of the type of threat involved.

Key words: Journalism, Occupational safety, Mexico, Threat, Media, Democracy

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1. Introduction

Mexico has in the last couple of decades become infamous for being an extremely unsafe place for journalists (CPJ 2019; Article 19, 2019). The research has primarily focused on the prevalence of physical violence against the press, murdered journalists and impunity. Violence and physical threats, being the worst form of threat to safety, have naturally taken a dominant role in the research on safety for journalists. However, other aspects in the research on occupational safety amongst journalists in Mexico, such as digital safety and financial safety, have not been studied exhaustively. This study aims to approach the occupational safety of journalists in Mexico from a holistic perspective, to shed light on occupational safety in relation to psychological, digital and financial safety, as well as physical. Moreover, the study explores the effects of occupational threat, risk management and coping mechanisms on professional practice and emotional well-being. These are all parts that make up occupational safety, and, by extension, integral parts of creating and maintaining conditions for conducting journalism in a professional, long-term, and sustainable manner.

The study was composed of ten qualitative, semi-structured interviews with journalists in Mexico, in which they described how they perceived their occupational safety, as well as how it affected their professional practice and personal well-being. The interviews formed the basis for a thematic analysis, through which themes were identified that provide insights that deepen the understanding of occupational safety for journalists in Mexico.

2. Aim and Research-questions

2.1 Aim

The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of how Mexican journalists' working conditions and environments impact their sense of occupational safety in relation to their professional practice and personal well-being. This study aims to take a holistic approach to occupational safety and therefore considers safety from multiple perspectives: physical, psychological, digital, and financial. This is based on the understanding that these different aspects interact and together shape the conditions under which journalists work. Occupational

safety is integral for long term, sustainable journalistic work, and ultimately important for maintaining democratic social structures. Mexico is considered a hybrid regime with democracy on the decline (Landguiden, 2025), therefore, the question of occupational safety for journalists in Mexico becomes highly relevant.

2.2. Research questions:

- How do journalists who work in Mexico perceive their occupational safety?
- What are the effects of their perceived occupational safety on their journalistic practice and emotional well-being?

3. Background

This chapter provides a brief historical overview of the conditions of the media in Mexico, in order to offer background to the contemporary context within which journalists in Mexico operate today. It additionally offers a perspective on the current conditions facing journalists in Mexico, in order to give some prior understanding of the topics and circumstances that are addressed in the results chapter.

3.1 Historical context

To understand the Mexican media environment today, it is important to have a basic understanding of the country's history and political climate, as this context provides a clearer understanding of the roots of the modern Mexican media landscape. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1911–1917), political power was consolidated under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI's rule is characterized as authoritarian and akin to a one-party state (Landguiden, 2025). Mexico's Constitution of 1917 guarantees freedom of expression and of the press, though the conditions for these liberties were not necessarily supported during the PRI's rule. (Ferreira 2006, ref. In Relly & Gonzalez de Bustamente, 2014, p. 110). The post-revolutionary government in Mexico controlled the news media through subsidization and bribes

to media-workers (Benavides 2000, pp. 87-88). Between the 1940s and the 1980s "clientelism, corporatism, and a state-centered ideology of social justice" effectively tied most of Mexico's social, economic, and political institutions to the government or the ruling party (Hughes, 2006, ref. In Relly & Gonzalez de Bustamente, 2014, p. 110). During this period, the news media remained largely subordinate to the PRI, primarily spreading state-approved information (Arrendondo Ramírez & Sánchez Ruíz, 1986 ref. In Relly & Gonzalez de Bustamente, 2014, p. 110).

Beginning in the 1980s, a series of reforms were implemented, aimed at deregulation and free trade (Landguiden, 2025). During this period, government-funded support for various sectors, including media, was withdrawn in an effort to curb economic losses (Lawson, 2002, ref. In Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014, p. 110). At the same time, a rise in civic participation throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s contributed to the transformation of the Mexican press toward democratic consolidation, with several pioneering news outlets beginning to publish content critical of the regime (Hughes, 2003, p. 89). By the 1990s, many national newspapers had also begun to move away from authoritarian traditions and instead empowering citizens by promoting democratic ideals. This shift gave rise to a hybrid media landscape, combining elements of civic, market-driven, and state-centered journalism (Ibid., p. 89).

Mexico has long ranked among the most dangerous countries in Latin America for journalists (Estévez, 2010, pp. 4-5). While much of the attention has focused on the surge of violence following President Calderón's militarized campaign against organized crime, commonly referred to as the War on drugs, which began in 2006, the PRI's connections with drug trafficking can be traced back to the post–World War II era (O'Neil, 2009, p. 64). As the PRI's grip on political power weakened, so did its patron–client relationship with criminal organizations – an arrangement that had enabled a corrupt system securing distribution rights, market access, and state protection for traffickers (Shirk, 2011, ref. In Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014, p. 111).

The 2000 election of Vicente Fox Quesada from the PAN party over the PRI, which had held power for over seventy years, marked a significant political shift, further dismantling the old

model. In response, drug cartels sought greater autonomy and developed new strategies to secure trafficking routes by bribing local officials along the northern border. Increasing their profits greatly, these groups militarized their operations and engaged in violent competition for control over smuggling corridors (O'Neil, 2009, p. 65). Following Calderón's declaration of war on the cartels, over 60,000 deaths were attributed to organized crime, state corruption, and drug-related violence (Human Rights Watch, 2013, *Mexico*). This campaign was backed by over $1.1 billion in U.S. aid under the Mérida Initiative, aimed at militarizing Mexico's border enforcement. (Ribando Seelke & Finklea, 2013, ref. In Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014, p.111).

3.2 Threats to journalists today

In 2011 the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Mexico among "the world's most murderous countries for the press," where authorities appeared unable or unwilling to bring perpetrators to justice (2011:1). The issue of impunity in cases of violence against the press in Mexico is still to this day considered wide-spread and structural (Article 19, 2025).

It should be noted, however, that violence against journalists is not a phenomenon that emerged in the 21st century. Attacks on the press are neither a new development nor confined to any single country (CPJ, 2019; Article 19, 2019). However, the nature of these attacks and the identity of the perpetrators have changed significantly. For much of the 20th century, most journalists who lost their lives in the field were considered casual victims of war or conflict – victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. These deaths were typically caused by landmines, bombings, crossfire, or snipers. In recent years, though, journalists have increasingly become deliberate targets of violence perpetrated by terrorist groups, criminal organizations, mobs, and even political elites (Cottle, Sambrook, & Mosdell, 2016, ref. In González, 2021, p. 309). This shift, from collateral victims to intentional targets is the result of a combination of factors; First, organized crime has expanded its influence, becoming a powerful force in shaping political and economic dynamics, particularly in emerging democracies. Second, journalists are no longer universally regarded as neutral observers. In high-risk regions like Mexico, and when reporting on sensitive topics, they are seen as antagonists by some actors and treated as such.

Third, the rise of digital technologies has transformed journalism into both a more efficient profession and a more vulnerable one. While digital technology has enabled the growth of online media and streamlined reporting processes, these same tools also expose journalists to new forms of digital insecurity, such as hacking or GPS tracking (Cottle, Sambrook, & Mosdell, 2016 ref. In Gonzalez, 2021, p. 309).Online surveillance occurs in a variety of ways and by the application of a series of technologies and practices. Part of them may interfere with the way in which journalists collect, store, and communicate information to the public (Di Salvo, 2022, p. 45). There are at least three levels of contemporary internet surveillance; interception of data-in-transit via Internet cables; access to stored data, and installation of spyware and other hacking instruments used in order to gain access to individual computers or smartphones (Lyon, 2015, Ref. in Di Salvo, 2022, p. 45). They all pose a serious threat to the work of investigative journalists. This can particularly affect their communication with one another, their communication with sources, or the data that journalists store in order to produce journalistic work (Mills & Sarikakis, 2016, p.1, Ref. in Di Salvo, 2022, p. 45). The first two levels of internet surveillance reflect powers or technical resources that are exclusive for states or intelligence services (Lyon, 2015, Ref. in Di Salvo, 2022, p. 45). Targeted attacks, however, are available to private and corporate actors aiming to gain remote access to individual journalists' devices and archives. This is made possible by spyware that has become commodified and increasingly accessible (Harkin, Molnar & Vowles, 2020, ref. In. Di Salvo, 2022, p. 45).

Lastly, the constant flow of information and media coverage has made actors in conflicts more visable. This has made them more aware of how they are represented in the press (Cottle, Sambrook, & Mosdell, 2016 ref. In Gonzalez, 2021, p. 309).

4. Literature review

This chapter presents previous research on the topic of occupational safety among journalists. Studies based in Mexico have been of particular interest, as this is the context examined. As mentioned earlier, much of the existing research on occupational safety for journalists in Mexico has focused on physical threats (Díaz-Cerveró & Barredo Ibáñez, 2020; Hughes, Marquéz-Ramírez & Lara Klahr, 2016; Woodman, 2020). However, since physical safety is only one of

the four perspectives on occupational safety considered in this study, research on digital and financial safety conducted outside the Mexican context has also been included. All researchers mentioned in this literature review, except for Arturo Guerrero, who is a Mexican journalist and author, and Dr. Machin-Mastromatteo, who conducts research in library and information science, are scholars in the fields of media and journalism. Several of the media scholars mentioned have specialized in Latin America.

4.1 Precarity in the Global South

Precarity has become a defining aspect of working conditions in contemporary journalism (Deuze 2007; Cohen 2016, ref. in Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020, p. 242). Precarity relates to and explains journalists' ongoing experiences of institutional disruption in form of changes to rules, norms and routines relating to journalists' work context, workflow and autonomy (de Peuter, 2011, ref. In Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020, p.242). Matthews et. al argue that research about precarity within journalism often assumes a western perspective, where full and permanent employment emerges as the underlying norm. The concept of precarity is not as straightforwardly applicable to the conditions found in the Global South (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020, p. 242). The reasons for this are that the precarious conditions under which journalists in the Global South work can be said to be more complex than the precarity observed in the West, and are expressed through mechanisms such as censorship, clientelism, or the lasting effects of colonialism present within media systems, all of which shape precarious work environments for journalists (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020, p. 244). In their interview-study on precariousness amongst Nigerian journalists, Matthews and Onyemaobi found a situation they describe as journalists being trapped between "professionalism and survival" (p. 245), and a fragile professionalism. The term fragile professionalism should be understood in contrast to how the narrative of precarity among journalists is often described in the West, as a dismantling and erosion of the professionalization developed during the 20th century, Nigerian journalists view it as something that never existed in the first place. Moreover, training and professional development are seen as impossible simply because there is no time for it (p. 247). Although Nigeria has a completely different history than Mexico, there are parallels between these contexts. As discussed in the background, Mexico took significant steps toward an independent

professional journalism in the 1980s, and 1990s, yet many media outlets remain dependent on state support. Understanding precarity not merely as an erosion of professionalization, but also as a condition that has arguably been more present in Mexico than in Western contexts, given the relatively brief history of a freer press, becomes important in this study for grasping the nature of the precarity that shapes the working conditions of many journalists in Mexico.

4.2 Occupational stress amongst journalists in Mexico and regional differences

When examining how journalists cope with occupational stress across three distinct local contexts in Mexico; Tamaulipas, Puebla and Mexico City, researchers found that a majority of respondents to an online questionnaire reported feeling vulnerable to intimidation or physical assaults by criminals, police or politicians (Hughes et al. 2021, p. 221). Gender-based threats were also widespread across these regions, while organizationally based risks were reported exclusively in Mexico City. The most severe instances of aggression were observed in Tamaulipas (ibid. p. 229). Regardless of the specific context of risk, these stressful experiences significantly affected the journalists' well-being (ibid. p. 229). These findings are relevant to this study as they highlight the regional differences that exist within Mexico, showing that journalists in different areas are exposed to different types of threats. At the same time, the feelings provoked by occupational stress experienced by journalists appear to be similar regardless of region.

4.3 Risk-reducing practices among Mexican journalists

In their study of risk-reduction practices among Mexican journalists, Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez (2017) reveal how structural violence and insecurity have led to widespread adaptations in journalistic routines. A majority of journalists reported employing self-protective strategies, including self-censorship (67.4%), adherence to organizational censorship policies (57.3%), avoidance of street reporting (64.2%), and concealing information from potentially suspicious individuals within their own newsrooms (50.3%) (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 505). The likelihood of engaging in self-censorship was significantly higher among journalists who had received direct threats, worked in high-risk states, perceived strong economic pressures from

their media organizations, or supported interpretive journalism aimed at social change, such as fostering public debate or civic development (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 506–508). Organizational censorship was likewise shaped by individual and contextual factors: younger journalists and those working in economically pressured or smaller local media were more likely to conform to censorship, whereas journalists who identified with strong collegial networks were less likely to do so (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 508–509). The decision to abandon street reporting was most strongly predicted by the experience of direct threats; those who had been threatened were found to be 80% more likely to leave the field (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 511). Additionally, reporters covering police or crime were 222% more likely to withhold information from colleagues within their own newsrooms, which shows how distrust and internal fragmentation can become prevalent under violent conditions (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 512). These findings point to a broader erosion of journalistic autonomy, whereby violence, fear, and economic instability integrate to undermine professional ideals and democratic functions, particularly in environments marked by weak institutions or vulnerabilities within local or regional media (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, p. 513–514). These findings are particularly relevant in relation to research question two, regarding the effects of occupational threat and risk-management on professional practice. The findings provide a broad understanding of the types of work-related behaviours that may develop in response to threats. They also help identify groups that are more or less likely to adopt such behaviours as strategies to reduce risk.

4.4 Social-media usage as protection-tool for journalists along the US-Mexico border

When researching journalists working along the US–Mexico border, González de Bustamante, and Relly (2014) found that increasing violence has led journalists to use social media both as a reporting tool and as a form of protection. For many Mexican journalists, social media replaced unreliable or censored official sources, especially in violent states like Tamaulipas. Journalists adapted by using vague language, creating anonymous accounts, and avoiding direct commentary to reduce the risk of retaliation (González de Bustamante and Relly, 2014, pp. 514–515). At the same time, they were aware of the dangers of misinformation and digital surveillance, which led to self-censorship and careful verification practices (p. 515). US-based

journalists, often barred from entering Mexico for safety reasons, relied heavily on social media to monitor events. However, they also raised concerns about the accuracy of information and the limits of remote reporting (p. 516). Social media also helped foster cross-border connections and support networks among journalists, such as *La Red de Periodistas de Juárez*, though differences in resources and practices sometimes created tensions (pp. 517–519). Overall, the study highlights how journalists use social media to bypass traditional power structures, but also how these tools come with new forms of risk and uncertainty (pp. 518–519). In the context of this study, the findings of González de Bustamante and Relly are particularly relevant to the research question concerning perceived digital occupational safety and digital threats. Since their study in 2014, the use of social media has only increased and has become a highly important journalistic tool. Awareness of digital surveillance has also increased since then, raising important questions about how social media and digital tools are used today, and what effect digital threats and risks have on the use of these technologies.

4.5 Internet surveillance and its effect on professional practices

Through qualitative interviews about the effects of Internet surveillance with investigative journalists in Europe, Di Salvo found that digital surveillance challenged journalists' ability to protect their sources, and it was very difficult for them to verify whether they were being surveilled or not. As a result, a professional practice has emerged in which the interviewed journalists always assume they are under surveillance and adapt their working methods accordingly (Di Salvo, 2022, pp. 48–50). These findings clearly illustrate how threats can alter behavior without any actual violations taking place. The mere threat of digital surveillance has led journalists to change their working methods without even knowing whether they are being surveilled. Di Salvo's study is relevant for this thesis because it demonstrates how journalists in a different context respond to digital surveillance, showing that digital threats can indeed transform journalistic practices. As such, the study provides valuable conceptual grounding for understanding the potential consequences of digital threats towards journalists in Mexico.

4.6 The effects of displacement

In their study of internally displaced journalists in Mexico, Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez (2023) use a social-ecological framework to analyse how violence, institutional weakness, and professional isolation intersect to shape the displacement experience. Based on 19 in-depth interviews with journalists who fled their homes due to targeted threats, the authors examine how displacement affects these individuals on three levels. At the individual level, journalists described high levels of psychological stress, including anxiety, trauma, and fear for their families' safety. Many continued to experience emotional distress even after relocation and expressed feelings of guilt and helplessness (Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez, 2023, pp. 996–998). The financial impact was also severe, as most were forced to abandon steady employment and endure significant economic hardship. At the professional level, displacement often resulted in the erosion of journalistic identity. Some were unable to continue working due to fear, a lack of networks in the host city, or the stigma of being a displaced journalist. This led to underemployment, deskilling, or a complete departure from the profession (pp. 999–1001). The study also highlights macro-level factors, such as the failure of the state to provide meaningful protection or long-term support. Many participants reported a deep mistrust of government protection programs, which they viewed as underfunded, disorganized, or even complicit in the violence that caused their displacement (pp. 1001–1003). While some received temporary aid or relocation assistance, long-term reintegration into journalism or stable living conditions remained rare. Overall, the article provides a rare, in-depth look into how structural violence not only displaces journalists physically but also fractures their careers, identities, and well-being. This study offers a valuable point of departure, as it demonstrates how structural violence affects journalists in Mexico on multiple levels, and how displacement influences both their professional practice and personal well-being: Two areas of focus that are central to this thesis.

5. Theoretical framework

This thesis is theoretically grounded in the *Occupational Safety Conceptual Model*. The model has been chosen as the theoretical foundation because it provides a comprehensive and broad framework that clarifies the themes and dynamics surrounding the subject of occupational safety within the journalistic profession that is examined in this thesis. Additionally, the concepts of

professional reflexivity and *collective collaboration* have been used to deepen the understanding of aspects of professional practices and professional identity in relation to safety that are specific to journalists working in zones of conflict, such as in some parts of Mexico, and which, to some extent, distinguish these practices from the professional norms typical of journalists operating outside of violent environments or zones of conflict.

5.1 Occupational safety conceptual model

The model was developed in response to a need for a more holistic understanding of journalistic safety that extends beyond traditional workplace parameters. Drawing on both sociological and political theory, it emphasizes that safety is not only an outcome of physical environments, but also of structural, institutional, and perceptual factors (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1212). It operates on both material and perceptual levels, encompassing objective threats as well as journalists' subjective awareness and interpretations of insecurity (ibid., p. 1214). The model detaches journalistic work from the traditional newsroom setting; Given that journalists frequently work from home or out in the field, often in decentralized and unstable environments, their exposure to threats becomes diffuse and difficult to manage (ibid., p. 1213). The model recognizes that these threats may come not only from within institutional or organizational contexts but also from external actors such as politicians, members of the public, and digital aggressors, which sets apart the journalistic profession to some degree from many others, which highlights the need for a model for occupational safety for journalists.

5.2 Threats and Risk

The model classifies threats into four main types: physical, psychological, digital, and financial, all of which are considered intentional threats with the potential to harm individual journalists and journalism as a social institution (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1215).

Physical threats include violence, murder, sexual assault, forced relocation, detention, abduction, imprisonment, and physical harm due to biological or environmental factors. Psychological

threats affect emotional well-being and manifest through intimidation, harassment, doxing, hate speech, workplace bullying, or traumatizing assignments. Digital threats involve surveillance, hacking, and restrictions in accessing or disseminating information. Financial threats are rooted in precarity, especially for freelancers, and may include unemployment, unstable income, lack of editorial support, and poor access to safety training (ibid., pp. 1215–1216).

Although analytically distinct, these categories often overlap. Financial precarity can induce psychological stress, while weak digital security can translate into both physical and psychological vulnerability. Nonetheless, distinguishing between them facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how they interact and can inform more effective protective strategies (ibid., p. 1215).

5.3 Power Dynamics and Journalistic Autonomy

At the core of the model is the recognition that power dynamics fundamentally shape the threats faced by journalists. Power is conceptualized as domination, or "power over" others (Haugaard, 2012, p. 33, ref. in Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1216), and builds on classic definitions by Weber (1979) and Lukes (1974/2005). Three dimensions of power are outlined: First, it may manifest as “the ability to influence the making of decisions.” Second, it can be seen in “the capacity to shape the political agenda and thus prevent decisions being made.” Third, power can operate through “controlling people’s thoughts by the manipulation of their perceptions and preferences” (Heywood 2015, p. 110). This final dimension is closely connected to ideological, symbolic, or discursive power (p. 115), often described as the “power to construct reality” (Bourdieu 1979; Hayes and Silke 2019, ref. Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1216). In the context of journalism, these power dimensions can be understood as an individual or collective actors' power over journalists, but also the journalists' power over other actors. From the three dimensions of power, journalistic influence can under specific circumstances impact political agenda and shape perceptions, attitudes and public opinion and, by extension, construct reality. This is due to the resources in form of information and public attention that journalists hold (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1216).

5.4 Coping strategies

Coping is defined as a set of individual and social responses to work-related stress caused by threats to journalists' safety. Based on Lazarus' transactional model of stress (1990), coping is viewed as dependent on how individuals perceive and respond to a threatening situation in relation to their resources (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1220; Hughes et al. 2021, p. 223). The model distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which includes proactive strategies such as planning, building skills or modifying routines, and emotion-focused coping, aimed at regulating emotional responses, for example through seeking support or reframing situations. Coping is not merely an individual process but is shaped by social and organizational contexts such as editorial cultures, peer networks and broader societal norms. In collectivist cultures like those found in parts of Latin America, professional solidarity plays an especially important role (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1221).

Within the Occupational safety concept model, two types of coping are identified. Adaptive coping is defined as coping that enables journalists to manage risks while maintaining professional identity and autonomy, such as accessing training, planning, or engaging in shared practices. Maladaptive coping is defined as practices that may protect individuals short-term, for example: Compliance, in the form of self-censorship, concealment or refraining from sensitive coverage, or avoidance, like withdrawing from public platforms or exiting the profession. Though these coping-strategies may increase individual safety in the short term, in the long term they undermine journalistic integrity and democratic function (ibid., p. 1221).

Outcomes of coping are typically classified as: Resistance, meaning maintaining autonomy through adaptive strategies and resilience; Submission, meaning prioritizing safety through compliance or avoidance, meaning leaving journalism due to unbearable conditions or lack of institutional protection.

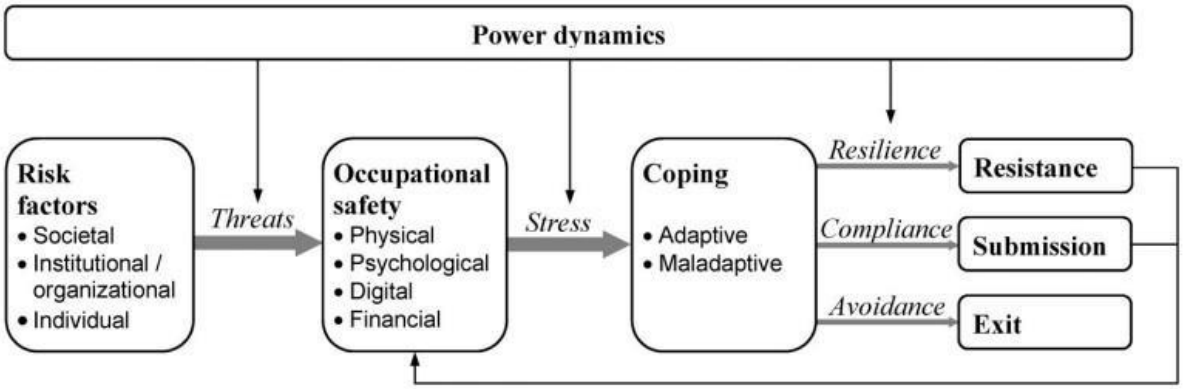

Figure 1. Journalists' safety conceptual model.

(Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1213).

5.5 Complementary concepts: Reflexivity and Collaboration

In addition to the Occupational Safety Concept Model, this thesis incorporates two complementary frameworks developed by González de Bustamante and Relly (2016). These frameworks have been added to deepen the understanding of journalistic practice in high-risk environments, such as Mexico.

The first is professional reflexivity, which refers to journalists' ongoing negotiation between professional ideals and the violent, unpredictable realities in which they work (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016, pp. 7–8). Reflexivity encompasses the calculated decisions journalists must make about publishing sensitive content, interacting with sources and protecting themselves and their families. It is shaped not only by individual ethics but also by institutional pressures, societal dynamics and the absence of state protection. For example, some journalists engage in self-censorship as a survival tactic, while others participate in informal support networks.

Adaptability is seen as an essential aspect of professional practice. Journalists in northern Mexico frequently reported that their actions often contradicted their professional ideals, not due to lack of commitment, but because the environment demanded constant strategic adjustment (González & Relly, 2016, p. 11).

The second concept is collective collaboration, which describes informal practices of mutual support among journalists, even across competing outlets. These collaborations, which may include information-sharing or team-based reporting often serve as vital coping mechanisms in the absence of formal protection systems (González & Relly, 2016, pp. 11-12). They help to build resilience by providing emotional, practical and sometimes even physical support.

6. Methodology and data collection

In this chapter the methods used; qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, are presented. This section also outlines the data collection process. Furthermore, the analytical framework on which the analysis is based is presented, as is a discussion on the limitations of the chosen methods and mode of data collection, ethical considerations, and a comment on the reliability and validity of the study.

6.1 Qualitative interview

Qualitative interview has been chosen in this study in order to gain knowledge about the different dimensions surrounding occupational safety amongst journalists working in Mexico. The qualitative interview makes it possible to map out situations and circumstances that have influenced the respondents' views on occupational safety, as well as the meaning they assign to these situations and circumstances. The study is interested in the respondents' reality as they themselves describe it, which is a fundamental aim of the qualitative interview method (Ekström & Larsson, 2019, p. 102). The qualitative interview is partly open in nature. It is formed by the interaction between the researcher and the respondent (Ibid. p. 101) and tends to be more dynamic and less structured than interviews that are conducted through a standardized questionnaire (Ibid. p. 103). The qualitative interviews conducted within this study also reflect this tendency, as the interviews with different respondents ended up focusing on different aspects of occupational safety, depending on the respondents' background, perspective and experience. The respondents' statements and narratives must be understood both as expressions of their personal perspectives and perceptions and also in relation to the different contexts in which they

exist, such as; the social situation of the interview, the institution and organization where the respondent is active, as well as the social, political and cultural conditions that are of relevance for the subject of the study (Ekström & Larsson, 2019, p.103). Here, one can differentiate between informants, who through interviews can provide valuable background information, and respondents who share their personal perspective and experience (Ibid. p. 103). In this study, some respondents acted as both respondents and informants, sharing both their personal perspectives as well as more general background information about occupational safety amongst journalists in Mexico, though still speaking from personal experience and their own understanding.

In this study, semi-structured, long form interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. The occupational safety concept model was operationalized and laid the basis for the interview guide used in this study. Each concept, relating to specific types of safety, such as financial and digital, as well as concepts of coping were translated into questions to ensure a comprehensive exploration of occupational safety. This method allowed for follow-up questions and had the benefit of being able to bring out nuances in the respondents' answers.

6.2 Thematic analysis

Qualitative analysis can arguably be considered as part of the qualitative interview method. However, by incorporating thematic analysis in this study, the hope is that the analysis and the conclusions drawn in this study will be more coherent and easier to follow.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, it provided a clear and structured approach to understanding the experiences and perspectives of the journalists. The thematic analysis was based on coding of the transcriptions from the interviews. Therefore, it also had the advantage of showing how prevalent different themes were, as well as which appeared within a specific group in the population. For example, it could show that a particular theme was common among freelancers only.

This study recognizes that themes do not simply "emerge" from the data on their own. Instead, the researcher plays an active and interpretive role in identifying, organizing, and presenting patterns within thematic analysis (Ely et al. 1997, ref. In Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). To ensure transparency and credibility, the analytical process is described in detail, showing how themes were developed. The coding process followed an abductive approach: It was based both on existing theory and on new ideas that emerged from the data. On the one hand, coding was informed by the theoretical concepts presented in chapter 5, as well as previous research. On the other hand, the process remained open to identifying unexpected patterns or themes that were not part of the original framework. The steps of the coding process included: Careful reading and re-reading of transcripts, generating preliminary codes based on both theory and observations from the material, grouping and reviewing codes to form themes, as well as interpreting themes in relation to the broader research aim. Codes, in this study, are understood as the smallest meaningful units of data: specific parts of the interviews that relate to the concept of occupational safety.

Themes were developed based on two main criteria: Firstly, frequency. This refers to how often a particular theme appeared across the interview transcripts. Frequency was measured at the level of the data item, meaning each individual interview. This was done to give an indication of how common a theme was among participants. However, frequency was not the primary focus of the analysis, as it aimed to explore the depth and meaning of participants' experiences. More importantly, themes were evaluated based on how well they contributed to answering the research questions. A theme that appeared less frequently in the data could still receive detailed attention if it was considered important for understanding occupational safety and how it related to professional practice or personal well-being. For example, workplace sexual harassment was discussed by only two of the ten participants. Nevertheless, since it relates directly to the topic of this study, it was given space in the analysis and discussion.

The study followed a semantic approach to thematic analysis. This means the analysis focused primarily on the explicit content of what participants said and how they said it, with the goal of identifying and summarizing key patterns. In some cases, the analysis also included a latent interpretation, where underlying meanings and broader societal influences were considered (Patton, 1990, ref. in Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was conducted from a contextualist perspective, which assumes that participants' experiences are shaped both by individual interpretation and by the wider social and cultural context in which they live and work. This approach recognizes that the data are not simply objective facts, but are influenced by the participants' environments, identities, and working conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.7).

6.3 Data collection

Respondents were selected based on a snowball sampling strategy initiated through author contacts. Ten journalists working in Mexico were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in English, in person, in or near Mexico City and lasted on average 75-90 minutes. Five of the respondents were male and four female, one was non-binary. The ages of the respondents varied from 27 - 64 years, and they had between 5 - 33 years of experience working as journalists in Mexico. Five respondents are currently freelancing for Mexican, American and Latin American news outlets, though three of the freelancers previously held employment within Mexican media outlets. Two respondents are currently employed by American news agencies and two are currently employed by Mexican news media. All respondents reported working with a mix of journalistic tasks, however two described themselves primarily as video journalists, one as a photographer and the rest as general reporters. Seven respondents were raised in Mexico, and three in the United States. One respondent lived in Veracruz, while the remaining lived in or near Mexico City. However, many worked several times a month in other regions.

6.4 Ethical considerations

Regarding ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Pseudonymity has been practiced to avoid potential personal harm. Respondents were offered to check on their transcribed interview material, in order to establish trust between the author and the respondents and in order to establish points during the research process where the respondents were offered some control over their personal data. This is one way in which the project was organized in adherence to the requirements of ethically correct behavior as stipulated by Södertörn University and in connection to the GDPR regulations (Södertörn

University, n.d), which also corresponds with ethical guidelines issued by Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024).

6.5 Methodological critique, validity and reliability

Validity refers to the extent to which a study truly examines what it claims to investigate (Ekström & Johansson, 2019, p. 13). In this study, the interview guide on which the qualitative interviews were based has been included as an attachment to demonstrate how the study's design aligns with the research questions it seeks to address. Regarding reliability, that is, the trustworthiness of the results presented here (Ekström & Johansson, 2019, p. 13), it can be stated that no conflicts of interest have been present during the work process. The reliability of the study was further strengthened through participant feedback, ensuring that the information provided was interpreted in line with the participants' intentions and not misrepresented by the researcher.

The goal of data saturation was reached in this study. Data saturation refers to the point in qualitative research when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation was reached within the first 12 interviews, as no new themes appeared beyond that point (p. 74). The reached data saturation suggests that the findings of this study may be considered generalizable to some extent. However, certain reservations must be made due to the limitations of the sample and study design. Most importantly, the interviews were conducted in or near Mexico City and were carried out in English. These factors imply that the achieved data saturation should not be overemphasized, as it does not necessarily mean that no new themes would have emerged if interviews had been conducted in other regions of Mexico or if the sample had included journalists who speak only Spanish. Compared to other regions in Mexico, Mexico City is a relatively safe place for journalists (Hughes et al., p. 225). Generalizability is also not the main focus of this study, as the study rather aims to highlight details and nuances, as well as to illuminate differences and similarities between respondents with different backgrounds, experiences, and working conditions, and their experienced occupational safety.

7. Results and analysis

In this chapter, the results of the study are presented. Each section, introduced by a subheading, represents one of the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis conducted on the transcriptions of the respondents' answers. The themes selected and presented here aim to highlight specific aspects of journalists' occupational safety in Mexico and how they impact professional practice and personal well-being. Direct quotes from the respondents have been included to provide deeper understanding and illustrative examples. The themes presented will also be discussed and analyzed here in relation to the occupational safety concept model.

Reading guide: Sections 7.1–7.3 address the question of how journalists in Mexico perceive their occupational safety. Section 7.4 presents findings related to psychological threats and also explores how other types of threats to occupational safety affect journalists' personal well-being. Section 7.5 discusses coping strategies and the effects of threats to occupational safety on journalists' professional practice.

7.1 Physical threat: Regional differences, gendered violence and safety equipment as a double-edged sword

Experiences and perceptions of physical threat varied between respondents. A majority of the journalists reported having been subjected to physical threats on multiple occasions in the course of their careers as journalists. Some described experiencing an almost constant fear of physical threat while working, particularly those residing outside of Mexico City or engaged primarily in investigative journalism. Frequent experiences of physical threat were less common amongst reporters primarily working within Mexico city, and journalists who held steady employment from foreign media-outlets. Narratives involving physical threats frequently emerged in connection with projects related to human rights, investigating those in power, reporting on crime, women's rights issues, as well as coverage of demonstrations and civil unrest and covering natural disasters. Notably, accounts of physical threats were especially prominent during time spent traveling, in assignments requiring travel through or to high-risk areas, classified as such either due to high levels of cartel control or because of dangers associated with the natural environment or natural disasters. The physical threats manifested in various ways, but

the two most commonly described types were stone-throwing during demonstrations and physical surveillance, such as being followed by unknown cars or individuals, or encountering physically intimidating behavior from people stationed at territorial boundaries. Territorial boundaries here refer to the ways in which cartels, who hold power over specific areas within Mexico, monitor and enforce the borders of their territories through various means.

> The most dangerous situation, in my personal experience, is when you move from one cartel's territory into another cartel territory [...] Working in Michoacan, one time we were crossing from X territory into X cartel territory. At the last checkpoint, the chief of that checkpoint said, "we're monitoring the internet and anything you write. Anything you write we will know. And you will have to pass through here again when you leave". There was only one way in and one way out. And the guys were armed, and his tone [and] his body language was extremely threatening. – Journalist 1

Several respondents reported having been exposed to common violent crime while working in the field, including incidents such as express kidnappings. Some also noted the difficulty in determining whether acts of violence against colleagues, such as shootings, had been specifically targeted at them in their capacity as journalists, or whether they had fallen victim to general crime, given the high levels of common criminality in Mexico.

The data revealed that physical threats to journalists were also gendered, meaning that female journalists face unique threats. Two reported sexual harassment from supervisors. Additionally, they expressed these situations were further exacerbated by the journalists' perception that their employers lacked the capacity to address cases of harassment in a safe and impartial way. Whistleblower mechanisms were absent, and in one instance, the person responsible for human resources had a close personal relationship with the individual accused of harassment. This severely undermined the journalists' trust in their employer's ability to respond in a professional and protective manner. Fear of sexual violence while working in field was also present in the data, though none reported experiencing sexual violence beyond verbal harassment in field. No male respondents expressed having experienced or fearing sexual harassment or violence.

Some respondents noted that equipment intended to enhance a reporter's physical safety, gear they considered standard when reporting from conflict zones in other countries, could sometimes increase the level of risk when working in Mexico. Their reasoning was that such equipment could attract unwanted attention to the reporter, and items like bulletproof vests might raise suspicions that the journalist was working for cartels, the military, or intelligence services.

> Some issues about safety, that work in other parts of the world, in Mexico don't work. Because here, if you are a journalist, you can't use a safety bulletproof vest because the police are going to think that you are a Narco, even if it says press on it, they can kill you and just take that out and say, "no, he was a narco". And people are going to believe that, because we don't have much trust in the media here. And also, here we are a target. The journalists are a target for the government and for cartels. – Journalist 7

Others noted that the risk of physical threats increased in the absence of such equipment. This view was the most common among respondents who held staff-employment. Several freelancers emphasized that due to limited resources, they often lacked access to safety equipment such as GPS trackers, bullet-proof vests, and satellite internet (e.g., Starlink). One staff journalist also reported having experienced similar limitations.

The vast majority, however, argued that the use of visible safety equipment, such as bulletproof vests or traveling in armored vehicles should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. This was because such equipment could attract unwanted attention and thereby increase the level of risk, while in some situations it could also be useful.

> Maybe as a freelancer, if you are hired by a foreign agency you have the resources, but also it's like a double-edged sword because I've heard a lot of stories about [an international news agency] going to make a piece on some city in northern Mexico, and they go with this big van full of equipment, with vests. That's the opposite of security because people will notice you immediately and think well, what are you doing with your vests? Are you from another cartel, are you from the government? What are you doing here? And maybe if you just brought your camera in your backpack, no one would have noticed you. – Journalist 3

In sum, most respondents described experiencing some level of physical threat, though few described it as something constant in their day-to-day professional practice. The types of

physical violence experienced varied from criminal actors, state actors as well as actors within the institution where the journalist worked, in cases of sexual violence. Views on the use of safety-equipment varied to some degree, though almost all considered the use of GPS-trackers as a standard measurement to enhance physical safety.

Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. define physical threat as the most intimidating form of power: the capacity to inflict harm, which appears through psychological or physical violence. This power stems from inequalities such as physical strength and, more crucially, from unequal access to tools and organizational structures that facilitate harm, like weapons and military arrangements (p. 1217). The respondents' reasoning regarding safety equipment becomes particularly interesting in this context. They highlight how the use of equipment intended to reduce the risk arising from encounters with actors who have access to tools capable of causing physical harm, such as weapons, can contribute to suspicion and, according to some, further increase the security threat.

7.2 Digital threat: Digital surveillance – A vague but common problem

Half of respondents reported having experienced, or suspected they had been subjected to digital surveillance. Nearly all had, at various times, felt concern about being monitored, particularly in periods following big reveals in the media about the use of digital surveillance such as Pegasus, targeting journalists. All who believed themselves to have been under surveillance were convinced that the military or the Mexican state was responsible. However, respondents varied in the degree of concern they expressed and in how they interpreted or described the situation of digital surveillance of journalists in Mexico; Two respondents characterized the surveillance as extensive, with one stating that most independent journalists in Mexico are under some level of digital surveillance. The others described it primarily as a concern that arose during periods when they were engaged in investigative projects, or as something that primarily affects investigative journalists. Several journalists expressed concern or fear that their contacts and sources may have been harmed as a result of digital surveillance, or reported feeling that their ability to protect sources had been compromised when they believed they were being monitored.

> I have confirmation that I was under surveillance from the Mexican military while working on a story. I did a freedom of information request and uncovered an army report detailing the movements of me [...] We were interviewing opium farmers [...] in Guerrero. We came in contact with a couple army patrols. They produced a report detailing every conversation they had with us, including aspects that they would not have known had they not had access to our phones. So do I believe my phone has been tapped? Yes. Do I believe I've been under government surveillance? Yes. Do I think my phone has been infected by spyware? No [...] It appeared to be an old style [surveillance device], they couldn't download all my information, they could simply tell who I was calling and what I had said, and that was something we had sort of assumed. What made me angry was that it could have compromised the security of my sources, so I had concerns about [them]. – Journalist 1
>
> *Note: Journalist 1 explained that he found out about having been surveilled five years after the incident.

Other respondents viewed surveillance as more of an all-encompassing issue:

> Pegasus is old news. It was 10 years later, in 2021 that they revealed it [...] they've got so much more advanced stuff now. They have spyware now [...] And after a specific set of stories I did, I started noticing really weird stuff on my phone. – Journalist 2

All respondents viewed the Mexican military as the main actor behind digital surveillance, though the perceptions on the extents of surveillance varied. One respondent expressed their view in the following manner:

> Usually it's the military. But then they do it on behalf of politicians. The biggest cartel, quote unquote, is the army. The most powerful group, that has the most power to influence other criminal groups is them, you know, and that's why they get to determine what criminal groups do. They're generally the ones who use spyware but we also don't know, because these are super classified programs. People who have talked to insiders in the government have said they don't just target like a single journalist here with spyware. They kind of throw a wider net of surveillance digitally, because they just want to know what people are working on. They want to be able to know what kind of stories you're following. They want to be like, this person knows about this thing, so how do we do damage control without having to kill them, you know? They do kill journalists, but they don't want to because they prefer the stories not come out, and having to kill the journalists, which is always Mexicans, except for a few occasions, implies that there's going to be more attention on the work that they did. So they do a kind of blanket surveillance from what I understand. There's a lot of people who do any sort of reportage on either corruption or human rights, like stuff that would bother power structures, corporate, military, or criminal. Or just say state-corporate criminals. They get surveilled. – Journalist 2

The lack of knowledge and transparency regarding how journalists' information was used or processed by state actors, such as the police and the military, was perceived by several journalists as deeply unsettling.

One journalist mentioned scams as a threat to digital safety, and reported being contacted by people under false identity who had claimed to be a source of hers. Similar things had happened to her colleagues. However, she found it difficult to assess the intention of the scammer; if she had been targeted as a journalist, or if it was a general attempt at fraud. A parallel emerged here between the physical violence that journalists described as common crime and this type of digital threat: namely, the uncertainty as to whether the journalist was a specific target or a random victim. This ambiguity adds yet another layer of complexity to efforts aimed at improving occupational safety, as it becomes more difficult to determine the nature of the threat or violence the journalist is facing. Consequently, it also becomes harder to identify what type of protective measures are necessary. Some respondents described this vagueness as a source of paranoia and as a condition that made it challenging to assess whether their concerns were justified or whether their fear was exaggerated and paranoid.

Vagueness and anxiety caused by uncertainty about being a potential target were prominent among the respondents. This relates to a theme found in Di Salvo's paper on investigative journalists' views on the impact of internet surveillance on their work, namely, the ephemeral nature of internet surveillance and the uncertainty about being a potential target (Di Salvo, 2022, p. 48). Although Di Salvo's study focused on European investigative journalists, these findings suggest that similar sentiments are present among journalists in Mexico.

The results show that investigative journalists felt particularly vulnerable to digital surveillance. Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. highlight in their discussion of how power dynamics underpin threats to occupational safety that power-based antagonistic societal, institutional/organizational, and group/individual pressures are the risk factors that create threats. These define the room for action within which journalists are expected to perform their work. If and when journalists maneuver to maximize performance and transgress this space beyond a threshold acceptable to antagonists, they become subject to threats and thereby expose themselves to risk (Slavtcheva-

Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1218). The findings here indicate that investigative journalists, whose main role is to investigate those in power, are particularly vulnerable to digital surveillance, which supports this thesis.

7.3 Financial threat: Wide-spread precarity and inequality

One recurring theme across all interviews with freelance journalists was financial stress, which for four out of five interviewees had led to taking on additional part-time jobs alongside their journalistic work, ranging from raising chickens, making graphic novels, to teaching, in order to diversify their income. Three of them reported doing so involuntarily, stating that they would solely practice journalistic work if given the opportunity. One mentioned wanting to leave the profession because of feelings of financial stress. Based on the Occupational safety concept model, diversifying income can still be viewed as an adaptive coping strategy, as it enables them to remain in the profession despite difficult economic conditions. By taking on other types of work, they are adapting to the prevailing circumstances. At least three interviewees described their additional jobs as a way to finance journalistic projects. They also mentioned how more commercial and/or fast-paced assignments could help fund longer, more independent, or in-depth journalism projects that they felt a stronger personal passion for.

Among permanently employed journalists, financial stress was not as commonly reported. However, most staff-employed journalists described working long shifts or having difficulties finding time for their private lives, as they were expected to be constantly available. These conditions were generally accepted, and often justified by comparing themselves to colleagues who were perceived to be in more precarious situations. This perspective relates to Matthews and Onyemaobi's article on precarity in the Global South and indicates a tendency toward what they refer to as "fragile professionalism" (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020, p. 247). The respondents' point of reference was not a comparison with secure employment and time for rest, but rather a comparison with the majority of Mexican journalists. In relation to them, they felt privileged, despite heavy workloads and stress.

Freelance respondents also highlighted the presence of organizational risk factors arising in their interactions with editors and commissioning parties. These factors contributed to a compromised sense of occupational safety and created vulnerability across financial, physical, and psychological dimensions. Respondents described experiencing heightened economic insecurity, increased exposure to physical danger, and psychological stress. Additionally, several expressed feelings of frustration, meaninglessness, and a lack of recognition or appreciation in their professional roles. Journalist 2, who mainly works as an investigative journalist, described it in the following way:

> As a freelancer, publications could not give two shits about what you're doing, and you can try to explain to them, be like, "Hey, so for me to do the reporting for this story I have to go to a pretty frightening place, it'll be fine, here's the reasons why I've decided it's okay to go, but I need you to do this…", and then the publications just very clearly don't care. – Journalist 2

One described an experience of receiving only half of the agreed-upon payment for an assignment from a commissioning party, and how this incident caused significant stress. Since then, he has continuously worried about whether he will be paid and finds it difficult to trust that he will receive compensation for his work. Another respondent described a similar experience:

> The boss wrote me and she was like, my team was very unhappy with you. You did not provide what they wanted. We can only pay you two thirds of what we promised, but what we had agreed on. And I was like, excuse me, I did everything they wanted. They last minute wanted things in English. That is five times more work. They're like, no, we can only pay you this. That really, really affected me. Like it really depressed me. And so in the end, I contacted someone who actually was part of (an organization for journalists rights). – Journalist 5.

This insecurity was described by several freelancers as being exacerbated by the common practice of relying on verbal agreements. Some reported that commissioning editors had reacted with irritation when they asked for written contracts.

> In Mexico, if you ask for a contract, people are like, a what? I've worked on stories where they don't give contracts, and I'm like, then give it to me in writing and they'll say, I already told you how much I am going to pay and they don't want to do it. You have to beg and then you're seen as a problem. – Journalist 5.

Almost all respondents described the relationship between local journalists and foreign correspondents as highly unequal, with foreign correspondents often exploiting local journalists when collaborating with them or hiring them as fixers. This inequality was described as manifesting through a financial imbalance of power, where local journalists accepted significantly lower compensation in comparison. Respondents emphasized that fixers in Mexico are almost always trained and practicing journalists, not merely individuals with local knowledge. Nevertheless, foreign correspondents and media outlets from the Global North often treated them not as journalistic collaborators with whom to build long-term relationships or formally contract for assignments in which they might act as experts, but rather as service providers. These fixers were expected to supply sources, contextual knowledge, story ideas, and leads without receiving public credit or fair compensation. The payment offered was often substantially lower than what foreign correspondents were paid for the same story, and sometimes did not reflect the budgetary capacity of the international media outlets involved. This dynamic was experienced as a power imbalance that negatively affected the Mexican journalists' sense of professional identity, pride, and above all, perceptions of fair working conditions. Although many expressed indignation and a strong sense of being exploited, some noted that they felt unable to resist the situation: they needed the income, and felt easily replaceable. Several described experiences where, after declining such assignments, they saw colleagues accept them. This reinforced a sense of disempowerment and an inability to push back. One journalist described viewing his experiences of this phenomena as another part of colonialism.

> I have 10 years [of experience] covering the fishermen of Veracruz. It's a very nice topic, not dangerous. I have 10 years doing that and then I receive a call: "Hey, we have this photographer who is going to take photos of the fishermen. Take this guy, and please help him. Show him all your spots." I felt like, no, why don't you ask me? I mean, you know me. You saw my work. Why do I need to guide a Spanish man who came here? It's ridiculous. But it's our reality always. And if I don't do it, my friend who works for [a news agency] is going to do it, because money pays everything. – Journalist 7.

> I have some colleagues, friend of mine who are happy with that because they say I don't care, it's money and I know, I know it's a moral situation that we have. We have to do for money some things and others we need to say no even when we lose the opportunity and someone else is going to take it. And Let's be honest, not all the newspapers and not all international media wants to say the truth about Mexico. They want to sell their version, you know. And I don't want to contribute to the narratives of other countries' versions of my reality. So, we have problems. Not being with dignity, with a dignified contract. We don't have continuous work with the media and also they pay per day, they don't have any policies about safety with us. So for a lot, not all the newspapers or agencies, but For 90%, we are just… Some worker who stayed with them for one or two days, and that's another vulnerability of our work. – Journalist 7

> Mexican journalists so often have to turn in so many stories, like have to write four stories a day. So if they have a really interesting story about how this corporation is exploiting the wind farms of Oaxaca to take more land from the farmers or whatever, they might publish a really short story about that because they don't have time or resources to do a longer story So foreign journalists will come in and say oh, I like your story. Give me your contacts. I'll invite you to coffee. They'll give the contacts because they're like in good spirits. And then the foreign journalists will do this longer investigation because they have the resources and money to do it without involving the journalist who broke the story. – Journalist 5.

Income inequality and social inequality between fixers and foreign correspondents has been examined in previous research. Kotišová and Deuze note in their critical review of scholarly research on fixers that those working in conflict zones almost always face a financial disadvantage (Kotišová and Deuze, 2022, p. 1168).

Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023) highlight that freelance journalists, driven by economic incentives, may take on greater personal risks than staff journalists, as dangerous stories or high-risk news coverage can serve as a unique selling point that leads to more assignments and higher income. This can be understood as an aspect of media logic's negative bias where negative news receives more attention and visibility. This view was shared by some freelance journalists, one of

whom, for example, noted that news from Sinaloa almost always focused on cartel violence and almost never on football.

> I think in general, obviously the character of the work puts journalists, as I said, in this two-fold situation. Not only that but also, if I'm a journalist in Sinaloa and I want to sell a story for a national newspaper, they won't be interested if I write something about football in Mazatlan. Sinaloa is "the big crime story", so then, you have to go and make your story about crime and violence. – Journalist 3

> If people don't have enough money, they're taking more risk. I think that's the story of the majority of Mexican journalists. I remember being in Puebla, I was there to do a story, and I finished my story and was hanging out with other journalists. It was one in the morning and we were at a bar, and one journalist got a call saying that they had found vats of acid where they thought bodies were being dissolved in the middle of nowhere and they wanted him to go and take photos. He didn't go, but like, when Mexican journalists get paid $5 a story, which many do, they get paid five dollars or four dollars a story or even less. That four dollars means an extra meal and they will go at one in the morning to do that. – Journalist 5.

At the same time, some freelancers described their decision to cover dangerous topics or report from insecure areas as an expression of the autonomy inherent to freelancing. They valued the freedom to go to locations where, had they been working under an editor, they likely would not have been allowed to travel due to the editor's responsibility for ensuring their safety. Some respondents who were employed, however, argued that staff journalists were actually better positioned to report from insecure regions, as they had access to safety equipment, insurance, and security coordinators through their employers. Freelancers, lacking these resources, were often unable to pursue such assignments, they reasoned. In summary, there was considerable variation in how journalists perceived whether freelancers took on greater risks due to financial incentives when choosing what topics to report on.

> I do independent documentaries and I have a documentary right now about poppy producers in Mexico. And there's definitely situations very dangerous that I recorded in it that I'm glad I went and could record and an editor probably would not have let me, a proper editor would not let me go there, so. – Journalist 5

Though reporters primarily working for foreign media strongly protruded as a privileged group, all journalists under age 40 described a sense of uncertainty about the future, and a majority expressed that they would likely not have been able to continue working as journalists if they had children. This was due to the precarious nature of the work, insufficient pay, or excessively long working hours. None of these respondents had children.

The results revealed a strong link between limited financial resources and decreased physical and psychological safety. Conversely, there was an association between increased feelings of safety and working with editors or commissioning outlets that provided greater resources, such as access to safety consultants or protective equipment. However, this difference was most commonly described on an emotional level; respondents reported feeling significantly safer when working with editors who regularly checked in on their well-being or progress. This, too, can be understood as a resource-related issue, as editors with reasonable working conditions and manageable workloads are more able to provide support to their reporters. At the same time, some respondents described negative experiences working with editors at well-resourced outlets, indicating that institutional resources alone do not guarantee supportive professional relationships.

Several of the findings confirm Slavtcheva-Petkova et al.'s statement that "Precarity challenges the operational basis of journalism as an institution." (2023, p. 1215), with freelancers being especially affected by economic insecurity, as well as by the increased risks that come with a lack of resources and organizational support. Financial insecurity can also be viewed through the lens of power dynamics. For example, this becomes evident in the accounts of respondents who spoke explicitly or implicitly about the lack of autonomy resulting from being easily replaceable. The awareness of this replaceability led them to accept conditions that were, to some extent, harmful to them or that they would not have agreed to had they enjoyed a more stable income.

7.4 Psychological threats and the effects of threat on personal well-being: Psychological distress resulting from exposure to threats, coverage of traumatic events, and strained relationships with editors

Psychological threats and emotional distress emerged as the type of occupational safety risk most clearly identified as a consequence of other forms of threats, for example, feeling heightened anxiety for long periods of time due to financial instability. Direct psychological threats were described most prominently and by the largest number of respondents when they spoke about experiencing mental health struggles after reporting on traumatic events. More than half of the respondents stated that this had led to feelings of depression, low mood, or post-traumatic stress disorder. The types of coverage that resulted in negative emotions and psychological distress spanned from murders and disappearances, LGBTQ-rights, violence against women, corruption and land and water defense. This was in several cases related to the reporter being threatened in some capacity, but more commonly, it was related to seeing others suffer. Some of the reporters spoke about the cumulative, psychologically corrosive effect of repeatedly covering difficult and potentially traumatic subjects. This was often linked to reflections and descriptions of becoming desensitised through their work, or of violence becoming normalised during periods when they were repeatedly exposed to it in the field. Some described how this had led to breakdowns or to their nervous systems becoming hypersensitive, typically upon returning home, or on a day off.

One respondent described struggling a lot with feelings of guilt because of the inherent imbalance in power and opportunity between her as a journalist and her sources, while covering a story about mothers looking for their disappeared children (commonly referred to as Desaparecidos):

> From the moment I was in that first discovery, I knew that that is what a journalist dreams of. I'd read so much about Desaparecidos, but so rarely is a journalist there. They'll arrive later perhaps. I felt a lot of guilt knowing that I stood to gain so much: were I able to rise as a writer to the challenge of writing a good piece, the reward for me would be ineffable. For [the mothers], I always knew that in the end, yes, maybe shining a light on their work would get them donations, maybe it would even somehow help as like one straw on a camel's back; pressuring the government, you know, embarrassing the government enough into some sort of action, like maybe, maybe… Those are all very abstract things. What I stood to gain was very concrete, nothing about it was abstract. I knew I wanted an agent, I knew I wanted a book deal. I got all of that and it haunted me from before it even happened, and certainly after. – Journalist 6

Feelings of guilt and an awareness of this power imbalance were also present among several other respondents.

Other ways in which psychological threats were experienced or described included workplace discrimination, and bullying or social exclusion by editors or colleagues. Burnout also emerged as a prominent theme. It was frequently linked to economic insecurity and stress, as well as to increased workloads resulting from downsized newsrooms, high demands from editors and expectations to work excessively long shifts..

Relationships with editors were mentioned by all freelance journalists as a source of concern and stress. This emerged on several levels. First, several freelancers reported feeling anxious or having experienced conflict with editors or commissioning outlets due to having been paid less than agreed upon or having payments delayed for several months. Second, many freelancers stated that they refrained from raising concerns about needs, safety issues, or poor working conditions with editors or clients, fearing they would be perceived as difficult to work with, which might result in fewer assignments. Some had experienced this.

> [I was] looking for disappeared people with people who were looking for their missing loved ones. It's very emotionally intense, it's hot, it is hard, all these things, and they just have no idea. [Editors] don't know how to check in with you. One of the bosses of this project asked me how it went, and I said, like, the editor had no idea what he was doing, like I explained all this, and instead of sympathizing with me, she got upset and talked to the editor in question. And through a series of other things, I eventually was laid off. That's why it's important sometimes to have these intermediary organizations that can help you as a journalist because you alone just seem like you are the problem. – Journalist 5

Third, multiple freelance journalists described emotional distress resulting from editors mocking or completely ignoring them after they had reported experiencing physical threats, traumatic events, or having worked in physically unsafe environments, despite being under contract with the newsroom where the editor was employed. Being mocked, dismissed, or entirely ignored were the most brutal manifestations of emotionally taxing relationships with editors. Something that appeared in even more cases, and which several respondents identified as the underlying

cause of such treatment, was editors' lack of understanding of the type of assignments they had commissioned and the security conditions in the places or contexts from which the journalists were reporting. This lack of knowledge, often on the part of foreign editors, led to feelings among journalists of being seen as insignificant in the eyes of their editors, resulting in frustration, conflict, sorrow, and in some cases, depression.

> I think also even a lot of times working with foreign crews, they don't understand, even when you're on site, the level of danger that you're in. I was hired as a drone pilot. It was in a very dangerous town where journalists had been murdered. And they wanted me to go fly and record a river. To record that river, I worked with one journalist to contact another journalist who contacted the head of the local cartel to get permission to fly the drone. We had to go meet him, get permission, then go fly the drone, and the director was like, where are you? Why did it take so long? Why were you doing that? And I'm like, we had to get permission. What do you mean you gotta get permission? I'm, like, I don't think you understand anything. Even though we're here because a journalist got killed, making a documentary [...] It felt like they didn't understand anything about the safety here. It's just a constant, total dismissal of our needs. Of our reality, I guess. And I think that's the case with both foreign and non-foreign editors. I think they don't understand my reality, and much less the reality of local journalists who can't, if something happens, then they can't just get on a plane. – Journalist 5

Two journalists spoke explicitly about the psychological effects of adrenaline surges, and similar sentiments could be observed to some extent in interviews with two additional journalists. Adrenaline was described as thrilling and as something they felt drawn to. One journalist emphasised that this was something he had needed to be cautious about, comparing adrenaline to a drug that one can become addicted to. He believed that several of his colleagues had experienced this, in the sense that they took significant risks and actively sought out dangerous environments, which had affected him when working in a team. Another journalist explained that he enjoyed the rush that came with reporting from violent settings.

Several journalists described receiving threats by letter or message following a publication, which led to feelings of anxiety for some. One journalist explained that he had received threatening phone calls on a fairly regular basis, not tied to one particular publication, which,

combined with his belief that he was being digitally surveilled, had made the work feel particularly burdensome.

Two journalists mentioned that during previous President Andrés Manuel López Obrador time in office, they experienced anxiety in connection with the so-called *mañaneras*, his morning press conferences, where journalists who had published content he disapproved of, often investigations concerning him or his party (LatAm Journalism Review, 2023), were publicly singled out. They knew colleagues who had been targeted in this way and were worried that the same could happen to themselves or to friends. One compared the phenomena to doxxing. This hostility toward the press can be seen as a contributing factor to the growing public mistrust of journalists and the media in Mexico. On a macro level, this mistrust can also be understood as a source of increased insecurity for journalists. As several respondents put it, the suspicion toward journalists persists even when they are subjected to violence, threats, or murder, and becomes something that segments of the public use as justification when such crimes go uninvestigated. In this way, public mistrust becomes a factor that reinforces the widespread impunity. One journalist, for example, described how people had spread information that two recently murdered journalists had been smoking marijuana in their apartment, implying that they had essentially brought it upon themselves.

In line with the occupational safety concept model, the *mañaneras* can be understood as an exercise of symbolic power, in which journalism is delegitimized through the establishment of a "fake news" narrative (2023, p. 1217). In accordance with the model, this also produces the effect described by the journalists, where such delegitimization leads to broader acceptance of impunity (Gonzalez Macias and Reyna Garcia, 2019, ref. In Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

7.5 Coping and the effects of threats to occupational safety on professional practice: Self-censorship, distancing, support-networks and collective collaboration

During the interviews, it became evident that the presence of various types of threats had a significant impact on which stories journalists chose to report, how the reporting was carried out, and what the final published journalistic product looked like. In other words, threats influenced

the process at the idea stage, during production, and in the final product that reached the public. There were cases where journalists chose to drop a story or not follow up on a previously published report due to direct threats, even when they otherwise would have done so. This was most commonly due to physical threat, such as being visited or followed by threatening individuals, or digital threat in the form of threatening messages. In addition, decisions to anonymize witnesses and sources, or to alter details in order to protect them, were very common. Freelance journalists also often chose not to report from the city or village where they lived, opting instead to work in places farther away to reduce risks. As a result, nearly all, nine out of ten of the interviewed journalists, engaged in some form of self-censorship.

> I am thinking more seriously about what I am going to cover. I had a co-worker who was writing about the involvement of business in suspicious disappearances or deaths in the mining sector, people who were opposed to mines. So that's the kind of story where I think he did the reporting very well, the local journalists who worked with him, also were very responsible. But that's a risk. That kind of story, to me, is one that I wouldn't try to do because it's unsafe. Going to places where people are trying to cover something up is very much a risk. You not only put yourself at risk, but also the people you're interviewing. – Journalist 9

Distance, in time or in place, was often mentioned as a professional practice conducted with the sole purpose of increasing the safety of the journalist and his or her sources.

> My priority is always to protect my sources. Actually, that's why I never work for the news. I don't want to have the top news. The work I am doing right now I will be publishing in one year, because that's better for my sources. I do my work very very slow. Some of those guys and women and men became my friends. I have a great relationship with all my sources. For me, that is the most important part. I need to protect them. And also, if they are protected, I'm protected. – Journalist 7

> When you are taking photos, everybody's looking at you. So people start to recognize you, and that's good some times, but it's very bad in others. That's why I started to work far from my house. I started to work in other states and then in other countries because I don't like that people not only notice me, people start to notice and pay attention to my family and things like that. And that's one of the challenges here because we need to protect our family too. Our friends, we need to protect everything around us. – Journalist 7

> My documentary is 27 minutes long. I didn't want to do one that was over an hour because I didn' want to take the risk of going to those places more times. So I mean, I think it's every journalists' self-censorship that plays a part [...] Like, I live in a small town outside of Mexico City and there was just a series of forest fires, like four forest fires there last week. There's many journalists that live there, but like most of them live a very similar life to me. We work in Mexico City and then go there. I was like, none of us are doing stories about what's happening here, you know? And this is like a serious story, they're all provoked fires. I think we're not used to working there, but also, I think there's a reality of a privilege where we don't want to report on what's happened there because it involves politics and accusing this person of starting the fire or this group and I think that's self-censorship, but still, we are in a much more privileged position than the journalist who lives in a small town in Veracruz who's like of course I'm going to report on what's happening in my town. – Journalist 5

The practice of geographically distancing one's work from one's place of residence can be seen as, although not as severe as the experiences of displacement examined in Nieto-Brizio and Márquez-Ramírez's study, a similar form of risk minimization in relation to where one lives, that has significant impact on one's professional practice, and also one's personal well-being, since it negatively affected the participants' senses of personal freedom and journalistic autonomy.

Similarly, self-imposed limits such as covering a topic only once, was a protective mechanism that affected some respondents professional practice:

> I promised myself from the start that I would never write about [disappearances] again. This was my one shot to get it right. – Journalist 6

These strategies can be understood as tendencies toward professional reflexivity (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016, pp. 7–8), as they go against typical journalistic virtues such as being first on the scene, first to publish, or to "break" a story. They can also be regarded as coping strategies that result in submission, meaning that the journalists often choose to comply with perceived or experienced threats, in the words of Slavtcheva-Petkova (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1221).

Some coping strategies, such as self-censorship, have been previously mentioned as responses to the aforementioned threats. In addition to this, coping strategies that in various ways involved being in social contexts, community, or collaboration emerged as the most common forms of coping. These could involve formal networks or organisations where journalists supported each other, but being involved in such structures was less common than processing difficulties and insecurity through conversations with colleagues or people similar to colleagues, such as in group chats with other freelance journalists. The most common way of handling security-related challenges in the work was talking with friends who also worked in the same field.

Involvement in formal networks to promote occupational safety was regarded by some as a good way to manage risks and promote resilience. Various networks with different areas of focus were mentioned, but the most common ways these were used to manage risks and threats were to seek support in financial disputes with clients. For example, a freelance organization had helped two of the respondents with legal advice in such matters. Another way some respondents found support in these types of organizations was by participating in professional development workshops or safety training. These workshops were mainly seen as a tool for becoming better equipped against physical violence, but group therapy workshops focusing on mental health were also mentioned. However, similar to what González de Bustamante and Relly (2014) found regarding support networks, this study also revealed that differences in resources and practices sometimes created tensions (pp. 517–519), as well as some degree of mistrust within formal support networks. Journalists with fewer resources and those working more locally experienced elitism within these networks: They felt that leaders within such networks sometimes prioritized journalists with high status, and their own friends. Even respondents who were involved in and viewed formal networks positively acknowledged the problem of reaching less privileged journalists and those working outside major cities, and noted that it was often the same small group of journalists who regularly participated in these contexts, while the majority of journalists in Mexico do not take part in such support networks. Some respondents also referred to the country's history and the rule of the PRI as contributing to a culture of distrust or aversion toward unions or forms of collaboration resembling union engagement. None of the respondents were affiliated with a labor union.

Coping through collective collaboration, in the form of informal practices of mutual support among journalists, even across competing outlets was commonly observed, particularly among freelance journalists. These collaborations, which may include information-sharing or joint travel and team-based reporting, often function as crucial coping mechanisms in the absence of formal protection structures. González and Relly (2016, p. 11) identify collective collaboration as a common form of adaptation or coping mechanism among journalists in Mexico, a finding that aligns closely with the present study. One respondent, for instance, described how, during her time as a freelancer, she would seek out other journalists traveling to the same locations, even if they were working on separate projects, in order to travel together and enhance her sense of safety.

8. Conclusions and Discussion

This chapter provides a synthesis of the findings and situates them within the theoretical framework, outlining the conclusions that may be drawn. It concludes with a reflection on areas in need of further research.

The purpose of this study was to to deepen the understanding of how Mexican journalists' working conditions and environments impact their sense of occupational safety in relation to their professional practice and personal well-being.

The findings suggest that threats exert a substantial influence on journalists in Mexico, affecting both their professional practice and personal well-being. All four dimensions of threats to occupational safety were to varying degrees evident in the data.

Journalists in Mexico's perceptions on their occupational safety varied regarding how they experienced threats. Experiences of physical threats did occur, but were rarely something respondents had encountered more than a handful of times. Such threats were significantly more common among those reporting from dangerous locations, especially when they stayed there for extended periods (more than a few days), and were more frequently reported by freelancers than by staff journalists. Gendered threats also emerged. Digital threats were present, and a major

concern that emerged was the uncertainty around whether one was being surveilled, which caused considerable anxiety. Concerns regarding digital surveillance were most prevalent amongst investigative journalists. Psychological threats were strongly associated with reporting on traumatic events, but they also appeared as a consequence of other types of threats, such as experiencing severe stress and anxiety due to being under digital surveillance, or in the form of PTSD or emotional distress as a result of being subjected to violence. Financial threats were, second to psychological threat (if understood as an effect of other types of threat), by far the most widespread, primarily taking the form of insecure employment. Lack of financial resources increased overall exposure to threats. For example, through greater vulnerability to physical threats due to the absence of safety equipment, accepting more dangerous assignments than one otherwise would, or choosing less secure modes of travel.

One aspect that emerged from the analysis, and which could be further clarified in the occupational safety conceptual model, is the role of economic resources in enhancing journalists' safety. A lack of resources appeared in the findings as a primary underlying factor, and as a potential predictor of heightened security risks.

In addition to widespread precarity, certain tendencies toward what Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020, p. 247) describe as "fragile professionalism" could be discerned, particularly in respondents' reasoning that other journalists faced worse conditions and that one therefore should not complain. These tendencies are concerning, as journalists’ ability to negotiate for better conditions is undermined when precarious circumstances are regarded as normal or universal.

The prevalence of threat affected respondent's professional practice, as efforts to minimize risk shaped their work, often through self-censorship, at every stage of the journalistic process. Prior to reporting, it influenced the selection of topics, leading journalists to avoid certain subjects perceived as too dangerous. During the reporting phase, it affected decisions such as how long to remain in high-risk areas and how deeply to investigate sensitive issues. It also influenced the editing process, including which details to disclose and which sources to include, anonymize, or omit entirely. After the reporting was completed, safety concerns guided decisions about how and when the content would be published. In some cases, this meant delaying publication or adjusting the format of the material in order to reduce exposure and avoid potential

repercussions. In this way, risk minimization became embedded in the routine of professional practice, shaping both journalistic output and the conditions under which it was produced.

The most common coping strategies, alongside the aforementioned forms of tactical publication choice or self-censorship, for dealing with threats were various forms of collective support: sharing emotions with friends, communicating with colleagues while out in the field, joining organizations that advocate for journalists' rights, or engaging in collective collaboration.

In line with the Occupational safety conceptual model, the findings indicate that power dynamics underpin the threats and risks faced by journalists in Mexico. The most commonly identified actors in the data were the state, editors, supervisors or other clients, criminal actors, and the general public. While much of the existing literature primarily highlights criminal actors and cartels as the main sources of threat to journalists in Mexico (CPJ 2019; Article 19, 2019; Landguiden, 2025), the results of this study revealed that many respondents emphasized the blurred boundaries between criminal and state actors. Furthermore, several viewed state actors as more threatening – particularly due to experiences of digital surveillance, but also through the exercise of symbolic power, like in the case of the *mañaneras*.

The results revealed significant differences in occupational safety between Mexican journalists and foreign journalists working in Mexico. These differences were expressed through disparities in resources and income, a lower exposure to physical threats among journalists with foreign citizenship (which can also be linked to white privilege), as well as the use of local fixers by foreign correspondents, and descriptions of how fixers are exploited in these situations. These issues have been examined by scholars such as Kotišová and Deuze (2022), but in a globalized and shifting media landscape, marked by increased precarity and short-term employment, this problem is likely to grow. Therefore, further research is needed to deepen the understanding of these dynamics and to raise awareness.

The widespread precariousness amongst journalists in Mexico is another issue that would be interesting to investigate in further research. The increased precariousness among journalists can be considered a global phenomenon, and this study shows that union involvement was unpopular among the respondents. Taking a closer look at why this is the case and in what ways collective

movements can strengthen journalists' rights, as well as examining the issues within these movements more closely, would be valuable in order to better understand the impact these movements have and how they could become more effective in their work to empower journalists.

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