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Blurred Boundaries of Journalism to Guarantee Safety: Approaches of Resistance and Resilience for Investigative Journalism in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

News organizations and journalists around the world have seen an increase in threats and attacks against themselves and their work. In Latin America, this is heightened by the ongoing state of violence. To continue producing quality investigative journalism, professionals must find ways to deal with the situation. This study analyzes how journalists from small- and medium-sized outlets can perform their duties with greater security. Through 15 in-depth interviews with Latin American practitioners, this study aims to understand which safety measures are being adopted and their implications for the boundaries of journalism. Results illustrate that these professionals are assuming new roles by incorporating security measures into their daily routines. Consequently, these security procedures are merged with journalistic activity, invading other fields. Our interviewees highlighted that their news organizations are embracing collaboration and other sorts of collective actions such as advocacy to promote greater security. This study offers a new perspective on the boundaries of journalism that takes into consideration a set of tasks absorbed by journalists and news organizations that are often invisible and expands the literature on news safety in Latin America. We conclude with an agenda for future research.

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Introduction

Media practitioners face an increasing variety of challenges to serve the public with timely and reliable news. These range from the rise of political polarization and populist movements to the end of traditional news media business models (Villi and Picard 2019; Deuze 2019). Media professionals and their news organizations have to adopt a combination of work arrangements to fulfill journalistic objectives, which includes increasing security provisions (Holton et al. 2021; Porlezza and Di Salvo 2020). This is particularly true for journalists and media organizations focused on investigative journalism, which requires stronger safety measures due to the nature of the work.

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Latin America historically suffers from political and economic instabilities (Reyes and Sawyer 2019), and the region's media systems are dependent on the political and economic powers of their respective countries (Porto 2015; Saldaña and Mourão 2018). On the other side, there has also been a significant increase in independent, nonprofit journalism in Latin America which is dedicated to investigative reporting based on solid evidence, facts and data analysis (de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita 2021a; Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014).

While some scholars assert the ways in which “legacy news organizations have produced numerous investigations that revealed wrongdoing and corruption in government, corporations, religious institutions, and other sectors of society”, in recent decades (Saldaña and Waisbord 2021) there has been a growing interest in investigative reporting by small- and medium-sized news outlets in Latin America (Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014), where “[m]any of them are independent, non-profit news organizations that emerged during the internet boom of the 2000s” (Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos 2021, 564). These organizations have shaken political systems in the region through their investigations, increasing risks for themselves and their practitioners. Consequently, these professionals face onslaughts ranging from virtual attacks and physical threats to legal actions in national courts. These attacks come from the higher echelons of government and public agents who have seen social media's ubiquity as their primary attack tool (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2017).

Drawing on literature about Latin American news media and the boundaries of journalism, this study explores how investigative journalists from independent, nonprofit news media organizations (that are usually small- to medium-sized companies) adopt safety measures. Generally speaking, these news outlets lack the resources to invest in safety measures compared to legacy news outlets and media conglomerates but, despite these limitations, independent news organizations have sought to develop a safer environment that allows them to continue working.

As authoritarian regimes continue to exert pressure on investigative journalism, in judicial and digital spheres, Latin American news outlets are required to expend an increasing amount of resources to deal with these tactics. Consequently, Latin American news outlets have to look for new ways to strengthen their incident response against attacks and other abuses. Safety measures need to be adopted to increase their security. However, they raise questions about the burdens imposed on small and medium-size organizations and their professionals. This movement might have further implications for journalism practices, as they stretch the professional boundaries. However, little is known about how the ongoing and structural state of violence against news organizations and their practitioners has stretched their professional boundaries to protect themselves. We pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Which measures are small- and medium-sized investigative news organizations in Latin America using to protect themselves, their sources, and their professionals?

RQ2: How are safety measures expanding the boundaries of journalism in Latin America?

We conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen ($n = 15$) Latin American media practitioners between November 2019 and May 2021. Following Flick's (2009) and Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao's (2004) qualitative research methodology, these interviews

were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, focusing on experiences, meanings, and unconscious concerns. This study brings a wide range of experiences and interpretations of professionals from a diverse range of countries. We selected professionals from eight countries, ranging from Cuba to Brazil, to discuss the safety measures that journalists and their (small- and medium-sized) media organizations are putting in place to continue reporting with quality. These countries have different political, economic, and social backgrounds that impose further impacts.

This study argues that structural violence and the ongoing state of violence have stretched even more the already blurred boundaries of journalism, which have been experiencing changes since the digital transformation. Journalism has long been affected and transformed by technological advancements, resulting in changes in norms and practices (Phillips et al. 2009) and adding new actors who play central roles in the field (Holton et al. 2021). These changes often occur at the frontiers or boundaries within the journalism, confronting the traditional notion of the field by adding new actors and activities, while protecting journalistic autonomy. (Schudson and Anderson 2009; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Our study aims to shed light on approaches of resistance and resilience by Latin American journalists and news outlets to assess risks and safeguard the future of investigative journalism. This study contributes to the academic literature by concentrating on the impact of violence against Latin American news practitioners and showing how it affects the boundaries of their work. Furthermore, it expands the literature related to journalistic safety in Latin America by demonstrating how these practices guarantee security and maintain news practitioners' ability to report. We conclude with useful observations and possible future directions for study.

Theoretical Background

Investigative Reporting in Latin America: The Role of Independent and Nonprofit Journalism Initiatives

The Latin American media system is characterized by the dominance of private commercial media organizations over those owned by the state, limiting the watchdog role of journalism due to the economic and political interests of the families owning these media companies (Porto 2015). Consequently, there is an evident prevalence of commercial television, while there is a minimum interest in public radio and television (Fox and Waisbord 2002).

These family groups also prevail in the printed press. Media owners often have horizontal business structures, with interests in other economic sectors such as banking, construction, and farming (Porto 2015). They are also involved in politics (Salaverría and de-Lima-Santos 2021). However, the region is not a homogeneous entity, and its realities cannot be interpreted as a singular whole (Lugo-Ocando 2008; Waisbord 2012). For example, the increased suppression and censorship of media in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela has not spread widely across Latin America. Similarly, the development of public service broadcasting in Chile is an exception across the region (Porto 2015).

During recent decades, the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in many parts of Latin America has aided the process of media reform. This scenario has further

changed with the liberalization and privatization of news media organizations. Simultaneously, the emergence of digital media in Latin America provided new ways to communicate and consume information. This landscape of digital-native news sites challenged what mainstream, traditional news organizations were producing, and served as an alternative dedicated to reporting with transparency, independence, and rigor (Harlow and Salaverría 2016). Harlow (2021) states that Latin American journalists see media participation in the community, independence, and taking a stance against injustice as important characteristics of their alternative media.

Thus, digital-native news organizations, many of which are small- or medium-sized businesses, have “provided a public service that has been in most cases much better and more critical than their traditional mainstream counterparts” (Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014, 528). The increasing abundance of media outlets is directly associated with the widespread adoption of digital media and the potential to reach distinct publics at local, national, or international levels (Marques and Miola 2021).

Media practitioners believe that the internet has helped them to reach wider audiences and made it possible to execute innovative, award-winning investigative projects (Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014). However, these evolutions in the Latin American media system are seen as forced positions because open competition comes with many hidden rules that limit the freedom of the actors involved (Guerrero 2014). For example, many of these news outlets rely on foreign aid to sustain their businesses, mainly through donations from philanthropic foundations (Harlow 2021; Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014). Scholars have suggested that, although foundations do not directly influence the content of the journalism they fund, specific thematic areas of their interest have direct consequences on journalistic coverage (Scott, Bunce, and Wright 2019).

Investigative Journalism and Security Issues in Latin America

Historically, watchdog reporting has always been influenced by the executive power that is part of Latin American politics. Presidents promoted their instrumental uses and a clientelism approach to media policies that favored groups that did not produce content undermining their governments. Clientelism is a practice common across the region that consists of a “form of social organization that undermines the rule of law, as well as the impersonal and transparent management of public resources by government officials” (Porto 2015, 4).

Media systems influence the production of news reporting, affecting journalists by impacting on their coverage and working conditions (Lohner, Banjac, and Neverla 2016). This structural violence is built via instruments promoted through political and economic contexts. For example, Latin American politicians have “deployed overt and subtle forms of control to tame the media, curb freedom of expression, and dominate the public sphere” (Porto 2015, 4).

Boundaries between government officials, the judicial system, and crime factions do not therefore exist, leading to government abuses. There is no clear idea of who is behind the violence against journalists (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Salazar 2019). For example, these mechanisms include “collusion with media owners, selective allocation of government advertising and subsidies in exchange for favorable

coverage, bribes for reporters, manipulation of access to information” (Porto 2015, 4). Even though most of the countries have adopted democratic political systems, Latin American investigative journalists “still face persecutions and engage in self-censorship as a preservation strategy” (Saldaña and Mourão 2018, 315).

Journalism safety has been broadly defined as strategies that focus on promoting safe environments to the exercise of the profession and measures to fight or mitigate the impunity on crimes committed against media practitioners (UNESCO 2016). The increasing erosion, restriction and compromise of the journalistic ecosystem may constitute a threat to the sustainability of investigative journalism (Posetti 2017). For this reason, scholars and practitioners are studying and implementing protection frameworks to ensure that journalists are able to carry out their work under safe conditions.

Technology has brought additional risks, especially concerning the security of journalists, sources, and news organizations (González and Rodelo 2020). Many media practitioners are significantly “adapting their work in an effort to shield their sources from exposure, sometimes even seeking to avoid electronic devices and communications altogether” (Posetti 2017, 8). Governments can use technology to monitor, harass, and repress journalists and media professionals, posing greater challenges to investigative reporting (Iesue et al. 2021).

In Latin America, this is taken to a higher level because violence is on the rise and radical populist leaders (such as Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro) have acrimonious relations with media institutions (Iesue et al. 2021). Researchers have illustrated how poor visibility, especially of digital risks, and insufficient confrontation of the problem are common in Latin American countries such as Brazil and Mexico (Christofolletti and Torres 2017).

The so-called Snowden effect has shed light on pervasive, illegal, and largely uncontrolled government spying that journalists and news organizations may be experiencing while communicating with their sources online (Di Salvo 2022). For example, Brazilian journalists value the confidentiality of their sources more than their own privacy (Christofolletti 2019). The revelations made by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden highlighted the importance of investigative journalism and called for real change on law, policy and politics. More recent revelations have shown that even more dangerous surveillance threats are being posed to the safety of journalists, targeted with spyware technology such as Pegasus (Di Salvo 2022).

Furthermore, the patterns of violence and fear that were historically commonplace in Latin America – such as guerilla movements, civil wars, bloody revolutions, brutal dictatorships, political conflicts, domestic violence, and criminal violence (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011) – are still a reality (Faletto 1993) with higher homicide rates and other common acts of violence across the region (Salaverría and de-Lima-Santos 2021).

Saldaña & Mourão state that “[f]ear of violence and the lack of a culture of free speech still pose severe consequences for Latin American investigative reporting” (2018, 319). Thus, safety and security measures start to become the core of daily routine. Small- and medium-sized news outlets, which do not have many resources to cover lawsuits, have to develop ways to protect their websites and train their staff in different security and safety measures.

The Blurred Boundaries of Journalism

Facing an increasing variety of challenges to journalistic practice – ranging from the resurgence of political polarization and populist movements to the end of traditional business models of news media – media professionals have had to seek other work arrangements in order to increase their security models and continue reporting with quality. In this scenario of fierce competition, media organizations and journalists are required to expand their ways of understanding news work to embrace tasks beyond the traditional limits of journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

Carlson (2016) states that journalism is a diverse profession that is embedded by various forces, both internal and external. This leads one to think that the edges of journalism might change or stretch in different directions, according to various influences, needs, contexts, and cultures. This is especially relevant in Latin America where the media industry has suffered from historical political and economic instabilities that led to significant media politicization and profound dependence on the political and economic powers (Porto 2015).

Traditionally, the metajournalistic discourse sets limits for the entry of various actors inside and outside journalism by defining what can or cannot be done (Carlson 2016). Therefore, it establishes boundaries of what is a generally accepted behavior in the journalistic field. In other words, boundaries of work are an important endeavor to organize the world of journalism by understanding how certain people, types of activities, and ways of thinking are evolving to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the limits of acceptable journalistic practices (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

The boundaries of journalism are based on the work of sociologist Thomas Gieryn, who divided the boundary work into three main categories: expansion, expulsion, and protection of autonomy (Gieryn 1983). Expansion is when one field invades another, and the activities are merged. Expulsion bans intruders and protects the field from novel actors. Autonomy is conferred to significant actors to reinforce the control of a field.

Several researchers have described the peripheral actors who are emerging in journalism and are interacting with traditional actors. These include public relations agents, advertisers, and data journalists (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; de-Lima-Santos 2022; Eldridge 2017; Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019). Some of these actors are dissolving the metajournalistic discourse and are not accepted in the journalistic field (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; de-Lima-Santos 2022). Conversely, several business-oriented functions are being incorporated into journalistic activities that were not otherwise attributed to journalists. For example, Scott, Bunce, and Wright (2019) found differences in the way journalism is understood, valued, and practiced by news outlets that depend on philanthropic or corporate funding. In this case, journalists are required to include non-editorial work in their daily activities to pursue and manage the foundation funding. These duties are seen as legitimate journalistic practices by the news outlets and journalists who undertake them. This rhetoric is used in defense of a strict news-business boundary logic driven by the news industry crisis and its attempt at survival (Coddington 2015).

This resulted in a “shift in journalists’ role perceptions to more outcome-oriented reporting” (Scott, Bunce, and Wright 2019, 2035). Investigative journalists, especially, are reinforcing and renewing their ways of work in the face of increased risks (Porlezza and Di Salvo 2020). Emerging scholarly literature concentrates on the challenges posed

by new technologies and the new skills that journalists must develop to take advantage of technological tools (Örnebring 2010; Pavlik 2000). This means creating new safety measures to cope with the impacts of violence. For example, tools that protect journalistic work and sources such as Pretty Good Privacy (PGP), the Tor Browser, Signal, and SecureDrop, have become widely used in news work (Di Salvo 2021a). However, academic literature about how these surveillance tools are influencing norms, routines, and practices of journalists is yet limited.

Security is especially important in a region such as the Global South, known for its ongoing violence against its citizens and the press. These nations present their own nuances and needs. In Latin America, there has been a massive increase in independent and nonprofit journalism initiatives supporting free democracy through an informed public (Salaverría et al. 2019). These organizations have produced investigations that have shaken political systems, exposing themselves and their professionals to increased threats and risks. From virtual attacks and physical threats to legal actions in national courts, these professionals face novel and renewed forms of attacks by the higher echelons of government and public agents, who have seen social media's ubiquity as their primary tool for attack (Holton et al. 2021).

In this realm of expansion, journalism invades other fields to incorporate survival mechanisms to safeguard professionals and organizations. Scholarly literature has illustrated that journalists rely on self-censorship (González and Rodelo 2020; Fadnes, Krøvel, and Larsen 2020) and agenda cutting (Buchmeier 2020) as temporary actions to mitigate threats and attacks. However, these measures are not enough to reduce the state of permanent danger in which Latin American journalists live. A closer look at the academic literature reveals a gap in how Latin American journalists are expanding their practices to adopt safety measures to guarantee the continuation of news reporting in Latin America.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with Latin American practitioners. Small- and medium-sized news organizations in Latin America have been producing the most powerful investigations in the region, some of them award-winning (Lagunes and Svejnar 2020). Furthermore, these news organizations are the ones facing greater difficulties regarding their safety (Konow-Lund and Høiby 2021). An initial list of possible interviewees was created based on previous research about prominent news organizations that are conducting impactful investigations in Latin America and who had received the Global Editors Network's Data Journalism Awards, awards from the Gabo Foundation, the Online News Association's Online Journalism Awards, and Sigma Awards. We followed a snowball approach (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), asking the interviewees to recommend other professionals from small- and medium-sized news outlets that were concerned with safety and security measures.

Smaller digital news outlets distance themselves from the traditional mainstream media by producing a kind of journalism that they believe to be normatively good. These players force the industry to evolve and innovate (see Boczkowski 2005; de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita 2021). Consequently, these organizations serve as parameters,

Table 1. Description of the interviewees and their organizations.

Interviewee	Organization	Country
I1	The Intercept Brasil	Brazil
I2	The Intercept Brasil	Brazil
I3	Freelance	Brazil
I4	GK	Ecuador
I5	Cuestión Publica	Colombia
I6	Portal Catarinas	Brazil
I7	Colectivo Voces	Cuba
I8	Ojo Público	Peru
I9	IDL-Reporteros	Peru
I10	Boletín Ecológico	Nicaragua
I11	Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI)	Puerto Rico
I12	Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI)	Puerto Rico
I13	Armando.info	Venezuela
I14	Rutas del Conflicto	Colombia
I15	Efecto Cocuyo	Venezuela

to further the implications of journalism and safety, in the expansion of journalism's professional boundaries.

The final list included 15 interviewees from eight countries, as shown in [Table 1](#). We understood that a small sample size might pose a limitation. However, even in a small sample, insights into Latin American journalists' experiences and the common characteristics of their work can be identified. Furthermore, this is not a comparative study. It aims at using lessons from practitioners in Latin America to discuss the safety of journalists and the role of threats and risks in shaping the journalistic field.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with these 15 professionals between November 2020 and May 2021 via videoconference. On average, interviews lasted 50 min and were conducted in Portuguese or Spanish, depending on the interviewee's mother tongue. The baseline interview covered five domains: (1) risks and threats, (2) measures and strategies adopted, (3) perceptions on digital safety, (4) perceptions on legal safety, and (5) perceptions on physical safety. Respondents could comment about investigative journalism in their organizations and country.

These practitioners belonged to 12 news outlets. One practitioner worked as a freelancer contributing to a number of digital news outlets. These organizations sought to produce investigative journalism with national and global resonance, covering topics ranging from environmental crimes to politics. [Table 2](#) summarizes the features of these news outlets.

All interviews were transcribed and submitted to thematic content analysis (Clarke and Braun 2014). This is a traditional method that systematically analyzes qualitative data to distinguish themes that emerge and find their relationships. Thematic analysis organizes interview content by theme. This step was performed in NVivo, a proprietary software tool, which assists in qualitative data analysis.

We identified four main themes that were recurrently cited by the interviewees: (1) the need for security specialization, (2) the need to deal with psychological effects of cyber threats and attacks, (3) the increasing use of the law against journalists or news outlets, and, (4) the physical measures adopted to protect these professionals. These points are discussed in the following section.

Table 2. News organizations and their description.

Organization	Country	Description	Link
Armando.info	Venezuela	Established in Venezuela in the heat of the crisis and the censorship of its media, Armando.info provides an independent platform to report on transnational, in-depth stories about Venezuela and Latin America.	https://armando.info/
Boletín Ecológico	Nicaragua	Established in 1993, the organization aims to inform the general population and decision-makers with scientific-technical information and investigations about environmental and sustainable development in Nicaragua and Central America.	http://www.boletinecologico.org/boletin_ecologico/index.html
Colectivo Voces	Cuba	Colectivo Voces covers topics related to citizenship, political participation, gender equality, social inclusion, human rights and sustainable development to empower the Cubans through communication tools.	https://sumavoces.org/
Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI)	Puerto Rico	Created in 2007, the Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI) is an independent, non-profit entity that aims to promote access to information for Puerto Ricans through three axes: investigative journalism, litigation, and journalistic training.	https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/
Cuestión Pública	Colombia	The news outlet was created to fill the gap in offerings of independent investigative journalism in Colombia and to shed light on cases of abuses of power.	https://cuestionpublica.com/
Efecto Cocuyo	Venezuela	Among recent issues of censorship in Venezuela, alternate media began to emerge in the country in the mid-2010s. Efecto Cocuyo emerged in this wave of news organizations working to provide access to information and the free practice of journalism in the country.	https://efectococuyo.com/
GK	Ecuador	GK journalism not only gives the news, but tries to explain it, giving its context and analyzing why it happened, particularly focusing on human rights and social transformation. The outlet produces news articles and audiovisual content, such as infographics, explainer videos, and illustrations.	https://gk.city/
IDL-Reporteros	Peru	IDL-Reporteros is an online newspaper, specializing in investigative reporting against corruption in Peru and promoting transparency.	https://www.idl-reporteros.pe/
Ojo Público	Peru	Ojo Público is a digital media platform for investigative journalism and new narratives that aim to offer relevant stories using data and innovative information tools on urgent issues of the national public agenda.	https://ojo-publico.com/
Portal Catarinas	Brazil	Catarinas is a news portal specializing in gender, feminism and human rights. The outlet seeks to articulate the feminist agenda in the construction of news stories.	https://catarinas.info/
Rutas del Conflicto	Colombia	Rutas del Conflicto brings together maps, documents, and news stories of the decades-long violent conflict in Colombia, giving the chance for users to search this information online and to explore and	https://rutadelconflicto.com/

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Organization	Country	Description	Link
The Intercept Brasil	Brazil	visualize the relationships between these crimes. The Intercept Brasil is the Brazilian subdomain of the US organization that was founded by journalists Glenn Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill and the filmmaker Laura Poitras in 2014. The organization is aimed at a Brazilian audience and describes itself as a news agency focused on watchdog and investigative journalism in the country.	https://theintercept.com/brasil/

Findings

Our study demonstrates that Latin American newsrooms may share some features aimed at safeguarding professionals and organizations. Conversely, each country has its own characteristics and dynamics. For example, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela share problems of authoritarian governments, while Colombian journalists “were often targets of violence throughout the half-century conflict with the FARC guerrilla,” (Barrios and Miller 2021, 1,423).

According to our interviewees, journalists and news organizations in Latin America suffer from specific problems related to their safety and health in four domains: digital, legal, physical, and psychological. Each of them requires new approaches to safeguard their work and themselves, incorporating non-journalistic actors and changing the competencies and abilities of journalists due to the increasing safety concerns. Below we describe each of these elements.

From Journalist to Digital Security Specialist

The digital environment poses many new challenges to the safety of journalists (Posetti 2017). Our interviewees reported cases across Latin America in which news outlets suffered not only government shutdowns but also cyberattacks on their news portals that collapsed pages for hours or days. Alongside attacks on news websites, digital harassment and hate speech have occurred. Interviewee I5, from Cuestión Pública (Colombia), said that after one of their first stories about a major investigation into Operation Lava Jato (Car Wash), they experienced attacks on their website, making them transfer their web hosting to another service provider that could offer better security against attacks by the government or other institutions involved in the scandal. Lava Jato had revealed the involvement of several politicians in corrupt schemes with Petrobras, a company majority-owned by the Brazilian state (see Lagunes and Svejnar 2020). In order to counter these attacks, journalists had to obtain knowledge about digital technology practices. This was acquired through training promoted by the nonprofit organization Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa and the company Curio (I5).

A similar situation happened to Brazilian organization Portal Catarinas, which covers topics from a gender perspective. The news outlet suffered attacks after publishing a story about a “rape grant” law proposed by a senator as a strategy to force rape victims to bear the rapist’s children and give parental rights to the criminal. According

to interviewee I6, they investigated where these cyber attacks came from but did not reach a conclusion. However, they speculated that “it was probably from here [Brazil]. Sometimes there are sites hosted in other countries. Our investigation does not indicate that it came from another country” (I6). To reach this conclusion, Portal Catarinas’ professionals collaborated with a digital specialist who helped them identify and resolve the issue. However, it required a great deal of time and energy to understand what caused the website to go down and how it could be fixed. Prior research suggests that news organizations and their professionals lack awareness of both technological threats and risks, which makes them more vulnerable (Bradshaw 2017).

A strategy adopted by some organizations represented in this study was to hire digital security specialists to deal with the increasing threats and vulnerabilities presented by the digital environment. The award-winning investigative news outlet Ojo Público (Peru) took this approach. “We do have some criteria or rules, such as not sharing information or sending an email directly. We also avoid performing certain tasks and actions. Then, we ask the support of a computer scientist [who is in our newsroom] who eventually reviews and detects if there is any threat” (I8).

These precautions are shared by The Intercept Brasil (TIB), an organization dedicated to investigative journalism in Brazil. TIB relies on leaked information, requiring the adoption of digital security measures to protect themselves and their sources, including holding workshops to learn how to deal with all sorts of attacks. “We had to invest in digital security and training of the team. We had a big concern with equipment, smartphones, emails, profiles on social media. [Then, we included] two-factor authentication in all the services and the use of antivirus [software on laptops]” (I1). Additionally, TIB’s journalists use SecureDrop as a security tool for sources contacting their journalists. Despite the complexity of the software, particularly for the sources (Di Salvo 2021a), this open-source tool provides a “whistleblower submission system that media organizations and NGOs can install to securely accept documents from anonymous sources” (SecureDrop).

Echoing findings from Di Salvo (2022), who saw a certain paranoia from journalists due to the sensitivity of their work, interviewee I1 stated: “all measures linked to digital security we adopted at a deep, intense level and we joke that we have an editorial desk that we call ‘paranoids.’” Another journalist from Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI) mentioned that they avoided saving data in the cloud as they were afraid of hacking or security breaches. In one of their largest investigations, they used “portable devices” (I12), such as flash disks and hard drives.

Cuba suffers from different types of digital threats that require practitioners to be innovative to create solutions. Internet access in Cuba is problematic, insufficient, and expensive. Furthermore, the government uses all means to shut down investigations to avoid being held accountable. This is a common situation found in the Global South. In August 2019, the Indonesian government shut down internet access in West Papua to control information about mass protests happening in the region (Lim 2020). To circumvent this situation, the organization Colectivo Voces adopted several strategies. Interviewee I7 says they “have had to resort to various resources to take care of ourselves because we have suffered a blockage of our website and our mobile application”. According to I7, other strategies were also adopted, such as reducing the number of images in their communication or allowing the audience to access a version of the content without images, thus avoiding the consumption of data on smartphones.

Interviewee I2 from TIB mentioned that they are also concerned about safety when collaborating with journalists from other news outlets, such as in the series “Vaza Jato” (roughly translated as Car Wash Leaks), which investigated money laundering scandals using the Telegram app. According to I2, TIB’s journalists played a large role in adopting strategies that would prevent leaked data from being compromised by security breaches or other issues that could damage their investigation. “We had a lot of concern with the security of our material but also the safety of the newsroom itself [as some journalists had access to data only in TIB’s newsroom]” (I2). As a smaller news media operation, TIB had “much more trouble to take these measures than the people at *Folha de S. Paulo*, UOL, *El País*, *Veja* [i.e., legacy news outlets]” (I2). This required a series of security protocols for its people.

The interviewees indicated that the blurred boundaries of journalism, which are widely discussed from the technological perspective (Carlson and Lewis 2015), are also seen through the lens of the safeguards adopted by Latin American practitioners. A common point among our interviewees is that when working for small- and medium-size investigative organizations, professionals must deal with new roles and activities that traditional journalists are not used to. This is in line with the realm of expansion, when one field invades another, taking over its domain (Carlson and Lewis 2015). In this case, journalists are working with digital security specialists to work on safety measures, while they are also adopting new competencies and skill sets to guarantee their safety.

However, I2 highlighted that there is no protocol for digital harassment and hate speech on the internet. This sheds light on another theme that emerged in the interviews, the psychological burden placed on practitioners.

Psychological Effects of Hate Speech and Digital Harassment

On the positive side, social networks give voice to almost everybody, becoming an open space for social communication. Due to the open nature of the internet, however, not all information on social media is reliable and trustworthy (Tandoc 2019). According to many of our interviewees, online harassment has become a common part of the work for journalists in Latin America. Holton et al. (2021) described how these experiences in the online environment have contributed to the fatigue, anxiety, and disconnection of journalists based in the United States.

In the case of small- and medium-sized news outlets, the reliance on freelance positions exposes professionals to even more online harassment. Interviewee I3, who works as a freelance journalist for many small news outlets in Brazil, told us that after a major scoop on the disastrous dealings of the Brazilian government in bringing back immigrants living in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was severely attacked and harassed on her social media profiles. She had to deal with it by herself, which influenced her decision to discontinue reporting on the case. “I decided to back down on the coverage due to the harassment. The editor said that my work would be protected, but what about me and my family? What could they do?” (I3).

IDL-Reporteros (Peru) demonstrated innovative approaches when fighting back against attacks that had plagued their organization for months. According to interviewee I9, journalists from the organization began searching for the profiles of those sending hate

messages or insults to these professionals, informing them that IDL-Reporteros would prosecute them for defamation and slander. “Those who put defamatory things on their social networks, such as that we are a criminal organization. They said much false information about us, even promoting the murder of Gustavo Gorriti, director of IDL-Reporteros, by raising the hashtag #muerteAGorriti” (I9).

Our interviewees mentioned harassment as a common issue, but they did not have support from their news organizations due to a lack of resources. An exception to this was GK (Ecuador), which offered psychological support to its journalists and trained them on how to deal with online harassment. Interviewee I4 said that GK had “implemented a comprehensive year-round mental health program for the entire team and, during the October break period, it was obviously necessary to have the equipment and other implementations that allow us to do a job in times of crisis [i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic]” (I4). According to I4, this support started after the assassination of a journalist in the country. This affected the mental health of Ecuadorian journalists who were afraid of being killed.

Judicialization: An Increasing Threat Against Journalists

The transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in great parts of Latin America has not meant reduced legal threats against journalists or news outlets reporting on public interest, which is jeopardized by institutions and politics that are afraid of these investigations (Porto 2015). For interviewees, threats to press freedom and the public’s right to information are highly corrosive to democracy and the rule of law. More than half of our interviewees mentioned that there has been a rising level of concern about the misuse of legal action to inhibit journalism, particularly by those wishing to prevent exposure of their wrongdoings.

Interviewee I13 from Armando.info mentioned that he and his colleagues had to flee the country because of this type of threat. “In Venezuela, if you are sued, you cannot write about the case. As a result, four of us left the country and are working remotely from abroad” (I13). This strategy has been used also in other countries where even receiving funds from international entities can be set up as treason, and journalists and news organizations can be sued for it (ARTICLE 19 2017).

Threats via judicial process are a method of harassment that has been used by governments and powerful people in Latin America to silence and prosecute journalists. Journalists seek help from other institutions or look for funds to help them pay attorney’s fees and costs. For example, IDL-Reporteros has used the collaborative support of the organization that hosts them to legally defend the Peruvian news outlet against these types of threats. CPI in Puerto Rico is hosted within a law school of the Inter American University of Puerto Rico, which offers a legal aid clinic as well as free services to the organization against legal claims. This partnership has been useful in promoting other values that both institutions share. “Apart from doing investigative journalism and education, we litigate for access to information. We do that with the lawyers of the law school at the University. They take our case to the competent local court and help us with the legal analyses” (I11). CPI also consults with them during its investigation process. “We have a lawyer who makes sure that all sensitive stories are totally bulletproof to any lawsuit, libel, etc.” (I12).

In Colombia, *Rutas del Conflicto* (a journalistic project that tells the stories of people who experienced violence due to the armed dispute between communist rebels and government forces that had been running since the 1960s), has faced judicial harassment from army forces. Due to their alliances with civil society, the organization is able to fight back against these threats. “We have many alliances which help to shield ourselves. One of the alliances is the Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP). This organization assists those who are being censored or suffering from judicial restraint” (I14).

Relying on associations has been widely used by small- and medium organizations that have to spend large sums of money to defend themselves against lawsuits. *Ojo Público* often resorts to grants provided by foundations so that they can pay for the attorneys’ fees and costs. Interviewee I8 mentioned that an organization “gave us a fund to deal with lawyers for a trial that was involved in drug trafficking” (I8). Some interviewees mentioned that journalistic associations such as *Abraji* (Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism) have recently started to support Latin American journalists to defend themselves against legal claims. Nevertheless, these associations cannot assist all small- and medium-sized news organizations that need this kind of support, leaving many organizations to bear the costs themselves. Moreover, no matter who wins the lawsuit, the perpetrator of such action has often already won. As lawsuits might take years to work through the court, the information will most likely be halted and hidden from the public in due course. This type of strategy is also known as SLAPP – a “strategic lawsuit against public participation” (Coe 2021) – directly related to preventing people from gaining knowledge by restricting their access to information. This restriction could hamper them from making better and more informed decisions. Unfortunately, these and other legal strategies have also been widely used in democratic countries.

Physical Security Is Yet Another Critical Component

The patterns of violence and fear that followed the political development of Latin America (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011) are also a concern for journalists. Across the region, attacks against media practitioners and outlets assume multiple, different façades, but the physical ones are the most concerning. Being killed, tortured, or jailed are the main effects of the ongoing state of violence in most Latin American countries.

This has been a primary focus of Latin American organizations that are putting in place protocols for their journalists while they are reporting on the ground. Half of our practitioners mentioned instances where their organizations had determined they should not carry out an investigation. This is in line with prior studies that emphasized measures adopted by journalists and organizations to safeguard themselves, such as self-censorship (González and Rodelo 2020; Fadnes, Krøvel, and Larsen 2020; Saldaña and Mourão 2018) and agenda-cutting (Buchmeier 2020).

Furthermore, our interviewees mentioned that they have to draw up an evacuation plan before attending any event that could pose a risk to their life. Interviewee I15 from *Efecto Cocuyo* (Venezuela) pointed out that they follow a protocol when covering street demonstrations: Their journalists are allowed to cover demonstrations only when another professional is available to go with them. Additionally, the Venezuelan news organization has trained their collaborators on how to evade circumstances that might put their lives at risk. “We develop an action protocol in which journalists should not

expose themselves when they are on the ground. In case something happens that we have planned, they know how to protect themselves" (I15).

Another approach adopted by journalists to guarantee their safety is taking self-defense classes. Interviewee I9 from IDL-Reporteros mentioned that every journalist in their newsroom is required to take martial art classes to know how to defend themselves against physical violence.

Our interviewees mentioned that a more subtle way of fighting back has been the use of collaborative networks, especially against government censorship and repression. Through collaboration with other journalists, interviewee I10 from *Boletín Ecológico* could avoid the detention imposed by the Nicaraguan government. According to I10, collaborative networks helped him continue his investigations from other countries, escaping government repression in Nicaragua. This interviewee also mentioned that collaborative networks allow "for example, that we can be interconnected in updated information about the situation and decisions of the government against ourselves" (I10).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study sheds light on the problems facing Latin America journalists and news organizations that are struggling to fulfill their mission to inform the public. Our findings illustrate that approaches are being adopted by Latin American journalists and news outlets to assess risks and safeguard investigative journalism. In countries where ongoing and structural violence persists, practitioners are more concerned about their safety. This increasing concern has driven journalists and news organizations to demonstrate a wide range of activities falling under the umbrella of the boundaries of journalism. In the realm of expansion, it can be seen that these professionals are adding new forms of boundary work, which includes non-journalistic tasks and actions to safeguard their work, sources and themselves.

These tasks describe modifications of job duties such as taking on new tasks to adopt safety measures, changing work processes to protect professionals and their work, or devoting extra time to certain aspects of the journalistic job (de-Lima-Santos 2022; Eldridge 2017; Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019). By expanding their ways of understanding news work, journalists demonstrate that the spheres and limits of journalism are not easy to map out (Carlson 2016). This study expands the literature by demonstrating that the expansion of boundaries is not tied to technology such as audience analytics and data (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018; de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita 2021; Eldridge 2017) but is also enlarged by cultural and contextual factors.

Our interviewees described the need to consider efforts in four directions: digital, physical, legal, and psychological. These four fronts are important to safeguard the independence of their investigative journalism and these professionals' lives. However, digital threats constitute one of the greatest concerns of these practitioners. Training to deal with all sorts of attacks, from digital to psychological, and searching for grants and collaboration to mitigate these attacks are becoming routine for Latin American journalists. This is in line with prior studies finding that, for the constant evolution of journalism, the practice cannot be seen as a solid, steady-state phenomenon (Carlson and Lewis 2015).

Additionally, our interviewees emphasized the need for new actors and professionals to support newsrooms in guaranteeing digital safety measures, due to the

stratification of knowledge work and its complexity. These new actors have been incorporated in the journalistic field such as digital security specialists, lawyers, and psychologists to provide guidance for these practitioners and their organizations. For example, by working with journalists, security specialists are training them to be more prepared for digital threats and harassment. While this involves using new skills and constantly updating these professionals' knowledge (the realm of expansion), it can also create divisions between journalists and the rest of the staff, as a way to reinforce the control of the journalistic field (the realm of protection of autonomy) (Coddington 2015).

Another important approach adopted by these journalists is establishing collaborations with other journalists or news media outlets (de-Lima-Santos and Mesquita 2023; Mesquita and de-Lima-Santos 2021; Mesquita 2022). These partnerships most commonly offer legal support, as in the case of Abraji.

Our findings also suggest that small- and medium-sized media organizations do not enjoy the same opportunities as large media organizations for physical, legal, digital, and psychological safety. In these smaller news outlets, the professionals highlighted that their safety strategies are based on the types and scope of investigative stories they are working on as well as the different media systems in the countries. As Porto (2016, 4) described, Latin American politicians have "deployed overt and subtle forms of control to tame the media, curb freedom of expression and dominate the public sphere". By conducting investigative reporting that mainstream media are not doing, these organizations and their journalists are more likely to suffer attacks and threats. Future research could expand these findings by comparing the approaches of large or mainstream media organizations with small- and medium-sized news outlets.

Safety measures are important to protect these professionals and their organizations, but they are not the solution for the problem. There is a need for politicians, educators, and civil society agents to work together to implement measures safeguarding these professionals and journalism itself. Only a collaboration among different actors can fight structural violence (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011).

This study has limitations since it portrays the view of a limited number of actors and does not include all Latin American countries. Following the snowball sampling technique, we identified a few practitioners from the Southern Cone (which includes Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), and the ones we contacted were not available for the interview. Even in a small sample, common characteristics of Latin American journalists can be found, although this is not a comparative study. On one hand, there is some integration of safety dimensions that represent "variations" in Latin American countries. On the other hand, each country has its own characteristics and dynamics. The presence or absence of these characteristics and dynamics in different countries merits attention. Future research should focus on the media systems of all Latin American countries to understand news safety in different contexts and the nuances of investigative journalism practice.

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