

Changes in journalism and their impact on professional autonomy: evidence from The Worlds of Journalism study in seven Latin American countries

Cambios en el periodismo y su impacto en la autonomía profesional: evidencia del estudio *The Worlds of Journalism* en siete Países de América Latina

Mudanças no jornalismo e seu impacto na autonomia profissional: evidência do estudo The Worlds of Journalism em sete países da América Latina

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ABSTRACT | The debates on the future of journalism have led to a great deal of research on its changes in the new hyper-digitalized context. However, its impact on press freedom, specifically on editorial autonomy, is unknown. Using data from the last The Worlds of Journalism Study (2012-2016), this article explores the perception of 2,789 journalists in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Mexico on this phenomena. Applying SEM covariance analysis, we identified five factors of change perceived by these professionals: interactive digital communication, professional certification, the social importance of journalism, economic pressures, and training and regulatory considerations. We found that autonomy increases when the perception of the social relevance of journalism and time for research is strengthened and decreases when lucrative pressures increase. The results reaffirm the importance of not losing sight of the core values or qualities of journalism, such as autonomy, social responsibility, and professionalism, which must be maintained in these times of strong changes mediated by new information and communications technologies.

KEYWORDS: Latin America; autonomy; journalism; changes; press freedom; influences on journalism.

HOW TO CITE

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RESUMEN | Los debates en torno al futuro del periodismo posibilitaron numerosas investigaciones sobre sus cambios en el nuevo contexto hiperdigitalizado. Sin embargo, se desconoce su impacto en la libertad de prensa, específicamente en la autonomía editorial. Con datos del último *The Worlds of Journalism Study 2012-2016*, este artículo explora la percepción de 2789 periodistas de Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador y México sobre este fenómeno. Mediante la aplicación de un análisis de covarianza SEM, se identificaron cinco factores de cambio percibidos por estos profesionales: la comunicación digital interactiva, la certificación profesional, las consideraciones formativas o normativas, la importancia social del periodismo y las presiones económicas. Respecto de la forma en la que operan estos cambios, la autonomía aumenta cuando se fortalece la percepción sobre la relevancia social del periodismo y el tiempo para investigar y disminuye cuando aumentan las presiones lucrativas. Los hallazgos reafirman la importancia de no perder de vista los valores o cualidades centrales del periodismo, como la autonomía, la responsabilidad social y el profesionalismo que deben mantenerse en estos tiempos de fuertes cambios mediados por las nuevas tecnologías de la información y de las comunicaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVES: *Latinoamérica; autonomía periodística; periodismo; cambios; libertad de prensa; influencias en el periodismo.*

RESUMO | Os debates sobre o futuro do jornalismo levaram a muitas pesquisas sobre as mudanças no jornalismo no novo contexto hiper-digitalizado. Entretanto, pouco se sabe sobre o impacto dessas transições em questões-chave, como a liberdade de imprensa, em especial a autonomia profissional. Utilizando dados do último *The Worlds of Journalism Study (2012-2016)*, este artigo explora a influência das mudanças no jornalismo percebido por 2789 jornalistas na Argentina, Brasil, Colômbia, Chile, Equador, El Salvador e México. Aplicando a análise de covariância SEM, identificamos cinco fatores de mudança com implicações para a autonomia jornalística: comunicação digital interativa, certificação profissional, importância social do jornalismo, pressões econômicas e considerações sobre treinamento e regulamentação. Descobrimos que a autonomia aumenta quando as percepções da importância social do jornalismo e o tempo para pesquisa são fortalecidos e diminuem quando as pressões de lucro aumentam. Os resultados reafirmam os valores centrais do jornalismo, que são mantidos mesmo em tempos de grandes mudanças.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: *América Latina; autonomia; jornalismo; mudanças; liberdade de imprensa; influências sobre o jornalismo.*

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is undergoing a profound transformation that is redefining or compromising its traditional values (Örnebring, 2009), its business model (Schelesinger & Doyle, 2015) and the working conditions of journalists (Grieco, 2020). The so-called digital turn, enthroned as the main mode of news dissemination, brings structural changes to journalism that motivate academic research (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020; Mellado et al., 2020).

The forced migration to various digital media platforms has led to various crises, not only economic (Brandstetter & Schmalhofer, 2014; Thurman & Fletcher, 2019), but also labor (Davidson & Meyers, 2016) and social (Mor & Reich, 2018), which have direct implications for journalistic practice (Suenzo et al., 2020). Similarly, the clearly delineated boundaries that existed between the traditional press and other forms of communication have blurred with the explosion of digital media and social networks, demonstrating a porosity of the information system (Carson & Lewis, 2015).

Influencers and digital leaders inform and transmit a large amount of information on social media, sometimes displacing/replacing/complicating the work of journalists, leading to deontological dilemmas for journalism (Suárez Villegas & Cruz Álvarez, 2016). News information is widely disseminated via social networks and reaches a huge audience. They compete with the historically established media, but without offering their level of curation and quality (Johnson & Kelling, 2018).

Journalists face numerous professional challenges, such as acquiring skills specific to the new digital ecosystem to survive in the labor market (Schmitz Weiss, 2015) and learning to work in convergent media environments (De Vuyst, 2017). In this way, the risk of layoffs due to the disappearance or downsizing of newsrooms and restructuring processes in the media would decrease (Davidson & Meyers, 2016; González-Macías & Cepeda-Robledo, 2021), all of which affect the mental and physical condition of journalists (Ekdale et al., 2015).

The digital ecosystem reinforces the need to seek new sustainable journalistic business models through digitally native media (Bell et al., 2017). Likewise, such an environment has challenged essential values such as journalistic autonomy (Suenzo et al., 2020) and news quality (Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2019). In this respect, these crises have led journalism to be considered “a profession in decline” (Meyers & Davidson, 2014, p. 994).

Journalism undoubtedly plays an important role in society. Its practice makes democracy vibrant and enables citizens to know the essentials to make decisions

about their context and their immediate future. However, although debates about its role have paved the way for the emergence of numerous studies on the changes in journalism in this hyper-digitized context (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012), little is known about the impact of these transitions on essential issues of democracy such as press freedom and journalistic autonomy in Latin America. Meta-analyses by Mellado (2012) and Suenzo and colleagues (2020) have highlighted the lack of empirical cross-national studies that contribute to the understanding of changes in journalism in the region.

Based on this empirical gap, the aim of this article was to identify the changes that journalists perceive in their profession at a general level and their impact on editorial autonomy in their countries' newsrooms, a key indicator of press freedom (McDevitt, 2003). The study of the Latin American journalistic context is relevant as the academic literature on changes in journalism focuses on Europe and the United States (Mellado et al., 2020). Given the role of journalism in shaping the public sphere, it is equally important to examine information professionals' perceptions of press freedom and journalistic autonomy at a time of great change both on the continent and in the global context (Örnebring, 2009; Waisbord, 2019).

The primary data for this paper comes from the international project *The Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS)*, which has been analyzing intercontinental journalistic cultures every five years since 2007. In the last measurement (2012-2016), on which this article is based, 27,500 journalists from 67 countries in Europe, Asia, America, Africa and Oceania took part (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Recent publications confirm the importance of this project with open data for secondary studies as a global benchmark for a comprehensive, rigorous and comparative understanding of journalism (Hamada, 2022; Humprecht, 2020). Information can be found at: <https://worldsofjournalism.org/>. Primary data from 2,789 Latin American journalists from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador and Mexico were used for this analysis. The third wave of the WJS, which is currently underway, involves 120 countries. The results will be published in early 2024 for data collected between 2021 and 2023.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization of journalistic autonomy

The dependent variable analyzed in this article is journalistic autonomy. Weaver and colleagues (2006) conceptually define professional autonomy as “the freedom journalists have to perform their professional functions” (p. 70). Journalists, for their part, commonly associate it with independence, criticality, and truthfulness (Splichal & Sparks, 1994; Waisbord, 2013), and it is considered crucial for assuming

roles such as disseminator, opponent, and social mobilizer that contribute to strengthening democracy (Gronemeyer, 2002; Mellado, 2014; McDevitt, 2003). Empirical research on this topic has found a high correlation between autonomy and job satisfaction (Demers, 1994; Stamm & Underwood 1993).

A broad literature deals with conceptual aspects of autonomy (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013), among which freedom of the press (McDevitt, 2003) or ethical aspects (Voakes, 1997) stand out. On an empirical level, journalistic autonomy has been examined using indicators such as: (a) the freedom to report on stories that the journalist considers relevant, (b) the freedom to choose the stories or news they work on in their work environment, (c) the freedom to decide which aspects to emphasize in a news story, (d) the guarantee that stories or news are not edited by other people, and (e) the freedom to participate in editorial decisions that affect their working conditions, taking into account the inseparable relationship between reporting and editing (Mellado & Humanes, 2012; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986).

In Latin America, the historical specificities of the political and social context pose major challenges to press freedom and journalistic autonomy, restrictions that have existed since the colonial period and independence (Rosas-Moreno & Higgins-Joyce, 2019). Although the desire of those in power to control public opinion is a universal constant (Russomanno, 2008), it has occurred on the continent with certain specificities and in sometimes extreme forms such as threats, kidnappings and even assassinations (Hughes et al., 2017). Political parallelism, originally proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to allude to how the media reflects the political divisions in society, has led major journalistic media outlets to attempt to control the narratives circulating in the public agenda, placing the interests of their respective political party or ideology above the common good and, in many cases, reinforcing political polarization (Arroyave & Barrios, 2012; Arroyave & Romero-Moreno, 2022).

From military regimes that tightly controlled the media in the middle of the last century, countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Nicaragua, Colombia and El Salvador have seen a transition to populist regimes with sometimes messianic and authoritarian leaders who have become staunch enemies of press freedom (Freedom House, 2017). In addition, insurgent groups and various sectors of organized crime, including drug cartels, have used bullets and explosives to curtail press freedom in the region (Garcés Prettel & Arroyave Cabrera, 2017; Hughes et al., 2017).

Regarding the influences on journalistic autonomy in the news context, comparative studies have made theoretical contributions to a better understanding

of this phenomenon (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013, Hugues et al., 2017). Hanitzsch and colleagues (2010) found six areas of perceived influence. Procedural –reporting routines, deadlines, editorial resources–, professional –editorial guidelines– and organizational –ownership, editorial decision making– have a higher weight for autonomy in 18 countries.

In the second wave of *The Worlds of Journalism Study* (2012-2016), which was conducted among 27,500 journalists in 67 countries, it was found that “procedural and organizational influences play a greater role for journalists than political, economic and personal network influences” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 130). These results are fully consistent with the findings from Chile, where autonomy was “the fifth most important factor, surpassed by factors related to working conditions” (Mellado & Humanes, 2012, p. 998). In fact, influences of reference group type, occupational influences and organizational influences had the greatest weight.

On the one hand, these studies show that editorial autonomy is not universal and depends largely on variables such as democratic performance, human development, the presence of emancipatory values, and the acceptance of power inequality (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). On the other hand, journalists’ failure to recognize political and economic influences when they evidently exist occurs because “these contextual influences are filtered through editorial organizations, which absorb external influences and translate them into internal imperatives and constraints” (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 156). In this way, the journalist, being professionally socialized within the institution, internalizes many of these restrictions, accepts them as part of his work and ends up naturalizing them. Therefore, many of these studies question that journalists report a wide editorial autonomy, when many of the difficulties they encounter in their work are evident.

In terms of market pressure, the so-called media capture is a widespread phenomenon on the continent (Guerrero & Márquez, 2014). Some Latin American studies have denounced that, at different times, there has been collusion between the political class and certain economic elites that own the main media, which has affected press freedom and the right to good information (Rockwell & Janus, 2002). Television consortia such as Televisa (Mexico) and Globo (Brazil) have consolidated monopolistic structures in their countries for decades thanks to their proximity to the respective ruling governments, leading to complacent and positive journalistic treatment (Lugo-Ocando, 2008), an influence that continues to this day (Rosas-Moreno & Higgins Joyce, 2019). The capture and co-optation of the media by political and economic elites is one of the problems that has hit press freedom hardest in Latin America (Waisbord, 2019).

However, the emergence of digital journalistic ventures provides independent reporting that has contributed to the strengthening of professional autonomy in the region (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Higgins Joyce, 2018). Initiatives such as *Animal Político* in Mexico, *El Faro* in El Salvador, *Plaza Pública* in Guatemala, *Ojo Público* in Peru, *El Confidencial* in Nicaragua, *Efecto Cucuyo* in Venezuela, and *La Silla Vacía* and *Las 2 Orillas* in Colombia have brought about a wave of change that has strengthened journalism: they have recovered the importance of reportage, chronicling and journalistic work in the formation of public opinion, focusing on the in-depth analysis of structural problems related to human rights, socioeconomic inequality, corruption and violence that affect Latin American countries and journalists (Salaverría & LimaSantos, 2021). Although these changes have given impetus to these new journalistic initiatives, they are still far from influencing public opinion on the continent. In addition, internet penetration barely reaches 30% of the population in several countries in the region, with the most vulnerable and rural areas being the most excluded (Kemp, 2020). Similarly, the survival of many of these initiatives remains a major challenge for journalists (Higgins Joyce, 2018).

The changes in news gathering and production in the mass media environment have clearly had an impact on journalism and journalists' perceived autonomy (Salaverría, 2016). The more democratic nature of online media, which allows for greater audience involvement, participation and constant feedback, has contributed to the democratization of media that have long been biased towards one-sided information (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). However, specific studies from Latin America show that this new digital ecosystem is affecting the quality of news. In interviews with 120 journalists in Chile, Ecuador and Mexico, Odriozola-Chéné and colleagues (2019) found that the immediacy of the new media ecosystem means that journalistic production times are now shorter and that the work of editors to curate and monitor quality has been drastically reduced in this new digital environment (Greene González, 2016).

The need to constantly update the information on the digital portal means that aspects such as in-depth information, comparison and research are only possible to a limited extent. Similarly, the lack of equipment, technological development and resources, which is closely linked to the economic insecurity of some media, prevents them from working to high quality standards.

There is no doubt that the new information ecosystem places new needs and demands on journalists. The dissemination of inaccurate, deliberately misleading and sometimes manipulative information in a large network has become a common practice (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In this sense,

high-level training that leads to rigorous work with investigative depth is particularly valued (Saldaña & Morao, 2018). The need for constant updating is also expressed by journalists (Odrizola-Chéné et al., 2019). Given the amount of information available through mobile devices, access to reputable and credible media is the fastest way to deal with the disinformation that is spreading in the new information ecosystems.

These structural changes affecting journalistic practice in the region, as well as the unprecedented growth of social media and their increasingly crucial role in the political life of the continent, emphasize the need to empirically examine the changes in the autonomy perceived by journalists in Latin America. The following questions emerge from the literature review:

What kind of changes in journalism do Latin American journalists often perceive?

How do the changes perceived by Latin American journalists influence their editorial autonomy?

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study is based on a non-experimental cross-sectional design that includes descriptive and predictive analyzes to answer the formulated research questions. The study population is journalists working in Latin America. The sample consists of 2,789 professionals from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador and Mexico. The data comes from the second wave of the WJS2 2012-2016, which is freely available for secondary analysis.

In Latin America, different types of samples were used, which are explained in more detail at this link: <https://worldsofjournalism.org/country-reports/>. In Argentina, a random and quota sample of 363 journalists was conducted between October 2013 and December 2014. In Colombia, a stratified, proportional, systematic sample of 560 journalists was drawn between March 2013 and October 2014, selected according to the quota of the type of journalism they practice in the newsrooms. In Chile, a proportional stratified sample of 491 journalists was conducted between May 2014 and January 2015. In Brazil, a simple random sample was used between September 2014 and January 2016, in which 376 journalists participated. In Ecuador, the sample of 372 journalists was drawn randomly and according to quotas between December 2014 and June 2015. In Mexico, a stratified random sample was drawn between January 2013 and March 2015, in which 377 journalists participated. In El Salvador, a stratified, systematic quota sample of 250 journalists was drawn between February and July 2015. The differences in the

survey periods are due to the fact that the WSJ project allows countries to complete the process within this time frame. As mentioned above, more recent data is not available as the third wave (2021-2023) has not yet been completed. The samples followed the guidelines for a common methodological framework established by the WJS2 Core Committee (Worlds of Journalism, 2012) to facilitate comparison between countries or regions. Data from each country were checked for good reliability using our own statistical procedures when analyzed individually and jointly with Cronbach's alpha.

Changes in Latin American journalism were analyzed using a scale that rates perceived changes on a scale of 1 (greatly decreased) to 5 (greatly increased). Several topics were assessed, such as: journalistic training, ethical standards, credibility of journalism, time available to research stories, content generation on social networks and blogs, audience participation in news production and the importance of a university degree.

The scale developed by the WJS2 expert team to measure change in journalism has factorial validity (KMO=0.802; Barlett Chi2=10.401; determinant=0.001; gl=120; p=0.000) and good overall internal reliability or consistency as assessed by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.799$). An exploratory principal component analysis revealed that the collected data were grouped into five factors that explained 63.57% of the total variance in perceived journalistic change. The reliability of each factor was reported in the results along with their fit indices. It is important to point out that, although the data are several years old, the epistemological scope of the study and the SEM structural analysis, which gives factorial and construct validity to the concepts analyzed, undoubtedly represent a methodological contribution that goes beyond the descriptive.

To assess editorial autonomy, journalists answered two questions about how much freedom they perceived in selecting stories and determining their focus, on a scale from 1 (no freedom) to 5 (complete freedom). The data collected with this scale were summarized into a single factor (KMO=0.500; Barlett Chi2=2324; determinant=0.429; gl=1; p=0.000), which explained 87.76% of the professional autonomy perceived by the Latin American journalists.

The internal consistency values of the perceived editorial autonomy scale are acceptable when analyzed overall ($\alpha=0.861$) and for each country separately. For example, the reliability of the scale was high in Argentina ($\alpha=0.829$), Brazil ($\alpha=0.828$), Chile ($\alpha=0.862$), Colombia ($\alpha=0.876$), Ecuador ($\alpha=0.906$) and El Salvador ($\alpha=0.839$). In Mexico ($\alpha=0.792$), the reliability value is in the acceptable range. The values given show that this instrument has a satisfactory statistical behavior.

Answering the first research question was possible through a descriptive analysis of the frequencies obtained for each of the indicators related to the factors of perceived change in journalism. These factors were identified through an exploratory factor analysis of the principal components, which was confirmatory validated through an SEM structural model by covariances using Amos version 23 software.

The descriptive analysis focused on the analysis of Latin American journalism at a general level, since the differences found by country (p -value Anova=0.000) in terms of autonomy and perceived change showed small effect sizes (d Cohen<0.20). In the case of perceived autonomy, it was possible to determine as a research unit that there were significant differences according to the Kruskal-Wallis test data ($p=0.000$) and for this reason comparisons between countries were made by applying a percentile scale. Both the analyzes and the reported frequencies and factors are our own and were generally performed by pooling the data from the seven countries. The original *WSJ2* reports were not used, as the coordinators of each country only report the data and frequencies of their specific context in their reports.

To answer the second research question, three levels of perceived autonomy (high, moderate and low) were defined using a percentile ranking process, which is described in the results section. These levels were recoded, assigning a value of 1 for high perceived autonomy and 0 for the rest. As the data obtained did not show a normal distribution, it was deemed appropriate to assess the impact of changes in journalism on the perception of editorial autonomy in Latin America using a predictive binary logistic regression analysis.

RESULTS

Perceived changes in journalism in the Latin American countries analyzed

Figure 1 below shows the SEM covariance structure analysis.

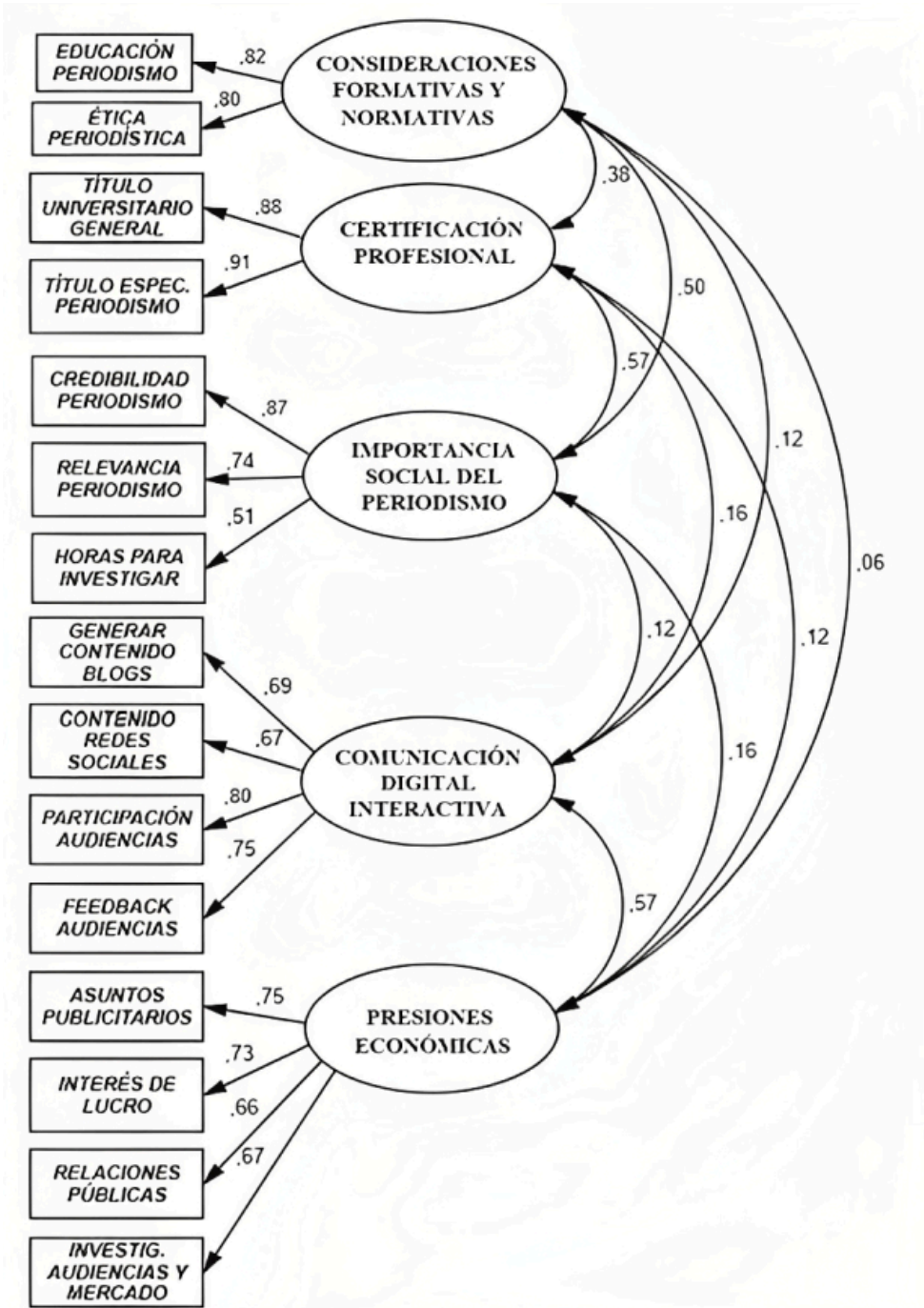


Figure 1. Types of changes perceived by journalists in their work

Source: Own elaboration based on WJS2 aggregate data in the seven countries analyzed.

The model of perceived change in journalism is composed of five factors that have satisfactory reliability indices: Training and regulatory considerations ($\alpha=0.788$), professional certification ($\alpha=0.891$), social importance of journalism ($\alpha=0.737$), economic pressure ($\alpha=0.793$), and interactive digital communication ($\alpha=0.815$). The parsimony values of this model (PCFI=0.610; PNFI=0.605) as well as the normalized (NFI=0.908), comparative (CFI=0.915) and incremental (IFI=0.915) indices are within statistically acceptable ranges.

The root mean square of the residual approximation of the model (RMSEA=0.063) was also less than 0.08, which corresponds to the accepted reference range. These results show that the model of perceived changes in journalism satisfactorily fits the five factors and indicators presented in the figure. Table 1 shows the changes perceived by Latin American journalists from Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and El Salvador that have increased or decreased the most according to the emerging factors.

The data in table 1 shows the five strongest drivers of change for journalism in Latin America. In first place is the strengthening of interactive digital communication. For this factor, most journalists (between 77.5% and 90.3%) consider that the use of social media, audience feedback, user-generated content such as blogs and audience participation in news production have increased. It is clear that the so-called digital turn has permeated newsrooms, enabling a more active role for prosumers, as they are currently known.

Secondly, professional certification has become a factor of change in this new competitive work environment. The majority of journalists believe that the media increasingly require a college degree (66.9%) or a degree in journalism or a related field (61.6%) in order to have better job opportunities.

In third place is the social importance of journalism. They believe that the importance of journalism has increased in this new media ecosystem (58.3%). It is not surprising that, given the constant flood of information that often reaches the public today via social media and networks, journalists believe that their professional practice has taken on an unusual importance. In fourth place is the economic pressure that newsrooms are under. 58.3% believe that market or audience research is one of the dimensions that has increased the most in the search for strategies to understand and attract new audiences and which undoubtedly influences professional practice.

Indeed, for the same factor, journalists emphasized that public relations (53.8%) and the pressure to make a profit (52.9%) are becoming increasingly important in newsrooms.

Factor	Indicators of changes analyzed	Percentage that perceives an increase	Percentage that perceives a decrease	Percentage that has not perceived any changes
Interactive digital communication	Social networks	90.3%	2.6%	7.1%
	Audience feedback	80.2%	4.5%	15.3%
	User-generated content, such as blogs	77.5%	7.3%	15.2%
	Participation of the audience in the production of news	77.5%	5.4%	17.1%
Professional degree	Have a university degree	66.9%	11.0%	22.1%
	Have a degree in journalism or a related field	61.6%	14.7%	23.7%
Social importance of journalism	Relevance	58.3%	18.7%	23.0%
	Credibility	45.2%	34.1%	20.7%
	Time available for research	25.1%	51.8%	23.1%
Economic pressures	Research on market or audience	58.2%	13.0%	28.8%
	Public relations	53.8%	12.1%	34.1%
	Pressures to generate earnings	52.9%	17.0%	30.1%
	Advertising issues	49.5%	17.1%	33.4%
Training and regulatory considerations	Journalism education	54.3%	25.6%	20.1%
	Ethical standards	45.5%	31.2%	23.3%

Table 1. Factors and indicators of change as perceived by journalists

Source: Prepared by the authors based on WJS2 aggregate data in the seven countries analyzed.

In fifth place are considerations of training and regulation. A total of 54.3% of Latin American journalists believe that journalistic training is an increasingly important prerequisite for access to the labor market. This is consistent with the second factor and, like this one, indicates that journalists are increasingly forced to professionalize themselves and update their skills. The labor market demands new skills and abilities that need to be constantly updated due to the dynamics of the media ecosystem.

However, when adding up the percentages of perceived decrease or lack of change, Latin American journalists in the seven countries surveyed consider that in the factor related to the social importance of journalism, the time available to research news (74.9%) and the credibility of journalism (54.8%) have been maintained or decreased. Similarly, 54.5% of respondents believe that concern for ethical standards related to training and legal requirements has decreased or remained the same.

Influence of perceived journalistic changes on editorial autonomy

The majority of Latin American journalists believe that in their countries there is a great (39%) or total freedom (29.9%) in the selection of news in terms of editorial autonomy. They also believe that there is a great deal (38.8%) or complete freedom (30.1%) to determine the focus of the news. Three levels of autonomy were defined: low, medium and high (MIN=2; MAX=10; P30=7; P70=9). This procedure was carried out due to the significant differences in journalistic autonomy between countries found when applying the Kruskal-Wallis test ($p=0.000$) to this data, which did not have a normal distribution and had standard deviations between 0.81 and 0.98.

The countries with the highest perception of editorial autonomy at a high level were Colombia (51.1%) and Mexico (43.2%). The remaining Latin American countries scored higher percentages in the medium level of autonomy: Chile (47.1%), Brazil (45%), El Salvador (41.7%), Argentina (41%) and Ecuador (35.8%). The countries with the highest levels of editorial autonomy are characterized by processes of social violence and widespread intimidation of journalists by illegal groups. In this context, Odriozola-Chéné and colleagues (2019) found that journalists in Veracruz, Mexico, the epicenter of violence and murders of communicators, stated that “trials, kidnappings and even death are a risk to the profession” (p. 125), suggesting a certain normalization of these aspects in professional performance.

A binary logistic regression analysis allowed us to determine, in the absence of normality in the data, that the factors of change perceived by Latino journalists affect editorial autonomy between 7.9% (Cox & Snell’s R²) and 10.4% (Nagelkerke’s R²) of their total variance ($p=0.000$; Standard error=0.049; Chi²=64.972), especially when predictively comparing the high level (recoded as 1) with the low and moderate levels of autonomy (recoded as 0).

Table 2 shows the specific indicators of the factors of change that significantly and more strongly predict the degree of editorial autonomy. The social relevance of journalism emerges as a protective factor of change that strengthens the editorial autonomy perceived by journalists in Latin America. At this point, the relevance of journalism in society and hours of research were found to be significant predictors of change that, when increased, contribute to greater editorial autonomy.

Predictors	Publishing autonomy (standardized coefficients)
Training and regulatory considerations	
Journalism education	-0.019
Ethical standards	-0.005
Professional degree	
Having a university degree	0.105
Have a degree in journalism or related field	-0,056
Social importance of journalism	
Credibility	-0.087
Relevance to society	0.282***
Time available to research	0.216***
Interactive digital communication	
User-generated content (blogs)	0.094
Social networks	0.128
Audience participation in news production	-0.013
Audience feedback	0.027
Economic pressures	
Advertising considerations	0.027
Pressures to generate profits	-0.238***
Public relations	0.013
Market or audience research	-0.036

Significant standardized coefficients: * $p < 0.05$ **; $p < 0.01$ ***; $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Predictor changes of high level of editorial autonomy in the analyzed countries

Source: Own elaboration based on WJS2 pooled data in the seven analyzed countries.

In contrast, economic pressure is a risk factor that, when increased, tends to reduce journalistic autonomy. In fact, the perceived increase in pressure to make a profit in newsrooms was the strongest significant predictor negatively impacting editorial autonomy as perceived by Latin American journalists.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to identify the changes perceived by journalists in seven Latin American countries at a general level. It used primary and open data from the international *WJS2* project, which has become a global benchmark for journalism studies due to its high level of rigor, the large sample of the study and the degree of comparability it allows (Hamada, 2022; Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Humprecht et al., 2020).

One of the obvious changes perceived by the 2,789 Latin American journalists in this study has to do with the centrality of interactive digital communication in their work. Of the four indicators of this factor, three are directly related to the interactive role of journalism in the new information ecosystem of the 21st century (audience feedback, user-generated content and audience participation in news production). The Reuters Institute report (2021) had already warned of the increasing use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram in news platforms, especially in Latin America and Asia. This observation confirms the new collaborative, co-creative and networked role of the audience that characterizes the post-industrial journalism model (Deuze, 2017).

The second factor of change perceived by journalists, according to the model, is professional certification, which is in line with previous studies on the new skills and abilities required by the new digital media ecosystem (Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2019; Schmitz Weiss, 2015). In the region, it has become essential not only to become certified as a professional, but also to specialize in a specific area of journalism. Gone are the days when journalists learned their craft in newsrooms and university education was replaced by experience and self-taught training. Academic courses in communication journalism with a college structure, which emerged on the continent in the 1970s and were consolidated in the 1980s and 1990s, are also a recognized and desirable way to practice the profession in the region.

Although interactive digital communication and professional certification emerged as the two most important factors of change perceived by journalists in the seven countries studied, none of the indicators of change analyzed for either factor influenced editorial autonomy. In contrast, the social importance of journalism was recognized as an aspect that was strengthened and positively influenced the autonomy perceived by the Latin American journalists. Specifically, in this aspect, it was found that the perception of autonomy increases when the social importance of journalism and time for research are strengthened. This means that the perceived journalistic autonomy in the Latin American countries studied does not depend so much on the professional connection with the audience (interactive communication) or the level of training of the journalist (professional

certification), nor on the type of technology or its use, but on the social purpose of the profession. In other words, autonomy here depends more on teleology (social purpose) than on technology; more on aspiration (contribution to context and social relevance) than on media.

In the face of restrictions affecting freedom of expression in many ways in the form of state persecution, intimidation, censorship, legal harassment, threats from heads of state, political leaders at various levels, corrupt public and private officials, groups operating outside the law, etc. investigative journalism - in its role as a watchdog - has played a fundamental role in the region, uncovering numerous cases of corruption, denouncing all kinds of criminal practices or even putting transnational corrupt practices on the international public agenda (Panama Papers, Odebrecht case).

Precisely, thanks to investigative journalism, governments and leaders are held accountable for their actions (Saldaña & Morao, 2018) and “not only is it a foundation for democracy, economic development, the rule of law and civil society, but investigative journalism has also been recognized as one of the best tools to fight corruption” (Rosas-Moreno & Higgins Joyce 2019, p. 10). It is therefore understandable why investigative journalism is associated with the social relevance of the profession and strengthens the perception of autonomy among journalists.

Another key finding of this study is the impact of economic pressure on journalistic practice. Not only did it prove to be a stronger predictor negatively impacting professional autonomy, but it is also the factor where journalists in the region perceived the least change. Rosas-Moreno and Higgins Joyce (2019) have warned that the same media companies that consolidated power structures during the military regimes still hold dominant positions today and control or influence many smaller companies. Indeed, business groups and elite families own large media consortia in the region (Becerra & Mastrini, 2017), which, with the complacent gaze of state authorities, control and position narratives in the public agenda that always prove to be closer to their economic/political interests than to the common good. Thus, this old problem still exists, only now in a new digital guise, where the dictatorship of the click and the desire to position narratives in favor of advertisers in the public or private sector carry the most weight in the editorial decisions of newsrooms, as the results show.

This study is not without limitations. As the study is based on the *WJS2* project, in whose second wave (2012-2016) 2,789 journalists from seven Latin American countries participated, it is appropriate to extend the study to the other Latin American countries in order to identify trends by region (Southern Cone, Andean countries, Central America, Caribbean countries, etc.). The subjective nature

of the study should also be mentioned, as it is based solely on the perceptions of journalists. Future studies should include other research tools that allow an analysis of the circumstances that affect professional autonomy, such as the type of legislation or the level of access to information.

Finally, another limitation is that we could not include information on how the particular context of this COVID-19 pandemic intervenes in this relationship between journalistic autonomy and perceived journalistic changes. This is mainly due to the fact that the third wave of the *WJS*, in which the period 2021-2023 is analyzed, is still ongoing and the data will not be available until 2024.

Despite the limitations mentioned above, this research contributes to a better understanding of a concept as important to journalism as professional autonomy in the Latin American context. The results are encouraging and reinforce the importance of maintaining, in this changing environment, the core values or qualities of journalism in terms of social responsibility, professionalism and autonomy, which are strengthened as the social relevance and investigative nature of journalism increases.

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