
Special issue
Credibility

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“They don’t trust us; they don’t care if we’re attacked”: trust and risk perception in Mexican journalism

Abstract

Drawing from 93 semi-structured, in-person interviews with journalists from 23 states, this article analyzes the relation between trust and risk perception in Mexican journalism. It focuses on how Mexican journalists perceive and experience public trust placed in them as social actors, and how it influences their willingness or reluctance to assume the risks associated with reporting on corruption and drug-trafficking in a country marked by anti-press violence. The findings challenge previous studies as they show that journalists from all regions of the country –even in the so-called *safe states*– are fearful, even when they have not been victims of threats, beatings or kidnappings. Also, it explains that the connection between institutions and journalism makes news workers feel unprotected and unaccompanied. As a result, they accept self-censorship and even express a willingness to resign. Thus, this article surpasses the social, spatial and temporal delimitations of risk, by arguing that distrust in journalists increases the dangers they face.

Keywords

Journalism, Mexico, risk, trust, violence.

1. Introduction

Alfredo Corchado was born in San Luis del Cordero, a small town in Durango, Mexico, in 1960. He is a Mexican citizen and has spent most of his career as a journalist in Mexico, but he has also the American citizenship and has mainly worked as a foreign correspondent for American news outlets. Like many journalists covering corruption and drug trafficking in Mexico, Corchado has received several death threats. Unlike many of his colleagues, he has made them public and has not stopped reporting on these sensitive yet urgent issues. His rationale is: “I was born in Mexico, but I am a U.S. citizen now. I think that gives me a certain degree of protection. This is something I have always believed: If something happens to an American journalist, there will be consequences” (Corchado in Calzada, 2013). Many foreign

correspondents working in Mexico share this feeling¹. They feel protected compared to their Mexican counterparts and believe the US –or other western country– government and citizens would react if something happens to them. The international response to the latest murder of an American journalist in Mexican territory –Brad Will, in 2006– reaffirms his thinking.

Trust in western institutions and citizens does not make foreign correspondents working in Mexico immune to risk, but it certainly allows them to report on corruption and drug trafficking in one of the deadliest countries for journalists² with a sense of protection and accompaniment. Trust, here understood as the “[f]irm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018b), empowers them to undertake risks like being beaten, kidnapped or murdered convinced they are doing it for a higher purpose and with someone watching over them.

Mexican journalism scholars have paid close attention to the security crisis reported and experienced by Mexican journalists (Del Palacio, 2018; Gutiérrez, 2015; Rodelo, 2009), but they have not addressed the link between trust and risk perception. Risk, “[t]he possibility that something unpleasant or unwelcome will happen” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018a), has a direct connection with trust, and it cannot be accepted without the firm belief that someone will do something if the threat is materialized. Therefore, the relationship between these concepts is key to understand the logic of journalism practice in violent contexts.

Drawing from 93 in-person, semi-structured interviews with journalists from 23 states, this article studies the relation between trust and risk perception in Mexican journalism. This study focuses on how Mexican journalists perceive and experience public trust placed in them as social actors and how it impacts their willingness or reluctance to report on sensitive issues, such as drug-related stories or government corruption. Hence, this article fills a gap in research in Mexican journalism studies with substantial and nationwide empirical evidence.

The article is divided in four sections. The first one reviews previous research on attacks on the press in Mexico and establishes a connection with studies on trust in journalism. The second part presents a theoretical framework for the study of trust and risk perception in journalism. The third section describes the research design and explains how the interviews were conducted. The fourth part shows the findings, emphasizing Mexican journalists’ sense of helplessness amidst risk, and its effects in terms of self-censorship and willingness to resign. Lastly, the document provides some concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

Since 2008, Mexican journalism scholars have been studying the security crisis that news workers report and experience. Following Rodelo’s (2009) pioneer study on Sinaloa’s journalism, researchers have focused both on how journalists endure and account violence. Besides Sinaloa, northern states like Baja California (Merchant, 2018), Chihuahua (Salazar, 2012), Coahuila (Lemini, 2015), Nuevo León (Gutiérrez, 2015) and Sonora (Reyna, 2018) have received great attention as this region was the deadliest for journalists between 2000 and 2011 (Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública, 2011).

With the shift of anti-press violence, Veracruz has risen as the deadliest state with 22 journalists murdered between 2010 and 2018 (Ávila, 2018). Del Palacio (2014; 2015; 2018) has

¹ In 2015, during the seminar *Informando y Analizando ‘La Guerra a las Drogas’ en México*, held at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte’s headquarters in Mexico City, several American and British correspondents expressed they felt protected compared to their Mexican counterparts. Cárdenas’ (2006) research on British correspondents working in Mexico found a similar sense of exception before the so-called Mexican *War on Drugs*.

² With 14 murders, Mexico was the deadliest country for journalists in 2017 for the International Press Institute (IPI) (2017). According to the National Human Rights’ Commission (CNDH), between 2005 and 2018, 151 journalists have been murdered in Mexico and other 21 are missing (*Tribuna*, 2018).

written extensively about how the interactions between political actors and the press in Veracruz generated threats and aggressions against journalists. Southern states like Guerrero, Oaxaca and Quintana Roo have also registered aggressions against the press, but they have not been studied. Factors like the underdevelopment of their journalism scholarship and their reporters’ unwillingness to contribute with social scientists from other states may explain this gap in the literature.

In addition to these case studies, Mexican journalism scholars have been concerned with phenomena such as the construction of journalistic collectives in response to violence (De León, 2018), the psychological impact of covering corruption and drug trafficking (Flores, Reyes & Riedl, 2014), the erosion of professional norms (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016) and the agenda-setting capacity of organized crime (González, 2017). Some authors privilege qualitative approaches based on in-depth interviews and non-random populations; whereas others use quantitative approaches based on surveys and random sampling.

Beyond these research lines, there is a growing interest in the prediction of threats and aggressions. Focusing their attention in organized crime’s control strategies, Holland and Ríos (2017) have shown there is a correlation between the competition over drug markets and fatal violence against the press, since drug cartels tend to conquer territories through violence. With a similar methodology, Brambila (2017) has found that journalists’ murders are more likely to happen in states with high levels of violence, internal conflict, human rights violations, low democratic development and raising economic inequality.

Instead of murders, Hughes and Márquez (2018) predict threats through a nationwide survey. They have revealed that threats usually arise from the clash between local-level authoritarianism and journalists’ democratic normative aspirations. In other words, those respondents that assume journalism’s watchdog role are also the ones that have been the most vulnerable to threats against their physical integrity. Threats are relevant because they are more frequent than murders and can predict the inhibiting effects of anti-press violence in terms of self-censorship and willingness to resign.

Overall, this scholarship has shown the complexity and diversity of the security crisis experienced and reported by Mexican journalists, thus challenging governmental discourses and journalists’ preconceptions. Nonetheless, we have found a *passé* reading of risk –limited to threats and aggressions– and a reluctance to acknowledge the relationship between this concept and trust. This issue has prevented further explanations regarding the scope of the danger journalists face, as well as new perspectives on why some journalists resort self-censorship, while others carry on despite the possibility of being beaten, kidnapped or murdered.

Mexican journalism scholars have not paid enough attention to trust in journalism, nor journalists’ trust in institutions³. Instead, they have favored normative interpretations of the relation between the political establishment and the press, where a mutual distrust is a precondition for critical journalism. However, trust in institutions is not synonymous with trust in everything politicians say or an uncritical reproduction of everything they say. Quite the opposite, it is trust –or the benefit of the doubt– in institutions’ disposition and capabilities to carry out their respective tasks as expected. If journalists are not trusted and in turn they do not trust, they become averse to risk.

Trust in journalism involves three elements: trust in journalism as an institution, trust in journalists as social actors, and trust in what journalism and journalists do in terms of research, as well as selecting, analyzing and presenting news (Blöbaum, 2014). Overall, public opinion researchers focus on trust in journalism as institution and neglect both trust in

³ Márquez and Hughes (2016) offer one of the few studies with evidence of Mexican journalists’ distrust in institutions like political parties, trade unions, police and the government, among others. They measure trust in institutions through a national survey.

journalists as social actors and trust in what journalists do. They compare trust in journalism (or news media) as an institution with trust in diverse institutions to trace patterns of change and continuity, but they do not take journalism as their focal point.

Based on comparative survey data, Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl (2018) found that trust in journalism is linked to trust in political institutions. Hence, if there is disenchantment with institutions, it is quite probable trust in journalism will be low. Data on Mexico confirms this hypothesis: trust in journalism in this country has rose and fell with citizens’ faith in the democratic transition, peaking after 1994 and decreasing between 2010 and 2014. Updated data could be more definitive since president Enrique Peña closed his term in office (2012–2018) with only 18% of approval (Consulta Mitofsky, 2018).

Could Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl’s (2018) *trust nexus* hypothesis also explain journalists’ trust in institutions? Additionally, could it explain how journalists perceive and experience trust in them as social actors in violent contexts? If citizens distrust institutions and journalism, perhaps anti-press violence could make citizens trust in journalism in detriment of political institutions. After all, governments, armed forces and political parties are among the main foes for the Mexican press (Article 19, 2017). Nonetheless, data shows that Mexican citizens’ trust in journalism keeps decreasing.

3. Theoretical framework

Mexican journalism scholars understand risk as beatings, kidnappings and murders, all of these different attacks against one or more members of the journalistic community. Hughes and Márquez (2018) have redrawn this definition by focusing on threats as the possible incidence of those aggressions. Yet, they have also reduced risk to actions directed against one or more journalists. Following Beck (1992; 2002; 2009), our interpretation of risk is broader and goes beyond social, spatial and temporal conditions. Thus, we address how it is perceived and experienced by those that have not even been directly exposed to it, besides those who already have suffered it.

Data analyses like those conducted by Brambila (2017) and Holland and Ríos (2017) try to restrict risk to a specific time and space. Through data correlations from a particular period, they characterize specific territories as riskier for journalists than others. Although these studies are based on empirical evidence, they merely show a snapshot of a certain moment, and ignore that this social phenomenon is constantly moving. Furthermore, the widespread nature of corruption, extreme violence and impunity in Mexico contribute to its rapid social reproduction and expansion.

In the period between 2005 and 2018, 172 journalists were murdered or disappeared in 26 of the 32 Mexican states (*Tribuna*, 2018). Until 2011, half of these events occurred in northern states (Centro de Estudios Sociales y de Opinión Pública, 2011). By 2010, Veracruz has emerged as the deadliest state for journalists with 22 murders (Ávila, 2018). Despite the fact that more murders are happening in Veracruz, the northern states are not crime-free zones either, as the killings of Javier Valdez Cárdenas, in Sinaloa, and Miroslava Breach, in Chihuahua, both in 2017, make evident. Mexico City has registered seven journalists’ murder cases between 2006 and 2016, with Aurelio Cabrera as the latest (*La Jornada de Oriente*, 2016). However, until 2015, many considered Mexico City it as a safe place for journalists. Trusting this narrative, Rubén Espinosa escaped from Veracruz looking for protection. In August of 2015, he and four women that offered him shelter were killed in Mexico’s capital. Mexican press acknowledged this through headlines like “The end of the refuge of journalists in Mexico” (Velázquez, 2018) or “CDMX, the third most dangerous city for journalists” (Fuentes, 2018).

Following Beck (1992; 2002; 2009), we argue that the risk Mexican journalists face is not limited to threats, beatings, kidnappings and murders that have already occurred. On the contrary, it is the possibility that those aggressions may happen once again in the same place or in a different location. We also emphasize that even those journalists that have not been

directly exposed to such dangers perceive and experience risk in their daily routines. A total of 172 news professionals have been murdered or disappeared in 26 of the 32 Mexican states. Therefore, the supposed havens have been eroded. In other words, safe states are safe just until they are not.

Besides space, this kind of risk cannot be constrained to temporal and social limits. That is, even if events like the murders of Espinosa and his hosts have come to pass, they remain as a latent possibility of risk for journalists and human rights activists for an undefined period of time. Likewise, social differentiations such as age, class and gender or newsroom divisions like rank, beat or style of reporting have been proven equally vulnerable. This is because journalists from all walks of life have been threaten or attacked. Under these circumstances, even Hughes and Márquez’s (2018) argument could be revised since anti-press violence and watchdog journalism are being constantly decoupled.

These factors make risk delocalized and immeasurable (Beck, 2006). We could predict that another journalist will be killed in Mexico, but we could not predict where, when, how, and why he or she will be killed. Contrary to what Bartman (2018) has stressed, individual risk has been replaced by systemic risk (Beck, 2002) and this threat affects the journalistic community as a whole. The fact that some have been threaten or beaten does not mean that risk only afflicts them. Evidently, the direct victims have wounds and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Flores, Reyes & Riedl, 2014) that others do not, but fear is experienced nationwide:

Risk possesses the “destructive force of war”. The language of threat is infectious and transforms social inequality: social need is hierarchical, the new threat, by contrast, is democratic. It affects even the rich and powerful. The shocks are felt in all areas of society. Markets collapse, legal systems fail to register offenses, governments become the targets of accusations while at the same time gaining new leeway for action (Beck, 2009, p. 8).

In opposition to risk management theories (Campbell & Currie, 2006), Beck (2006) claims that risk cannot be managed since it is delocalized, immeasurable and cannot be restituted. When studying anti-press violence in Mexico, this theorization is especially useful as Mexican journalists are facing a threat they cannot predict, manage or mitigate. Therefore, rather than asking how journalists manage risk, we should ask how they perceive risk, despite the fact that some of them have not been directly threaten, beaten or kidnapped yet. In this context, the direct or indirect exposure to danger decreases journalists’ trust. Their distrust in institutions (Márquez & Hughes, 2016, p. 6) becomes distrust in their sources, citizens and even other members of their professional community. Threats and aggressions come not only from organized crime, but from governments, armed forces, political parties and ordinary citizens (Article 19, 2017). Thus, they do not know who to trust. Paradoxically, amidst risk, they must trust someone to continue reporting the news in one of the deadliest countries for journalists in the world.

As Beck asserts, “the dissolution of trust multiplies risks” (Beck, 2002, p. 44) and those social actors that could be trusted become likely sources of danger. This makes Mexican journalists fearful instead of fearless. Unlike their American counterparts working in Mexico, they cannot trust political institutions as these are precisely one of their main concerns. Likewise, if citizens do not trust them, how could they expect something from them? This lack of support from the respective actors and institutions explains, partly at least, the development of journalistic collectives as mechanisms for self-defense (De León, 2018).

Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl’s (2018) *trust nexus* hypothesis emphasizes a correlation between trust or distrust in journalism, and trust or distrust in institutions. They do not include risk in the equation and do not account for journalists’ points of view. However, this allows us understanding how Mexican journalists experience and perceive trust placed in them as social actors, and how its presence or lack thereof determines their willingness or reluctance to do their job in these adverse circumstances. If citizens do not trust institutions

because they perceive them as corrupt, how can we explain that attacks on journalists, presumably a direct consequence of their watchdog role, do not contribute to increasing trust in journalism? Citizens and journalists’ *trust nexuses* are indeed complex, and the possibility of risk increases such complexity. We hypothesize Mexican journalists resort to self-censoring or a higher willingness to resign, not as a direct effect of risk, but because they feel helpless due to the lack of accompaniment and protection from institutions and society at large.

4. Research design

Studies on the security crisis reported and experienced by Mexican journalists is undergoing a methodological shift from qualitative to quantitative approaches (Brambila, 2017; Holland & Ríos, 2017; Hughes & Márquez, 2018). In order to understand this complex phenomenon, we argue journalists’ experiences and perceptions should be emphasized through interviews, either in-depth or semi-structured. Contrasting with data analyses or even nationwide surveys, interviews allow journalists to express their views on their own terms, instead of forcing and limiting them to respond standardized questionnaires.

Thus, this study is based on 93 semi-structured interviews with journalists from 23 of the 32 Mexican states. The interviews were conducted between February 2017 and August 2018. The informants were selected based on two criteria: (1) they had to be current journalism practitioners, either as newsroom staff or freelancers. The type of news outlet was not a criterion of exclusion: we interviewed journalists working for newspapers, radio, television and news websites. Also (2), they should currently be covering or have covered hard news, with or without experience in reporting on corruption and drug-trafficking.

Directly been a victim of anti-press violence was not a requirement, although many of our interviewees were. We decided to include journalists that have not been personally exposed to risk in order to examine how they perceive and experience the security crisis, as opposed to those colleagues directly threaten or attacked. As *Table 1* shows, we focused more on states that have been characterized as the deadliest for journalists, such as Baja California and Sinaloa in the northwest; Michoacán and Jalisco in the west; Veracruz and Quintana Roo in the southeast.

Table 1: Geographic distribution of the sample.

Zone	Selected states and sample
Northwest	Baja California: 9 Chihuahua: 6 Sinaloa: 6 Sonora: 5 Total: 26
Northeast	Coahuila: 3 Nuevo León: 4 San Luis Potosí: 4 Tamaulipas: 4 Total: 15
West	Aguascalientes: 1 Guanajuato: 2 Jalisco: 6 Michoacán: 7 Zacatecas: 3 Total: 19
Centre	Mexico City: 4 State of Mexico: 2 Guerrero: 2 Morelos: 1

	Puebla: 8 Total: 17
Southeast	Chiapas: 3 Oaxaca: 3 Quintana Roo: 4 Tabasco: 1 Veracruz: 5 Total: 16

Source: Own elaboration.

The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling. The sample included local reporters and state correspondents from national media outlets such as *El Universal*, *La Jornada*, *Proceso*, *Reforma* (written press), *Televisa*, *Imagen Televisión* and *TV Azteca* (television channels). The sample also included journalists from credited local and regional news outlets like *El Diario de Juárez* (Chihuahua), *El Informador* (Jalisco), *El Siglo de Torreón* (Coahuila), *Río Doce* (Sinaloa) and *Zeta* (Baja California). Members of hyper-local online news sites were also considered, as well as staff from national and international news agencies like *Notimex*, *EFE* and *AFP*.

As ascertained before, this study contributes to explaining how Mexican journalists perceive and experience the risk of becoming victims of anti-press violence, how does it affect their trust in institutions and society, and what is the impact of such actual or potential aggressions in carrying out their professional activities. Our questionnaire was organized in two sections: the first one explored the overall situation of risk and risk perception in Mexican journalists; the second focused on the individual, organizational and societal impacts of the continuous attacks on the press.

5. Findings

Both quantitative (Brambila, 2017; Holland & Ríos, 2017; Hughes & Márquez, 2018) and qualitative studies (Del Palacio, 2018; Gutiérrez, 2015; Rodelo, 2009) of anti-press violence in Mexico have tried to bound risk through social, spatial and temporal demarcations. Some have attempted to make threats and aggressions predictable through data correlations, while others have focused on the deadliest states, as if the phenomenon could be spatially contained. Our findings challenge both perspectives and stress the delocalized and immeasurable character of risk, and how it carries over to the erosion of trust.

5.1. Risk perception

Throughout the country, many of our interviewees have been victims of diverse attacks; these range from attempted murder, kidnappings with torture, beatings, temporary detentions by the armed forces or organized crime, to imprisonment under false charges, as well as multiple kinds of threats and sustained harassment. These events have occurred in each of the regions and states included in the sample. Therefore, even if some states are more prone to these incidents than others, this research has found no evidence of the existence of *safe states*. Notwithstanding, it does not mean that all regions and states are equally deadly. However, risk and fear are indeed widespread.

For example, a female journalist from the Western state of Guanajuato was beaten by football fans while covering a game; also, she has been constantly threatened by public officials and citizens, thus claiming there is “a generalized fear” (interviewee 1) within the Mexican journalistic community. Her state, Guanajuato, registered one journalist murdered –Gerardo Nieto in 2015– between 2005 and 2018, and statistically could be characterized as one of the safest for journalists in Mexico. Nonetheless, both objectively and subjectively, risk is very much present in Guanajuato as interviewee 2 expresses:

We do not feel safe anymore. Especially when we know we could be easily identified by anyone. We are scared to go out or drive our car, because we do not know if we are being followed or if someone is waiting for us out there. As a reporter, you should be very careful (interviewee 2, Western region, male, reporter).

In Sonora, a Northwestern border state, there has been four murder cases and a disappearance in the same period (2005–2018). The kidnapping happened in the state’s capital, Hermosillo, and the victim was a journalist working in the state’s leading newspaper, *El Imparcial*. Even if this event took place back in 2005, it has had a lasting effect in this state’s journalists as it showed what could happen if they dared publish something inconvenient for someone dangerous. “We are journalists, not heroes. The graveyards are full of heroes” (interviewee 3 Northwestern region, male, director). Hence:

Alfredo Jiménez’s [disappearance and probable] assassination in 2005 was a hallmark for investigative journalism [in Sonora], because we stopped reporting on organized crime. We are aware that there are certain issues that cannot be published, the *War on Drugs* for instance. We do not even think about covering it anymore. It is no longer a story [for us] (interviewee 4, Northwestern region, female, reporter).

Between 2005 and 2018, the Southeastern state of Chiapas had one killed journalist – Rosendo Pardo in 2006, prior to the so-called Mexican *War on Drugs*– and it did not get attention by Mexican journalism scholars. In spite of this fact, the journalists we interviewed in Chiapas have been constantly threaten and discredited⁴. As we were writing this article, two journalists were murdered in this state within two weeks, Mario Gómez and Sergio Martínez. Public officials quickly stated Martínez was not an active journalist (Pérez, 2018), as any threat would disappear if journalists quit their jobs.

Before these events, a freelance reporter from this state was discredited by public officials and she considers these attacks were not restricted to journalists, as they also affected their families’ psychological well-being: “Your personal life will never be the same [after an anti-press violence event]. You will live in fear because you do not know what a politician is willing to do to harm you. It really affects you, because you cannot be free [anymore]” (interviewee 5, Southeastern region, female, freelance reporter). Hence, she knew that discredit strategies could be just the tip of the iceberg.

The murder of two journalists in Chiapas confirms that risk cannot be constrained in terms of time and space, because this issue is always moving. How could we predict these murders are exceptions and not the new rule in this state? How could we predict that Chiapas will or will not become the new Veracruz? Data analyses like the ones developed by Bartman (2018), Brambila (2017) and Holland and Ríos (2017) only show a snapshot of certain moments and ignore the delocalized and incalculable nature of the phenomenon they analyze. Although valuable, they are statistical analyses rather than sociological explanations.

Following Beck’s research (1992; 2002; 2009), we insist the risk Mexican journalists face is not limited to threats, beatings, kidnappings and murders having already occurred. Quite the opposite, risk is the perception that those kinds of aggressions could happen once again in the same or in a different place. Among our interviewees there are several journalists that have not been directly threaten or attacked. Nevertheless, they are very aware their safety is quite fragile, and any wrong move could transform them into victims, since “[o]rganized crime and politicians want to shut [our] mouths” (interviewee 6, Western region, male, reporter).

5.2. *Distrust nexus*

Mexican journalists’ distrust in political institutions is fully justified. Our interviewees have been victims not only of organized crime, but of governors, political parties, armed forces,

⁴ Martínez (2015), a scholar and journalist from Chiapas, has also exposed this discredit strategy, developed by the state government since 2012 to harass critical journalists.

police, unions and citizens. There is a case of a journalist in the Southeastern region that received a death threat from a newspaper owner, and several news professionals state that newsrooms are infiltrated with colleagues working as informants for different power groups. Hence, the social actors and institutions that should be trusted have proven they are not. This makes journalists fearful and paranoid because no one supports them, and anyone could attack them.

Their distrust in institutions is not just based on perception, but also on experience. In a liberal democracy, journalists are expected to provide citizens with the information they need to make informed political decisions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and, in turn, they are supposed to receive a set of protections from political institutions. According to our interviewees, even the protection mechanisms have failed them: “mechanisms exist at a discursive level, but [they do not work] in practice” (interviewee 7, Western region, male, photographer).

Public officials accept their incompetence: “We have not been able, as Mecanismo [de Protección a Defensores de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas] [Mechanism of Protection for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists] to gain the confidence of journalists. Journalists, by nature, distrust government and that makes our meetings even more difficult” (Campa in *El Universal*, 2017). What they rarely admit is that statistically, governments, political parties, armed forces and the police are among the main offenders against the press in Mexico (Article 19, 2017).

Additionally, Mexican journalists are aware citizens do not trust them, because they consider media to be another political institution. As Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl (2018) argue, citizens’ distrust in institutions becomes distrust in journalism and journalists due to their close working relationship. Some of our interviewees argue that citizens do not understand journalism’s role in society, while others accept this lack of trust is grounded in their distancing of citizens’ priorities. Thus, some news professionals blame citizens for their ignorance, apathy and disengagement, while others assume their own partial responsibility:

Society is sick and tired of everything, media included. I am aware that journalists are unpleasant figures for citizens. Nevertheless, there are also some people that show us their gratitude when we cover their problems or the issues that are important to them (interviewee 8, Southeastern region, female, editor).

In a nation marked by anti-press violence, the distrust nexus between institutions and journalism is quite paradoxical: journalists are falling victims to institutions and yet, they are seen as part of those same institutions. Journalism as an institution and journalists as social actors have not been able to gain the public trust. Duly grounded or not, citizens keep referring to the press as sold out or corrupt (*prensa vendida*) to condemn any journalistic abuse or fraudulent act. In this networked society, citizens do not limit these condemnations to face-to-face expressions and resort to social media to call journalists “corrupt” and “gossipmongers”.

But what is most discouraging for journalists is that citizens do not acknowledge the risk they assume to cover corruption and drug-trafficking as part of their role as purveyors of relevant information. In other words, they risk their lives for them. As one of our informants’ laments:

People do not really care. Even when we expose corruption or wrongdoings, things that they should know, they simply do not buy our newspaper. They rather buy a celebrity magazine. People do not mind anti-press violence. We, [journalists, have to] defend ourselves” (interviewee 9, Southeastern region, male, director).

This sense of abandonment and lack of protection is summarized in the statement that gives title to this article: “They do not trust us; they do not care if we are attacked” (interviewee 10, Central region, male, photographer). Even though some of the journalists we interviewed commented there are individuals and non-governmental organizations supporting them,

their conclusion is rather bleak: “at the end of the day, we march alone” (interviewee 11, Northwestern region, female, reporter). After 172 murders or kidnappings between 2005 and 2018 (*Tribuna*, 2018), they do not understand what else needs to happen for citizens to start backing them up:

I know it hurts, but we have to accept that society has left us alone. There is a lack of understanding regarding what we do [as journalists] and the implications of anti-press violence. Maybe in Mexico City the situation is better, but once you go to other places you face a different reality. As long as people ignore what we do, they will not value our job. This may be one of the origins of the endemic impunity of the aggressions against us. I do not know if society is waiting for something like [the mass kidnapping of students in] Ayotzinapa involving journalists to finally see [the risks we are facing] (interviewee 12, Northwestern region, female, reporter).

5.3. *Self-censorship and willingness to resign*

Beck (2002) argues that distrust multiplies risks and makes the social actors and institutions that should be trusted, to become possible sources of danger. When journalists are not trusted and do not trust anyone, we claim, they become risk-averse. As previous studies have shown, one of the effects of such risk aversion is self-censorship (Del Palacio, 2018; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016; Rodelo, 2009). However, we claim that self-censorship is not a direct but an indirect effect of threats and aggressions, mediated both by citizens’ distrust in journalists as social actors, and by journalists’ distrust in institutions.

When journalists perceive an attack as a latent possibility and have to reconsider before publishing a potentially dangerous story, they face a threefold dilemma: they either assume risk and all that it involves, resort to self-censorship, or leave journalism either temporarily or even for good. Our interviewees, all of them active journalists at the time of our interviews, had experienced all these possibilities: some have been kidnapped and beaten after publishing a harsh story, others have accepted self-censorship as a mechanism of self-defense, and many have developed a willingness to resign (although only a few have actually quitted).

Following the path of self-censorship is not always a reaction to a threat or aggression. On the contrary, quite frequently is a cautionary measure journalist take in order to prevent falling in danger. Beyond murder, most of the journalists interviewed for this article agree that the main consequence of anti-press violence in Mexico is self-censorship, whether they have been directly exposed to risk or not. They understand self-censorship as a direct effect of these attacks and feel discouraged since they have to practice a rather inconsequential journalism, instead of the watchdog role they idealize, in order to stay alive:

I think twice before publishing anything. I evaluate the consequences and see if someone [dangerous] could be affected by it. Then I decide whether the story is worth publishing or not. Some people may say it is self-censorship. I say it is not risking my life (interviewee 13, Southeastern region, male, reporter).

As several journalists acknowledge, censorship in Mexican journalism is beyond the self-censorship they practice. This is due to editors acting as gatekeepers of potentially dangerous content. This makes news professionals even more risk averse because they do not feel supported by their newsroom when they report on sensitive issues such as corruption or drug-trafficking: “If I already know that my story might be changed or not even published, why would I assume the risk by myself?” (interviewee 14, Western region, female, reporter). Just as citizens do not show their support, journalists acknowledge that taking the risk might not be worthy: “Miroslava [Breach, a journalist murdered in the northwestern state of Chihuahua in 2017] was my colleague. We worked together. After her assassination, I asked myself if this is what I want, if this is worthy” (interviewee 15, Northwestern region, female, photographer).

With this result in mind, many of our interviewees put their safety before their ideals and start developing a willingness to resign. They comment: “this situation drains the enthusiasm”, and that “it makes [them] wonder whether [they] want to keep doing this or not” (interviewee 16, Western region, female, correspondent). Some journalists act on those intentions and quit journalism for a certain period, while others stay put, either because they expect things to eventually change, or because they lack social capital and abilities to easily move to a different position in the job market:

Despite violence, we try to be professional all the time. But there are many of us that have decided to get out of here and leave the job as a consequence of the constant fear [we live in]. We, the ones that have stayed, ought to do the best we can (interviewee 17, northwestern region, female, reporter).

Many journalists know colleagues that have quit their jobs because they were either victims of anti-press violence or afraid to become one. As they see them go and sometimes succeed outside journalism, they begin to reflect on the prospects of resigning and having to reinvent themselves. Unfortunately, as the recent case of Martínez’s murder in Chiapas shows, leaving journalism does not necessarily eradicate the risk. As Espinosa, who fled Veracruz to find death in Mexico City, Martínez could not put himself out of danger by quitting journalism, thus founding death as a bar owner (Pérez, 2018).

6. Conclusions

Contrary to Alfredo Corchado and other foreign correspondents working in Mexico, Mexican journalists have left behind the idea of becoming martyrs of democracy. They have become risk-averse and avoided publishing dangerous content. They resort to these practices not due to lack of professionalism, but because they perceive and experience a lack of support from institutions and society, as well as from their own newsrooms. Under these circumstances, they become fearful instead of fearless. As a result, they adopt self-censorship as a mechanism of self-defense, or start developing a willingness to resign, as they realize the fulfillment of their democratic ideals is increasingly distant.

According to our interviewees, citizens do not trust them because they consider them to be part of political institutions, in what Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl (2018) have termed as the *trust nexus*. Paradoxically, even when governments, political parties and the armed forces are among the main offenders of journalists (Article 19, 2017), reporters think citizens keep seeing them as part of political institutions. Both journalism as an institution and journalists as social actors have not been able to overcome the *sold-out* and *corrupt* press stigma.

Unlike previous studies, both quantitative (Brambila, 2017; Holland & Ríos, 2017; Hughes & Márquez, 2018) and qualitative (Del Palacio, 2018; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016; Rodelo, 2009), this article argues the risks Mexican journalists face are not limited to the threats, beatings, kidnappings and murders that have already occurred. In the same sense, following Beck (1992; 2002; 2009), it stresses this kind of danger cannot be constrained to time and space because it is constantly moving. The recent murders of journalists in Chiapas and Quintana Roo, once relatively safe states for journalists, confirm this hypothesis.

Rather than focusing on data or surveys, we emphasize that –in order to understand what Mexican journalists perceive and experience– we need to approach them through qualitative interviews where they can freely express themselves beyond standardized questionnaires. Mexican journalism scholars have been inclined to this approach (Del Palacio, 2018; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016; Rodelo, 2009), but the recent interest in the prediction of threats and attacks has pushed this approach behind. Furthermore, this article fills a gap in research by studying the link between trust and risk perception through substantial and nationwide evidence.

To summarize, this article contributes to the increasing literature on anti-press violence in Mexico with three key arguments: first, the actual or potential risk to journalists is not necessarily constrained to specific places. As the latest killings of journalists during the second half of 2018 have proved, the supposedly safe states can no longer be considered as such. In other words, the belief that certain cities are havens for news workers should be questioned. Second, the willingness to face risk is not merely a matter of professionalization. It is a matter of increasing mutual trust between media, institutions and citizens instead. Hence, the lack of institutional and social support has gradually eroded reporters’ motivation in doing their job. Third, although self-censorship is the most evident result of this situation, there is also an increasing willingness to resign within newsrooms across the country. This means, either as a reaction or as an act of self-preservation, several interviewees accepted that leaving their current profession has become a viable option.

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