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## Miscellaneous

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# Putting context at the forefront: a critical case study of journalists' layoffs in Mexico

## Abstract

**At a time of crisis in news media organizations, with changes in the world of work occurring in different regions, a significant number of newsrooms have been affected by the mass firing of journalists. Multiple layoffs can be understood as part of a broader process of organizational change that is linked to deterioration in the working conditions of media workers and a transformation of journalistic modes of production. To understand the processes of organizational change in news organizations with multiple layoffs, this critical case study of news organizations in a western Mexican city relied on the analysis of data from multiple sources of information. It was found that the processes deriving in multiple layoffs do not develop homogeneously, but take shape according to context-specific characteristics such as, in the Mexican case, the institutional fragility of journalism and the uneven protection of rights across the territory. The collected data set illustrates how the processes of downsizing, convergence and precarization –commonly studied separately– may occur simultaneously and in an integrated fashion. Specific interplays of global and local trends found in this case study include pressure from governments and lack of tools for claiming labor rights.**

## Keywords

**Layoffs, precarization, convergence, Mexico, journalism, news organizations.**

## 1. Introduction

Between 2018 and 2019, the Mexican media conglomerate Imagen laid off 25 percent of its workforce –four hundred people– in order to deal with the loss of income expected following a change of the ruling party in the federal government. This media group had been one of the most favored during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), from which it received 2,327 million pesos in advertising revenue –around 121 million US dollars (Beauregard, 2019). At a time of crisis in news media organizations (Meyer, 2009; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Waisbord, 2019) and of profound transformations in the world of work (Örnebring, 2009), newsrooms like Imagen have been affected by the sacking of many of their journalists.

Layoffs and closures in news organizations are just the visible part of a complex process that includes interconnected phenomena transforming journalism. The Imagen example makes it clear that understanding such processes requires contextual knowledge, as the case portrays the entanglement between clientelistic media-government relationships and global trends affecting news organizations. Although journalism has been declared in a state of crisis for several years, structural changes in news organizations do not develop homogeneously,

and the forms they take depend on the singularities of each context (Waisbord, 2019). Domestic conditions –in the Mexican case, of historical clientelism and institutional fragility– can exacerbate the adverse effects macro trends have on journalism (Waisbord, 2019).

Experts have recognized as adverse effects of the structural changes taking place in journalism the risk of professional values considered central to journalistic practice disappearing (Bird, 2009; Örnebring, 2009; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Suenzo *et al.*, 2020), and the weakening of journalism in relation to other institutions and groups holding power (McChesney, 2015; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Evidence of these dangers can be found in the downsizing and/or cancellation of investigative journalism projects; the failure of digital-native news outlets conducting local and/or investigative journalism to develop sustainable business models (Bell, Owen, Brown, Hauka & Rashidian, 2017; McChesney, 2015); in fired journalists often leaving journalism to work in other industries (Reyna, 2017); and in media staff who have survived restructuring finding themselves subject to worse working conditions and developing psychological and physical afflictions that hinder their journalistic practice (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Reinardy, 2010).

As previously suggested, structural processes transforming news organizations have an impact on journalistic modes of production and on the working conditions of journalists. To understand these processes in depth, this study focuses on processes of organizational change in news organizations with multiple layoffs in a western Mexican city. The study is grounded on the assumption that research based on numerical data must be complemented with qualitative studies that enable us to delve into the phenomena studied and understand how they are related to the conditions of the context in which the news organizations operate (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012), without assuming that the crisis in journalism manifests itself in the same way in the global south as it does in the global north.

This study contributes to the literature by showing how processes that are usually studied separately, in spite of the close links between them, are integrated: for example, how organizational downsizing, technological convergence and precarization are linked to macro trends and context-specific phenomena at the meso level. To support the idea that they are integrated, the theoretical framework adopted in the study accounts for both macro trends and their interaction with local conditions. After a brief introduction to the method of study adopted, there is a description of the processes of downsizing, convergence and precarization observed in the critical case study, and finally a proposal that argues for the importance of conducting case studies that emphasize processes of change in contexts other than Western ones.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The core ideas underpinning this critical case study are summed up in the historical-structural approach for the study of media, as outlined by Sánchez Ruiz (1992). This perspective sees societies as complex systems whose components interact in multiple ways. Multiple particular circumstances derived from the past shape facts and social relations. This process forms institutions and molds the fundamental societal subsystems (economy, politics, culture). However, societal structures are not invariable, and historical development is not inescapable. In other words, agency at the individual and social levels has the potential to shape structures (Sánchez Ruiz, 1992; Giddens, 1995).

For its study, any social object can be understood as constituted by a nexus of elements with different dimensions and mediating relationships. It is in this spirit that, for example, Örnebring (2018) called for the understanding of precarization in journalism in a manner that is not isolated from the labor phenomena in other fields or from the general trends behind these phenomena. In a similar manner, González Macías and Echeverría (2017) underscored the need to delve into the situated and interdependent relationship between media and politics in order to explain Mexican media's development. In addition to dimensions and

mediating relationships, any analysis of an object can focus on levels that are usually organized in a hierarchical way (Sánchez Ruiz, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

A consequence of the latter points is that global trends as well as processes of globalization –such as neoliberalism, employment trends, concentration of capitals and property, commercialization of media, etc.– fail to explain each of the dynamics related to media at the national and local levels; similarly, domestic dynamics do not merely echo global trends (Waisbord, 2014). In this sense, Waisbord (2014) has recommended focusing on “how local media and cultural processes engage with globalization” (p. 28).

Likewise, most research on media has been done in global north settings, posing results in specific settings as universal. It is, in this way, “ethnocentric” in character (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 2). Conversely, scholars in contexts with less developed academia tend to take the dominant literature as “universal” (p. 2), uncritically appropriating concepts, categories and theories that refer to distant settings for making inferences in cases where they do not necessarily apply. Besides suggesting a more critical appropriation, this circumstance calls for the production of research that is focused on distinct settings. This way, results in the form of data, concepts and theories can enable comparisons between cases.

### **2.1. Macro trends affecting journalism(s)**

The crisis in the news media coincides with general trends in the world of work associated with both the application of neoliberal policies and the rise of new information technologies (Meneses, 2010; Örnebring, 2009). General work trends include, according to Örnebring (2009), first, the deregulation of labor markets, reducing the participation of the State as a mediator in labor relations –something that has implied, in Europe, a weakening of trade unions and, in some Latin American countries, has meant changes to the law that have allowed companies to subcontract labor (Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2022). Second, an upsurge in new forms of employment, such as freelancing and, in general, in forms of employment that grant flexibility to employers –transferring risk to employees (Cohen, 2012). Third, the technologization of the workplace –a process that requires staff to exercise new skills and paves the way for layoffs. Fourth, the concurrent deskilling-reskilling of the workforce: journalists are expected to develop skills related to technology and productivity in a process that leads to disdain for skills related to experience and knowledge (Örnebring, 2009).

Uncertainty about the profitability of the news organizations' traditional business models, in turn, implies a need to adapt in order to cope with instability in a media environment that has become radically distinct from what it was before (Bell *et al.*, 2017; Meneses, 2010; Reinardy, 2010). One form of adaptation is to transform the journalistic modes of production. Principles guiding adaptation include development toward convergence (Klinenberg, 2005; Meneses, 2010), and the adoption of service and craft production modes (Picard, 2014). The term *convergence* refers to the coincidence of different technologies. There is technical convergence when digitization eliminates the barriers between production in media that were once separate; there is functional convergence, in services, when the same organization produces content for different media; and there may be economic convergence, of businesses, that is produced through mergers or the acquisition of organizations (Meneses, 2010). On the other hand, Picard (2014) highlights the transition in recent years from an industrial production mode –based on mass production and the dissemination of news– to a service production mode, focused on developing distribution platforms rather than news production, and increasingly dependent on syndicated or user-generated content; or else to a craft production mode –by small companies or journalistic cooperatives offering quality and authenticity by focusing on niche topics, using specialized techniques, or serving small communities.

Precarization of media workers has intensified in different countries. In the United Kingdom, this phenomenon is seen as a result of the adaptations undertaken in news

organizations, as a decrease in income and the corporate restructuring in traditional media seeking to reinvent themselves have caused multiple layoffs (Nel, 2020). In countries for which statistics are available, the trend for job losses in the printed news sector to increase has not reversed: between January 2017 and April 2018 at least 36 percent of newspapers with a circulation greater than 50 thousand copies a day in the United States had multiple layoffs (Grieco, Sumida & Fedeli, 2018). Likewise, between 2008 and 2019, the number of workers in American newspapers fell by 53 percent (Grieco, 2020).

Studies in different settings have described consequences of multiple layoffs that include reducing payrolls at the same time as raising expectations for media workers to increase their productivity and skills (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Klinenberg, 2005). In addition, there are increased feelings of job insecurity among journalists (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Örnebring, 2018), an increased perception of the need to supplement their income with additional jobs (Örnebring, 2018), the anticipation of shorter careers in media organizations (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Reyna, 2017), as well as the acceptance –particularly among young journalists– of precarity as unavoidable in journalistic work (Örnebring, 2018). Among students and recent graduates, there is a rush to be employed to gain experience (Örnebring, 2018); and mature media workers may be forced to choose between retiring from journalism or reskilling (Örnebring, 2018). Age differences with regard to the working conditions and needs of media workers have led to rivalries between generational cohorts (Gollmitzer, 2014). Media workers are increasingly working in flexible conditions that allow the possibility of working outside the newsroom but also require them to be available to carry out activities for different media at any time (Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2020; Klinenberg, 2005; Meneses, 2010). Freelancers, excluded from most studies on journalists, only began to be studied by researchers in recent years, when it was recognized that it is increasingly less accurate to assume that the majority of staff in media organizations work full time; in other words, journalistic work has increasingly become casual (Cohen, 2012; Gollmitzer, 2014; Patrick & Elks, 2015). In conclusion, precarization is a “key characteristic of contemporary journalistic work” (Örnebring, 2018, p. 109). The phenomena listed here have been considered a threat to the quality of journalism, as well as drivers of change in the professional values of journalism (Bird, 2009; Meneses, 2010; Örnebring, 2009; Sherwood & O'Donnell, 2018; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Suenzo *et al.*, 2020).

## **2.2. *The contribution of context to understanding changes in journalism***

My account of the situation so far may lead to the assumption that we are facing a single crisis affecting different countries at the same time and in the same fashion. However, changes can also be analyzed as separate crises stemming from particular historical conditions that must be included in any explanation of the development of media systems in the world (Espino Sánchez, 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Waisbord, 2014). Therefore, it makes sense to examine the articulations between macro trends and local context. The trends described so far make up the conditions of the press that have led to organizational changes and job insecurity in news organizations in multiple settings. However, regional and local context add nuance to my depiction. Specifically, there are conditions common to Latin American countries that have given shape to their media systems, as well as conditions particular to Mexico –where this case study is situated.

In Latin America, news organizations continue to be economically dependent on government subsidies (provided mainly through advertising contracts), something that inescapably shapes editorial content. The historically low readership of newspapers in Latin America –compared to that of Western Europe, the United States and Canada– adds to the pressure on editorial content, as it is hard to make a profit and media organizations are vulnerable to being used instrumentally to achieve political ends while obtaining private benefits (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Media patrimonialism, a concept that sums up the above phenomena, refers to dynamics in which patrons give public goods to clients in

exchange for political support, both at the institutional (media–government relationships) and the routine level (reporters–officials relationships) (Waisbord, 2013).

Mexican journalism is particularly affected by the weaknesses in large public institutions: failures in the justice system perpetuate impunity for the perpetrators of crimes against journalists (De León & González, 2020); while the ineffectiveness of anti–corruption strategies has allowed resources to be diverted into mutually beneficial patron–client relationships between media companies and political actors that set limits for the autonomy of journalists. The lack of presence of the state in areas of the territory –i.e., through law enforcement– means journalism is a long way from being an uninhibited enterprise for reporters covering a broad range of subjects. The above conditions have been conceptualized as a *hybrid regime* –that is, one that combines competitive elections and democratic institutions with authoritarian practices and that is incapable of containing violence against journalists, due to institutional weaknesses and uneven levels of protection of rights throughout its territory (Hughes & Vorobeyva, 2021). González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) argue that any analysis must distinguish between conditions for journalism at the center and in *peripheral zones*. Unevenness, this time stemming from the coexistence of authoritarian and liberal features, is also highlighted in González Macías and Echeverría's (2017) discussion of the Mexican media's development. The authors explain the uneven *modernization* of the Mexican press by pointing to regional differences in influences endogenous and exogenous to media.

Accurate statistics for multiple layoffs in Mexican and Latin American media organizations are lacking. However, Blanco Herrero *et al.* (2020) report signs that structural changes affecting the working conditions of people employed in the sector are taking place: first, the average age of journalists decreased in the period 2007–2017, suggesting that organizations are losing experienced staff and/or are attracting inexperienced staff. Second, the proportion of full-time journalists decreased, while that of freelance journalists increased, suggesting a process of flexibility and casualization of work. Third, journalists' salaries fell and the proportion of journalists with multiple jobs –both within and outside the journalistic field– increased, suggesting a process of job precarization.

A look specifically at Mexico gives us even more elements for seeing the interweaving between macro patterns and particular conditions: Mexico was the Latin American country where multi-employment grew the most (Blanco Herrero *et al.*, 2020). In spite of an increase in journalistic collaborative networks (Martínez Mendoza & Ramos Rojas, 2020), Mexico is, together with Chile, the country in the region with the least participation of journalists in professional organizations, a fact that could be explained by the State cooptation that had discredited them in the past (Márquez & Hughes, 2017). Likewise, the same source indicates that 42% of Mexican journalists work for more than one platform, and 79% cover more than one source or topic, showing that journalistic work takes place largely in the context of greater demands, which is unfavorable both for specialized and for investigative journalism. Precarity has long been assumed in the literature as intrinsic to Mexican journalism, as it is part of a cycle in which the low profitability of news organizations fuels journalists' precarity; while, at the same time, harsh work conditions sustain corruption and a lack of professionalization at the individual level (González Macías & Cepeda Robledo, 2021). Violence is another condition faced by Mexican journalists, as risks involving physical safety remain their top concern (González & Rodelo, 2020).

Furthermore, a view focused on the domestic specificities of journalistic conditions might prove fruitful when trying to understand differences within single countries, as critical differences arise from particular conditions. For example, a typical situation in Mexico at the state level is the control and concentration of resources by single actors that co-opt news organizations –e. g., state governors. In this kind of scenario, corrupt media owners are singled out as the main roadblocks for journalists' autonomy (Espino Sánchez, 2016; González Macías & Cepeda Robledo, 2021; González Macías & Echeverría, 2017). Yet, this source of

constraints coexists with an increased potential for diversity of the means of funding in the largest metropolitan areas, combined with a higher presence of the state and a greater rule of law, enabling in those settings opportunities for the emergence of democratic journalism.

### **2.3. Study setting**

The selection of case study followed a critical case logic as outlined by Patton (2014). Thus, if harsh situations for news organizations are found in a media-rich metropolis with plenty of educated audiences and funding opportunities for media and greater level of protection of rights, it is expected that the same level of difficulties or greater ones will be observed in less developed areas. These comparatively favorable conditions are present in the case study, which focused on the news media organizations in the Guadalajara metropolitan area (GMA).

As the third most populated city in the country, the GMA is a significant market for news media, as evidenced by the abundance and diversity of its public and commercial news organizations. The co-existence of examples of civic journalism, experimental journalism groups, and civil society organizations with a strong presence in the public sphere reflects this dynamism and has allowed a certain *deinstitutionalization* of journalism in the sense that control of the news and of the journalistic profession is not exclusively in the hands of the government, nor is ownership of news companies solely deposited in large media organizations (Picard, 2014). However, in comparison with the other largest metropolitan areas –Mexico City and Monterrey– the GMA has a lower consumption of newspapers and, therefore, less appeal for advertising companies, as well as, in print media organizations, a greater dependence on government advertising and, in organizations owned by conglomerates, a greater dependence on synergy with subsidiaries in other locations.

In the GMA, the global trends presented in the last section combine with particular conditions to generate patterns of –often cyclical– multiple layoffs as well as closures of journalistic projects. Layoffs and closures are the most visible phenomena within a complex process of change.

The inquiry in this critical case study focused on the processes that have given rise to the present situation (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012), adopting a strategy that aims to emphasize the dynamics of change and the phenomena associated with these processes—especially the effects of multiple layoffs and organizational change on journalists. In this way, I posed as a research question: *what are the characteristics of the processes occurring in news organizations with multiple layoffs and how are they related to the particular conditions of the Mexican context?*

### **3. Method**

To understand the processes of organizational change in news organizations with multiple layoffs in the studied setting, I followed two strategies: The first strategy was to map the multiple layoff events –defined as any layoff event with three or more dismissed media workers– into a matrix that broke down each event, its date, the media organization, and the number of workers affected, if known. The matrix was crucial for two reasons: First, a list of events and affected media organizations was necessary for sampling knowledgeable participants. Second, it made possible to establish not just the extent of the phenomenon in the analyzed case (the GMA) but its patterns: between 2015 and 2021, there were 17 multiple layoff events in surviving media organizations involving up to 47 media employees each (see Table 1). The events affected 9 different media organizations (five organizations had two events and one organization had three events during the period). Additionally, I registered three media closures and three cancellations of media projects in the same period.

**Table 1:** Multiple layoff events in surviving media organizations from the GMA.

<i>Media organization type</i>	<i>Layoff events</i>
Newspaper	8
Radio	3
Convergent (newspaper + radio)	2
Convergent (newspaper + tv)	2
Television	2
<i>Total</i>	17

Note: between January, 2015, and December, 2021. Events ranged from 3 to 47 employees being laid off.

Source: Own elaboration.

As a second strategy, I gathered data from multiple sources. This strategy relied heavily on the application of semi-structured interviews to media workers, and also on the recovery of data from social media and other published sources. During the study, the social network Twitter functioned as a public space that allowed media workers to publicly ventilate layoff events. Their expressions not only helped to situate layoff events in a timeline, but proved to be rich enough to complement interviews as a data source, as they covered themes including the features of layoffs, the organization climate at the organization and the outcomes of the event at the individual level. For example, user @prishdez wrote in a Twitter thread: “When the layoffs occurred at *El Diario NTR*, they were difficult days, but something I will never forget was that as a team, together, the dismissed reporters [...] demanded that our right to liquidation, to fair payment, be respected” (prishdez, 2019). 15 tweets were gathered from three handles identified by using the search terms “despidos” + [name of media]. Two other published sources (Covarrubias, 2017; Valdez, 2016) complemented the data set. Complementing interviews with unobtrusive data also helped to reduce the number of participants, something desirable due to practical considerations –so as to avoid devoting time and resources for collecting unnecessary data (Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2020, and March 2021 in online and in-person modalities. The researcher interviewed 14 low to middle ranking media workers surviving in or separated from news organizations based in the GMA that had multiple layoffs during the 2015–2020 period. Participants were selected via snowball sampling, underscoring variety in terms of gender, age, position and media organization: 57% identified as men; 43% as women; participants’ age ranged from 25 to 58 years old (median age: 38 years old); their journalistic experience ranged from 5 to 33 years (median: 12 years); they had a median experience of having worked at 3 different news organizations during their journalistic trajectory; 29% were positioned at a medium rank of authority within the organization; 71% at a low rank. Each interview lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. The interviews were preceded by a description of the research objective, a commitment to the confidential use of data, and a verbal request for informed consent. After this prelude, the interview was organized in six blocks of questions: (1) journalistic trajectory and present working status; (2) characteristics of the layoff event; (3) working conditions at the organization; (4) outcomes of the layoff event in the organization; (5) outcomes at the individual level; and (6) outcomes at the institutional and social levels.

The criterion for stopping data collection was theoretical saturation. Analysis of the data was carried out at the same time as the data collection and consisted of reading the transcribed interviews and complementary data and creating codes and themes in accordance with the precepts of the grounded theory method (Strauss, 2003). In order to protect the privacy of the participants, their identity is established in this article solely by means of an alphabetic code (A–N).

## 4. Results

In order to account for the structural processes at play in news organizations with multiple layoffs in the Mexican context, the interview data was organized according to the three main themes that emerged during the analysis: (1) organizational downsizing, (2) convergence in the news organization, and (3) the precariousness of journalistic work. The themes are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Downsizing, convergence and labor precarization processes in studied case.

	<i>Downsizing</i>	<i>Convergence</i>	<i>Labor precarization</i>
Main features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Labor flexibilization (subcontracting, temporary contracts, alternative forms of employment).</li> <li>- Multiple layoffs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The media organization produces contents for different media (functional convergence).</li> <li>- Media workers produce for different organizations and media using integrated digital technologies (such as computers and phones) (digital convergence).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Losses in job benefits.</li> <li>- Employment informality.</li> <li>- Wage stagnation: <i>"I need a minimum of two jobs, but I regularly have three or four sources of income... to be able to cover my expense" (I).</i></li> </ul>
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Restructuring of organization: areas removed/merged.</li> <li>- Revamping of work processes: changes in editorial criteria, new management policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workers acquire more roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>- Reskilling: <i>"I have photos of everything" (I).</i></li> <li>- Deskilling: e. g., less depth in reporting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional distress.</li> <li>- Burnout.</li> <li>- Resignation: <i>"This tiredness that... I was already dragging... had already made me question if I had to look for other work horizons" (C).</i></li> </ul>
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Layoffs aimed primarily at employees with higher salaries: <i>"Day by day we were generating seniority, which would cost the company more when we retired" (D).</i></li> <li>- Nonconformity to work demands and government pressure can prompt layoffs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pressure to conform to greater work demands.</li> <li>- Exhaustion of workers: <i>"There were days when I had to close at two or three in the morning and I had to open at 8" (E).</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of tools for claiming labor rights: ineffective unions, lack of effective trade organizations.</li> <li>- Small journalistic field as deterrent for claiming labor rights.</li> <li>- Young educated inexperienced workers willing to accept low salaries.</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

### 4.1. Organizational downsizing

Two main forms of organizational downsizing are labor flexibilization and layoffs. Downsizing through flexibilization includes measures such as the subcontracting of work, temporary contracts, and the adoption of alternative forms of employment. Permanent posts (*plazas*) seem to be a thing of the past (D-E). There are large media organizations in the city where, since the 2000s, many of the staff have had temporary contracts that do not recognize seniority (D, K). Personnel in this situation remain in the company waiting for a *plaza* to open—many times to no avail (D, F). Usually, temporary contracts must be renewed every six months or more frequently (H, K, L).

Staff might be forced to sign new contracts for the same company or for an outsourcing entity (A-B, J, K). Outsourced personnel do not usually receive profit sharing, as the outsourcing company generally does not generate any profit (K, M). In one organization, media workers were transferred to a company in which all the personnel were unionized, but, at the same time, they had to “lose” their seniority (hence any increased compensation for



unfair dismissal depending on the number of years at work) (J). Journalists have no way of opposing these changes, as they are often not part of a union or organization that effectively represents them. Additionally, managers often insist that the change is only “nominal” and will not affect seniority (A–B). This creates uncertainty for media workers: as B says, “some do trust and others, well... they need to keep working, right?”.

Traditional forms of employment (such as *trusted employees*, and indefinite contracts) coexist with alternative forms such as outsourcing, temporary contracts, freelancers, workers subject to a probationary period (F, N), interns and, in radio, the commercialization of time slots. For example, as a sports journalist producing a sports radio program, K was not considered an employee; instead, he had the obligation of commercializing the program and paying the broadcasting organization around 70 percent of the advertising revenues generated. Regardless of the form of employment, organizations seek to reduce costs at the expense of benefits such as rest days and paid overtime, or by asking for less freelance articles (G, N).

Downsizing through layoffs varies according to the characteristics of the organizations, which might observe different criteria for selecting the staff to be laid off. A first criterion is salary levels. In D's organization, those picked out to be fired were the founding employees –journalists with fifteen or more years of seniority– in a surgical operation carried out at the conglomerate's Mexico City headquarters on the basis of financial considerations. K says, on the other hand, that all the employees laid off in his organization were unionized; and L, although young and without seniority, had one of the highest rates of pay among staff in his organization and was therefore fired. Some cases (D, I, K) occurred in relatively old organizations in which the longest serving, unionized, personnel would receive the highest salaries –that by law cannot be reduced– and quite decent perks, which meant their income had come to represent a significant part of the payroll: “Day by day we were generating seniority, which would cost the company more when we retired. So, they preferred to *invest* and lighten up the payroll” (D). For I, this was inevitable:

The truth is that it was a great achievement to have lasted that long there, but I ended up being... the most expensive journalist in... [the organization], and it had to happen sooner or later. So, I think it was logical in a way, if the value of the trade, of the business, was going down so much.

A second criterion mentioned was productivity. C stated that, in his organization, those who survived were the ones who were best able to adjust to increased workloads. This participant's organization is young, and the layoff was probably a way to cut costs in a context of declining advertising revenue and lower government subsidies. A third criterion was government pressure. Although his organization justified the layoffs as being due to the Covid-19 economic crisis, N attributes his dismissal to pressure from the local government due to the editorial policy of his newscast. N worked in a media conglomerate with a history of giving in to government pressure in exchange for benefits.

There are companies that promote early retirement and “attractive” settlements as a way to “prevent” layoffs (H, J). There may even be negotiations with long-term employees, who might resign voluntarily if offered a fair settlement (I, J), or who, in the face of financial need, agree to retire in exchange for a financial compensation (H).

Downsizing includes changes in the organization's structure: investigative units, beats, processes, and products can disappear. Some areas are removed, or merged with others. In some newspapers, culture and sports sections have been affected (B); and, in many organizations, specialized positions such as proofreading, photography, and infographics have diminished or disappeared (A, B, I, F). Downsizing can contribute to the debilitation of local journalism, as organizations with a national scope can reduce or even eliminate all permanent staff in regional offices that are deemed non-essential (K).

Downsizing leads to revamping work processes within the newsroom –from policies for preventing journalistic errors (A), to adjustments in editorial criteria for appealing to wider audiences– for instance, increasing the focus on crime issues (G). Downsizing can imply a reduction in the amount of content produced, reducing the quantity of newspaper pages (D), or eliminating weekend editions (B). Due to the loss of specialized posts and personnel, fewer people review and proof-read articles, which increases the number of typos and factual mistakes in them (A, D, H). Likewise, there is less capacity for following up on public affairs (D), and less opportunity to add depth and complexity to the reporting (I).

#### **4.2. *Convergence in the news organization***

Organizational downsizing has occurred at the same time as processes transforming news organizations into multimedia companies capable of producing content for converging markets: in the case study, organizations previously focused on a single medium now produce news articles for the web, while newspapers have ventured into radio and/or video on demand. For example, a newspaper organization reduced its payroll almost exactly at the same time as it expanded into radio, which exhausted the remaining workers (B-C):

We, twenty percent of the team, stayed, and still have to do a hundred percent of the work, because I think the only thing that was done at the time was to reduce the paper by one page, but... we had to fill out the newspaper, and we had the web, and we had to participate, [and] fill out the radio... slots (C).

The intertwining of organizational downsizing and convergence has caused reporters to acquire more roles and responsibilities as part of a process of adaptation in which managers can even resort to punishment. A newspaper, for instance, implemented a “zero errors” policy sanctioning reporters who accumulated three errors “of fact, of name, of date or of number” with the cancellation of a rest day (Portavoz\_GDL, 2017, November 14). There is also pressure on journalists to increase their skills for expanding their chances of being hired in media companies (L), something crucial not just for young journalists, but also for experienced staff:

I have photos of everything because I know that is part of my obligation, but also... I like to have material available for many platforms, because suddenly opportunities arise, and you can participate in other types of projects, and you get more earnings, and you get a space that you did not have, so it is necessary under that logic... to make yourself more complete as a journalist (I).

#### **4.3. *The precariousness of journalistic work***

Even in news organizations that offered fair working conditions, salaries have deteriorated in recent decades, as there have been few wage increases, and significant losses in benefits (H-I). One participant recalled that it was in the mid-2000s that she decided she needed a second journalistic job: “Until then, I hadn’t needed to work in another organization to cover my expenses. Since then, I have needed at least two [jobs], but I regularly have three or four incomes” (I). Media workers who belong to unions can have better benefits (J-L), as well as greater peace of mind, since they perceive that the union takes care of their interests (K). Most of the participants agreed on the worsening of working conditions. Lost benefits include overtime, the second day off, and paid vacations (H). Employers’ contributions to social security can be less than the amount that corresponds to their salary –an illegal but common way for companies to reduce costs in the country. This hurts workers, who will accumulate less money in their retirement and housing funds. Journalists might be afraid of getting sick, as managers can deduct the days not worked: “I had colleagues from other media who... became ill with dengue fever and... they worked like that –sick– so that their salary would not be cut” (B).

Accounts of the layoff experience expose behaviors from managers that range from cooperating (B) to being furtive and violent –with employees being isolated in rooms, kicked

out of offices by security guards, or prevented from accessing information (E, K). Although most participants considered the settlement fair and in accordance with the law (A-B, D-F, I, L), there have been layoffs and media closures in which former workers complain over a lack of compensation (G, N), or an unfair one (H, K): One participant was offered a lower than expected amount under the pretext that the media company was in financial difficulties; mockingly, workers were told that they could always sue if they did not agree (H): “[They told us that] if we signed, fine. But if not, and the case went to court, well what would we live off during the proceedings?” (H). Another participant claims he and his colleagues had been deceived, as the lawyer notified them later that although they had been fired, the documents they signed certified their dismissal as voluntary resignation (K).

The relatively small size of the journalistic field adds another layer of precariousness, as journalists fear being stigmatized for demanding their rights through legal action, and know that in the future they might have to knock on the doors of the same organization that fired them. So, when there are labor lawsuits against media organizations, former workers try to avoid the risk of repercussions: after a mass firing, media workers “did not want to make a scandal because they feared that it would harm them” (G). When the settlement is considered fair, the dismissed personnel try to maintain a good relationship with the organization: “I also tried to... finish well because you don’t know when you will come back” (L). As suggested in the previous testimony, layoffs are often followed a few months later by the opening of vacancies with lower salaries (C, F). The newly hired staff are usually younger and, therefore, less experienced (K), but it is not uncommon for the same workers who were laid off to be rehired almost immediately with lower pay and/or lower benefits (F, H).

Precarization affects the emotional state of the workers. There is uncertainty about what will happen in the media organization: when the next layoff will be, who will be the next to be fired, and whether the organization or the area will survive, or change its working conditions (G, J). Workers may doubt whether they have retained their seniority after being asked to sign a new employment contract (A-C). Uncertainty is a state of mind fueled by the perception of “strange things” within the organization: cryptic phrases or silences from the bosses are interpreted by workers as a sign that something bad is about to happen (B-C). In other cases, there are rumors (A, J, K) or, simply, awareness of the layoffs and closures that have been taking place in other areas of the same organization (K, N). Uncertainty fuels fear, and beliefs that breed submission: “if they say no to something then they will be unemployed” (B).

After layoffs, media workers express symptoms of burnout, such as fatigue (B, E, H), apathy (B, H), depression, and anxiety (H). They often question the meaning of continuing in the media organization (K). A common emotion was feeling like a *maquiladora* worker doing impersonal, alienating, easily replaceable piecework (B-C, F, H, N). Disappointment was also recorded in their stories: feeling undervalued (E), being forced to settle for a job with poor working conditions (F), imagining that things were going to get better and finding they didn’t (G, J); or, among the youngest, experiencing conditions that they had not expected when they were at college (E).

During organizational changes, some journalists decide to resign voluntarily, as some conditions develop that it is not possible for them to tolerate: For instance, they foresee future layoffs and deteriorating working conditions, and decide it is better to resign than to continue in a situation that is adverse to their mental health (C, G, I), they experience pressure or censorship in the newsroom (C, I), or disagree with the organization’s editorial policy (C, G, I).

## **5. Conclusions**

This article gave an account of processes of organizational change in news organizations with multiple layoffs in the Mexican context. Macro trends impacting journalism and the world of work in general (e. g., technologization, casualization, flexibilization) were manifest in this case study. Additionally, these trends occur at the same time as processes of adjustment to

alternative modes of production that respond to the crises of journalism in the Latin American contexts –that is, one in which journalistic business models continue to be highly dependent on government subsidies and in which rights are unevenly protected throughout the territories– causing Mexican news organizations to reproduce the aforementioned tendencies in an amplified form. In the light of the evidence presented in this critical case study it is proposed that the transformations in news organizations are complex and seem to occur in a heterogeneous way as a result of the influence of macro trends intertwined with particular contextual conditions. Therefore, processes of change in specific contexts cannot be understood in depth without considering the aforementioned global–local entanglements, as well as the interrelation of the different processes in play. In particular, this case study illustrates how the processes of downsizing, convergence and precarization –commonly studied separately– may occur simultaneously and in an integrated fashion.

Organizational downsizing in news organizations is to a great extent comparable to similar processes observed in other settings and even in other cultural industries in the context of the rise of neoliberalism and work flexibilization and casualization (Gollmitzer, 2014). Similar to other contexts, downsizing manifested itself as a process in which, paradoxically, organizations “invest” in getting rid of experienced personnel, exalt productivity, and provide the conditions for journalists to leave the profession (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Klinenberg, 2005; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2016). A specific interplay of global and local trends found in this case study is that adjustments in the editorial criteria for increasing the range of audiences in the Mexican context can take the form of a greater focus on crime issues –putting media workers at risk– and sensationalism –trivializing or distorting complex phenomena. Likewise, government pressure was revealed to be an additional cause for multiple layoffs in news organizations in our case study.

Functional and technical convergence, carried out at the same time as downsizing, has led to profound changes in the structures of organizations and their work processes. Convergence has changed journalistic jobs in the sense that positions previously considered essential have disappeared, new ones have emerged, and the skills needed for the remaining ones have mutated. As in other settings (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Klinenberg, 2005; Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2022; Reinardy, 2010), an emphasis on productivity permeates work demands and influences the hiring of young journalists possessing multimedia productivity skills. However, even after organizational adaptations aimed at improving economic sustainability, the collected data set shows that the organizations' persistent economic dependence on governments still makes them susceptible to political pressure reducing in this way the autonomy of journalists.

As the findings from studies based on other contexts reveal, precarization is maximized by convergence and downsizing, as layoffs, larger work demands and emphasis on productivity lead to a worsening of working conditions (Ekdale *et al.*, 2015; Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2022; Reinardy, 2011). However, in our case study, precarization was intensified by the lack of mechanisms –such as effective unions, trade organizations and advocacy groups– that could prevent violations of media workers' rights and provide them with agency –for example, by putting limits to work demands and by defending nonconforming workers. Unfortunately, gains in self-protection, professionalization and economic independence coming from the participation of journalists in innovative independent professional organizations (Martínez Mendoza & Ramos Rojas, 2020) are neither a dominant nor a uniform phenomenon in the country. In contrast, employers' fraudulent under-declaration of wages remains common while the lethargic labor justice and fears of reprisal discourages media workers from taking legal action.

The main limitation of this study stems from its design. The critical case study focused on documenting and describing processes of change involving news organizations with multiple layoffs in a single Mexican city; therefore, it is not representative of what happens in

the country as a whole or in the Latin American region. However, its critical approach enables us to anticipate that challenges of similar or greater severity will be observed in less developed contexts; while from its integrative perspective, it sheds light on how global trends are manifested in different contexts than those of the global north, to produce specific arrangements with the potential to induce institutional transformations in journalism. A second limitation comes from gathering data solely from low to middle ranking media workers, therefore lacking the perspective of elite participants.

Future case studies on the processes of organizational change taking place in journalism would benefit from including the perspective of elite actors and decision makers (e. g., media owners and managers, legislators), as they remain markedly understudied. Likewise, case studies on the topic would be enriched by complementing interview, observational and documentary data with survey data coming from statistical offices.

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