

“A Significant Impact on our Democracy”: Chilean Media Audiences’ Claims for Dignity

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Chile’s largest social uprising in 30 years began in October 2019. Protests erupted throughout the country, inspired by a widespread belief that the state and powerful institutional actors, such as the media, had undermined the dignity of much of the population. In this article, we explore how and the extent to which mainstream media, specifically television, has affected the dignity of the Chilean people and how participants in the social uprising defined the concept. Drawing on the hundreds of complaints filed with the National Television Council (CNTV) and using grounded theory, we argue that allegations against harm to people’s dignity caused by the media have become more prevalent in Chile. The reasons given by audience members include the violence of the broadcasts themselves, the stigmatization of certain people and groups, and a lack of journalistic ethics. Ultimately, this article analyzes a key concept for social uprisings and connects it to the ethical and political role of media systems and newsmaking in contemporary democracies.

Keywords: audience, television, Chile, dignity, mobilization

Calls for dignity have been central to the demands made by Latin American social movements over the past several years. In Colombia, a group of indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, former militia warriors, and peasants embarked upon a long walk toward Bogotá in what they called the “March for Dignity” in 2020 (Forero, 2020). In Chile, one of the most common slogans of the 2019 social uprising was “Until Dignity

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Becomes a Habit" (Badilla, 2020). It appeared on walls, banners, social media, and even posters based on the U.S. cartoon *The Simpsons* (Stuardo, 2019; Tompkins & Dean Moore, 1996). The phrase also gained popularity in the context of the marches marking International Women's Day in Mexico in 2020 (Bleas, 2020). Latin America's recent waves of discord have placed dignity at the forefront of rallies, demonstrations, and messages about working toward a better life. The concept has been so prevalent that new names, such as Dignity Hill and Dignity Square, have popped up in urban areas such as Cali, Colombia, and Santiago, Chile.

However, what does dignity mean in the context of uprisings that unite millions around a common goal? Some authors point to a change in the concept itself. Most agree that there is a material/immaterial discomfort at the heart of these calls that points to inequality, misrepresentation, and discrimination. The parties responsible for these practices, which include the media, are powerful enough to exert influence over the whole of society (Díez García & Laraña, 2017). For example, television is the main source of news in Chilean households (Antezana, 2021). As a result, national television networks play a major role in establishing what is considered important or newsworthy. They give voice to certain social actors while quelling others, and shape subjects and events, ultimately providing a representation of what society looks like and should look like. The power of an almost entirely private and market-driven actor (Santa Cruz, 2017) to produce discourse and disseminate meaning is one reason for Latin Americans' distrust of mainstream news, journalism, and the media in general. This was clear during Chile's 2019 *estallido social* [social uprising]. During Chile's largest mobilization in 30 years (Somma, 2021), people assembled in the country's streets and squares, largely rejecting the presence of mainstream media cameras and journalists.

This article explores this rejection, analyzing it as a clue to the extent of and ways in which the media are believed to undermine people's dignity in Chile. We also use this lens to explore the meaning of dignity in the eyes of the people who consumed the media coverage of Chile's 2019 *estallido social*. We call it a clue because our focus is not necessarily on the protesters themselves. Our primary subject is the audience that raises concerns about dignity vis-à-vis television daily coverage. According to the National Television Council (CNTV, 2020a), the number of complaints submitted by audience members has been increasing significantly from the 2000s until today, from 450 complaints filed in 2006 to 12,223 in 2021. Among the total number of complaints,² those that appeal to "dignity and fundamental rights" have been positioned since 2016 as the most relevant: 49.2% in 2018, 54.9% in 2019, 54.6% in 2020, and 44.8% in 2021 of the complaints corresponding to this topic (CNTV, 2019, 2020a, 2021a).

Starting from this observation, we engaged in a qualitative analysis of these complaints, specifically those submitted between 2018 and 2021, and found that many reports claim that television news programs harm the audience's dignity by stigmatizing individuals and social groups and demonstrating a lack of journalistic ethics. The latter is perceived as increasing during times of social revolt, which expands the ideological and political spectrum of people whose dignity is affected. This broadening allows us to arrive at a better understanding of how dignity is defined in Chilean society, consider its pervasiveness, and imagine a different type of television.

² CNTV's website offers eight topics that users can identify as the main focus of a complaint: dignity and fundamental rights, democracy, peace, protection of the environment, family, educating children and young people, pornography, and indigenous people.

Dignity and Mobilization

In the long history of social movement scholarship, dignity is not often included in the demands for governments to take concrete measures to address issues related to food, work, education, or pensions. Dignity was established as one of the cornerstones of all human rights (Habermas, 2010; Margalit, 1996) in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the late 1940s. However, it was not until neoliberal policies were introduced that dignity became a key element of social movements and the surrounding discourse. A pivotal moment in the social and political meaning of the word came on January 1, 1994, with the Zapatista uprising in Mexico's Lacandona Jungle. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) took up arms when Mexico signed a free trade agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada. The move came in response to what Zapatistas considered to be years of obscurity, abandonment, and abuse. In a February 1994 letter, the Zapatistas offered their reasons for saying *iBasta!* [Enough] (EZLN, 1994). The word "dignity" appears frequently in this message:

We talked to each other, looked inwards, and looked at our history. We saw our great-grandparents suffer and struggle. We saw our grandparents struggle. We saw our parents with fury in their hands. We saw that not everything had been taken from us, that we had what was most precious, what gave us the will to live, what made us rise above plants and animals, what made the stone beneath our feet, and we saw, brothers, and we saw that DIGNITY was all we had, and we saw that the shame of having forgotten it was great, and we saw that DIGNITY would allow men to be men again, and dignity once again dwelled in our hearts, and we were still new, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were still new and called us again, to dignity, to the struggle. (p. 119)

The concept involves approaching the materialist/postmaterialist divide in a more contemporary way. It encompasses issues such as access to basic elements like water, claims for autonomy and emancipation from humiliating or oppressive living conditions, freedom from discrimination and daily inequalities, and the systematic undermining of life (Honneth, 1996; Jütten, 2017). The power of this new way of understanding the concept lies in its appeal to people's sense of worth as human beings (Misztal, 2013), around which different perspectives and life stories coalesce. The claim for dignity implies a rejection of humiliation and dehumanization, whether in the form of constructing dams, limiting the supply of gas for heating homes in the country's southern regions, or occupying lands for mining (Holloway & Peláez, 1998). In Latin America, invoking dignity is a call to action, "a participatory movement in all those countries where people have risen up to claim their right to a dignified life" and not merely to survive extenuating circumstances (Revilla Blanco, 2010, p. 60). The latter can mean accessing certain material elements that contribute to well-being (Fraser & Honneth, 2003); being recognized in terms of autonomy (Dworkin, 1978); equal treatment (Arensburg-Castelli, Barrientos-Delgado, Astudillo-Lizama, & Venegas, 2021); relationships based on respect and not on discrimination (Honneth, 1996; Jütten, 2017); and access to water (Harris & Roa-García, 2013).

These and other issues led to Chile's largest social uprising in 30 years, which began in October 2019 under the administration of the right-wing tycoon Sebastian Piñera (Somma, 2021). A subway fare hike in Santiago was the spark that led high school students to jump over turnstiles and occupy public transit

stations on October 18, 2019. The protests quickly escalated and spread throughout the country. To regain control of Santiago, President Piñera called on the army and declared a curfew. People swarmed cities and towns, organizing a movement that swelled to the largest numbers seen in Chile since the return of democracy in 1990 (Hernández & Rebolledo, 2021). In contrast to previous social movements, the rallies and marches were mainly attended by ordinary Chileans rather than groups of workers, students, or peasants (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017). Wide sections of society rejected the deterioration of living conditions on matters such as transport, the environment, health, pensions, and water. The *estallido social* was a response to inequities that permeated various parts of daily life and to the perception of being abused by the dominant market logic (Contreras Cerda & Saavedra Utman, 2021).

The movement, which had no clear leadership, attracted both politically engaged Chileans and those not involved in activism. In contrast to prior movements, the *estallido social* was not launched or led by a charismatic leader, an old or new party, or even a civil society organization (Somma, 2022). In this leaderless movement, notions of "dignity" served as the glue that bound diverse demands for socio-economic equality and an end to abuses and discrimination. This large movement led to the renaming of a space that traditionally hosts spontaneous celebrations of sports and political victories. Plaza Italia became Plaza Dignidad to the protesters who occupied the space daily. The call for dignity echoed through the streets, though the precise meaning of the term and the ways it was represented were diverse, elusive, and polysemic.

Representation and the Media

Chile's *estallido social* blended new and old slogans and symbols, many of which were loaded with meaning. Posters, graffiti, and stickers covered public walls; the banging of pots and pans echoed through the streets; thousands sang chants and songs during large protests; and social media was saturated with messages, memes, and videos (BBC News, 2019; Pinochet Cobos, 2021). Chile's social uprising once again proved that social movements are about people united around a problem and a claim—which in this case was far-reaching—and depend upon protesters' ability to make their demands public and recognizable (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). All the media and communication practices mentioned in this paragraph, and many more, were part of the effort to make the movement appealing and inviting and to position the individuals who represented it as legitimate and valid subjects.

Symbolic performance is a key element of any movement. As Tilly and Wood (2009) noted, a key feature of social movements is their capacity to display expressions of worthiness, unity, number, and commitment. One important contextual element of that endeavor is the structural conditions of visibility—that is, the power relations embedded in what is public and seen and what is hidden and made invisible. Social movements have historically struggled to gain accurate representation in mainstream media (Gitlin, 1980; Susánszky, Kopper, & Zsigó, 2022). They usually have a limited chance of success because—apart from protest participants, a movement's limited reach via leaflets, or even their vast social media reach—the media is still powerful and will primarily focus on the negative aspects of social uprisings. This tendency, which has been called the protest paradigm (Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012), points to the fact that the media tends to seek to preserve the status quo, criminalize activists, and frame the movement as detrimental to the well-being of society.

The literature on Chile supports this notion. Several studies have analyzed media representations of social movements, the framing of protests, the use of stereotypes to describe protesters, and op-eds about social conflicts (Browne, Romero, & Guarda, 2015; Cabalin, 2014). Research conducted in Chile shows that the mainstream media has worked against social movements, contributing to activists' perception of the media as an adversary that works against all movements that could undermine Chile's neoliberal model (Pérez-Arredondo, 2019). While the latter is in line with most of the literature on the topic, the extent to which general audiences also perceive the media to be a harmful actor has not been gauged. The first question that this study addresses is whether the media violates people's sense of dignity and, if so, how. This approach assumes that the media is a structural actor in society and political life and allows us to analyze the shapes, contours, and meanings of dignity from the perspective of media audiences. Our second question, which flows from the first, focuses on the precise meaning of dignity for media audiences during social protests.

At the Latin American level, it is worth noting that, as Segura and Waisbord (2016) pointed out, "the inclusion of participatory mechanisms in the implementation of media legislation is absolutely novel in the history of media governance in the region" (p. 157). Despite this, countries such as Argentina and Uruguay started implementing them during the first decade of the 2000s. On the other hand, countries such as Mexico and Colombia, which lack mechanisms for citizen participation in the formulation of media regulations, have implemented accountability systems that enable limited citizen reporting (via complaint mechanisms) about broadcasted content and adherence to the law. It is worth noting that these two countries are "imperfect duopolies" dominating most of the audience and advertising, such as Caracol and RCN in Colombia, and Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico (2016).

This research is based on an analysis of Chilean television content that aired between 2018 and 2021 using two criteria. The first is that television was "the most important traditional news source" (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 126) and the highest trusted type of media in Chile by 2019. The second is that, unlike other media in the country, the television industry has implemented a mechanism that allows audience members to file complaints to the National Television Council (CNTV), a public institution tasked with "enforcing the correct functioning of Chilean television services" (CNTV, n.d., para. 1). Every report or complaint filed by an audience member is reviewed by CNTV officers and can lead to penalties for television companies. As such, audience members have a direct channel for sharing their opinions on the work of the media. As we will see in the sections that follow, CNTV filings have brought the concept of dignity into sharp focus in recent years.

Materials and Methods

Based on our two main questions, we submitted a request to CNTV under Chile's Transparency Law (Law 20.285), which requires government institutions to provide public information to anyone who requests it. Our appeal focused on accessing reports submitted between 2018 and 2021 about TV news programs. We analyzed the reports, looking at the media's treatment of the concept of dignity beyond the period in which the conflict reached its peak (October 2019). Our goal in expanding the scope of our study was to thoroughly assess the media's role before, during, and after the crisis. Our sample covers three eight-month periods: July 2018–February 2019 inclusive; July 2019–February 2020 inclusive; and July 2020–February

2021 inclusive. These periods were chosen for two reasons. First, given that one purpose of the research is to analyze the implications of the *estallido social*, we decided that the period during which it began (October 2019) as a midpoint would allow us to consider the periods before, during, and after and to look for possible changes. As such, we studied the same period during the previous year (2018) and the year following the uprising (2020). Second, we chose a "long" half-year period (July–February and not only through December, as tends to be the case in the southern hemisphere) to broaden the range of topics covered. We included the summer months (January and February), a period during which social issues tend to change, thus enriching the range of topics to be identified.

As mentioned earlier, the information request was made on two separate occasions. In both cases, we decided to request complaints related to evening news programs because, in addition to being the most frequently reported programs (CNTV, 2020a), the dignity of individuals is the legal good that encompasses more than half of the complaints. Thus, first, on March 16, 2020, we requested all complaints about the legal right of human dignity among evening news programs made between July 2019 and February 2020 inclusive.

The response arrived on April 3, 2020, along with an Ordinary Official Letter and a document containing the complaints prepared by the Department of Enforcement and Supervision of the CNTV. Once we concluded the analysis the following year (on May 4, 2021), we requested the year before and after the social outbreak as a means of updating the information. Therefore, the request was made under the same terms as before, but pointing to news programs between July 2018 and February 2019 inclusive and between July 2020 and February 2021 inclusive. Finally, on June 7, 2021, we received the requested documents containing the complaints.

The database included 1,668 complaints, 239 from the first period, 984 from the second period, and 445 from the third period. We used a qualitative methodological design to process the data. Our design follows grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002) to address the topics and reasons raised by people in an effort to reach their understanding of dignity. We engaged in open coding to identify patterns in the text, noting them and adding comments based on the initial evaluation of the complaints. We then completed an axial encoding process to organize the information and identify the relationships between the patterns that emerged (which we called "categories" at this point). We also selected the comments that were most relevant to the research questions, and we created subcategories, that is, comments that, while different, fell within one larger category, such as violence. Based on the grounded theory analytical process (Charmaz, 2006), we moved from emerging elements to more defined and specific findings. Ultimately, we conducted selective encoding to clarify the general order and direction of the complaints submitted by audience members about the notion of dignity, leading to the results we describe and explain in the following section. All of this was processed manually and systematically in an Excel document directly by the researchers during each six-month phase (2020–2021).

Results

The Media and Everyday Violations of Dignity

The inductive categorization we arrived at answered the first question—whether the media violates people’s sense of dignity and, if so, how—and pointed in three directions. Dignity appeared vulnerable when broadcasting reports that constitute violence, when media and the news stigmatized individuals and social groups, and finally, when audiences perceived a lack of journalistic ethics in the broadcast that could end up in violence or stigmatization of individuals or groups of people.

Reporting That Constitutes Violence

The first way in which the media appears to violate people’s dignity involves journalists, producers, and editors engaging in certain acts or news coverage being perceived as violent and harmful. Audience members identified two situations that generated most of the violence deployed through the news: the justification of gender-based violence and the broadcast of violent images. We describe these further below.

Allegations about violent reporting focus on the justification of gender-based violence—mainly violence related to misogyny or acts perpetrated against sexual and gender dissidents—supported and encouraged within the broadcast, as noted abundantly in the complaints filed. For the complainants, the latter occurs when a vicious act is covered in a way that justifies the aggressor’s actions and blames the victim(s). This includes cases in which the report develops a psychological profile of the victim, such as a woman who was raped and murdered while pregnant and then illegally buried, arguing that her psychological characteristics caused her to fall into her “murderer’s web” (CNTV, 2020b, case 28801). The treatment of this case, indeed, was highly denounced by the audience, with 63 of the 948 complaints filed alluding to it in the period July 2019–February 2020, making it one of the most denounced of the period. Many viewers claimed that such coverage blamed the victim and provided justification for the crime, violating the dignity of women and society as a whole:

24 Horas Central [the news channel] broadcast a description of the psychological profile of a deceased victim of a crime that is the subject of legal proceedings. This represents a significant lack of journalistic and legal ethics (in addition to the crime of publishing confidential documents). They are implying that the victim’s social condition and gender may be causal to her homicide, bringing morbid news coverage to a pathetic and simply unjustifiable and unforgivable extreme. There are so many elements of social and gender-based discrimination in this coverage that I would need more space than provided here to list them all. In short, the lack of journalistic ethics, the lack of dignity afforded to people, including both this victim and her entire social group and the women referred to, and the lack of respect for the pain of the family and other loved ones by highlighting the

sensationalism and cheap morbid content are unfit for any human being with a minimum level of respect and education. (CNTV, 2020b, case 28845³)

Similarly, audiences perceive violence in the framing of news on gender-related issues. The latter occurs when women or sexual and gender dissidents are the victims, but the news tones down the crime and reports it as an accident, a sad story, or something that happened by chance. This outrage against media framing was evident in the extensive coverage of a man who victimized a transgender woman in Channel 13's piece "Nightmare in Malaysia: Felipe Osiadacz Speaks." Audience members accused the news program of describing the "murderer as a victim of circumstance" (CNTV, 2020b, case 30164) by talking about his "sad story" (CNTV, 2020b, case 30157) to the point of holding transgender people responsible for their own murders. Forty-eight of the complaints made in this period (July 2019–February 2020) alluded to this case. Audience members also identified themselves as victims, arguing that "presenting this unpunished murderer on screen denigrates and humiliates all trans people and, honestly, any decent person" (CNTV, 2020b, case 30164). The spectators who claim that news programs are violent use adjectives to describe them, such as sexist, misogynistic, irresponsible, discriminatory, and negligent. They accuse journalists of revictimizing and stigmatizing individuals, normalizing violence, fear mongering, inciting hatred, and showing contempt for the victims and the social groups to which they belong, thus violating human dignity.⁴

The second way that reporting constitutes violence is through the use of images perceived to be violent and stressful. Watching explicit clips depicting human or animal abuse can be a shocking and violent experience. Thus, in broadcasting such images, the media is perceived to cause harm to their audiences. The complaints filed in this regard refer to aberrations, excessive use of violence, morbid content, recklessness, and sensationalism. For audiences, there is a limit to that type of newsmaking, and they express their contempt at witnessing explicit content—especially when it is broadcast without warning—because of their violence and because, at times, they revictimize vulnerable subjects. It is important to note that prime-time newscasts are broadcast at a time of day when entire families are watching, as was noted in many complaints.

³ The code numbers that appear in the text are the case numbers that CNTV assigns to every single complaint filed by television audience members.

⁴ Other cases whose framing is highly questioned and that are also associated with gender violence are a femicide suicide that occurred in 2019 with 26 complaints, and the femicide of a minor in 2020 with 15 complaints (period July 2020–February 2021). In both cases, the object of the complaints is also that there is a news focus where the victims are blamed for their deaths.

Stigmatized Individuals and Social Groups

A second area in which violations of dignity occur is related to the stigmatization of specific individuals or social groups in the media, which positions them as social outcasts. In this category, we find the reproduction or reinforcement of gender stereotypes, as well as others, coming from the intersection of class, gender, race/ethnicity, or nationality. A sentence representative of several complaints about femicide states that the TV channel's framing of the story seeks "to justify and problematize the social condition and gender of the victim as possible causes of homicide" (CNTV, 2020b, case 28845).

In these cases, the argument goes beyond the individual whose dignity is affected and extends to the entire identity group. Even when a news piece refers to a specific person, all members of the group to which that person belongs may experience discrimination. The latter occurs, for example, among people from stigmatized low-income neighborhoods, women, sex and gender dissidents, individuals with disabilities, immigrants, and especially the Mapuche people, Chile's largest indigenous group. The extract below shows how specific news coverage victimizes and discriminates against the Mapuche people.

In the October 9 evening edition of TVN news, journalist Matías Del Río claimed that Mapuche people committed a terrorist act even though no trial has been held. An ethical journalist would not refer to our indigenous group in this way, holding them responsible for crimes for which no one has been tried. Stating that these were biased, irresponsible, discriminatory comments that demonstrate a lack of ethics falls short. (CNTV, 2020b, case 45276)

This particular case produced only one complaint, but the complaints relating to how the Mapuche people are discriminated against by the news are greater—seven in the first period analyzed, three in the second period, and five in the last period. Even more significant is that, despite the fact that these are different news cases, there is a similar argument: the news not only discriminates against Mapuche people but also criminalizes them.

Many of these allegations point to how the media voluntarily or involuntarily connects social groups to criminal acts, thus harming people's sense of dignity. The latter not only applies to Mapuche people, but it also affects students (136 complaints relating to the criminalization of this group across the three periods), protesters of the *estallido social* (113 complaints), poor people (10 complaints), and immigrants (17 complaints). As the scholars who developed the protest paradigm (McLeod & Hertog, 1999) and the propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) have pointed out, such connections embody the idea of an "evil other." In this case, the "evil other" is constructed by linking crimes to certain social groups. One example of such criminalization can be found in reports on social activism associated with individuals' nationalities. As the author of one complaint wrote, "A person's nationality is irrelevant and contributes nothing special to the topic" (CNTV, 2020b, case 31416). Such practices are also linked to the legal sphere and demonstrate a lack of respect for the presumption of innocence and due process. News programs explicitly expose individuals as presumed guilty before legal proceedings are complete, stigmatizing them and, in many cases, their social groups.

In this account of how people perceive the violation of dignity by the media, it is worth noting that many historically stigmatized groups have achieved a great deal of visibility in recent years (Saavedra Utman, 2019). As a result, audiences are more sensitive to how the media can harm their self-perceptions, including groups that have recently challenged the status quo in Chile—women, students, the Mapuche people, and protesters. All played a vital role in the 2019 social uprising, as their identity had been harmed, according to the audience, because of media criminalization.

The Perceived Lack of Journalistic Ethics

The failure to demonstrate journalistic ethics is a category that cuts across all the claims reviewed. When audience members mention a lack of ethics, they allude to specific situations that harm the honor and dignity of the subjects portrayed by a news report, damaging what Patrick Charaudeau (2006) calls “the communicative contract” between audience and journalists (p. 41). This contract involves a bond in which the audience expects certain behavior—beyond nuances, valid divergent perspectives, and ideological biases—from the media as long as the media has the social legitimacy to present news to society. The complaints refer to issues such as reporting on judicial proceedings without respecting the presumption of innocence and due process, and also to instances in which media outlets published images or revealed the identities of individuals who did not consent to being part of the broadcast, violating their right to privacy and protection of their identity.

Audience testimonies also tend to mention a lack of ethics when there is explicit censorship (for example, cutting off live coverage), when events or developments are not covered at all, or when specific issues are deliberately ignored. CNTV complaints also allege misrepresentation of the facts when, for instance, broadcasts show interviews edited with a sensationalistic tone, clips featuring biased labels, images that contradict what the journalists say (false associations), and news coverage that appears staged.

An example of the latter came after the broadcast of a piece showing what was labeled political indoctrination at a high school in Santiago. A total of 127 complaints focused solely on that case of staged news. The report, aired by Channel 13, focused on the alleged indoctrination of students at a girls' school by extremist political groups. The content that the TV station described as leaked footage of guerrilla-like training was actually a school project. The images were taken from the students' social media accounts and broadcast nationwide out of context and without their permission. The viewers who submitted complaints mentioned the channel's failure to protect students' privacy and accused Teletrece [the Channel 13 newscast] of staging the piece to discredit and stigmatize students, their school, and the role of high school students in social uprisings.

Yesterday, October 21, 2018, Teletrece aired a report titled “Indoctrination in School 1” in which journalist Alfonso Concha engaged in absolutely biased and odd reporting on supposed political indoctrination of students at the school by members of the *FPMR* [the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front] just one day before the vote on the “Safe Classroom” bill. Without engaging in any serious journalistic investigation, and drawing on images assembled in an absolutely biased, crude and malicious manner, he accused both parents of School 1 students and members of the

Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front of engaging in said indoctrination. I am writing to report the bad intentions and deliberate hoax that this reporting constitutes. For example, old photographs of two parents were displayed with an image of the School 1 students wearing FPMR bandannas (which was actually part of a play, not a protest, as the students who took part in it explained to the press). I see this as having a serious impact on our democracy, as such a crude staging was broadcast on open television during prime time just one day before the Senate voted on the Safe Classroom bill. This criminalizes students' political participation as well as the participation of two parents within the school community that their daughter belongs to. . . . This reporting not only intimidates the two parents based on their political activities, but extends to their daughter and their entire family. Furthermore, it confuses the public by providing partial information that is not objective and represents a serious assault on the truth, demonstrating a very serious lack of journalistic ethics and political irresponsibility on the part of Channel 13. (CNTV, 2021b, case 20569)

In this case and others, the accusation of a lack of ethics is related to trickery and manipulation of the audience, particularly older adults. At least 595 of the total complaints in the three periods referred to these setups, manipulation of information, and lack of journalistic ethics. Audience members allege that such reporting impacts young audience members, but that older adults are the most impacted, as noted in the following complaint:

This channel cannot twist to the truth about the situation in this country. My parents are older adults, and they are left with that truth, with what the channel shows. If it weren't for me, they would only watch lies on TV. I wonder how many people receive only the information provided by this channel, which is public! Enough lies. TVN should be punished and should publicly recognize this intervention. Stop tricking the Chilean people. (CNTV, 2020b, case 30970)

Interestingly, this argument goes beyond violations of the right to privacy of specific subjects. There is a sense that collective damage is caused by a sustained practice that undermines groups, institutions, and society as a whole. As a previous allegation notes, harmful reporting has "a significant impact on our democracy" (CNTV, 2021b, case 20569). Audience members do not see the failure of news programs to follow journalistic ethics as mistakes. They allege that these channels intentionally try to "manipulate" audiences and "confuse the public," ultimately breaking the contract referred to earlier (Charaudeau, 2006). This may explain why so many allegations refer to the dignity of people portrayed in TV reports and that of society as a whole. Both are seen as objects of fraud, manipulation, and abuse.

The Meaning of Dignity

The second research question—what dignity means to media audiences—was analyzed through the 2018–2021 time span, but with a special focus on July 2019 to February 2020, that is, during Chile's social uprising. Data from this period provide a great deal of material for exploring the depth and shape of this concept. Allegations peaked in November 2019, when most news pieces focused on the social uprising that

had spread to every part of the country. Nearly 600 complaints were filed that month, exceeding the number filed in the preceding and subsequent months and during the same months in previous years.

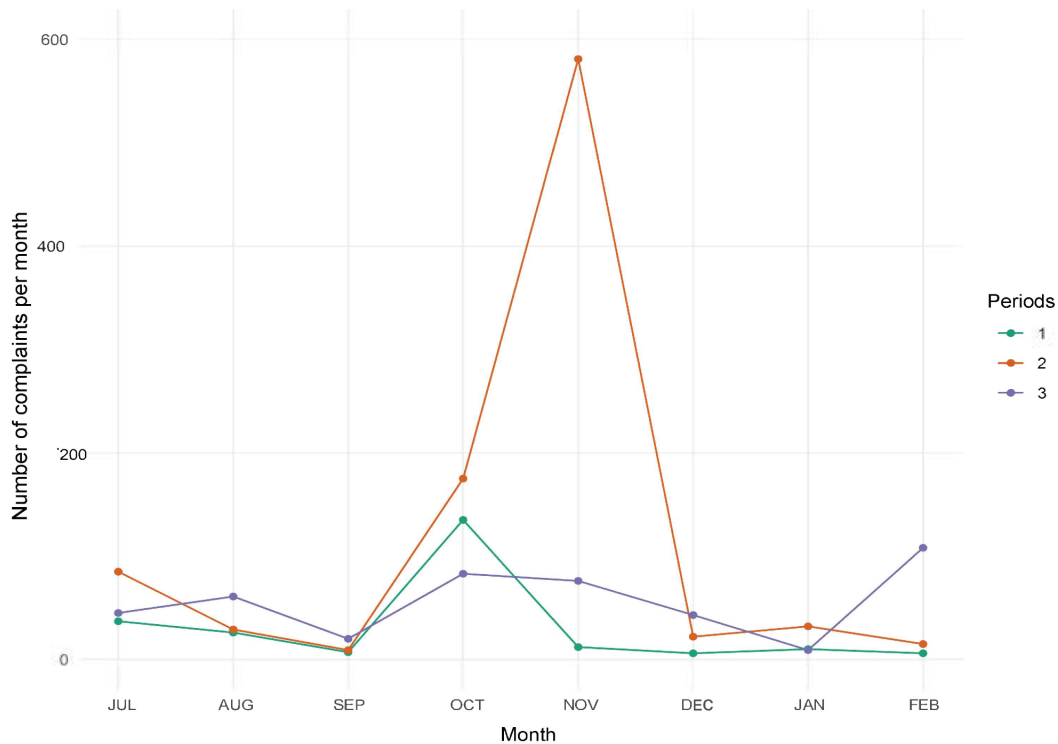


Figure 1—Peak of allegations about dignity in November 2019.

The high number of allegations of broadcasts or content that harm dignity allowed us to identify four conceptual clusters of meanings associated with “dignity”: (1) claims that appeal to legal goods established by the CNTV and human rights; (2) claims that appeal to emotions and allude to negative situations; (3) claims that allude to vulnerable groups (usually what are considered “minorities”); and, finally, (4) claims that allude to journalistic ethics in television news programs. The use of words associated with the claim about the role that the media, television, the news, or journalists should play in society (journalistic ethics) increased during the *estallido social*. The number of times people raised these topics at the time of the *estallido social* reached 315 complaints, far exceeding the totals for the first and third periods (144 and 117 complaints, respectively), suggesting that the expectations and demands of audiences about the role of television rise considerably in times of social conflict.

We wanted to see if we could build a definition of dignity from the audience’s perspective based on each cluster. The answer to that question is yes, but only in broad terms. Each cluster channels ideas, meanings, values, and cases, generating a definition of dignity related to respecting subjects’ recognition, privacy, honor, and the right to defend themselves, as well as media behavior that is respectful, well-informed, balanced, and careful to avoid exposing people and triggering negative emotions. These

elements were identified by those in favor of or against the uprising and its coverage, as is clearly reflected in each report.

For audiences who supported the protests, there was outrage when TV coverage failed to show “the growing mistreatment perpetrated by the police and soldiers after curfew” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30492). The focus of these claims was human rights. In terms of negative emotions, audiences observed that the coverage portrayed only the “bad side of the protests, instilling fear in the civilian population” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30461). Some audience members warned that the media was hiding footage of the police throwing “tear gas canisters at families with children and elderly people” who attended marches (CNTV, 2020b, case 30494). In terms of TV ethics, the trend was similar. People accused TV hosts of lying in many cases: “[She] shows a clear graph of ‘public opinion.’ However, it delivers the data upside down, exalting fear, spreading lies and coverage of staged actions, misrepresenting information, and violating the viewer’s right to be informed in an adequate, ethical manner” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30333).

Audience members who did not support the protests complained about TV coverage in the four clusters mentioned above for different reasons. For example, some alleged that human rights were violated by TV hosts’ dismissal of people’s pain and their failure to consider the rights of those affected by looting and ransacking. Some of the complainants said the press was damaging the social fabric through excessive coverage of the events—thus encouraging hate, “increasing national polarization” (CNTV, 2020b, case 31177), and failing “to contribute at all to the social peace that is needed” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30583). Supporters of the police and military also claimed that reporters lacked journalistic ethics. These viewers were angry about newscasts that failed to show how officials “were victimized by protesters who used bombs, stones, and all kinds of blunt instruments” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30533). Similarly, this type of viewer accused journalists of conducting interviews in a “biased and unprofessional manner (. . .), suggesting that the police murdered people” (CNTV, 2020b, case 30583).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of the data collected in this study yielded results related to our first question. Many complaints focused on dignity and the three ways the media affects it. First, the media is understood to be an actor who can perpetrate violence through its coverage. This implies that violence is not limited to the event broadcast or to an image but can be produced through the work of media professionals. The media is perceived as manufacturing visual programming and an approach to newsmaking that does not “mirror” reality but stages elements in a way that affects people’s dignity. In this sense, modes of framing content (through associations between images and headlines, for instance), showing support for victimizers or attacking victims (particularly victims of gender-based violence), broadcasting “graphic images” without warning, and other practices are thought to affect people’s dignity.

The second aspect that audience members mention when filing complaints about the media’s impact on dignity is the stigmatization of individuals and social groups in the news. It is interesting to note that “minority” groups are a dynamic category that is directly related to social movements. Stigmatized groups linked to collectives that have traditionally suffered from discrimination, such as the Mapuche people,

students, and women, have become much more visible in recent years, and their identities and images have been disputed because of their impact on national politics.

Third, the violation of people's dignity is also seen as being connected to a lack of journalistic ethics and specifically to situations in which the media twists information, generating biased or even demonstrably false associations. In this context, the arguments presented by individuals who filed claims go beyond condemning the media for harming the image of specific subjects or groups. The claimants argue that the victim of such deceit is the entire audience in these cases. News coverage that fails to follow journalistic ethics is associated with an attempt to "confuse the public" and society, thus betraying their audiences and taking people as subjects with poor judgment.

About the second research question, when the intensity of social mobilizations rises, the number of complaints about dignity also increases, which enhances our findings in two ways. First, as media coverage increases and the movement gains visibility, complaints focused on misrepresentation, inaccuracy, and deceit increase. For those who support the protests—viewers interested in ensuring that their actions, goals, and subjects are represented correctly—the perception of rights being violated grows, and the notion of dignity gains depth. In this case, the meaning of dignity is closer to people's sense of worth as human beings (Misztal, 2013), the right to equal treatment (Honneth, 1996), being treated well, freedom from deceptive media practices, and recognition of their right to have a voice in society (Saavedra Utman, 2019). However, our second research question was not only about pro-protest audiences; it focused on what dignity means from the perspective of media audiences in general.

The breadth of the question allowed us to expand our findings through analyses of the complaints filed by audience members who opposed the protests. This proves that the media's attack on people's dignity reached audiences who had not previously shown a willingness to make allegations. In other words, some complaints were filed by audience members who had not been targeted, abused, or misrepresented in the past, or whose worldviews and ideologies presumably aligned with the status quo. Indeed, for every cluster in which a critical perspective toward the media was raised from pro-protest perspectives, there was a competing point of view from an opposing ideological standpoint. Coverage, which some saw as an attack on people's dignity, was perceived by others as an example of adequate and insightful reporting. This dichotomy, which peaked during the timeframe that coincided with the most intense period of Chile's social uprising, speaks to an agreement of contending positions, opportunities presented by, and limitations of this study.

Such agreement shows the importance of the media as an actor that produces violence, damages people's dignity, and undermines Chile's democracy. From a social constructionist perspective (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992), the media does not mirror reality, but manufactures the whole news package—from its logo, editorial criteria, to selecting and framing a story and the order in which each piece is broadcast and the music played with it. This causes audience members to perceive the media as harming the dignity of individuals and the population in general. This allows us to understand the meaning of dignity during the *estallido social*.

In this sense, one key opportunity involves connecting audience studies with social movements and communicative participation, as the literature has yet to consider this link. Assuming that the media is perceived as damaging dignity, especially during fraught historical periods, an immediate challenge is to continue studying the phenomena and ways to reverse the trend. This focus would pave the way for approaches based on media accountability, media ethics, regulation, journalism for peace, or media participation to contribute to countering the perception that the mainstream media harms people's dignity and that of society in general.

The main limitation of this research is the nature of the case study. As this analysis was conducted in a specific society, any generalization made in reference to societies with different characteristics must be handled carefully. However, based on the nature of social uprisings and the structure of media landscapes in the region, the issues raised in this article should resonate throughout Latin America.

Furthermore, despite the fact that citizen complaints are anonymous, it is reasonable to assume that those who submit them do not necessarily constitute a representative sample of Chilean society. In fact, CNTV provides some sociodemographic variables for those who predominantly make complaints. Thus, we know that the majority of complainants are women aged between 18 and 49 years old residing in urban areas. We also know that most of those who file complaints are highly educated individuals, several of them with university degrees—which represents 13% of the Chilean population (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2013). Regardless, understanding the definitions of dignity held by this audience is relevant, as these complaints do not enjoy the same visibility as opinions expressed through social media. In this sense, the anonymously submitted and privately made complaints to the CNTV do not necessarily seek visibility effects, but rather, pursue justice.

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