SITUATION OF JOURNALISM IN VENEZUELA 2019
As an indicator of the crisis in the country in its different areas – political, economic and social, Venezuelan journalism is currently experiencing tensions and challenges regarding its present and future development. It further faces increasing tensions and harassment resulting from an adverse and in many cases hostile environment for accomplishing its mission: The search, processing and dissemination of timely and verified information.

Never as in recent years are media and journalists news. The country has been experiencing a growing number of cases of subtle or outright violations of the rights to information and freedom of expression. Attacks and intimidations add to the restrictions and controls that have been imposed on the media and journalists by government officers. The outcome has not taken long: Only in print media, Venezuela’s Press and Society Institute (Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, IPYS) points out that 50 media ceased circulation definitively between 2013 and 2018, and less than half of them had a surviving digital version. Among them, we find such flagship newspapers as El Nacional, established 75 years ago and, among the local ones, the centenary newspaper El Impulso from Barquisimeto.
The problems with access to paper, ink, and other supplies, lack of resources to continue the industrial aspect of printing processes and to continue to retain staff led to these media to close in significant measure.

The same has happened with the suspension of radio and television programs, the end of broadcast for radio stations and local television stations. The geography of journalism in Venezuela continues to shrink thereby affecting citizens' right to access diverse information, to have a plurality of news content choices. Statements from multilateral organizations, reports and follow-up efforts by national and international associations and NGOs, universities, and research centers are numberless. All of them account for the harassment, pressure, threats and sanctions on media and journalists restricting the free exercise of the right to expression, opinion and information.

Consequently, it is essential to investigate and document the status of journalism in Venezuela. This has been one of the tasks that the NGO Medianálisis has endeavored itself to accomplish, with the Status of Journalism in Venezuela Survey. This annual investigation has been conducted continuously since 2015 and we are now presenting the 2019 report.
The Status of Journalism in Venezuela Survey, in its annual editions from 2015 to 2019, is based on quantitative, non-experimental research, by means of a face-to-face poll, administered on this occasion to 365 journalists working in 141 media located in the most populated urban hubs in the country, to wit, Maracay (Aragua State); Barcelona-Lechería-Puerto La Cruz Metro Area (Anzoátegui State); Ciudad Bolívar-Puerto Ordaz-San Félix Metro Area (Bolivar State); Valencia (Carabobo State); Barquisimeto (Lara State); San Cristóbal, (Táchira State) and Maracaibo (Zulia State).

According to the investigation, Venezuelan journalists are generally young, mostly under 30 years old. There seems to be no differences between sexes in participation, although for this year there is a slight increase in the presence of men over women. Gender differences are observed across the type of media: There are more men working in radio, more women in digital media and similar proportions in print media and television.
Also regarding gender, upon looking into the participation of men and women in editorial decision-making and in positions of authority, a high percentage (61%) of male presence was found both in decision-making and immediate supervisor positions among the journalists inquired. Four out of ten journalists surveyed are located in Greater Caracas and, among them, almost 90% work in digital media, which in turn reveals the growth and potential of this type of media in Venezuelan journalism. However, the majority of those inquired in other regions of the country work in mainstream media, especially radio and television, which could indicate that a pattern of traditional practices in news output persists. This is also evident in the fact that the main tasks indicated are classically journalistic: Street reporters and news desk writers, as well as positions of editors, news desk heads, and producers. In this sense, the need to address training these professionals in such areas as sourcing, data management, content curation, among other skills required in activities related to the digital and social media realms is observed.

The media staff have decreased in size. Almost half of the media companies have between six and twenty employees. As for digital media, 57% barely reaches twenty employees.
More than half of the journalists (61%) graduated from college, but almost a quarter have not started or completed a degree, an aspect that, along with the necessary professional development, deserves being addressed by unions, universities and media companies themselves.

The type of employment relationship between journalists and media companies is established by contract in 55% of cases. This majority proportion is consistent in digital, print and television media, but decreases substantially in radio.

One particularly noteworthy aspect is the increasingly precarious working conditions of news professionals: One in three journalists earns between one and two minimum wages. This would explain why two out of three journalists resort to taking multiple jobs, with the aggravating fact that some of these occupations have no connection with their condition as communicators. Furthermore, an increasing number of journalists perform their duties without being affiliated to professional associations or unions, although outside Caracas there is a greater proportion of unionized professionals. This indicates that a significant percentage of these workers are exposed to potential employer abuse.
Along with precarious working conditions, Venezuelan journalism faces an even greater challenge, such as fulfilling its responsibility to report in an environment of threats, intimidation and even personal attacks. A high percentage of journalists (63%) indicates problems associated with the editorial line of the media for which they work. The number of responses directly or indirectly identifying governmental factors as the source of such aggressions is high as well. Most of the attacks are personal threats, followed by the seizure or damage of journalists’ equipment and materials, unlawful detentions, and attacks on their personal safety. Equally significant is the fact that these actions are not reported, with the consequential increase of perpetrators remaining unpunished, mostly members of law enforcement bodies and civilians in pro-government clash groups.

Direct consequences of this environment of attacks and threats are censorship and self-censorship acknowledged by the journalists inquired. Internal censorship, applied by the media, affected one in five journalists; and such actions might have had the purpose of avoiding conflict with government authorities and preserving the media and journalists’ safety. Likewise, self-censorship occurs: One in ten journalists admitted to having modified or omitted already verified information on their own initiative.
The risks entailed with censorship and self-censorship are the subjugation of the journalistic practice, the silencing of critical issues and positions, the loss of informative plurality – in itself a dangerous indicator of loss of public freedoms, such as the rights to information and expression. This is a duty not only of journalists but also of the society as a whole, because what is at stake in the very fate of values and rights in democratic living.

In contrast to censorship and self-censorship, journalists may also deliberately modify or omit verified information based on criteria of ethical nature and regard for the quality of information. In these cases, we stand before self-regulation, either to protect the source, respect the rights of minors, or significantly improve the content of information. In the survey, 38% of journalists reported having modified or omitted information to protect the source.

Other informative quality criteria analyzed were the plurality in the use of the sources, their verification, and the use of data other than that released by government agencies. For the journalists surveyed, a plural vision of national events is portrayed on the media for which they work. The percentage of those who also receive instructions to fact-check the information is high, and there equally is a high response turnout indicating that, in most cases, journalists collect additional information beyond official figures. It is noteworthy that the digital media are the mostly ones taking care of these matters.
In responses from the journalists inquired, the majority was also found to handle incomplete information on the identity of the corporate ownership and shareholders of the media in which they work. This is evidence of poor transparency on the part of the media toward their news organizations. On the contrary, the respondents, specifically more than half of them (64%), state to know the editorial guidelines of those media. However, when investigating the knowledge that journalists have about internal officers with decision-making impact on content quality, such as the reader’s advocate, the editorial and advisory boards, only two of every five journalists know their activity.

This study allows drawing a map of Venezuelan journalism from the answers provided by the journalists themselves. Many of them reflect the need to the address job insecurity, the loss of autonomy and independence resulting from the pressures and attacks increasingly imposing higher levels of censorship and self-censorship on information endeavors. With the data in this fifth Status of Journalism in Venezuela Survey, Medianálisis points to some already alarming signals so that we can respond as a society to these challenges in defense of freedom of expression and the right to Information.
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