

## **Confronting Anti-Press Violence in Mexico: Strategies of Resistance in Mexican and U.S. News Coverage of Journalist Killings**

ELIZABETH M. CHAMBERS  
JENNIFER R. HENRICHSEN  
Washington State University, USA

Violence against journalists in Mexico has escalated dramatically in recent decades. This same violence limits news organizations' ability to report on journalist killings even while news coverage is an important vehicle for raising awareness, and few studies have critically examined this coverage. The purpose of this study was to compare Mexican and U.S. news coverage of journalist killings in Mexico through the framework of metajournalistic discourse to explore how this coverage constitutes a form of resistance. In 2023, we conducted a qualitative text analysis of 77 news articles about the 19 Mexican journalists and media workers killed in 2022. Our findings demonstrate how news coverage sometimes confronts anti-press violence in Mexico through nonstandard newswriting practices and contextualization. We discuss how these findings extend the theory of metajournalistic discourse and explore their implications for public awareness about anti-press violence, journalistic autonomy and authority, professional solidarity, and the normative role of journalism.

*Keywords: journalistic practice, metajournalistic discourse, Mexico, press freedom, resistance, violence against journalists*

With global press freedoms on the decline, journalists worldwide continue to face high levels of violence and other threats to their safety (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022). Between 2016 and 2021, 455 journalists were killed because of their work, and nine out of 10 of these murders remain unsolved (UNESCO, 2022). A large proportion of journalist killings occur in Latin America, and in particular Mexico, where 153 journalists and media workers have been killed in the last 30 years (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2023) and a record 19 were killed in 2022 alone (UNESCO, 2023). Mexican journalists also experience numerous other threats to their safety perpetrated by public officials, private security, and organized criminal groups, including digital surveillance, mob censorship, harassment, kidnapping, and torture (Harlow, Wallace, & Cueva Chacón, 2022; Seelke, Martin, & Davis-Castro, 2022). Systemic violence against journalists in Mexico has increased exponentially since the country's fragile transition to democracy in the 1990s, as increased independent journalism has been accompanied by a rise in political corruption, organized violent crime, and criminal impunity exacerbated by

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Elizabeth M. Chambers: [elizabeth.chambers1@wsu.edu](mailto:elizabeth.chambers1@wsu.edu)

Jennifer R. Henrichsen: [jennifer.henrichsen@wsu.edu](mailto:jennifer.henrichsen@wsu.edu)

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Mexico's limited protections for press freedoms (José A. Brambila, 2017; Julieta A. Brambila, 2017; Ramírez, 2015; Seelke et al., 2022).

One consequence of anti-press violence is self-censorship, which has significant implications for democracy. Mexican journalists feel they have less freedom to write about topics including political and military elites and organized crime (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018), and they routinely limit what they publish to protect their own safety (Harlow et al., 2022; Robledo, 2017). Self-censorship as a consequence of anti-press violence in Mexico even extends into the United States, with journalists near the border limiting crossing into Mexico for reporting and decreasing their crime coverage out of fears for their safety (Carter & Kodrich, 2013; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014). The Mexican government also pressures news outlets to censor their content by strategically awarding or withholding tens of millions of advertising dollars annually (Dragomir, 2018; Media Ownership Monitor, 2018). Further, a few politicians and billionaire businessmen own most of the Mexican media (Media Ownership Monitor, 2018).

Self-censorship perpetuates the cycle of anti-press violence by preventing journalists from fulfilling their democratic role of informing the public and holding the government accountable (Seelke et al., 2022). However, journalists around the world have strategies for resistance and resilience. They take measures to protect their physical and digital security (Barão da Silva, Sbaraini Fontes, & Marques, 2022; Barrios & Miller, 2021; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023), ensure their economic survival (Ataman, Çoban, & Erkmén, 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2021; Jeppesen, 2016), and provide mutual support through networks of solidarity (Ataman et al., 2019; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014; Ozawa, Lukito, Lee, Varma, & Alves, 2023). This resistance is in full view in Mexico, where journalists take steps ranging from the ordinary to the extreme to continue their work (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021). As González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) write, "In Mexico, undoubtedly, too many journalists have died, but journalism is far from dead" (pp. 1–2).

Journalists' persistence in their work is their ultimate act of resistance, and news coverage is a key vehicle for raising public awareness about journalist killings and enabling nongovernmental organizations and international bodies such as the United Nations to pressure the Mexican government into action (Seelke et al., 2022). However, Mexican news outlets face limitations in their freedom to cover journalist killings, and often bow to official government narratives that these deaths were the result of common crime or personal disputes (del Palacio Montiel, 2020) or cover the killings as isolated incidents rather than part of a trend of systemic violence against journalists (Leos Andrade, 2017; Nicolás Gavilán, 2018). Only more rarely does Mexican news coverage confront the issue directly (del Palacio Montiel, 2020).

Few studies have examined this news coverage or how it serves as a form of journalistic resistance, and none have investigated U.S. news coverage of journalist killings in Mexico despite the countries' shared 2,000-mile border and extensive political, economic, and cultural ties. Although Mexican and U.S. journalists share concerns over anti-press violence in the border region (Carter & Kodrich, 2013), most U.S. journalists enjoy greater security and legal protections. Given that the journalism cultures of Mexico and the United States otherwise share Western norms (Hanitzsch et al., 2011), a cross-national comparison allows us to explore how threats to journalist safety and press freedom may constrain coverage of anti-press violence. The United States is also responsible for most of the illegal firearms trafficked into Mexico in recent years

(Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 2023); U.S. news coverage of structural violence in Mexico, thus, warrants study given its power to shape public perceptions and policy debates in the United States concerning gun control, aid to Mexico, and Mexican migrants and asylum-seekers.

The purpose of this study was to compare how Mexican and U.S. news organizations write about Mexican journalist killings to explore journalists' strategies of resistance, using Carlson's (2016) theory of metajournalistic discourse and González de Bustamante and Relly's (2021) concept of journalistic resistance as a theoretical framework. The study focused on the 19 journalists and media workers killed in Mexico in 2022, comparing the news coverage of their deaths through a sample of 77 news articles from local, regional, and national news outlets in Mexico and the United States. Findings from a qualitative text analysis revealed that news coverage from both countries sometimes confronts the issue of anti-press violence in Mexico directly or indirectly through nonstandard newswriting practices and contextualization. We overview four ways news coverage accomplishes this: naming the systemic issue, attributing responsibility, expressing skepticism of official sources and giving voice to others, and issuing condemnations and condolences. We then discuss implications of these findings, including public awareness about anti-press violence, journalistic autonomy and authority, professional solidarity, and the normative role of journalism. This study also has theoretical implications given its novel conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse about journalist killings as a form of resistance.

### **Theoretical Framework: Metajournalistic Discourse and Journalistic Resistance**

Public expressions about journalism itself, including about journalists and their conditions of work, constitute metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016). Although metajournalistic discourse can come from nonjournalistic as well as journalistic actors, metajournalistic news content is of particular interest as it represents journalists' narratives about themselves and their profession that they communicate to the public. According to Carlson (2016), metajournalistic discourse serves to define the boundaries of journalism and to defend its legitimacy, a particularly important function when journalists' authority as purveyors of information and arbiters of truth is under attack (Carlson, 2018). In this milieu, news coverage of journalist killings represents metajournalistic discourse that attempts to publicize and make meaning of anti-press violence even while continuing to operate under threat of that violence.

For this reason, we argue that metajournalistic discourse that confronts the issue of systemic violence against journalists represents a form of resistance. In their study of women's activism in Mexico, Staudt and Méndez (2015) define resistance as intentional acts that "challenge, reject, or strategically ignore official discourse and its legitimation discourse" (p. 5). González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) expand that definition in their work on Mexican journalism, defining resistance as "conscious acts among journalists and members of journalism communities to individually and collectively oppose adverse and threatening conditions with the intent to improve safety, professional autonomy, and journalism as a whole" (p. 7). Effective news coverage of journalist killings constitutes an act of resistance because it seeks to improve journalist safety by publicizing threats to it and because it helps preserve journalistic autonomy and the normative role of journalism as watchdog by refusing to self-censor. González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) further distinguish between everyday resistance, which requires minimal changes to journalists'

routines, and extraordinary resistance, which is extreme or unprecedented measures. They argue resistance fosters resilience as journalists who support each other are better able to continue their work.

### **Journalists' Strategies of Resistance and Resilience**

Journalists' strategies for resistance and resilience take many forms and vary by time and place (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021), with differing cultural contexts sometimes demanding entirely opposite strategies. It is also worth noting that individual acts of resistance do not address the need for structural change to prevent anti-press violence (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021), and that the idea of resistance to authority as a virtue is a Western notion (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2022). Nonetheless, at a basic level, resistance strategies are survival strategies.

A range of studies (Barão da Silva et al., 2022; Barrios & Miller, 2021; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014, 2021; Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023) have documented measures that journalists take to improve their physical and digital security, such as requiring staff to take self-defense classes (Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023), limiting on-site reporting (Carter & Kodrich, 2013; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014), communicating with sources via secure online methods (Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023), and publishing content anonymously (Barrios & Miller, 2021). González de Bustamante and Relly (2021) describe the various resistance strategies that journalists in Mexico have adopted in response to their precarious working conditions, which include keeping more sources anonymous, traveling in groups with other reporters, wearing bulletproof vests, destroying records, waiting for approval from crime bosses to publish stories, or leaving the country.

Unfortunately, self-censorship is also a common strategy to preserve personal safety, one adopted by journalists around the world (Ataman et al., 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2022; Walulya & Nassanga, 2020; Xu, 2015), and particularly throughout Latin America (Barão da Silva et al., 2022; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023). Journalists also change the language they use to describe sensitive topics, whether to protect their personal safety in Mexico (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014) or to evade state censors in China (Xu, 2015).

In addition to protecting their physical and digital safety, news organizations and independent journalists take steps to ensure their economic survival and independence. This includes seeking funding from readers, peers, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and other international sources (Ataman et al., 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2021; Jeppesen, 2016).

Solidarity and collaboration are key strategies of resistance among journalists. Several studies (Ataman et al., 2019; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014; Ozawa, et al., 2023) have shown how journalists form solidarity networks composed of colleagues, professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and others to share information and provide mutual support, whether political, economic, or personal. Journalists across several northern Mexican states and U.S. journalists who cover northern Mexico form one such informal network (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014), while La Red de Periodistas de Juárez (the Juárez Journalist Network) is a rare example of a formalized grassroots network of Mexican journalists (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021). In Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, informal

networks of news outlets share articles on sensitive topics with each other and publish them simultaneously and anonymously, sacrificing a scoop to protect the safety of the reporter and their employer (Barrios & Miller, 2021; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021).

In addition to largely informal networks, collective action among journalists sometimes takes the form of overt advocacy or activism, which includes public campaigns or protests to raise awareness for journalists' situation and call for government action (Ataman et al., 2019; Barrios & Miller, 2021; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021; Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023), educational initiatives (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021), and memorializing killed journalists (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021).

A final form of resistance is news content itself. When operating in a hostile environment, persistence is resistance (Ozawa et al., 2023). Although security threats can have a chilling effect on journalism through self-censorship, Ozawa et al. (2023) found they can also have a "catalyzing effect" that spurs continued or increased news coverage as journalists continue their work in their own countries or after fleeing abroad, deliberately resisting self-censorship while remaining aware of the risks (p. 4). In addition to continuing their usual work, journalists disclosing how they have been victimized by anti-press attacks also constitutes resistance (Ataman et al., 2019). By publicizing threats and attacks that they or their colleagues have suffered by disclosing them in their reporting, on social media, or by filing criminal complaints, journalists provide professional solidarity to each other and raise awareness of anti-press violence (Ataman et al., 2019).

### **News Coverage of Journalist Killings**

A limited number of studies have examined Mexican news coverage of journalist killings between 2012 and 2017 in states with high levels of anti-press violence, namely Sinaloa (Nicolás Gavilán, 2018) and Veracruz (del Palacio Montiel, 2020; Leos Andrade, 2017). Leos Andrade (2017) found that national news outlets often had little or no coverage of the 17 journalists killed in Veracruz in a five-year span, for instance. When news outlets cover these killings, they often rely only on official sources (del Palacio Montiel, 2020; Leos Andrade, 2017), which has resulted in outlets repeating official narratives that the kidnapping, torture, and murder of well-known journalists are not related to their journalistic work but rather attributed to common crime or interpersonal conflicts (del Palacio Montiel, 2020). Another theme in Mexican coverage is that it often fails to connect individual murders to the trend of journalist killings or the wider issue of systemic anti-press violence (Leos Andrade, 2017; Nicolás Gavilán, 2018).

The precarious working conditions of Mexican journalists help explain the limitations of this news coverage, however. One study (Mar, 2017) documented the profound effect the killings of nine Veracruz journalists, including one of their own, had on the staff of the regional newspaper *Notiver* over the course of two years. To protect their staff's safety, editors eventually made the decision to alter the organization's newsgathering practices and censor its content significantly, including cutting all coverage of organized crime and euphemizing descriptions of violence.

More rarely, Mexican news coverage directly confronts the systemic issues of anti-press violence, criminal impunity, and government complacency or collusion. Although uncommon, some news articles

cover journalist killings through the frames of condemnation, demands for justice, or a trend of increasing journalist deaths (Leos Andrade, 2017). In the case of Sinaloa journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas, killed outside his office in 2017, Nicolás Gavilán (2018) found that coverage from local newspapers broke from that of national newspapers to discuss solutions to anti-press violence and Mexico's flawed judicial system and to emphasize the agency of average citizens to push for change.

One example of overt resistance comes from the national news magazine *Proceso*: After its crime reporter Regina Martínez was severely beaten and murdered in her home, and officials used a confession obtained under torture to claim her death was because of a robbery gone wrong, the magazine published a now-famous statement: "We don't believe them" (del Palacio Montiel, 2020, p. 206; translation ours). Another example comes from *Notiver* before its policy of self-censorship: The newspaper halted publication for a day to protest the murders of two journalists in the region and called in an opinion column for the responsible party, who they wrote was obvious, to be held accountable (Mar, 2017). The columnist was murdered several months later, demonstrating the unrelenting threat to outspoken journalists' lives.

Limited research outside of Mexico reveals that the way news organizations cover journalist killings varies widely by country. Carlson's (2006) study of U.S. news coverage of two American journalists' deaths during the Iraq war in 2003, for instance, found that discourse around their deaths used the construct of the "killed in action journalist," created through narratives of bravery, volunteerism, sacrifice, and witnessing, to reinforce the normative role of journalism as a force for collective good and a cultural authority. A comparison of U.S. and Middle Eastern news framing of an American journalist's death and a Kurdish journalist's death (Subedar, 2012) found this sort of valorization is racialized: When the journalist's ethnicity was the same as that of news outlet's staff, their death was covered with a political hero frame; whereas, if their ethnicity was different, they were portrayed as an accidental victim.

A final study (Delanthamajalu, 2020) comparing U.S. and Indian coverage of the killing of woman journalist Gauri Lankesh in India also found national differences, in this case concerning differing representations of gender and India's democracy. Findings showed that coverage in both countries used her murder to legitimize political projects purportedly aimed at saving women or saving journalists, but in different ways: U.S. coverage portrayed India as a failing democracy in need of saving and liberal Indian coverage portrayed Lankesh as a martyr against a brand of right-wing Indian nationalism she had been covering, but both failed to fully consider the gendered nature of her murder. Although news outlets covering journalist killings outside of Mexico sometimes fail to connect these deaths to systemic violence against journalists, they often frame these killings in a way that advances political interests or journalism as a profession.

### **Methodology**

This study employed qualitative text analysis to compare how Mexican and U.S. news outlets covered the killings of 19 Mexican journalists and media workers in calendar year 2022, based on data from UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists.

Our sample consisted of three Spanish-language articles from Mexican news outlets and three English-language articles from U.S. news outlets for each killing. We used one local, regional, and national news outlet per death for each country, given that past research identified differences between local and national Mexican coverage of anti-press violence (Nicolás Gavilán, 2018). We chose outlets based on their geographic proximity to each killing (i.e., local and regional Mexican outlets located in the region where each killing occurred and local and regional U.S. outlets closest to the border) and by circulation, using the largest outlet in each locality, region, or country to cover a killing. If an outlet covered a killing multiple times, we used its first report. Articles were identified via Nexis Lexis, Google News, and direct searches of newspaper websites using killed journalists' names as keywords. The timeframe was limited to articles published within one month of each incident as these initial reports likely shape public perceptions and narratives about journalist killings.

This produced a sample of 77 articles, including 45 articles from 33 outlets in Mexico and 32 articles from 14 outlets in the United States (see Table 1 for a list of included news outlets with location). Data collection showed that multiple Mexican outlets reported on each death while U.S. outlets often did not. In the United States, often only one or two outlets covered a journalist's killing, or multiple outlets used the same syndicated story, and two of 19 killings were not covered at all, resulting in a smaller U.S. sample.

**Table 1. News Outlets With Location.**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location (City, State)</b>
Local	<i>El Despertar</i>	Zitácuaro, Michoacán
	<i>El Diario de Ciudad Victoria</i>	Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas
	<i>El Diario de Minatitlán</i>	Minatitlán, Veracruz
	<i>El Dictamen</i>	Veracruz, Veracruz
	<i>Gráfico al Día</i>	Xalapa, Veracruz
	<i>El Heraldo de Juárez</i>	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua*
	<i>El Imparcial de Istmo</i>	Salina Cruz, Oaxaca
	<i>Informativo La Región</i>	Zitácuaro, Michoacán
	<i>News San Miguel</i>	San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato
	<i>Página 24</i>	Zacatecas, Zacatecas
	<i>Sinaloa en Línea</i>	Culiacán, Sinaloa
	<i>El Sol de Tijuana</i>	Tijuana, Baja California*
	<i>Tribuna de San Luis</i>	San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora*
	<i>Vértice Diario</i>	Chilpancingo, Guerrero
Regional	<i>Cambio de Michoacán</i>	Morelia, Michoacán
	<i>El Debate Sinaloa</i>	Culiacán, Sinaloa
	<i>Diario de Xalapa</i>	Xalapa, Veracruz
	<i>IstmoPress</i>	Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca
	<i>El Periódico AM Hidalgo</i>	Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo
	<i>El Sol de Acapulco</i>	Acapulco, Guerrero
	<i>El Sol de Tampico</i>	Tampico, Tamaulipas
	<i>El Sol de Zacatecas</i>	Zacatecas, Zacatecas

	<i>Tiempo</i>	Chihuahua, Chihuahua
	<i>Tribuna del Yaqui</i>	Ciudad Obregón, Sonora
	<i>El Vigía</i>	Ensenada, Baja California*
	<i>La Voz de Michoacán</i>	Morelia, Michoacán
National	<i>El Economista</i>	Mexico City
	<i>Excelsior</i>	Mexico City
	<i>La Jornada</i>	Mexico City
	<i>Milenio</i>	Monterrey, Nuevo León
	<i>Ovaciones</i>	Mexico City
	<i>La Prensa</i>	Mexico City
	<i>El Universal</i>	Mexico City
Local	<i>El Paso Times</i>	El Paso, Texas*
	<i>Península 360 Press</i>	Redwood City, California
Regional	<i>AZ Central</i>	Phoenix, Arizona
	<i>Deadline</i>	Los Angeles, California
	<i>The San Diego Union-Tribune</i>	San Diego, California*
National	<i>Associated Press</i>	New York, New York
	<i>CBS</i>	New York, New York
	<i>CNN</i>	Atlanta, Georgia
	<i>Democracy Now!</i>	New York, New York
	<i>Inside Edition</i>	New York, New York
	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Los Angeles, California
	<i>New York Post</i>	New York, New York
	<i>Radio &amp; Television Business Report</i>	Boca Raton, Florida
	<i>The Washington Post</i>	Washington, D.C.

\*Located within 50 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Coauthor Elizabeth Chambers, a fluent Spanish speaker and native English speaker, translated Spanish-language articles into English for analysis. The translations were then verified by a second fluent Spanish speaker, and key language was checked by a native Spanish speaker from Mexico. We cite articles without author names for journalists' safety.

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) and concepts drawn from critical discourse analysis (Baker & Ellece, 2011), articles were analyzed by one coder first with open coding by hand and then by focused coding in ATLAS.ti. Both authors discussed the coding and analytic memos to achieve convergence of themes. The data collection and analysis took place in 2023.

The main limitation of this study is its sample, which included initial news reports but excluded later follow-up or opinion articles, and was limited to news coverage from a one-year period. Despite its limitations, this sample focuses on a year of markedly escalated anti-press violence in Mexico and captures perspectives from both countries from local, regional, and national news outlets. This varied sample offers insights that may be useful for a range of researchers and practitioners.



### Findings

Findings reveal that Mexican and U.S. journalists sometimes confront the issue of anti-press violence in Mexico through their coverage, whether directly or indirectly, in ways that represent acts of resistance. They do this in four main ways, often making use of nonstandard newswriting practices: naming the systemic issue, attributing responsibility, expressing skepticism of official sources and giving voice to others, and issuing condemnations and condolences.

#### ***Naming the Systemic Issue***

Initial news reports only sometimes connect an individual journalist's killing to other journalist killings and rarely explicitly name the issue of systemic anti-press violence, but some do. By naming the systemic issue, journalists confront and resist it. Some U.S. coverage uses the phrase *violence against journalists*; only two Mexican news outlets do, and through quotes. Online article tags, which label and group related content, hint at the systemic issue by identifying a trend of journalist killings: The common tag *murdered journalists* and less common *attacks on journalists* in Mexico and *journalist killings* in the United States name a pervasive phenomenon and digitally connect each article they are used with. These labels also genericize journalists, however, at the risk of distancing and dehumanizing them.

Identifying a trend without explaining it or addressing potential solutions also creates a sense of inevitability around this violence and reduces the reader's sense of agency to address it (Holling, 2019). Many articles in both countries connect individual journalist deaths to trends of journalist killings, but only U.S. coverage attempts to explain the trend, and rarely. For instance, one article includes this explanation: "Journalists in Mexico are targeted for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they're attacked by organized crime groups. In other cases, it appears that the assailants have links to public officials they've reported on" ("Another Mexican Journalist is Killed," 2022, para. 24). Beyond identifying trends, article tags in both countries sometimes directly connect these killings to wider issues, even when the article content does not: in Mexico, these include *security, insecurity, journalism, freedom of expression, femicide, and violence in Mexico*, and in the United States, *freedom of the press, journalism, assassinations, drug cartels, public safety, and violence*.

Although some news outlets name the issue of systemic violence against journalists directly, others do so indirectly by identifying the victim as a journalist and attributing their work as the reason for their death. In multiple instances, the Mexican government denied that the victim was a journalist or minimized their journalistic work and its role in their murder. Although several news outlets in Mexico and even the United States repeat this official stance, others resist this narrative, clearly identifying the victim as a journalist and sometimes explicitly attributing their work as the motive for the murder. Specifically, some coverage in both countries describes how journalists reported on organized crime or government corruption and connects this to their deaths. One article from an independently owned outlet quotes killed journalist Robert Toledo's editor, Armando Linares López, as saying, "exposing the corruption of politicians and officials today led us to the death of one of our colleagues," a stark contrast to coverage repeating government denials ("Ruín y cobarde," 2022, para. 10). Linares was killed weeks

later, illustrating the very real risk journalists take when resisting official narratives and naming the issue of violence against journalists.

### ***Attributing Responsibility***

Another way news coverage confronts violence against journalists is by attributing responsibility for journalist killings. It does this in two ways: by identifying a perpetrator and by discussing government culpability and responsibility.

#### *Identifying a Perpetrator*

When information about who perpetrated a crime is limited, most news coverage uses passive voice and agentless constructions (e.g., *a journalist was killed*), which has the effect of erasing the perpetrator from the narrative completely. In rare instances, however, news coverage does identify a perpetrator. Using even a generic term to describe unidentified suspects acknowledges that someone perpetrates this violence. In Mexico, perpetrators are most often described with terms including *attackers*, *armed person*, *armed commando*, or *gunmen*, and less often *sicarios* (hitmen) or *criminal groups*. *Commando*, *sicario*, and *criminal group* all suggest organized and planned activity. Using active voice and clear agents centers these perpetrators in the narrative, such as in the headline "Hitmen murder broadcaster and reporter Pedro Kumul, in Xalapa, Veracruz" ("Sicarios asesinan a locutor," 2022). In the United States, perpetrators are most often described as *gunmen*, *a person*, or *people*.

Less often, articles identify the more specific perpetrators of criminal groups and the government, although they do this in a generic way rather than making allegations, for instance: "Though organized crime is often involved in journalist killings, small town officials or politicians with political or criminal motivations are often suspects as well. Journalists running small news outlets in Mexico's interior are easy targets" ("2 Journalists Killed," 2022, para. 21).

#### *Discussing Government Culpability and Responsibility*

A second way news coverage in both countries, but most explicitly in the United States, attributes responsibility is by discussing the Mexican government's culpability and responsibility to journalists. Some articles subtly assign blame to the government by presenting statistics on journalist killings in terms of government administrations, for instance, "With the alleged murder of José Luis Gamboa Arenas, there are already five journalist victims in the current administration headed by Cuitláhuac García Jiménez" ("José Luis Gamboa," 2022, para. 1). Other articles quote criticisms of investigations and the government's journalist protection mechanism.

In rare instances, U.S. news outlets criticize the Mexican government more directly: "Rather than addressing the causes behind López Vásquez's killing or expressing concern about the continued onslaught against the Mexican media, [Mexican President] López Obrador showed a slide that he claimed showed [journalist] Loret de Mola's salary" ("Another Mexican Journalist is Killed," 2022, para. 9).

Most U.S. news outlets and the rare Mexican outlet also quote direct calls for government action, solutions-oriented reporting that increases reader agency to address the issue. One independently owned local outlet in the southwestern United States even issues a direct call to action and expresses their solidarity with Mexican journalists in a note at the end of an article:

We demand that all reporters, photographers, cameramen, editors, publishers and other journalistic positions be protected by the State, because, although our media is focused on the Latino community in California, we have collaborators who work in Mexico, and today their integrity is compromised. ("11 Journalists Have Been Murdered," 2022, para. 18)

These rare instances of attributing responsibility for journalist killings confront anti-press violence and its causes directly rather than allowing responsibility parties to escape unnamed.

### ***Expressing Skepticism of Official Sources and Giving Voice to Others***

One way news coverage becomes complicit in violence against journalists is by relying on and prioritizing official sources, but some articles express skepticism of these sources and prioritize others, another act of resistance. Clear skepticism is rare in Mexican coverage, limited to one local news outlet's note that a statement from the authorities blaming a journalist's murder on a personal dispute was "unusual" ("Sin móvil, asesinato," 2022, para. 5). Skepticism of government statements is slightly more common in U.S. coverage, from one regional outlet and two national outlets. For instance, one Associated Press article states, "Reporters and photographers have been killed this year in Mexico at the rate of almost one a week, despite assertions by the government that the situation is under control" ("An Eighth Journalist is Killed," 2022, para. 2).

Although coverage in both countries relies on official sources for information, the next most-cited source is other journalists, and some articles prioritize statements from journalists by quoting them first. This is more common in U.S. coverage but also occurs in Mexico. For instance, one article from an independent outlet opens not with a lead but with a paragraph-long quote from a journalist's impassioned speech at the funeral of his colleague, which reads in part, "We are fed up with speeches. We demand a law that protects us. You can't take our lives for denouncing corruption" ("Adiós Heber," 2022, para. 1). In contrast to articles that uncritically report government-provided information, this article gives voice to a journalist confronting the government.

Some news articles also describe or quote the murdered journalist's work at length, such as the independent *Vértice Diario* reproducing the last column of its murdered writer Fredid Román, a column that expounded on the issue of state crime in Mexico ("En Chilpancingo, periodista asesinado," 2022). These reproductions carry on the work of murdered journalists and thus represent a subtle form of resistance.

### ***Issuing Condemnations and Condolences***

A final strategy of resistance in news coverage in both Mexico and the United States is issuing condemnations and condolences. News outlets often report on and quote sources strongly condemning a

journalist's killing, including other journalists, other outlets, nongovernmental organizations, and officials. They sometimes do this at length, such as one independent local Mexican outlet that quoted in its entirety *Testigo Minero's* paragraphs-long condemnation of the murder of one of its staff ("Asesinan a reportero policiaco," 2022). Quoting condemnations without taking a stance as an organization maintains traditional journalistic neutrality, although the amount of space devoted to these condemnations gives voice to them and represents a subtle endorsement. One local news outlet in the United States breaks with this neutrality, however, by adding a bolded first-person condemnation at the end its news reports on a journalist killing: "From this media located in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA, we deeply condemn the murders of Mexican journalists who seek to freely and safely exercise their journalistic work in Mexico," it begins ("11 Journalists Have Been Murdered," 2022, para. 17).

Similar to condemnations, news outlets in both countries convey sources' condolences and expressions of sorrow. One independent regional Mexican outlet in the border region breaks with traditional journalistic neutrality, although not third-person writing, by concluding a news article with the statement: "Agencia Fronteriza de Noticias [Border News Agency] deeply laments this incident, and demands a thorough investigation and clarification of the events that led to this death" ("Matan a Margarito Martínez," 2022, para. 4). Thus, news outlets condemn and grieve journalist killings, whether through extensively quoting others or issuing rare organizational statements.

Additionally, news outlets sometimes convey condemnations and condolences visually. Several articles in the United States and fewer in Mexico are accompanied by photos of signs in Spanish from protests against journalist killings. These signs contain messages including "No+" for "no more"; "No more violence against journalists"; "Killing journalists doesn't kill the truth"; and "Press, don't shoot" ("An Eighth Journalist is Killed," 2022; "Another Journalist is Slain," 2022; "FGE, sin antecedente," 2022; "Inició la Fiscalía actuaciones," 2022; "Matan a dos periodistas," 2022; "2 Journalists Killed," 2022). Mexican news outlets also convey grief and loss visually: One outlet adds a black ribbon over the photo of the killed journalist ("Periodista es asesinado," 2022), and several others, plus one U.S. outlet, make the nonstandard alteration of presenting journalists' photos in black and white ("Hallan cuerpo," 2022; "Journalist Fredid Román," 2022; "Ola de violencia," 2022; "Ruín y cobarde," 2022).

Several independent Mexican outlets subtly express their disapproval by borrowing damning language from quotes and using it in headlines, sub headers, or body copy without quotation marks, in effect adopting the language (and attendant viewpoint) as their own. One article, for instance, quotes a colleague of the victim saying, "Today the threats are finally carried out and one of our comrades lost his life at the hands of three people who (. . .) shot him in a despicable way, in a cowardly way" ("Ruín y cobarde," 2022, para. 3). The article then uses these adjectives in the headline without quotation marks: "Despicable and cowardly murder of a Monitor journalist," condemning the murder without officially taking a stance as an organization. Another article uses a quote from a journalist almost verbatim as the title of a subsection of the article, but instead of presenting it in quotation marks presents it in double asterisks, nonstandard punctuation that serves to emphasize it further: "\*\*\*We no longer want to be another statistic\*\*" ("Adiós Heber," 2022, para. 10). Thus, Mexican news outlets sometimes blur the lines between their sources and themselves, breaking with traditional journalistic neutrality to adopt sources' language

and ideas as their own and condemn journalist killings. Without abandoning the journalistic norm of third-person writing, journalists from these news outlets express their solidarity with their colleagues.

### Discussion

This study compared Mexican and U.S. news coverage of journalist killings in Mexico, conceptualizing it as metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) and exploring how it constitutes journalistic resistance (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2021). Findings revealed this coverage discursively confronts violence against journalists in a number of ways, whether directly or indirectly; indirect means may be the only way journalists in precarious working conditions can bring attention to this issue. By navigating this precarity in Mexico and the border region to raise awareness about anti-press violence and improve journalist safety and autonomy, this coverage serves as a form of resistance. Further, this discursive resistance demonstrates that metajournalistic discourse functions not only to defend the institution of journalism against discursive threats but also to counter physical attacks.

For Mexican journalists, writing about journalist killings at all is an act of resistance. In that coverage, naming the systemic issue of anti-press violence constitutes further resistance, our findings showed. It is unsurprising that U.S. news coverage uses the phrase *violence against journalists* more often than Mexican news coverage, given the ways Mexican journalists censor their writing out of security concerns (Harlow et al., 2022; Robledo, 2017). This reticence to describe anti-press violence directly parallels past findings that Mexican journalists use euphemisms and indirect language when writing about crime (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014). It is notable that online article tags in both countries articulate relevant wider issues such as freedom of expression or systemic violence even when the article content does not. By meticulously tagging articles, news outlets can create an online network and record of journalist killings over time, an important artifact that counters forced silence and denials around anti-press violence. By describing or tagging larger concepts such as press freedoms or democracy, news articles also reinforce the cultural authority of journalism in much the same way that U.S. news coverage of journalists killed in Iraq did (Carlson, 2006).

Another way we found news coverage names the systemic issue of anti-press violence is by identifying victims as journalists and attributing their work as the motive for their murders. In doing so, journalists exercise their collective professional autonomy, defining what their profession is and who is a member. This, González de Bustamante and Relly (2016) note, is perhaps the only form of autonomy available to Mexican journalists. U.S. journalists can also exercise this autonomy in solidarity with their Mexican peers. Interestingly, journalists in Mexico and China have opposite approaches concerning identifying themselves as journalists: Although the Mexican government often denies journalists this identity and attendant legal protections, and assuming the label is a form of resistance, journalists in China will avoid officially registering as journalists to resist government restrictions and censorship (Xu, 2015). Journalistic resistance strategies, then, are highly context dependent.

When most news coverage avoids attributing responsibility for journalist killings, as this study found, identifying a perpetrator and discussing government culpability and responsibility constitutes an act of resistance. In recent years in the United States, there has been a push for media outlets to avoid glorifying

the perpetrators of mass shootings through strategies such as anonymized narratives and withholding details to prevent copycat crimes (Silva & Greene-Colozzi, 2019). The opposite strategy is necessary in the case of Mexican journalist killings, however; centering victims instead of perpetrators in these narratives erases the causes of this systemic violence and reduces agency to address it. Of course, naming perpetrators once the information becomes available represents a security risk for Mexican journalists; this demonstrates the need for more U.S. coverage both as a form of practical support and an act of transnational professional solidarity.

In addition to identifying perpetrators, we found that discussing government culpability and responsibility is an important way to generate public pressure and a sense of agency to address anti-press violence. Discussing ways the government has failed to protect journalists or to achieve justice for their murders is consistent with solutions journalism, which by proposing solutions to societal problems reshapes the normative role of journalism (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). Solutions journalism rejects overt advocacy in favor of maintaining traditional journalistic neutrality (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018), however, meaning the rare instances of news articles that directly call for government action push the normative role of journalism even further. News outlets remain neutral on the issue of anti-press violence at their own peril, however. Reporting on strong condemnations and calls for action, or issuing a separate statement or adding an editorial note containing the organization's own stance, offers a way for outlets to remain neutral in their reporting but take a position as an organization. U.S. news organizations are also free to criticize the Mexican government in a way that Mexican outlets are not, further underscoring the need for U.S. coverage and solidarity.

Another strategy of resistance we found in coverage of journalist killings is expressing skepticism of official sources and giving voice to others, especially journalists. News coverage that does this is emblematic of Staudt and Méndez's (2015) definition of resistance as challenging official discourses. It also reveals a tension between official and journalistic sources; this coverage is a battleground for arbitrating the truth about journalist killings and their cause. Overall, skepticism of official sources is rare, especially in Mexico. Based on our recent sample, there appears to be less overt defiance of government narratives in Mexico now compared to a decade ago, when *Proceso* famously declared its disbelief of the authorities after Regina Martínez's murder in 2012 (del Palacio Montiel, 2020) and *Notiver* published its confrontational column in 2011 (Mar, 2017). Some news coverage gives voice to journalistic sources over official ones, including reproducing the final work of murdered journalists. Reproductions like this do the same work as the nonprofit organization Forbidden Stories, a network of journalists that finishes and publishes the work of threatened or killed journalists (Forbidden Stories, n.d.), an act of resistance against censorship and powers that use violence to suppress journalism.

A final strategy of resistance we identified is issuing condemnations and condolences for killed journalists. Most often this is done through reporting on and quoting sources rather than taking a stance as an organization, which parallels past research that found Mexican coverage sometimes uses the frames of condemnation or demands for justice when covering journalist killings (Leos Andrade, 2017). Rare instances of first-person or third-person statements included in news reports that directly express condemnations or condolences break with this normative neutrality and objectivity. The statement of condemnation from *Península 360 Press*, a local news outlet based in San Francisco, California, that collaborates with Latin American journalists, also makes its solidarity with Mexican journalists explicit, reflective of journalist

solidarity networks around the world (Ataman et al., 2019; Ozawa et al., 2023) and in the U.S.-Mexico border region in particular (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014). It is notable that the only U.S. news outlet to make an explicit statement of its solidarity with Mexican journalists, however, was created largely by and for the Latine community. Much like the way the valorization of killed journalists is racialized (Subedar, 2012), journalist solidarity may be racialized as well.

### Conclusion

Self-censorship exacerbates the cycle of anti-press violence and criminal impunity, endemic issues in Mexico that have escalated in recent years. Journalists around the world have developed strategies for resistance and resilience, however, that enable them to continue their work. We argue news coverage that confronts the issue of violence against journalists constitutes a form a resistance, and demonstrate this through a qualitative text analysis comparing Mexican and U.S. news coverage of journalist killings in Mexico.

Our novel conceptualization of this coverage as journalistic resistance extends Carlson's (2016) theory of metajournalistic discourse and offers a framework for analyzing the practical and theoretical significance of this coverage, in particular its potential to improve the issue it documents. Although individual acts of resistance do not alleviate the need for structural reforms, this coverage is an important vehicle for improving public awareness about anti-press violence and enabling international bodies to pressure the Mexican government into action. Publishing this coverage is also a way for journalists to reinforce their collective autonomy and express professional solidarity.

This study was limited to initial news reports of Mexican journalists killed in 2022, which suggests multiple avenues for future research. These include studying a wider range of cases and report types and considering the role of cross-national journalistic collaboration or exile journalism in this coverage. The study fills a noteworthy gap in research on news coverage of journalist killings, however, as the first to our knowledge to compare Mexican and U.S. coverage, and sheds light on its importance. Effective news coverage of anti-press violence plays a key role in remedying it.

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