

Country Report

Journalists in El Salvador

José Luis Benítez Alvarez, *Universidad Centroamericana*,
Lydia Frost & Thomas Hanitzsch, *LMU Munich*

19 January, 2017

Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in El Salvador is male, in his mid-thirties and holds a university degree in journalism or communication. Of the 250 interviewed journalists, 101 were women, making for a proportion of 40.4 percent of the overall sample. On average, journalists in El Salvador were 32.00 years old ($s=9.27$); half of the journalists were younger than 28 years. Journalists tend to be well educated: 79.6 percent of the respondents held a degree from a graduate program. 67.2 percent held a Bachelor's degree and 10.0 percent held a Master's degree. Another 2.4 percent of the journalists had obtained a doctoral degree, and 14.4 percent had undertaken some university studies but did not complete their studies. Across the whole sample of journalists in El Salvador, 81.4 percent had specialized in journalism and/or communication.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in El Salvador held a full-time position (68.8%), whereas 26.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and 4.4 percent worked as freelance journalists. Of those with full or part-time employment, 71.7 percent said they held permanent positions, and 28.3 percent worked on a temporary contract.

Most journalists worked on various topics and subjects (71.6%). The remaining 28.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked on a specific desk, such as politics, local news, or sports. On the whole, journalists in El Salvador worked for 1.27 newsrooms ($s=.64$); 32.5 percent of them had additional jobs outside the area of journalism. The minority of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (30.7%).

The majority of journalists in the sample worked for print media: 17.4 percent contributed to daily newspapers and 0.3 percent to weekly newspapers. Another 24.0 percent of the journalists worked for private or public service television, and 21.8 for private or public radio. Few journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (1.6%), for online newsrooms of traditional media (17.8%), and for stand-alone online news sites (17.1%).

Journalistic Roles

With regards to professional role orientations, journalists in El Salvador found it most important to report things as they are, to monitor and scrutinize political leaders, to educate the audience, and to let people express their views (see Table 1). The relevance of these roles was fairly undisputed among the interviewed journalists as the relatively low standard deviations indicate.

Still, a majority of journalists in El Salvador found it important to support national development, to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, to advocate for social

change, to provide information people need to make political decisions, to influence public opinion, and to set the political agenda. Political roles like supporting government policy, conveying a positive image of political leadership, and acting as an adversary of the government were supported by only a minority of respondents.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying "extremely" and "very important"	Mean	Standard Deviation
Report things as they are	250	93.2	4.60	.72
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	250	86.4	4.28	.91
Educate the audience	250	85.6	4.32	.85
Let people express their views	249	83.5	4.30	.83
Support national development	250	80.8	4.24	1.00
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	250	80.0	4.24	.97
Advocate for social change	245	78.4	4.26	.97
Provide information people need to make political decisions	248	76.6	4.06	1.08
Influence public opinion	249	71.9	4.06	1.06
Set the political agenda	247	68.8	3.91	1.09
Tell stories about the world	250	68.4	3.91	1.01
Provide analysis of current affairs	240	67.5	3.81	1.20
Monitor and scrutinize business	248	64.1	3.78	1.10
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	248	62.9	3.75	1.21
Motivate people to participate in political activity	247	60.7	3.58	1.31
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	249	60.6	3.62	1.19
Be a detached observer	236	52.1	3.33	1.33
Provide entertainment and relaxation	247	42.9	3.10	1.43
Support government policy	245	35.9	3.04	1.28
Convey a positive image of political leadership	245	22.0	2.44	1.32
Be an adversary of the government	238	18.1	2.20	1.28

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

Professional Ethics

Journalists in El Salvador generally demonstrated a strong commitment to professional standards of ethics. The respondents almost unanimously agreed that journalists should always adhere to the codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (see Table 2). Furthermore, around three out of ten journalists agreed with the view their ethical decisions are a matter of personal judgment and that sometimes it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it. However, slightly more than half of the interviewees subscribed to the idea that journalists' ethical decisions depend on the specific situation.

The picture was mixed with regards to a selected number of potentially controversial reporting techniques. Less than half of the journalists in El Salvador found the use of confidential business or government documents without authorization as well as the use of hidden microphones or cameras justifiable at least on occasion (see Table 3). Still, about three out of ten journalists thought it was acceptable to use recreations or dramatizations of news by actors, to get employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information, and to claim to be somebody else. Only a minority of journalists found it permissible to publish stories with unverified content as well as to alter or fabricate quotes from sources. The practice of "brown envelope journalism" – that is, journalists taking money from sources, presumably in return for positive coverage – was almost unanimously condemned by journalists in El Salvador.

Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	250	95.2	4.71	.63
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	249	52.6	3.19	1.57
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	249	39.4	2.80	1.52
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	249	30.9	2.53	1.48

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

	N	Percentage saying “always justified”	Percentage saying “justified on occasion”
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	243	9.9	34.6
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	245	5.7	28.2
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	246	5.3	42.7
Claiming to be somebody else	246	3.7	28.0
Using hidden microphones or cameras	245	3.7	39.2
Paying people for confidential information	245	3.3	22.9
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	245	3.3	22.9
Altering photographs	249	3.2	5.2
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	246	2.4	18.7
Publishing stories with unverified content	248	2.4	6.9
Accepting money from sources	249	2.4	2.0
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	249	2.4	5.2

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

Professional Autonomy and Influences

Journalists in El Salvador reported a fairly high degree of professional autonomy. More than half of the respondents (56.0%) said that they had complete or a great deal of freedom in their selection of stories. With a total of 58.1 percent, the number of respondents who had complete or a great deal of freedom in deciding over what aspects to emphasize in a news story was even higher. Still a majority of journalists reported that they participated in editorial coordination activities (such as meetings and news management) “always” or “very often” (64.8%).

News production is influenced by a variety of factors. Among the potential sources of influences mentioned in the interview, “journalism ethics” fared on top of the list among the respondents (see Table 4). A majority of journalists found their work substantively constrained by editorial supervisors and higher editors, information access (or lack thereof), and by editorial policy. Also, more than half of the respondents admitted their work was influenced by their personal values and beliefs. Likewise, economic influences – stemming from owners and managers, profit expectations as well as advertising – seem to have some relevance in the newsrooms.

Overall, internal factors were found to be more influential than external constraints. Journalists in El Salvador felt little influenced by sources from within the political and civic realm: the government, business people, the military, police and state security, and pressure groups. They also reported only minor influence from friends, acquaintances and family as well as from colleagues in other media.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	250	86.0	4.36	.87
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	249	76.3	4.06	.96
Information access	248	73.8	4.01	.97
Editorial policy	247	72.1	3.98	1.06
Owners of the news organization	246	71.5	3.99	1.23
Managers of the news organization	247	68.8	3.94	1.12
Your personal values and beliefs	235	62.1	3.60	1.31
Time limits	249	60.2	3.65	1.15
Availability of news-gathering resources	242	57.9	3.58	1.21
Feedback from the audience	250	57.6	3.62	1.12
Relationships with news sources	250	53.2	3.51	1.18
Media laws and regulation	241	49.0	3.41	1.13
Audience research and data	234	44.9	3.21	1.28
Profit expectations	240	43.3	3.16	1.34
Advertising considerations	238	42.9	3.11	1.32
Public relations	246	40.2	3.12	1.26
Censorship	240	35.8	2.99	1.31
Religious considerations	231	34.6	2.82	1.35
Politicians	249	34.1	2.88	1.32
Competing news organizations	248	33.9	2.96	1.24
Government officials	249	33.7	2.90	1.33
Business people	246	32.9	2.79	1.31
Your peers on the staff	243	32.5	2.95	1.16
Military, police and state security	248	32.3	2.79	1.30
Pressure groups	242	27.7	2.64	1.25
Colleagues in other media	244	18.0	2.47	1.16
Friends, acquaintances and family	241	17.8	2.32	1.26

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.

Journalism in Transition

Journalism is currently in a state of change. According to journalists in El Salvador, the use of search engines had most profoundly changed over the last five years (see Table 5). Overall, the journalists’ responses point to a substantive deterioration of working conditions in the profession. A large majority of respondents reported an increase in their average working hours. Furthermore, the interviewed journalists felt that the time available for researching stories had dropped.

Influences on journalism and news production have changed as well. Influences on journalists have increased for all sources mentioned in Table 6. Here, it was especially the influence of social media, audience feedback, user-generated contents, and audience involvement in news production that had strengthened the most during the past five years. A majority of journalists in El Salvador reported an increase for market-related influences – such as competition, a pressure toward sensational news, public relations, and profit making pressures. Ethical standards were the source of influence that had weakened the most over the years.

The questions about changes in journalism were only presented to journalists who had five years or more of professional experience.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "increased"	Percentage saying has "decreased"
The use of search engines	106	96.2	.0
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	105	83.8	3.8
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	105	82.9	9.5
Having a university degree	106	82.1	3.8
Technical skills	105	81.9	7.6
The relevance of journalism for society	105	80.0	8.6
Average working hours of journalists	105	69.5	1.0
The credibility of journalism	106	63.2	22.6
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	106	43.4	8.5
Time available for researching stories	105	30.5	41.9

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in El Salvador. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "strengthened"	Percentage saying has "weakened"
Social media	103	94.2	2.9
Audience feedback	106	88.7	2.8
User-generated contents, such as blogs	103	84.5	5.8
Audience involvement in news production	106	80.2	2.8
Competition	104	75.0	9.6
Journalism education	103	67.0	15.5
Ethical standards	106	62.3	19.8
Western ways of practicing journalism	94	56.4	8.5
Audience research	101	53.5	10.9
Pressure toward sensational news	105	53.3	19.0
Public relations	105	52.4	11.4
Profit making pressures	104	51.9	12.5
Advertising considerations	103	42.7	12.6

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in El Salvador. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.

Journalistic Trust

When it comes to trust in public institutions, journalists in El Salvador turned out to have almost equal faith in all institutions (see Table 7). Their own institution – the news media – as well as the judiciary/the courts were trusted the most. Political institutions – such as the parliament, political parties, the government, politicians in general, and trade unions – were found trustworthy by three out of ten journalists. About the same number of interviewed journalists had confidence in religious leaders, the military, and the police. Overall, there was a fairly high agreement among the respondents over the question of institutional trust, as low standard deviation values indicate. Disagreement was most pronounced for political parties and politicians in general.

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

	N	Percentage saying "complete" and "a great deal of trust"	Mean	Standard Deviation
The news media	247	36.4	3.25	.98
The judiciary/the courts	246	35.4	2.99	1.05
The parliament	242	35.1	2.99	1.10
Political parties	247	32.0	2.84	1.17
The government	246	31.7	3.02	.98
Religious leaders	243	31.7	3.02	1.02
Politicians in general	247	31.2	2.86	1.12
The military	243	30.0	2.99	1.00
The police	247	27.9	3.01	.93
Trade unions	235	27.7	3.00	.95

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.

Methodological Information

<i>Size of the population:</i>	710 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	stratified proportionally systematic sampling, purposive quota sampling & convenience sample for newsrooms and convenience sample for journalists within newsrooms
<i>Sample size:</i>	250 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	face-to-face and online
<i>Response rate:</i>	51.2%
<i>Period of field research:</i>	02/2015-07/2015