Country Report

Journalists in Colombia

Jesús Arroyave, Universidad del Norte & Miguel Garcés, Universidad Tecnológica de Bolívar

9 May, 2017

Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in Colombia is male, in his mid-thirties, and holds a university degree in a field different from journalism or social communication. Of the 552 journalists interviewed, 219 were women and 333 were male, which makes 39.7 and 69.3 percent respectively. On average, the Colombian journalists interviewed were 35.21 years old (s=12.06), although half of the journalists were younger than 32 years. Colombian journalists tend to hold a university degree: 77.6 percent of the interviewed held a degree from a graduate program; 77.6 percent of the interviewed held a Bachelor's degree; 11.6 percent of the interviewed held a degree from a graduate program and 10.6 and percent had finished high school.

Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in Colombia held a full-time position (83.2%), whereas 11.2 percent of the respondents indicated that they held part-time employments, and 5.6 percent worked as freelance journalists. Of those with full or part-time employment, 46.8 percent said they held permanent positions, and 53.2 percent worked on a temporary contract.

Regarding professional experience, Colombian journalists, on average, had worked in the field 11.17 years (s=9.69), and about half of them had more than six years of professional experience. Most journalists worked covering different subjects and topics (52.1%), and 47.9 percent worked on a specific desk, such as politics, local news, crime, economy, or sports and entertainment.

Overall, Colombian journalists worked for 1.20 newsrooms (s=.49). 16.3 percent said they worked for various media. 27.4 percent of these journalists had secured additional jobs outside the field of journalism. A minority of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (27.8%).

Across the whole sample, the majority of surveyed journalists worked for print media: 28.8 percent worked in newspapers, 8.9 percent in weekly newspapers and 2.1 percent in magazines. Another significant group of journalists worked for public and private radio (31.8%) and television (20.9%). Few journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (2.0%) or for stand-alone online news sites (5.5%).

Journalistic Roles

With regards to how Colombian journalists reportedly viewed their professional purpose/role, they found it was most important to report news accurately, to provide analysis of current affairs, to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, to promote social change, and lastly, to educate the audience (Table 1). The standard deviations for each of these roles revealed that there was indisputable consensus on the perception of the relevance that these functions have within journalistic work.
Still, it was found that most journalists in Colombia valued letting people express their opinions, telling stories about the world, monitoring political leaders, and supporting national development. Furthermore, they valued influencing public opinion, providing people the information they need to make political decisions, and monitoring the business world. Lastly, journalists advocated for providing entertainment and news that capture a wider audience, setting the political agenda, motivating people to participate in political activities, and providing advice for daily life.

It also was found that the classic roles of impartial observers and government adversaries or watchdogs currently hold little importance for Colombian journalists. The same goes for the traditional roles of loyalists or functionalists related to promoting government policies and conveying a positive image of political leaders. The standard deviations showed divided opinions on the relevance of these roles in journalism. For some journalists, these classic and loyalist roles are not important in their work, while there are others who believe that these roles are crucial for their reporting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Roles of journalists</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying &quot;extremely&quot; and &quot;very important&quot; Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report things as they are</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide analysis of current affairs</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote tolerance and cultural diversity</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for social change</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educate the audience</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let people express their views</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell stories about the world</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor and scrutinize political leaders</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support national development</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence public opinion</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information people need to make political decisions</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor and scrutinize business</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide entertainment and relaxation</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set the political agenda</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivate people to participate in political activity</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a detached observer</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support government policy</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be an adversary of the government</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convey a positive image of political leadership</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**

The great majority of Colombian journalists reported they had a strong commitment to professional ethical standards. The majority of respondents agreed that journalists should always adhere to the codes of professional ethics, regardless of the situation or context (see Table 2). However, less than half of the interviewees subscribed to the idea that journalists' ethical decisions depended on the specific situation. Similarly, less than half of the respondents agreed with the view that their ethical decisions are a matter of personal judgment. Less than one out of five journalists considered that sometimes it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.
The picture was mixed with regards to a selected number of potentially controversial reporting techniques. For instance, less than 19.0 percent of journalists surveyed considered it acceptable to occasionally use some of the controversial journalistic practices presented in Table 3. These controversial practices were occasionally justified by this small group of journalists with relatively ethical ideologies: the use of microphones and hidden cameras (18.9%), the use of re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors (18.8%), the exertion of pressure on unwilling informants to get a story (12.2%), the use of confidential business or government documents without authorization (11.6%), claiming to be somebody else (11.5%), the practice of getting hired by a firm or organization to gain inside information (11.1%), and paying people for confidential information (9.5%).

Also, less than 8.0 percent of journalists agreed to justify the use of unauthorized personal documents (such as letters and photographs), publishing stories without verifying their contents, accepting money from sources, altering or inventing quotes from sources, and altering photographs.

**Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying &quot;strongly” and &quot;somewhat agree&quot;</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>89.0</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying “always justified”</th>
<th>Percentage saying “justified on occasion”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using hidden microphones or cameras</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using confidential business or government documents without authorization</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claiming to be somebody else</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying people for confidential information</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing stories with unverified content</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting money from sources</td>
<td>549</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altering or fabricating quotes from sources</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altering photographs</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Colombian journalists perceived they had a high level of professional autonomy in their jobs. The vast majority of respondents said they had complete or a great deal of freedom with their selection of stories (80.4%) and deciding what perspectives should be emphasized in the news (80.5%). Likewise, more than half of the journalists stated they had participated in activities concerning editorial coordination, such as meetings to address drafting or news management, “always” or “very often” (56.6%).

News production in Colombia can be influenced by a variety of factors. The journalists that participated in this survey perceived journalism ethics (76.6%) as the main source of influence on their career (see Table 4). However, the majority of surveyed journalists also perceived strong limitations at an organizational and procedural level in relation to editorial supervisors (67.0%), editorial policy (67.0%), access to information (66.5%), influence of line managers or editors (60.3%), owners of the news organization (60.3%), media laws (59.8%), and time limits (59.2%). In the same way, more than half of the journalists perceived the relationship with news sources (58.7%), feedback from the audience (56.5%), and personal values and beliefs (55.8%) as highly influencing factors in their jobs.

Table 4: Perceived influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Influence</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”</th>
<th>Mean ± Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalism ethics</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>4.19 ± 1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial supervisors and higher editors</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>3.78 ± 1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial policy</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>3.80 ± 1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information access</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>3.81 ± 1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers of the news organization</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>3.61 ± 1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners of the news organization</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>3.61 ± 1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media laws and regulation</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>3.64 ± 1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time limits</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>3.63 ± 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with news sources</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>3.57 ± 1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from the audience</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>3.54 ± 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your personal values and beliefs</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>3.45 ± 1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience research and data</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>3.25 ± 1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising considerations</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>3.08 ± 1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>3.09 ± 1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing news organizations</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>3.09 ± 1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit expectations</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>2.95 ± 1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your peers on the staff</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>2.97 ± 1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of news-gathering resources</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>2.66 ± 1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censorship</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>2.74 ± 1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious considerations</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>2.68 ± 1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure groups</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>2.58 ± 1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business people</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>2.66 ± 1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government officials</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>2.52 ± 1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>2.48 ± 1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues in other media</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>2.52 ± 1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends, acquaintances and family</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>2.32 ± 1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Overall, internal factors were found to be more influential than external constraints. Strikingly, journalists felt little influence from the political and citizenry sphere: public relations (40.5%), censorship (32.0%), religious considerations (28.6%), the government (25.3%), and politicians (24.2%). Similarly, all the surveyed journalists reported only minor influence from friends, acquaintances and family, as well as from
colleagues in other media. Likewise, economic influences – like advertising considerations, market competition, and profit expectations – seem to have little relevance in Colombian newsrooms.

**Journalism in Transition**

Colombian journalism has experienced significant changes on a technological and professional level. According to the surveyed journalists, the importance of technological skills (81.7%) and the use of search engines (88.8%) have increased the most during the last five years (see Table 5), and have been perceived as essential requirements to develop the field of journalism. Almost half of the respondents (49.9%) acknowledged that the relationship between journalists and the public has changed notably, as it is increasingly demanded that journalists have substantial interactions with their audiences.

On the other hand, the vast majority of Colombian journalists perceived an increasingly competitive social and professional environment that demanded improved training at the university level. Likewise, the majority of respondents believed that the need to have a degree in journalism has strengthened. Journalists in Colombia also felt an increasing relevance (69.3%) and credibility (60.7%) of journalism in society. This increase in relevance is particularly notable as the country is negotiating a peace agreement with the “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia” (FARC) to end the conflict that has plagued the country for more than fifty years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Changes in journalism</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying has “increased”</th>
<th>Percentage saying has “decreased”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The use of search engines</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a university degree</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a degree in journalism or a related field</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relevance of journalism for society</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The credibility of journalism</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions of journalists with their audiences</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average working hours of journalists</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists’ freedom to make editorial decisions</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time available for researching stories</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in Colombia. 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.

Nevertheless, this technologically advanced social environment contrasts with the detriment in labor conditions for journalists in Colombia. 45.1 percent of journalists assured that the average number of working hours is constantly increasing, but the time available for story investigations is decreasing (45.6%). It must be said that even though 56.6 percent of journalists – as stated in the previous section – assured they participated in editorial coordination activities, only 40.2 percent of these journalists perceived an increase in their freedom to make editorial decisions. In other words, even though journalists perceived advances in editorial participation, the vast majority agreed that editorial decisions were still being centralized.

Table 6 presents the specific ways in which changes are perceived by journalists in this social and professional environment marked by technologies, relationships, and economic pressures centered on publicity.
Firstly, journalists considered that the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter has strengthened, as well as the tendency towards citizen journalism, in which public participation in the production of news and production of content demanded an increasingly horizontal and interactive communication in the process of news production.

Table 6 reveals that journalists felt that there had been an increase in the pressure to produce news with sensationalist content (58.8%), as well as pressure to practice journalism for profit (50.3%), and to take into account publicity considerations (53.6%) at the time of airing, so that content does not go against the interest of the advertisers.

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

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage saying has &quot;strengthened&quot;</th>
<th>Percentage saying has &quot;weakened&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience involvement in news production</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-generated contents, such as blogs</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience feedback</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure toward sensational news</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience research</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising considerations</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit making pressures</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism education</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical standards</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in Colombia. 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.

Methodological Information

Size of the population: 10,000 working journalists (estimated)

Sampling method: stratified proportionally systematic sampling & purposive quota sampling for newsrooms and purposively chosen based on quota for journalists within newsrooms

Sample size: 560 working journalists

Interview methods: face-to-face, telephone and mail/e-mail

Response rate: 63.0%

Period of field research: 03/2013-10/2014