

## **Medium-specific threats for journalists: Examples from Philippines, Afghanistan and Venezuela**

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### **To cite this article:**

Mitra, S., Høiby, M., & Garrido, M. (2021). Medium-specific threats for journalists: Examples from Philippines, Afghanistan and Venezuela. *Journalism Practice*, 15(1), 80-98.

**Abstract:** *Between 2012 and 2016, UNESCO registered 530 deaths of journalists. They also published a statistic showing that television journalists were the most killed, followed by print media, radio and online journalists. Hinted in this statistics is the need to understand the relationship between the medium through which and in which the journalists produce news and the threats and dangers posed to them. In this article, we discuss this interlinkage and call it medium-specific threats. As examples of this interlinkage, we describe the cases of community radio journalists in the Philippines, photojournalists in Afghanistan and online journalists in Venezuela. Based on these examples from independently conducted studies from very different parts of the world, we make the broader case that while recognizing the prevailing political-economic and socio-cultural factors and forces at work in these media systems-in-flux, investigations of medium-specific threats to journalists is needed for more nuanced understanding of and thus mitigation of journalists' insecurities.*

**Key words:** **Safety of journalists, Anti-press violence, freedom of expression, UN sustainable development goals, Afghanistan, Philippines, Venezuela**

### **1. Introduction**

As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN) states, attacks against journalists diminish a state's possibility to ensure access to information for its citizens (UNGA, 2015: SDG 16.10). Such crimes against journalists have been recorded by the UNESCO and civil society organizations (CSOs) already for some time (e.g. by Committee to Protect Journalists since 1992) and the issue is now gaining academic attention. Academic studies are especially fruitful in delving beyond CSO-reported statistics on journalists' safety to identify deep-seated issues exacerbating journalists' insecurities. Scholars have discussed structural forces (e.g. Cottle et al., 2016; Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017), cultural assumptions (e.g. Palmer, 2018) and journalistic practice-related factors (e.g. Høiby & Ottosen, 2015; Hughes et al., 2017; Høiby, 2019) in this context.

Missing from CSO reports and prior academic studies is the discussion of how the medium through which and in which journalists produce news can affect their safety. Inspired by the growing body of academic research and informed by examples we found in our own country-specific studies on journalists' safety, here we offer an exploratory understanding of how journalists' insecurities may be affected by the medium through which and in which they produce news.

## **2. Critical Point of departure**

In our respective studies on journalists' safety in three very different parts of the world – Philippines, Afghanistan, and Venezuela – we independently found that the medium through which and in which journalists produced news was relevant to understanding the nature of threats and dangers they experienced. As a shorthand, we call this interlinked relationship medium-specific threats.

However, this current article is not meant to be a comparative analysis of the three cases based on common variables and indicators, but a discussion drawing from the findings from three different studies which were conducted with their own internal specific study designs. The studies in Afghanistan and Venezuela focused solely on the experiences of photojournalists and online journalists respectively while the study in Philippines, involved participants who could speak to safety of journalists in the country more broadly. The current article draws examples from these previous studies for its primary purpose which is to selectively highlight the findings related to interlinkages of professional safety and the medium in which and through which the journalists produced news. By highlighting this possible interlinkage, we aim to underscore the need for better understanding, and more focused evidence-gathering, than the current article can provide, regarding how some insecurities faced by journalists can be contingent on the particular medium through which and in which they produce news. This is our critical point of departure.

We build our argument on two focal points on recent statistics on anti-press violence. UNESCO's 2018 report broke down instances of media killings according to the medium in which and through which the targeted newswriters produced news. They noted that the majority of them worked for the television medium, followed by print, radio, and digital media (UNESCO, 2018: 141). The report also noted that between 2012 and 2016, 92 percent of journalists killed around the world were local journalists covering conflicts in their own society (UNESCO, 2018: 142). Combined, these two statistics offer an important understanding of the problems surrounding the safety of journalists around the world. First, that the issue is one primarily concerning local journalists rather than foreign correspondents, and second, that threats faced by different *types* of local journalists demand qualitative scrutiny. For this purpose, we bring together our recent research on journalists' safety in three different parts of the world, to argue that,

a) Aspects of local journalists' safety conditions in different parts of the world can be affected by the medium through which and in which they produce news.

b) These medium-specific threats to local journalists' safety, in turn, function in relation to the political-economic and socio-cultural processes in the particular societies and their transitory media systems (See End Note 1).

### **3. Theoretical and methodological approach**

Our collaboration for this article came about through a “lightbulb moment” of discovering an unexpected commonality between our respective studies (Liamputtong, 2013: 208). As such, our approach in this article is based on an inductive research strategy (Bryman, 2016: 23-4) adopted at the post-data analysis stage. We applied the inductive approach to interpreting a commonality among the three different bodies of evidence to highlight an under-researched aspect of insecurities faced by journalists.

The examples we present derive from research projects which were devised and conducted independently of each other, thus, each case study presented below has its own – similar but specific – methodologies. These are briefly presented within each section. However, all three studies were qualitative. A qualitative approach was crucial to our respective, in-depth exploration of the issues surrounding journalists' safety in the three countries. In particular, we all found that qualitative methods we employed were instrumental to answering “‘how’ and ‘why’ questions” related to journalists' safety for our respective investigations (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 545).

### **4. Example 1: Radio Journalists in the Philippines**

Though the Philippines is not in a state of war, it is one of the most dangerous places to do journalism in the world, and radio broadcasters based outside the capital Manila are particularly vulnerable. Since CPJ begun to register attacks on the press in 1992, 79 journalist murders have been registered in the Philippines. This compares to the total number of 1312 journalists killed worldwide in the same period, meaning that the Philippines account for 6.02 percent of all journalists' deaths for which motives have been confirmed. Among these journalists, more than half worked for radio (41). One could surmise if a majority of these radio broadcasters were killed closer in time to 1992, it would explain the phenomenon because of the prevailing media technology at that time. But more than half of these murders (22) took place after 2006 and thus well after the adoption of current media technologies.

Findings presented in this section are based on data gathered through semi-structured interviews with five journalists and four expert sources in May 2017. Four of the journalists (two Mindanao journalists and two Manila journalists) were consulted in a group discussion about the differences in threats facing local and non-local journalists in Mindanao. The other journalist and the expert sources were consulted through one-to-one interviews. Expert sources here were

persons regarded as having particular expertise about anti-press violence in the country, in this case, they were representatives of the Philippine Union of Journalists (NUJP) and the Philippine Centre of Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), and the Editor-in-chief of the news organization, Rappler, Maria Ressa. Ressa is also the author of several books relevant to the topic in Southeast Asia (e.g. Ressa, 2003). The findings about threats faced by radio broadcasters in particular, emerged in several interviews as a particular concern of the interviewees when talking about the journalists who faced relatively greater risks. Interviewees who were asked which reporters are more likely to receive threats answered “radio” and as one interviewee said, “...that’s based on the lists of killings; the majority of those who are killed were actually from radio.”

#### 4.1. Radio in the Philippine media landscape

According to scholars, Philippine media is affected by widespread private media ownership, forcing market-oriented coverage and tabloid-style, sensational reporting. The news media is closely connected to large corporations who put constraints on what gets reported, while continuous attempts are made by power-holders to exercise control through bribing and/or threatening journalists and media owners (Coronel, 2001; Guioguo, 2015). Ratings and advertising are crucial for survival (Estonilo, 2011). However, while the country figures near the top in global statistics of violence against journalists, the Philippine press remains critical and vibrant. Scholars point to a history of colonial rule by the Spanish, the Americans and the Japanese to explain, at least in part, the persistent and critical voice of the Philippine press since the end of dictatorship in 1986 (Rosales, 2006; Guioguo, 2015; Tandoc jr., 2017). Another explanation lies in the market-driven forces of private ownership after President Ferdinand Marcos’ rule, through which the media have been “forced by their audiences to adopt a much more critical stance” (Coronel, 2001:109). This has “opened the way for independent journalism to emerge” (ibid), but has left Filipino journalists to face the threats to the fundamentals of freedom they are trying to protect.

The fact that radio is a large and far-reaching medium in the Philippines, could naturally explain the high number of radio journalists assassinated. Moreover, radio has the biggest concentration in the provinces of Luzon, Mindanao, and Visayas respectively – all areas affected by conflict and poverty. These are the areas, in which most of the journalist assassinations have taken place (Aguilar et al., 2012: 674). As one of the interviewees in this study concluded, “The further you are away from Manila, the weaker the rule of law” (Expert source 1). Decentralization and the absence of a cohesive state that can abate local political power disputes, corruption and high prevalence of impunity, are also contributing factors (Aguilar et al., 2012). It appears in recent research that the level of democratic performance, violence in society, public insecurity, and economic inequality are related to anti-press violence, and that “anti-press violence is higher when sub-national state actors intensify criminal violence and when insecurity is geographically and topically proximate to journalists” (Hughes et al., 2012: 645). But the evidence gathered through first-hand interviews presented in this section suggest there are additional factors to consider for explaining the dangers of radio-based journalism in the Philippines.

#### 4.2. Vulnerabilities of community radio journalists

Community radio stations which operate with small newsrooms are particularly vulnerable due to the limited number of journalists they employ. Previous research has noted that small newsrooms can alternate stories between reporters to avoid exposure of few individuals when working on sensitive material such as corruption and crime (Høiby and Ottosen, 2015). This “safety in numbers” is unavailable to community radio journalists as sufficient numbers of journalists are lacking in the newsrooms.

Additionally, community radio stations often lack financial resources for safety training and equipment, and the time for briefing, debriefing and tackling reactions to stress for journalists. According to the NUJP, the smaller outlets – as community radio stations often are – “cannot refuse an assignment that is too dangerous” (Expert source 2) due to financial pressure and limited opportunities. These issues were discussed further in the group interview with journalists from Manila and Mindanao conducted for this study, and all participants agreed, when one of them stated that, “Those who have been through safety training are of course more ready to accept the fact if they think it’s too dangerous for them. They will back away. But for the smaller outfits there’s no choice. For the smaller outfits that is not an option” (Reporter 1).

#### 4.3. Vulnerabilities from media practice, pay systems and ethics

Public service programs on radio, in which listeners can call in and discuss problems in their society, is a growing trend in the Philippine media landscape. These programs provide airtime for public criticism, often of government officials, in which the radio host may partake in discussions, “even debating with them when the latter call to defend themselves, and demanding explanations and quick action” (Guioguo, 2015). The programs offer excitement for the listeners and thus contribute to sustaining the station. Interviewees say that libels, defamation, and false accusations occur frequently. One of them says that this form of journalism also exists in print media, although in the print medium the journalist is not as present in the discussion as they would be ‘on air’. The radio journalists expose themselves through facilitating and also participating in such discussions live on air. For the listeners, the broadcast journalist is perceived as the one giving voice to libels, accusations, and criticism.

The sensationalistic approach in radio journalism appears as an important and perhaps underrated issue when discussing the safety of journalists in the Philippines. It was mentioned by several of the interviewees, particularly in the case of radio broadcasting, where journalists often operate live and audience ratings are directly associated with the individual reporter. As one observed,

There’s this practice, in radio for example, to get more audience, they would be very sensationalized. Most of the time, the statements would be really libels, so of course the one that you criticize would tend to...especially if you accuse that it’s his ‘kingdom’ and he can do whatever he wants, he sends you a black ribbon or he sends somebody to tell you to stop ... or sends you an SMS saying ‘that’s your last broadcast’. So ethics is actually a big part of safety. (Reporter 2)

Need for sensationalism and less concern for ethics in radio journalism appear closely related to the media economy. In the provinces and in smaller media outlets such as community radio stations especially, salary for journalists is meagre. Usually, it is based on income from advertisement, in the form of a percentage or share of profits. And if advertisers are enterprises owned by the Mayor or other local power-holders, it becomes difficult to report on anything that may affect the advertisement revenue. At the same time, since their income is contingent on audience numbers, radio journalists also depend greatly on meeting the demands of their listeners – whether it be through entertainment or criticism of public officials. One of the expert sources said,

They deliberately sensationalize the handling of news reports because they believe that it is what will draw the audience to the station, and if you have more audience you will have more advertising, and then more money (Expert source 3).

#### 4.4. Vulnerabilities from convergence of radio with online media

Another issue that appeared in the interviewees' reflections on exposure and vulnerability of the radio broadcaster is their changing role and ways of covering stories. Web 2.0 technology has brought new ways of interaction between broadcasters and audiences. When this was brought up by the journalists in the group discussion, one said that,

I had a [conversation] with some local radio reporters, and they were talking about their conditions now in Zamboanga city. [...] Now, they said, they don't have breaks, they don't have weekend breaks, they don't have holidays. They have to make stories every day, all the time, because they have Facebook to feed the stories. If there's a shooting incident [...] they have to get out, they have to shoot the shooting, they have to go live on Facebook, and they have to also report live on their station.... If that incident breaks out in the middle of the night, you don't have any excuse to say that you're at home. You have to go out. And yet the pay is still the same (Reporter 3).

The interviewee said that news anchors also encourage reporters to stream videos on social media, either to film and post on the anchor's account, or to post on the reporter's own account. "Then they encourage everyone to go to the account to watch how a certain reporter covers the fire or the shooting incident". The group of interviewees agreed that such live, online reporting leaves little or no time for fact-checking or contextual analysis, and that sensationalism sometimes is encouraged in the process. "They don't even get the real data, because they have to be there, ahead". The interviewee continued:

Even their health is affected because they cannot sleep anymore. They used to have time every Saturday, Sunday, but that's not [the case] anymore for the local radio reporter. We are speaking about the radio reporters. Because they have to bring camera, they have to shoot now, they have to go live in social media, and they have to use social media to [attract audience].

During and after covering events, the radio broadcasters regularly participate in discussions on social media. The practice of letting listeners call in to ask questions on air is being, to some extent, replaced – or at least accompanied – by the Facebook wall.

The new demands of the profession; publishing on several platforms, streaming live and being available in all places at all times, not only weakens the journalist's capacity to tackle threats and make good decisions related to their safety, but also exposes them more than before. Live streaming, which is key in community radio, gives away the exact time and location of the reporter on duty, and when the pressure of time, audience ratings and exposure because of lack of safety in numbers are added, consequences can be fatal for radio journalists in the Philippines.

## 5. Example 2: Photojournalists in Afghanistan

Unlike Philippines, Afghanistan has been in a state of war near-continuously since late 1970s (Allansson et al., 2017: 574). The latest iteration of this conflict has been the invasion of the country by the United States (US) and its allies to oust the Taliban regime in 2001. At the time of writing, a resurgent Taliban and the recently emerged Islamic State are battling with the Afghan government forces and US troops, even as peace talks with the Taliban are ongoing (Mashal, 2018).

### 5.1. Political-economic changes in post-2001 Afghan media

While the conflict has ebbed and flowed since 2001, Afghanistan has also seen internationally-funded reconstruction and development during this period. The media industry in Afghanistan which had collapsed from decades of war and political instability (Rawan, 2002) has seen a large influx of funds from the international community, particularly Western donors (Cary, 2012). Success of these efforts, however, has been modest and media organizations are beholden in various ways to the Afghan government and other non-state political actors, while also often being dependent on donor funding for survival (Brown, 2013; Relly & Zanger, 2017; Mitra, 2019). One of the most glaring failures of the international community and post-2001 Afghan administrations is that Afghanistan continues to rank as a highly unsafe country for journalists (UNESCO, 2018a).

### 5.2. Photojournalism in the Afghan Media Landscape

What the macro-picture about insecurity of Afghan journalists does not show is that Afghan *photojournalists* face a particular threat not just because of their journalism, but because of the medium of photography through which and in which they do their journalism.

To understand this particular threat, the practice of photography in Afghanistan needs to be seen historically. Afghan society has long had elements of intolerance to photography. Edwards (2006: 113-4) noted that intolerance of photography was recorded in Afghanistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This continued in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Rawan (2002). This intolerance is based on hardline interpretations of Islam by certain clerics forbidding images of animate beings but also stems from honor codes prevalent among certain cultural

groups and areas in Afghanistan which dictate that women's faces are not seen or shown publicly, even in photographs (Dupree, 2002; Edwards, 2006).

This longer history of non-acceptance of photography in Afghan society, particularly of women, found its most violent expression under the Taliban who banned most forms of photography (Rawan, 2002; Dupree, 2002; Afghan Box Camera Project, 2016). Headshots for identification purposes were allowed (Murray, 2012), but "full-body shots, portraits for non-identity purposes, and particularly images of woman were more usually outlawed" (Afghan Box Camera Project, 2016). To impose this ban, the Taliban actively persecuted professional photographers. Not surprisingly, photojournalism became almost non-existent in Afghanistan by 2001 but with the help of foreign donors, and through Afghan initiative, photography and photojournalism have been again taken up by a number of Afghan men and women (Murray, 2012; Afghan box camera project, 2016; Mitra, 2019).

### 5.3 Socio-cultural intolerance and Afghan photojournalists' insecurities

A study specifically focusing on the practice of photojournalism in post-2001 Afghanistan was conducted for the first time in September-October, 2014. It was based on open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 20 Afghan photojournalists. As per the ethical guidelines followed in this study, the individual photojournalists, who were contacted through snowball and purposive sampling in Kabul, cannot be identified individually. They are referred to here as respondents followed by a random but consistent number between 1 and 20.

Of the 20 photojournalists, 17 were men and 3 women. Of these, only four had less than five years of experience working as photojournalists. Thirteen of the photojournalists interviewed had worked in freelance or full-time positions for a variety of global news organizations that are headquartered in Western countries. Five more respondents worked for an Afghan news organization which catered to both international and domestic clientele while two of the photojournalists had primarily worked for news organizations with exclusively domestic audiences.

One of the issues explored in-depth within this larger study was the lack of security these photojournalists faced. They described daily facing the prospects of death or physical injury, harassment, imprisonment, loss of equipment, or significant obstructions to their work. The interviewees also described the sources of these threats. In addition to Taliban insurgents, Afghan military and intelligence personnel, the civilian police, Afghan national government officials, the photojournalists also perceived the general population in Afghanistan as a source of threat to them. In fact, members of the general population were the most commonly discussed source of threat by the photojournalists. 17 of the 20 photojournalists thought that they faced



danger from members of the general population. They linked this threat to the continuing intolerance of photography in Afghanistan, particularly towards photographing women<sup>1</sup>.

For example, respondent 6, a photojournalist who had worked in both freelance and full-time positions for local news media as well as for international news media, said that,

...[W]hen we take pictures of women, we face different clashes, [people] asking ‘why you are taking picture[s] of wom[e]n, it’s not allowed’ and this kind of thing...mostly we avoid taking pictures of women...because of the cultural problem. Because two or three times, I went to jail. I mean jail for many hours, because people attack[ed] me [for] taking pictures. Even the woman in burqa, you know their face was not in view but they attack[ed]...me and in one case, they wanted to break my camera....

But the problem of intolerance of photography as a threat to photojournalists also goes beyond just photographing women according to the interviewees. For example, respondent 17 said,

If you go to a city and take picture of a man, then they are shouting at you, ‘why are you taking my picture?’ And if you go to any mosque, they are saying, no, no pictures. Everywhere you go...they are not happy with pictures.

Other respondents agreed with this view. Respondent 10, a photojournalist who worked for local and international news media, also said that he had even,

been punished because of taking photos [of] men, not from female, female is very sensitive, you know, in Afghanistan, still, there are many problems with male also. They cannot accept that.

Respondent 18, a full-time photojournalist with a global news agency, described an incident,

[where] there was [an] elder[s’] gathering. They were gathered with the ISAF<sup>2</sup>, with the Brits, [to] discuss about some problem[s in] the villages. When I tr[ie]d to take [a] picture, (gestures gun-cocking),

‘No, don’t!’ [They said]

‘But you are m[e]n, not wom[e]n’ [I said].

‘No!’

None of them [agreed].

The general distrust of photography in Afghan society was shared by members of the Afghan military forces and the police according to the interviewees. Four photojournalists felt that the members of the Afghan security forces were often motivated to enforce the societal taboo against photographing women, which accentuated the threats they faced from them. The intolerance of

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<sup>1</sup> While describing this particular threat, the photographers mostly spoke about photographing women in public spaces where it was implied that explicit consent should not be needed.

<sup>2</sup> International Security Assistance Force: the official name of the NATO forces which was present in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.

photography was also mentioned as one of the reasons why the Taliban target photojournalists. Respondent 13 who worked as a freelancer for several international news organizations said that he had had to move to Kabul because members of the Taliban in his provincial hometown

consider me a *kafer*, non-Muslim, they want me to be killed...I am being warned because I am doing such work...they don't want me to work with... photography.

Respondent 4, a female photojournalist said that when publishing her images online:

Sometimes, I don't use my name because they will find me ...if some Mullahs or Taliban sees it, there will be problem[s] for me.

This threat faced by photojournalists in Afghanistan because of the very medium through which and in which they do journalism is not often discussed within the issue of journalists' safety in Afghanistan. Foreign donor-led efforts have fueled a steady re-growth in photojournalism in the post-2001 period (Cary, 2012; Murray, 2012; Mitra, 2019) alongside the media industry as a whole. But, as this study found, intolerance of photography, and consequently threat to photojournalists, have not disappeared magically with the retreat of the Taliban and the infusion of donor dollars into the post-2001 Afghan media economy. The various success stories – the growth in opportunities for photography training, renowned photojournalists who have gained international recognition for their work, (Cary, 2012; Murray, 2012; Mitra, 2019) – have not fully replaced a culture of suspicion and intolerance, and even hatred, directed towards photojournalists because of the visual medium through which and in which they do journalism.

The patterns of the past that this continued intolerance of photography represents do not only exist at the socio-cultural level, but also in contemporary legal frameworks (Brown, 2013). This has direct implications for photojournalists, as Clark and Qaane (2015) discussed in the case of the imprisonment of the Afghan photographer Najibullah Musesfer in 2015.

Though freedom of expression is guaranteed under Article 34 of the new Afghan Constitution (2004), the Afghan Mass Media Law (2009) includes punitive measures for media if they offend Islam or go against the vaguely defined 'culture' or 'moral values' of Afghan society (see Articles 20, 45.1 and 45.8, Mass Media Law, 2009). The invocations of Islam and Afghan culture and moral values in the ominous yet ambiguous wording of these laws (Brown, 2013: 175; Clark & Qaane, 2015) are particularly relevant when it comes to the safety of Afghan photojournalists. This is because the visual medium through which and in which they do their journalism, according to interpretations by some sections of the Afghan society, makes them offenders against Islam, as well as Afghan culture and morality.

Whether they worked as freelancers and full-time photojournalists, for local or global news organizations, irrespective of whether they were male or female, this perception of constant threat from their own compatriots was felt by the Afghan photojournalists interviewed. However, international or domestic support for independent journalism in Afghanistan has by and large not taken this particular threat faced by photojournalists into account in their efforts to ensure journalists' safety.

## 6. Example 3: Online Journalists in Venezuela

The number of journalists killed in Venezuela is not as high as in the cases of the Philippines or Afghanistan. To date, the CPJ registers 9 cases while UNESCO reports only 3 (CPJ, 2018; UNESCO, 2018b). But focusing on fatalities does not reflect how unsafe it is to be a journalist in Venezuela. Venezuela currently does not have a free and independent media, and individuals are afraid of expressing their views on sensitive topics (Freedom House, 2018).

The dangerous situations is related to the political, social and economic instability that has lasted for the past 20 years. This produces uncertainty and has a direct impact on the safety of journalists who are frequently attacked due to their critical publications on national policies, against measures adopted by the government, or any other issue considered as a sensitive topic. In 2017 alone, the local CSO Espacio Público registered more than 534 attacks on journalists including arbitrary detentions, physical aggression, theft and illegal confiscation of equipment, and destruction of journalists' information (2018: 14).

Importantly, in 2017, the local CSO Ipys Venezuela indicated that Internet-based media were the most affected, followed by print media, TV, and radio (Ipys Venezuela, 2018). For a deeper understanding of how and why this happens, and the type of risks that online journalists are facing in Venezuela, a study was conducted between August and September 2017 to gather primary, in-depth, qualitative data on the topic. The data gathered includes the results of seven semi-structured interviews that were conducted in August 2017 with one representative each of seven different online Venezuelan media outlets. It also includes the results of an online survey that was conducted from 23 August to 6 September 2017. The survey was open for any Venezuelan Internet-user (approx. 16 million people; CONATEL, 2015) and was distributed through the main social media platforms used in Venezuela (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp). The survey followed a snowball sampling method. It was distributed via email by the researcher and the media outlets that participated in the preceding interviews. At the end of the period, 211 people completed the survey. In addition to this primary data, this section on threats faced by online journalists also relies on secondary data on the topic published by local and international organizations.

### 6.1. Political and Economic changes and Venezuelan media

To contextualize the particular threats faced by online journalists in Venezuela, a summary of the political and economic situation in the country is necessary. President Hugo Chavez won the elections in Venezuela for the first time in December 1998, and since the beginning of his first presidential period, he faced criticism from different political actors. In 2002, political tensions between opposition leaders, private sector representatives and President Chavez resulted in a coup d'état (IACHR, 2003). The coup was overturned, but it had a direct impact on the economy. The crisis served as the basis to implement a foreign currency control in 2003 which is still in place. The Venezuelan foreign currency ban has deeply affected the media sector, especially print media (Figueroa, 2018).

In addition, there have been politically motivated attacks on the media. Andrés Izarra, former Minister for Communications and Information, remarked that “socialism needs communicational

hegemony” and “all the media must depend on the state as a public commodity” (Olivares, 2009). Between 2006 and 2013, the government took several actions to achieve these goals. Sixty-two percent of the budget of the Minister for Communications and Information was devoted to the dissemination of government propaganda, establishment of the political state’s communication and the presidential agenda at the local and the international level, the production of special presidential programs, and the optimization of the operations conducted by state media (Salojärvi, 2016, p. 53).

The most critical measure adopted to impose communication hegemony was the closure of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) in 2007 (Bisbal, 2007; Canelón-Silva, 2014; Guzmán Cárdenas, 2014). The broadcasting license of RCTV – the oldest Venezuelan TV channel – was not renewed under President Chavez’s instruction (IFEX, 2007). This had a chilling effect on media owners and editorial lines came to be modified to please the government. Many journalists, especially those publishing information critical of the government, started using social media and websites instead. They relied on their reputation and experience to develop these online platforms to make sensitive publications (Otis, 2015). In 2017, the company Relaciones TN reported the existence of at least 100 digital media outlets, including radio, TV, and newspapers in Venezuela (Relaciones TN, 2017).

These initiatives, plus the mass commercialization of the Internet, made Venezuelans “‘intense’ consumers on social networks” (Nalvarte, 2016). In fact, approximately 14 million Venezuelan Internet-users have an active account across social media platforms (We Are Social, 2018: 141), and at least 44.56 per cent of Internet-users are accessing these platforms through mobile connections (ITU, 2018). The mobile Internet service is provided by three main companies Movilnet, Movistar and Digitel (CAF, 2013: 84) but the majority market share is controlled by the national company Movilnet (Freedom House, 2016).

After President Chavez died in 2013, social protests have been increasing, and in many cases they have led to widespread violence (IACHR, 2015). In fact, they reached a tipping point in March 2017 when they lasted for more than 100 days. In that period, 163 people were assassinated while thousands of people were injured and detained (OVCS, 2017). In the same year, President Nicolas Maduro passed the Presidential Decree No. 2849 which declared a state of economic emergency and the adoption of national plans to guarantee national security. He authorized measures to limit access to the Internet and the dissemination of information through Internet-based platforms (Article 2.7 and 2.10).

## 6.2 Political-economic turmoil and online journalists’ situation

There are many ways that the political-economic turmoil and the rise of Internet-based journalism in Venezuela has had an impact on online journalists’ safety. These are directly related to the specificities of the online medium through which and in which they report news. On the one hand, they have to manage offline situations related to online reporting like physical attacks or theft of their mobile devices; and on the other hand, they face particular risks derived from the use of digital media, including Distributed Denial of Service attacks (Henrichsen et al., 2015: 27-28), hacking, blockages, and surveillance.

One way that such medium-based threat manifests is through the use of cellphones. It is the main equipment used by digital journalists while reporting from the field but they are abstaining from using them to remain safe (Espacio Publico, 2018: 20-21). This needs further explanation. When online journalists use their cellphones in public to document and report events, criminals find the opportunity to rob them. Ten respondents to the survey and one interviewee indicated that these situations affected the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. As another survey also found, their fear of being robbed is fueled by the scarcity and high prices of mobile devices (Freedom House, 2016). Even though no official statistics has been published in the past decade, in 2011 it was estimated that 110,000 mobile phones were stolen per month (Latin American Herald Tribune, 2011) and in a country with increasing violence and poverty, robbery remains common (OSAC, 2018). Furthermore, the existing hyper-inflation makes it almost impossible for an online journalist who receives a minimum wage of less than 6 US Dollars per month to acquire a new smartphone (Reuters, 2019).

In addition, Venezuela has the slowest Internet speeds in the region (FastMetrics, 2018). This forces online journalists to remain in vulnerable places to upload information on to the Internet making them an easy target. When security forces identify them, they try to impede their newsgathering and dissemination by illegally confiscating their mobile phones (Freedom House, 2016). Retained devices are checked by authorities to delete pictures and videos, as well as to check the use of instant messaging applications, like Whatsapp and Telegram, to identify if the information was shared and to whom.

One of the participants of this study, the administrator of two Twitter accounts devoted to disseminating hyperlocal news (@LosOlivos and @VillaAponwao), indicated that

the majority of the people who were detained during the [2017] protests were young, they [authorities] took their phones and checked them, and as a consequence, people withdrew from WhatsApp and Telegram groups to avoid being tracked.

The number of online journalists affected by these threats is not recorded by international organizations separately but local CSOs have reported it as a trend. For instance, in 2017, Espacio Público registered four cases of illegal detentions for the dissemination of information through social media, in which one of the victims was tortured and freed under threat (Espacio Público, 2018: 26). Ipys Venezuela listed 54 illegal detentions that also involved physical and verbal attacks (Ipys Venezuela, 2018).

In data gathered for this study, it was found that for online journalists, threats to their safety extend to the online world. This is because, in Venezuela, anonymity is forbidden by the national constitution<sup>3</sup> so their use of real names in social media, blogs or websites makes them an easy target for physical and verbal attacks. They are also subjected to surveillance, usually conducted by police and the military (Freedom House, 2016). This surveillance is grounded in unclear regulations. To get access to the Internet, journalists need to have a data plan, but to get it they must provide very sensitive information. Article 4 of the Administrative Act No. 171, adopted on

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<sup>3</sup> Article 57 expressly states: "...Anonymity, war propaganda, discriminatory messages or those promoting religious intolerance are *not permitted*" (Emphases added).

26 October 2017, indicates that to obtain Internet services, people must provide a copy of their identification card, a copy of the tax identification number, email address, fingerprints, signature, and a photograph. This data provides necessary elements to start criminal procedures against critical journalists. For instance, the ‘Law against Hate and for Peaceful Coexistence and Tolerance’, allows journalists to be imprisoned up to 20 years for the use of social media to publish information deemed to be hate speech (articles 14, 20). But what is considered as hate speech is not properly defined and depends on the subjective analysis made by judges.

One would imagine that to avoid these risks, especially against surveillance, online journalists in Venezuela would adopt digital security measures. However, responses to the survey conducted for this study demonstrated that most do not or cannot use those tools. Out of 54 professional journalists surveyed, 30 had some form of digital training, but half of them didn’t use any digital tool to guarantee their online safety. The situation is the same for other Internet-users. In fact, only 24 Internet-users surveyed for this study indicated that they use any digital security tool. This explains why journalists remain vulnerable to digital attacks, including “Doubleswitch” attacks (Access Now, 2017).

The increasing importance of online journalists in Venezuela is directly related to the restrictions imposed on radio, TV, and print media. Journalists working for traditional media found a relatively safe space online to overcome barriers (Correa, 2009: 32), but in the last 5 years, the situation has dramatically changed. The Venezuelan legal framework has created at the same time a permissive environment for authorities and a restrictive environment for journalists, an environment in which those who do not comply with state policies can be targeted. Online journalists in Venezuela are among the most vulnerable groups because they can be identified with ease, and surveilled and attacked under legal guise, *both through offline and online means*.

## 8. Discussion

In the discussions above, we have highlighted how radio journalists, photojournalists, and online journalists in the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Venezuela respectively face threats and dangers affected by and related to the medium through which and in which they produce news.

We should note here that threats to journalists are also generated through overlap among the various media through and in which they produce news. Radio broadcasters take videos and pictures, photographers publish their images online, while online journalists similarly incorporate the use of visuals and audio in their work. The positive and negative effects on journalistic labour of this trend of medium overlap brought about by shifts in technology used for journalism is a well-researched area (e.g. Örnebring, 2010; Reich, 2013). What our examples hint at, is that increasing time constraint for journalists, easier exposure of identities to potential attackers, and other issues related to digital-format multi-media news production, may exacerbate threats for journalists. The understanding of the relationships between journalistic medium and journalists’ safety, that is at the heart of our discussion here, could be understood within this potential effect of technology-enabled media overlap on the safety of journalists in the three countries: the more types of media through which and in which the journalists produce news, the greater their

exposure to the various types of threats related to each of those media. But positing such a correlation would need more focused evidence-gathering, which is what we hope to spark through our current discussion.

Our argument here should not be seen as promoting a *medium-deterministic* understanding of threats to journalists. As we have described above, none of the threats faced by the journalists discussed here operated in a vacuum. The fact that regional radio stations in the Philippines are privately-owned, profit-oriented and yet cash-strapped, puts the small number of journalists who are employed by them, at risk because they must sensationalize events just to earn their living while being more easily identifiable. Western donors and NGOs have been encouraging the regrowth of photography in post-2001 Afghanistan but socio-cultural, and even legal, norms in the country still show continuities with the past when it comes to the visual medium. This contradiction means Afghan photojournalists work in opposition to the prevailing norms in their society, adding to their safety concerns. Similarly, the fact that critical news media have stopped operations in Venezuela, have forced journalists to use online media to continue working. They have assumed individually all the risks associated with the online medium in a politically repressive and economically turbulent society.

Thus, we recognize that the medium-specific threats discussed here ultimately stem from the fact that Philippines, Afghanistan, and Venezuela do not have strong mechanisms to protect freedom of expression and particularly, journalists. While considered a democracy since 1958, arguably, Venezuela's transition to an authoritarian regime over the last twenty years is now complete. Afghanistan's fledgling post-2001 democracy remains ineffective to administer large parts of the country and is ridden with factionalism, corruption, and lack of rule of law. The Philippines under the current populist administration shows growing transgressions against democratic norms. Extra-legal use of coercive power in every part of the society is on the rise. These larger shortcomings of the 'civil sphere' (Cottle et al., 2016) in the three countries allow for the culture of impunity within which the medium-specific threats to journalists' safety exist in these countries. In sum, we recognize that medium-specific threats ultimately depend on the political, economic structures and cultural rules and mores of the society the journalists live in and the media systems-in-flux they work in (Roudakova, 2012).

Nonetheless, we have chosen to approach a discussion of risks to journalists from the starting point of the medium through which and in which they produce news because the relationship between the two remains under-discussed. Insofar, we see our argument as not contradictory but complementary to previous academic explorations of structural and cultural issues affecting safety of journalists (Cottle et al., 2016; Høiby & Ottosen, 2015; Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017; Palmer, 2018). What we hope to add to the discussion is the need to take into account that the medium through which and in which news is produced by journalists interact with these structural and cultural factors and forces to affect journalists' safety in specific ways.

## **8. Conclusion**

We recognize that post-investigation inductive interpretation of qualitatively gathered data to present three different examples cannot have the same evidentiary force that a truly comparative investigation sharing the same variables and indicators from the outset could potentially have. But the fact that we found the commonality of medium-specific threats among our individual country-focused investigations in spite of not sharing prior unified study designs or any pre-meditated or common research questions among ourselves, shows, we believe, the need to conduct such comparative investigations in the future to gather more evidence. We call for future investigations that will measure threats associated with different media through which journalists produce news in particular media systems prior to comparing across the different media systems for a full understanding of the relationship of journalistic medium and safety issues faced by journalists (See End Note 2). In this regard, cross-pollination of research on journalists' safety with ongoing research on the impact of changing technologies on journalistic labour would be another fruitful endeavor. Our hope is that this line of inquiry will be incorporated, not only in future academic studies but also in future CSO reports on journalists' safety to equip advocacy groups and policymakers in preventing and mitigating the stifling of independent journalism. If we are to enhance the safety of journalists, we need to enhance our understanding of these interactions.

For the present, while recognizing the limitations inherent in our discussion, we felt compelled to shed light on this issue because if in such very disparate cases as we have described, local journalists – who bear the brunt of anti-press violence around the world (UNESCO, 2018a) – are facing threats and dangers related to their journalistic medium, then starting the conversation without delay is crucial.

## END NOTES

1. The three media systems we focus on in this article are very much in transition and so defy neat categorization (Roudakova, 2012). Problems with categorizing the Phillipino media system has been noted before. Shifting power nexi make for a media sector which is “fickle, transitory and ambiguous” in its orientation(s) (McCargo, 2012: 203). Consequently, voices “authorized and unauthorized” by powers-that-be can both make themselves heard depending on situation and context, making for a media landscape marked by “partisan polyvalence” McCargo described (2012: 223). Partisan polyvalence – a descriptive term rather than a category as McCargo argued (2012) – could also describe Afghanistan. The post-2001 Afghan media landscape has been called a patrons-based media system (Brown, 2013) where media organizations show parallelisms with the Afghan government, western or regional donors (cf. Relly & Zanger, 2017), political leaders or warlords, based on whose patronage the organization relies on. While the western donors have supported creating a pluralistic media system in Afghanistan (Barker, 2008) and to some extent, the Afghan government has created laws and policies to institute the same, the steady and strong influences of the other actors, not to mention the ebbs and flows of an ongoing conflict, keep the media system in flux. Venezuela has been described as one of the several “captured liberal” media systems in Latin America (Guerrero, 2014) though this category



does not do justice to the shifting political and economic sands Venezuela has been experiencing. Showing how Venezuela under the Bolivarian regime became a mixed authoritarian system, Cañizález (2014) documented how the Venezuelan state pursued an agenda of increasing hegemony over the national media system. But this growing authoritarian control of the traditional media formats was limited at first when it came to digital news formats (Correa, 2009) and an ongoing process when the study was conducted. This transitional process is described within the example discussed above.

In sum, each of these three countries' media systems are hard to place under traditional categories (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) which were originally based on analysis of more politically stable countries and contexts. Thus, following Roudakova (2012), we have focused on describing and analyzing journalists' medium-specific insecurities in relation to the political-economic and socio-cultural "processes" at work in the three countries, rather than on an unified, stable understanding of the media "systems" (p. 247) in these countries.

2. We are grateful to reviewer 2 who served for the fourth round of peer review of this article, for suggesting the potential design of future studies investigating medium-specific threats.

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