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Complete List of Authors:	Brambila, Julieta; Universidad de las Americas Puebla, Communication Department Hughes, Sallie; University of Miami
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Title

Violence against Journalists

Your Name Julieta Alejandra Brambila

Affiliation Universidad de las Américas Puebla

Email Address jabrambila.ramirez@udlap.mx

Your Name Sallie Hughes

Affiliation University of Miami

Email Address shughes@miami.edu

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Abstract

This entry provides an introduction to the concept of violence against journalists and the press. It synthesizes multiple approaches to the phenomenon to create a comprehensive definition, reviews dimensions of violence and the occupational and individual domains in which they create harm, identifies key findings and gaps in academic and advocacy organization literature, and explores future directions for research on this phenomenon.

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Main Text

Violence against journalists or the press more broadly remains poorly understood and has been defined too narrowly. The preferred approach in academic research has been to conceptualize violence against journalists as “attacks,” or verbal, psychological or physically intimidatory behaviours directed toward journalists, media workers and independent news bloggers.

Arguably, physical attacks are the most visible and extreme form of violence, understood as deliberate harm inflicted upon an individual or a group. Anti-press violence as directed attacks follow largely tacit definitions that guide lists of killed or disappeared journalists compiled by press rights groups such as Article 19, Reporters Without Borders (RWB), The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and International News Safety Institute (INSI), among others. Anti-press violence as directed attacks, usually focusing on physical aggressions rather than psychological harassment, eases statistical compilation of attacks and promotes reliance on counts to describe and analyze the phenomenon.

However, the definition of violence as direct attacks misses indirect or diffuse forms of violence, including structural, cultural and symbolic violence, which also harm journalists’ occupational performance and wellbeing. Structural violence, developed in the 1960s by Johann Galtung and others, is the harm that results from exploitative and unjust social, political and economic systems. Longstanding injustices and systems of domination are sometimes difficult to identify and often normalized or naturalized as “how things are.” Cultural and symbolic violence are the

norms, values, beliefs and manifestations of inequalities that legitimize and reproduce injustice through structural violence (Jiménez-Bautista, 2012). Female, sexual minority, ethnic minority and oppositional journalists are disproportionately affected by indirect violence, which may manifest as occupational marginalization, workplace silencing or exploitative labor conditions. Indirect violence may well be linked to direct assaults by normalizing, for example, workplace sexual aggression or the online harassment of ethnic minorities. Structural violence as economic inequality and vulnerability materializes as precarity or labor informality, both in economically developed and less-developed countries.

Growing empirical evidence demonstrates direct and indirect forms of violence hampers journalistic professional practice, produces a chilling effect upon colleagues and, ultimately, limits press freedom and the right to information. They also harm journalists as human beings with civil and human rights. Thus, a comprehensive definition of violence against journalists should encompass actions and conditions that injure or increase the risk of physical, psychological or occupational harm to journalists as human beings and as institutional actors. In other words, a definition of violence against journalists and the press must capture more than physical attacks and include the structures and ideologies that increase the harm to vulnerability of journalists. We define violence against journalists as both direct and indirect aggressions that may cause harm to journalists' occupational performance or individual wellbeing. Besides encompassing the various dimensions of violence against journalists, this conceptualization highlights the deleterious effects of violence to journalism as a source of societal improvement and to journalists' human rights.

Direct violence includes physical attacks, verbal intimidation and threats against journalists and outlets resulting from their editorial production. Targets are selected intentionally and strategically; in most cases, perpetrators know victims' names and other personal details. Psychological abuse includes threats, harassment and intimidation, while physical abuse includes injuries, robbery, beatings, torture, forcible displacement, kidnapping and murder. Monitoring and scholarly research focus almost exclusively on physical violence and, more specifically, on the counting of journalists' killings. This may be because violent death can be gauged more reliably than other forms of anti-press violence. However, consistency is elusive due to differences in data collection, verification and definition. CPJ notes that from 2006 to 2015, 616 journalists were murdered worldwide. In the same period, RWB counted 752; UNESCO 827, and INSI 1,311). However, killings just skim the surface of attacks journalists experience. More empirical research and better methodological tools are needed.

In historical perspective, direct violence against the institution of journalism increased as political, economic and criminal forces attempted to control news and shape the public sphere (Nerone, 1994). For this reason, not all journalists are targeted with direct violence. Investigative reporters and journalists covering crime, human rights, and dangerous or hazardous environments are frequent targets. Although some patterns of direct violence could be similar across time and space, existing empirical research shows direct violence against journalists is always linked to and influenced by a range of societal factors, including type of political regime and levels of societal and criminal violence, corruption, human rights abuses and social inequality.

Although violence against journalists significantly diminished in the twentieth century, as democratic institutions and respect for civil and human rights spread, anti-press violence still occurs in developed democracies because journalism there constitutes a public profession where journalists are accessible and scrutinized. In recent years, access to digital technologies and the internet have elevated journalists' visibility and brought new risks. Among Swedish journalists, Löfgren and Örnebring (2016: 888) found that one-third of participants had experienced online threats or insulting, intimidating or harassing comments. Other research suggests the situation is similar in other developed democracies.

Beyond the political system and public roles of journalism, violence against journalists seems to be related to armed conflict and social change that threatens privileges. Since the Crimean War and the American Civil War, modern war correspondents and reporters covering world conflicts have put their lives at risk and, quite often, witnessed atrocities. For example, 66 journalists were killed during the Vietnam conflict and combat-related crossfire has accounted for many journalist deaths. Since the Cold War, the rise of new wars, characterised by failed states, terrorism, armed criminal bands and paramilitary groups, as well as the increasing visibility of digital news, also increase risk for journalists and media workers (Tumber and Webster, 2006). In this context, scholars and press organisations have documented several cases of journalists kidnapped and killed by terrorists, especially since 2001. In contemporary warfare, not only have journalists lost their "neutral status," but also a monopoly on information (Cottle et al., 2016). In Syria, for example, the vast majority of media workers targeted with lethal violence were local citizen journalists and bloggers, who have assumed the role of monitoring power in conflict zones.

Notwithstanding, more journalists are targeted in countries that are not explicitly at war and where the political system is a hybrid of characteristics traditionally considered democratic or authoritarian. These countries have journalists who wish to challenge power, but the state cannot or will not protect them. For example, INSI found that, from 2008 to 2015, 60% of journalists and media workers killed were working in countries suffering from political or criminal violence, rather than in regular wars (Cottle et al., 2016: 45). Particularly risky are countries where elections formally decide political representation at the national level, but where the judicial system and mechanisms for accountability and restraint of subnational politicians are weak. Cases in point are Colombia, Mexico, Pakistan and the Philippines. Few studies have compared and analysed how societal dimensions influence the likelihood of anti-press violence in these new democracies. A recent cross-country comparative study found that democracies with uneven democratic performance, societal violence and economic inequality tend to have more journalists killed worldwide (Hughes et al., 2017). In such countries existing research suggested that the vast majority of journalists targeted were journalists working on the most dangerous stories in their communities, such as crime, corruption or a mix of both. The provincial press is more prone to violent attack, as journalists and outlets outside metropolis lack the material and symbolic resources of international and national media, and journalists belong to the community they report on and, consequently, are more exposed. As recent empirical investigations have shown (Brambila, 2017), comparative study below and beyond the nation state is a promising strategy for revealing the causes and consequences of anti-press violence at the local and regional levels, where violence and harassment takes place.

Measured as assassination, violence against journalists targets men more frequently. In part this may be because of the gendered division of labor in journalism. This trend may change as more women report from conflict zones and on hazardous newsbeats. However, violence against journalists materializes in many more ways than assassination and causation is more complex than presence in physically dangerous contexts.

Expanding the definition of violence against journalists to include structural violence, ideologically supported by cultural violence, the oppressive systems and associated practices of patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity and savage capitalism come into focus. Defined as the systematic domination, oppression and exploitation of women, patriarchy as structural violence can materialize in many forms of aggression that can be normalized or tolerated as the way things are. Female victims of murder or assault are commonly re-victimized through criticism of their morals or personal lives. In Nigeria, Unaegbu (2017) found that sexual harassment in the workplace is rarely reported because when it is the victims are usually shamed. Two of many other well-known examples of re-victimization are investigative reporter Regina Martinez in Mexico, who authorities said was beaten to death in a “crime of passion” rather than killed for exposing government corruption, and Amanda Lindhout of Canada. After Lindhout was released from captivity in Somalia, where she was repeatedly raped, readers criticized Lindhout’s “stupid decision” to report from Somalia with “crudely misogynist language” and female reporters asked Lindhout whether she had “tempted” the kidnappers because she was attractive (Steiner 2017: 19).

Many female journalists report gender-based harassment, reaching as high as 62 percent in the tech journalism sector, where online abuse is rampant (Adams 2017). Sexual aggression and assault within newsrooms seems relatively commonplace. An International Women’s Media Foundation and International News Safety Institute survey in 2013 found nearly two-thirds of female journalists reported suffering some form of workplace sexual harassment or assault. Half of the reported incidents of sexual assault were perpetrated by a co-worker, boss or supervisor, as were 53 percent of sexual harassment cases. Bosses were the most commonly reported perpetrators of “intimidation, threats and abuse” (32% of 1882 incidents where perpetrators were cited). Usually female journalists kept quiet about assaults from supervisors because of fear of reprisal. While it is important to keep in mind these figures are from non-random samples, the effects of patriarchy as an ideological system of domination are clear. Women are disproportionately absent in newsroom decision-making, self-censor to reduce risk, and leave journalism altogether. In mainstream news organizations they and others must follow norms and routines that deprecate and devalue care ethics and collaboration in order to be perceived as “professional.” Patriarchy therefore distorts news agendas and news frames, harming society and journalism as an institution. For women journalists as professionals and individuals, patriarchy legitimizes and reproduces violent conditions and behaviors carrying financial, occupational and health-related costs. Sexism harms female journalists through lower salaries, stunted career paths, and gender stratified newsbeats. Further, female role models in journalism disappear when women hide their gender identity to avoid online abuse. Workplace harassment or violence may cause severe occupational, psychological and physical consequences, according to multiple studies. Only a few studies directly measure the effects of occupational harassment and violence on journalists, but these studies along with research on the general population provide strong evidence that effects can be severe depending upon the intensity and frequency of harassment.

Little research examines how structural violence affects ethnic minority journalists in general market newsrooms, although what work there is suggests white supremacy shapes these environments and causes harm broadly similar to patriarchy. Targeting of ethnic minority journalists can be virulent, as it is for women. In her testimonial for CPJ in 2016, African American journalist Michelle Ferrier described the physiological and emotional reactions she suffered from receiving virulent hate mail. She described herself as becoming less trusting and angrier, and eventually self-censoring, buying a gun, changing her transportation routines and finally quitting. Her columns had described the everyday experiences of her family for a north-central Florida newspaper. Years later, thinking about the incidents, she described re-traumatization in ways that resemble Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which appears in threatened journalists at well above the rate of the overall population.

Ethnic minority journalists in mainstream outlets in the US, Canada and elsewhere face other obstacles that are less obvious. Studies have described them as feeling pigeonholed in racialized newsbeats, being accused of conflicts of interest when providing positive coverage of their own ethnic communities, having to work harder to be recognized, being told promotions were due to minority status, and experiencing feelings of cultural isolation. There are fewer ethnic minorities in newsrooms than the general population in US and Canadian newsrooms, and even fewer in positions of power. While ethnic community media in the US and other countries have strong advocacy traditions, in minority journalists in mainstream US organizations are told to adhere to norms of objectivity that separate them from their ethnic identities and lived experiences of racism. Nishikawa and colleagues note that minority journalists who advocate for their communities could be attacked as unprofessional, a potentially career-ending invective (2009: 254). Instead, some in their study engaged in stealth advocacy by covering topics and raising issues about coverage of minority communities that white colleagues overlook. Another study noted that having to repress one's identity to be considered a professional lowered job satisfaction and morale.

Journalists working in publications serving ethnic minority communities can be placed at risk because of their ethnicity. In part this is because these journalists and their publications are more closely involved in the struggles of aggrieved communities, which face marginalization and direct repression. Sometimes also these media compete with mainstream media, or oppose repressive local governments, which marshals state agents and private security against them. Krøvel (2017) found 80 cases of assault on indigenous journalists and media over 10 years in the RWB database. Attacks occurred in countries with varied levels of societal violence, including Canada, Chile, the United States, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. Krovel hypothesizes that violence against indigenous journalists remains understudied and invisible because these journalists are not considered professional in Western eyes, and thus are defined out of the phenomenon of violence against journalists.

Like white supremacy and patriarchy, heteronormativity is a system of oppression with associated practices that targets LGBT journalists with aggression. While there are studies of heteronormative representations in news, including invisibility and stereotyping, we found no studies of working conditions for gender non-conforming journalists. Certainly, the conditions

and effects of diffuse forms of violence on journalists of color and gender non-conformers deserve much greater attention in journalism studies.

Another system of oppression that harms journalists is the advance of unrestrained market capitalism in the late 20th and early 21 century, which expands flexible and exploitative labor arrangements where journalists work without contract or social protections, at levels just above the poverty rate, and for piece rates as freelancers for multiple platforms and outlets. These conditions are arguably more intense and commonplace in less-developed countries, but downsizing and closure of news organizations in developed countries has also pushed journalists out of the profession or into exploitative freelancer arrangements, as well as increasing workplace stress. Economic vulnerability also opens journalists to traditional clientelism, through quid pro quo exchanges of news for advertising revenues, as well as a market-driven logic that produces news solely for ratings or as “click bait.” These too harm journalism, if the quality of news output is considered.

Direct and indirect forms of violence distort news agendas, flatten diversity and hamper editorial autonomy, which is necessary for journalists to be able to fulfill democratic functions. Violence also harms journalists’ human rights and curtails their ability to live well-rounded, healthy, safe and productive lives. Responses to violence against journalists include transnational, collegial and individual efforts. These efforts attempt to increase journalists’ safety, reduce impunity for attacks, spotlight workplace harassment and poor working conditions, and although less studied, enhance resilience.

Attempts to “protect” journalists within the international system stalled because of suspicions about motives during the Cold War. Consensus on the language of safety and a narrower focus on extra-judicial killings opened space for coordinated response. International efforts led by UNESCO accelerated with the publication of *The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity* in 2012. The plan includes more than 120 concrete actions that address journalist safety and related issues. A spotlight on gender violence and steps to thwart it have recently been added. UNESCO invited member states to forward reports on the status of judicial investigations of journalist murders within their territories, which it publishes biennially. Compliance has risen from 27% of the 62 countries where journalists have been killed in 2014 to 74% in 2017. UNESCO also engages in conscious-raising such as resolutions to end impunity, commemoration days, and condemnation of each new assassination.

UNESCO works with journalist associations and human rights groups, which have formed at national and international levels to publicize assaults and demand investigation and punishment of attackers. Sometimes these groups partner with journalism studies researchers and academic centers such as Nordicom and the Centre for Freedom of the Media at University of Sheffield. Together these groups increased the visibility and pressure on national governments to respond. Strategies include normative appeals, collective monitoring, producing research reports and providing assistance for legal support, shelter and relocation of threatened journalists. They also provide training for journalists, media owners, police and judges in violent contexts.

Results are mixed. Visibility has increased, which is an important first step. Data collection on anti-press violence through the Sustainable Development Goals process may soon improve

measurement; one of the indicators reportedly tracks killings, kidnappings, forced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists and media workers. Pressure on national governments has prompted policy change in a few cases including creation of special prosecutors and protection programs for threatened journalists. Successful implementation is harder because journalist safety is tied to larger deficits in the rule of law and because state actors are sometimes the source of violence. This could explain lack of progress globally on impunity and rates of attack.

Effects of risk-reduction include detrimental changes to professional practice and personal routines (Hughes & Márquez Ramírez 2017). These effects and resilience strategies deserve greater attention. Local-level strategies in Mexico, a country where journalists face high-levels of anti-press violence, include collegial safety discussions, help with self-care for stress and trauma, emergency publicity of threats and shared tips and training (del Palacio 2015; González de Bustamante and Relly 2016). The reach of these efforts seems minimal considering 104 Mexican journalists have been assassinated or disappeared since 2000, according to Article 19. Flores and colleagues (2014) documented PTSD symptoms in Mexican photojournalists and journalists covering criminal violence at 1.5 to 2 times the level of traditional war correspondents. Journalists in South Africa, another country with high levels of societal violence, but not anti-press violence, are also more likely to exhibit PTSD symptoms, as are journalists who coverage mass casualty shootings.

Violence against journalists remains an emerging area of research in journalism studies, despite what appears to be increasing numbers of researchers, academic publications and research conferences dedicated to the topic. Research based upon the wider conceptualization of violence offered here, improvements in measures and comparative methodologies, and an empirical focus on consequences including resiliency are gaps that urgently need address.

SEE ALSO:

IEJS0089 (Freedom of Information)

IEJS0096 (Self-Censorship)

IEJS0106 (Censorship)

IEJS0108 (Free Speech and Free Press)

IEJS0134 (Investigative Journalism)

IEJS0139 (Peace Journalism)

IEJS0154 (Muckraking)

IEJS0167 (Watchdog Press)

IEJS0176 (Foreign Correspondents and Bureaus)

IEJS0201 (Crime Coverage)

IEJS0218 (War and Conflict Coverage)

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Brief Author Biography

Julieta Alejandra Brambila is assistant professor at the Communication Department at the Universidad de las Américas Puebla in Mexico. She is a summer research scholar at the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research addresses: Comparative Political Communication, Press Freedom and Antipress Violence and Journalists' Safety. About these topics, she has published over 10 journal articles and book chapters.

Sallie Hughes is associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Management and Faculty Director and Senior Faculty Research Area Lead at the University of Miami Institute for Advanced Study of the Americas, both at the University of Miami. She is the author of *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico* and co-author of *Making a Life in Multiethnic Miami: Immigration and the Rise of a Global City*. Her research interests include Journalism Studies, Latin American Studies, and journalist safety, stress and resilience.

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