

## **Professional Autonomy and Structural Influences: Exploring How Homicides, Perceived Insecurity, Aggressions Against Journalists, and Inequalities Affect Perceived Journalistic Autonomy in Colombia**

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Journalistic autonomy has been studied more frequently in countries with secure democracies in terms of journalists' perceptions of freedom and independence to work in the midst of the controls, pressures, and influences perceived in the newsrooms. Based on objective variables and on a national survey completed by 546 Colombian journalists, this article examines how inequality, violence, and insecurity affect their perceived autonomy to develop and publish news. Using regression analysis and statistical mediation, it was found that political and economic influences intervene in the relationship between aggressions against journalists and the decrease in journalistic autonomy. This decrease is strongest when violence comes internally from the work environment and when gender inequalities, homicides, and insecurity are connected to newsrooms. In the conclusion, recommendations are offered for future studies and postagreements of peace in Colombia.

*Keywords: autonomy, violence, insecurity, inequality, journalism, influences, press freedom, homicides, aggressions*

The media are essential for democracy because they contribute to generating public opinion and maintaining citizens who are informed about public topics. This trend began to consolidate in the 19th century in the Western countries, and it has become more evident in the 21st century, with the massification

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of social networks and online news platforms, which have contributed to strengthening freedom of expression worldwide (Soengas-Pérez, 2018).

Freedom of expression is a pivotal right for journalists to responsibly report and investigate without restrictions (Barrera, 2018). However, journalists currently face multiple limitations to their freedom and independence. Regarding this issue, international organizations have formed that focus on monitoring progress and difficulties in guaranteeing this right to journalists in their countries. Moreover, interest is increasing in studying factors that affect freedom in journalism and that impact professional autonomy (Hanitzsch et al., 2012; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013).

The literature on influences in journalism is wide (Berganza, Herrero-Jiménez, & Arcila, 2018; Hanitzsch et al., 2010; McQuail, 2010; Oller & Chavero, 2015; Reese, 1999, 2001), and a good part of it reveals that journalistic autonomy is overshadowed by political (Mellado & Humanes, 2012) and economic (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013; Waisbord, 2013) influences and the effects of media organizational structure (Skovsgaard, 2014). Despite this influx of literature, few studies have explored autonomy in democracies with severe violence against the press (Hughes, Garcés-Prettel, Márquez-Ramírez, & Arroyave-Cabrera, 2016), and even fewer have focused on the impact of violence and inequality on editorial autonomy.

This article partly supplements this empirical limitation by studying whether socioeconomic inequalities, attacks against journalists, perceived insecurity, and killing of civilians and journalists influence the professional autonomy perceived by journalists in Colombia. This investigation is particularly relevant because it provides information on the influence of these structural problems on press freedom in Colombia, which faces social conflicts derived from the effects of the internal armed conflict and the presence of drug trafficking organizations.

### **Journalistic Autonomy and Influence Factors**

Journalistic autonomy refers to the degree of freedom in making decisions related to the occupational duties of journalism (Gronemeyer, 2002). It is also considered a central part of the definition of journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and is essential for journalists to develop their work ethically (Bilbeny, 2012) and with democratic sense (McDevitt, 2003).

In the work of Sapiezynka, Lagos, and Cabalin (2013), two main trends related to the factors that influence journalists' autonomy can be distinguished. The first current trend is close to the neoclassical economy, in which the state is considered the main enemy of press freedom. Also, it considers the market to be the system that guarantees freedom of expression and thus allows for the plurality of voices.

The second current refers to the political economy, where communication is considered a public good and emphasizes aspects such as public space, access to speech, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. For the political economy, the main limitations to journalistic autonomy arise from the economic structure of the media, and their concentration, sources of income, and close link with the political sector.

In the Western context, especially in those countries with strong democracies and consolidated institutions, autonomy refers to the possibility of working independently of the political-state power and media owners' interests (Hök, 2013), which are related to the organizational pressures of the media (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013) and editorial policy (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). In his study of Danish journalists, Skovsgaard (2014) measures the autonomy of journalists based on the conflicts and agreements that arise in the relationship with their bosses or superiors, and although this is an important contribution, it varies contextually given the geographic scope of the study. Furthermore, Skovsgaard did not focus on the impact of violence on editorial autonomy in democracies with a history of severe violence.

In the U.S. context, Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, and Wilhoit (2006) define autonomy through the freedom perceived by journalists at the editorial level. In line with this study, Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) define autonomy as the freedom to decide the angles of the stories, the sources, and the narrative frames of the news. This work also reveals that political, individual, and organizational affairs are the greatest predictors that influence autonomy.

In the European context, other studies have revealed that the professional autonomy of journalists rises in countries with open political systems and more stable and diverse media markets, and it decreases as a result of corporate, economic, and commercial media influences (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). The intercontinental research developed by Hanitzsch et al. (2012) found that the sociopolitical changes of the countries and the influences exerted by business owners, politicians, rulers, and censorship within journalism diminish journalistic autonomy.

Although there has been an uptake of research in this area, a gap in examining autonomy in democracies with severe violence against the press still exists (González & Relly, 2016; Hughes et al., 2016), and even fewer studies focus on the impact of violence and inequality on autonomy in such context. In the case of Latin America, notable efforts have emerged to strengthen journalistic autonomy through the creation of digital news platforms that contribute to democracy and promote independent journalism. Autonomy and editorial independence are values to be preserved in this type of context, even more so because economic elites who have close ties with political power also own the most important media and tend not to be critical of governments (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009).

Ramos and Spinelli (2015) report successful initiatives related to the emergence of these online platforms, also known as digital journalistic ventures. Some digital media, such as Agencia Pública and Ponte in Brazil and Puercoespín and Checked in Argentina, are a sign that journalists are "creating self-sustainable business strategies that strengthen the investigative principles of the profession to report on issues related to the right of citizens and try to strengthen democracy in society" (p. 114). These authors point out that the challenge is to create value for independent journalism. These would include alternatives to self-management which provides mixed and nonprofit financial resources for journalists who "knows how to use digital tools to speak to a niche of society interested in knowing about subjects that involve the context in which they live with quality of research, investigation and seriousness" (p. 122).

As in Argentina and Brazil, other digital journalistic ventures have emerged in the rest of Latin America. These media offer independent coverage that strengthens professional autonomy. Some of the most

prominent online media are *Animal Político* in Mexico, *El Faro* in El Salvador, *Plaza Pública* in Guatemala, *Ojo Público* in Peru, *El Confidencial* in Nicaragua, *Efecto Cucuyo* in Venezuela, and *La Silla Vacía* and *La 2da Orilla* in Colombia; these media have become increasingly popular in the region (Arroyave, 2020).

These digital journalistic ventures have recovered the importance of the feature story, the chronicle, and the journalistic exercise in the creation of public opinion; they have focused on in-depth analysis of structural problems associated with human rights, socioeconomic inequality, corruption, and the violence affecting Latin American countries and journalists. In fact, in Colombia, Garcés' (2017) investigation revealed that journalists who work in this type of online media perceive greater professional autonomy than those who work in traditional media.

The structural problems mentioned earlier have been analyzed not only by journalists, but also by social scientists interested in investigating how these problems affect the work of journalists and professional autonomy in newsrooms. The prominent study by Hughes et al. (2017) reveals that democracies with uneven democratic performance tend to have more assassinations of journalists and that levels of democratic performance, violence, public insecurity, and economic inequality significantly shape how journalists perceive various influences in their work environment.

In Mexico, González and Relly (2016) analyzed the growing environment of violence and managed to measure autonomy based on what it means for journalists to be members of a professional community. They found that collective autonomy decreases because of the lack of solidarity and the need for group action by journalists to face the violence that affects the country and journalism. In Mexico, threats against journalists are a significant predictor of self-censorship, which Mexican journalists frequently use as a protective measure to reduce the risks of their work (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017).

In the case of structural violence, which is a term proposed by Galtung and Höivik (1971) to refer to inequalities in the distribution of wealth in countries, more studies are still required to deepen understanding of the impact of this type of inequality in newsrooms. This is particularly important because empirical evidence reveals that low salaries and threats against journalists are significant factors that negatively affect their perceived autonomy to develop news (Hughes et al., 2016).

Another type of inequality that merits deeper studies of autonomy has to do with gender issues in newsrooms. In Latin American countries, it is common to find women journalists who have reported being victims of discrimination (Garcés, 2017) and sexual violence (Rodríguez, 2014). These complaints are serious not only because of the psychological damage caused by these behaviors to journalists, but also because of the damage to democracy and to the profession.

This article intends to partially fill these knowledge gaps in the area of press freedom through the selection of Colombia as a case study given the fragile and insecure democracy that has resulted from 60 years of the internal armed conflict. The aim is to analyze the degree of influences that factors such as inequality, problems of insecurity and violence have on the professional autonomy of journalists.

### Colombia as Case Study

Colombia has been chosen for this study as one of most unequal and violent nations in the world according to an international ranking. Colombia has a Gini coefficient of 0.53 and a high intentional homicide rate of 25.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the 2016 World Bank report. Violence and inequality in Colombia are related to the effects of internal armed conflict that arose in 1960, the result of the political problems of the 19th century; these included state control by political elites, concentration of land in the hands of a few landholders, and bipartisan conflicts that spawned confrontations (1949–1959) and alliances such as the National Front (1958–1974).

This political alliance between elites closed the doors to political expression at the rural and popular levels. In fact, a part of society decided to join the guerrillas between 1949 and 1953 (Fals, 2016). Among the guerrilla groups of the historical internal armed conflict in Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), the People's Liberation Army (EPL), the April 19th movement (M-19), and the National Liberation Army (ELN) took up arms against the state between 1960 and 1970 and stand out for their violent actions.

The armed conflict was exacerbated in the 1970s by the rise of right-wing paramilitary groups, which allied with businessmen, politicians, and members of the public force to supposedly fight the guerrillas. In the 1990s, the guerrillas of the M-19 and the EPL were demobilized, followed by the paramilitaries in 2006. Two years later, most of their leaders and other ex-combatants were extradited to the United States for committing other crimes and for building criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking (Amnistía Internacional, 2008).

A peace process was carried out by the FARC in October 2012 and concluded with the demobilization of the guerrillas in September 2017. The Office of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations has affirmed that the balance of this process is positive: Between 2012 and 2015, forced internal migration decreased by 52%, and guerrilla attacks decreased by 60%. A fruitful dialogue with the ELN is hoped to end the violence, which, according to the Official Registry of Victims of May 2020, has affected 8,989,570 victims—8,011,693 corresponding to forced migrants and 977,877 to homicides and disappearances.

Also, journalism was affected by sociopolitical violence. Reports from the Colombian Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa<sup>2</sup> (FLIP, 2013, 2018) reveals that a total of 155 journalists were murdered in Colombia between 1938 and 2017 for reasons linked to their profession. This situation is critical because 47% of these crimes went unpunished (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015). In 2017, FLIP also documented 310 attacks that affected 368 journalists, an increase of 43.5% over the number reported in 2016. This has had a negative effect on democracy and journalism in different regions of the country.

Regarding the impact of this violence in the newsrooms, previous studies carried out in the Colombian context indicate a relationship between journalistic autonomy and the security risks of journalists (Garcés-Prettel & Arroyave-Cabrera, 2017). It is also known that the autonomy perceived by Colombian journalists

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<sup>2</sup> Foundation for Press Freedom.

decreases when publishing news about the armed forces, clergy, government, organized crime, corruption and political and economic elites (Garcés-Prettel, Jaramillo, Arroyave-Cabrera, & De Ávila-Majul, 2019).

Regarding structural violence related to gender inequalities, Carreño and Guarín's (2008) communication study conducted with female journalists in Colombia found that gender problems related to age and the status of being a woman reduce the chances of promotion within the media. The work of Barrios and Arroyave (2007) also indicates that Colombian women journalists feel discrimination and differences in the treatment they receive depending on whether they are single or married.

This article is relevant because it is one of the first empirical attempts to jointly assess whether the decrease in journalistic autonomy is due to the impact of inequality, insecurity, and internal and external violence, which affect newsrooms and put journalists' lives at risk. Internal violence against journalists from the news media has not been studied as a predictor of autonomy and has received little treatment in press freedom reports even though organizational pressures (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013; Skovsgaard, 2014) and the ownership of the media (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996) are variables that affect journalistic autonomy.

Likewise, this article studies in a novel way whether the political, organizational, and economic influences that condition newsrooms intervene in the relationship among aggressions against journalists, socioeconomic inequalities, and the decrease in journalistic autonomy. In this sense, the findings obtained respond in general terms to two central hypotheses:

*H1: Violence, insecurity, and inequality influence the professional autonomy perceived by Colombian journalists and tend to diminish it more strongly when these structural problems are internally related to newsrooms.*

*H2: The political, organizational, and economic influences in journalism intervene in the relationship between perceived journalistic autonomy and the structural problems of inequality and violence that internally affect the newsrooms.*

### **Method**

This predictive explanatory-level study was conducted nationwide with a convenience sampling of 546 Colombian journalists working in Cali, Quibdó, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Bogota, Manizales, Pereira, Santa Marta, Monteria, Cartagena, Sincelejo, Valledupar, Barranquilla, and Riohacha. These are the main cities of the three most populated regions of Colombia: Andean, Pacific, and Caribbean.

A convenience sample is based on nonprobabilistic designs that have been used in various studies on journalism (Barrios & Arroyave, 2007; Hummel, Dorer, Ganter, Götzenbrucker, & Prandner, 2014), given the accessibility or proximity of the subjects to the researcher. In Colombia, this type of sampling is relevant because it is difficult to carry out random probabilistic sampling, given that there is no national census of journalists.

However, there was good participation from journalists who work in print media (37.4%), radio (30%), television (21.6%), agencies (2.4%), magazines (2.2%), and online media (6.4%). These proportions

within the sample are congruent with the percentage rates of mass media in Colombia. The information obtained in this research was collected through a survey composed of three scales: the Direct Violence Scale (DVS) created by Garcés-Prettel and Arroyave-Cabrera (2017), the Professional Autonomy Scale (PAS), and the Perceived Influences in Journalism Scale created by Hanitzsch and colleagues (2010, 2012).

The aggressions were evaluated in the DVS, with a range of 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*), to establish whether journalists have been a victim of physical or verbal aggressions by civilians ( $M = 1.82$ ; frequency = 44.6%), bosses or superiors ( $M = 1.51$ ; frequency = 30.6%), managers or media directors ( $M = 1.33$ ; frequency = 19.6%), organized crime ( $M = 1.18$ ; frequency = 11.2%), or armed actors of the conflict, such as the public force ( $M = 1.66$ ; frequency = 37.2%) and the guerrillas and paramilitaries ( $M = 1.21$ ; frequency = 24%). These aggressions account for 64.4% of the total variance of direct violence reported by journalists and show a good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ).

Moreover, the numbers of intentional homicides of journalists and civilians during the internal armed conflict in the mentioned Colombian cities were added as independent variables in the category of direct violence. These data were obtained through the National Center for Historical Memory and FLIP. Likewise, perceived insecurity and inequalities in the newsroom were grouped as independent variables in the category of structural violence.

The insecurity perceived by journalists was evaluated through the DVS using a range from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*) according to whether journalists consider their job to be dangerous ( $M = 3.90$ ; frequency = 94.6%) or believe that the Colombian state does not provide security to practice journalism ( $M = 3.61$ ; frequency = 91.3%). The result shows a total variance of 72.4% of the perceived insecurity for the surveyed journalists and a 0.63 Cronbach's  $\alpha$  factor, which is acceptable in the case of exploratory studies (Nunnally, 1978).

The percentages of the indicators of perceived insecurity and the aggressions against journalists evaluated on the DVS scale were reported together with the average value. These percentages were obtained by setting value 1 as the absence of aggression and insecurity, and values 2, 3, and 4 as indicators of perceived insecurity and presence of aggression suffered at least once. The percentage values and the standard deviations obtained, which were, on average, equal to or greater than 1.0, reaffirm the significant existence of cases of journalists who have been attacked in professional practice, some more frequently than others.

Inequalities were analyzed using variables such as gender, and economic variables such as journalists' salary, rates of economic inequality (the Gini coefficient that evaluates, between 0 and 1, the inequitable distribution of income in cities was used), and the monetary poverty index (the percentage of the population with a per capita income lower than the poverty line in Colombia, which in 2017 was P 250,620, equivalent to US\$79).

A question with two response options (female/male) was introduced in the survey to evaluate the gender variable. Journalists' salary information was obtained with an open question and was organized into two groups: low salaries, which are equal to or less than two minimum monthly salaries in force in Colombia

(equivalent to US\$524), and salaries that are higher than this reference value. The monetary poverty and the Gini inequality rates by city were obtained through the National Department of Statistics of Colombia.

The PAS was used to evaluate perceived journalistic autonomy as a dependent variable using a range from 1 (*no freedom*) to 5 (*a lot of freedom*). This scale has good internal consistency, and it showed that the total variance of professional autonomy perceived by the surveyed journalists to develop (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ) and publish news in Colombia (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ) was 64.4%.

As for the development of news, the perceived autonomy to select the news ( $M = 4.22$ ) and the emphasis used to report on the news ( $M = 4.13$ ) were evaluated. As for news publication, the perceived autonomy to report on the government ( $M = 3.90$ ), organized crime ( $M = 3.90$ ), and economic ( $M = 3.88$ ), political ( $M = 3.70$ ), and religious elites ( $M = 3.94$ ) was evaluated. On average, these values are informative regarding how Colombian journalists tend not to perceive full professional autonomy.

The PIS was used to evaluate, using a range from 1 (*no influence*) to 5 (*very influential*), some factors of mediation at organizational, political, and economic levels, and it explains 69.2% of the influences perceived in the newsrooms. At the organizational level (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.73$ ), the influences coming from editorial policy ( $M = 3.78$ ) and heads or editors ( $M = 3.80$ ) were evaluated; at the political level (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.92$ ), the influence of politicians ( $M = 2.48$ ) and government officials ( $M = 2.52$ ) was evaluated; and at the economic level (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.73$ ), the expectations of profit ( $M = 2.96$ ) and pressure from advertisers and advertising interests ( $M = 3.08$ ) were evaluated.

To answer the first hypothesis, a predictive model of journalistic autonomy was constructed. The model is composed of 15 indicators of direct and structural violence, which comply with the recommendations given in the literature for the regression models, in which incorporating a minimum of 10 cases per additional variable is suggested (Montero-Granados, 2016). The statistical program SPSS v.21 was used to perform multiple regressions to identify the significant predictors that influence the autonomy perceived by the surveyed journalists in newsrooms.

In answering the second hypothesis, the mediation statistical procedures proposed by Hayes (2013) were applied to determine if the relationship between perceived autonomy and the significant effects of direct and structural violence (resulting from inequalities and aggressions against journalists) is mediated by pressures or influences in journalism at an organizational, political, or economic level. The mediation analysis was carried out using the SPSS software macro PROCESS v3.0.

Regarding the demographic characteristics of the sample, it is important to mention that 60.1% of the surveyed journalists were men, and 39% were women. Journalists had an average of 11 years of professional experience and worked mostly in private media (84.3%), with fewer in public media (15.7%).

## Results

To answer H1, the values obtained in the regression coefficients of each of the predictors of journalistic autonomy related to the indicators of inequality and violence evaluated in this study were reviewed. The results obtained in the multiple linear regression analysis are presented in Table 1. The significant predictors found are labeled with asterisks.

**Table 1. Predictors of Perceived Journalistic Autonomy.**

Predictors with respective standard regression coefficients ( $\beta$ )	Autonomy to develop news ( $\beta$ )	Autonomy to publish news ( $\beta$ )
<i>External level</i>		
Cities' monetary poverty	.059	.091
Income inequalities (Gini)	.070	.126
<i>Internal level</i>		
Gender (woman)	-.156*	-.207**
Low salaries of journalists	-.074	-.037
<i>Indicators of violence/insecurity</i>		
<i>External level</i>		
Number of civilians killed	-.194**	1.266
Public force aggressions	-.046	-.098
Guerrilla aggressions	-.042	.025
Paramilitary aggressions	-.054	-.054
Organized crime aggressions	-.071	-.013
Civilians' aggressions	.061	-.041
<i>Internal level</i>		
Number of journalists killed	.413	-.272**
Journalism is a risky job	.023	.109
The Colombian state does not guarantee the safety of journalists	-.126	-.175*
Bosses' or superiors' aggressions	-.046	-.121
Manager or media directors' aggressions	-.295**	-.106
R <sup>2</sup> of the model with all the predictors	20.1%	21.7%
R <sup>2</sup> adjusted with significant predictors	12.3%	15.9%

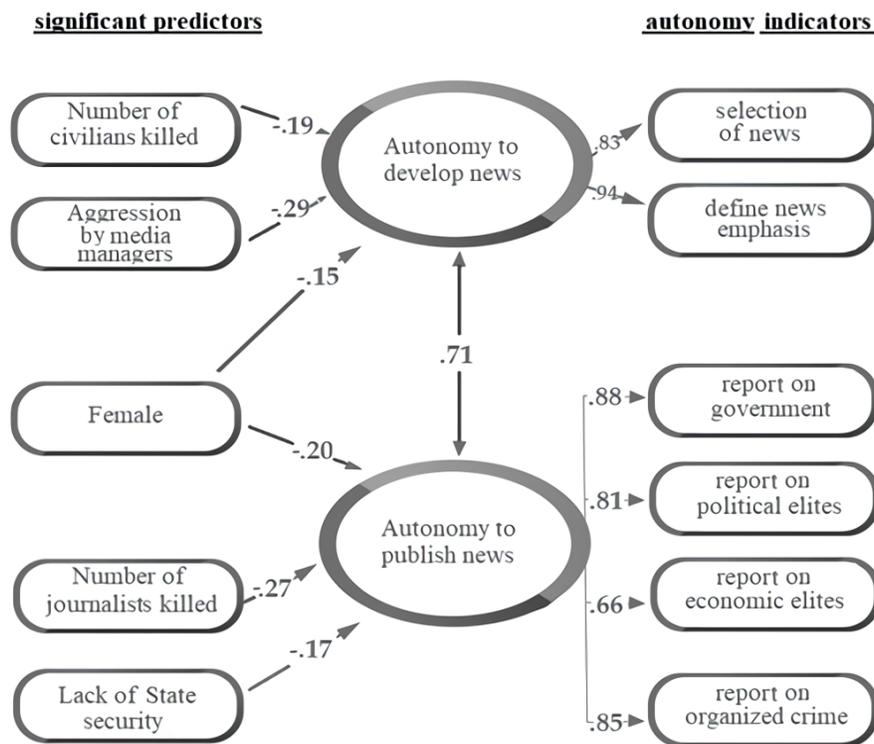
Standardized coefficients: \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

The regression analysis applied to all the predictors of journalistic autonomy presented in Table 1 allows for establishing that H1 is supported. First, because the general model is statistically significant,  $p$  value analysis of variance (ANOVA)  $< 0.05$ . This means that the indicators of inequality, violence, and insecurity (evaluated at the same time) influence the autonomy that surveyed journalists perceived they had to develop ( $p$  value ANOVA = 0.01;  $F = 2.77$ ;  $df = 15$ ) and publish ( $p$  value ANOVA = 0.00;  $F = 3.08$ ;  $df = 15$ ) news in Colombia. All these predictors explain 20.1% of the total variance of the perceived autonomy to develop news and 21.7% of the perceived autonomy to publish news.

However, it is important to note that only some predictors had a significant effect on journalistic autonomy. Regarding news development, the significant predictors of diminished perceived autonomy were journalist gender, local homicides of civilians, and manager or media director aggression against journalists. These predictors explained 12.3% of the total variance of perceived autonomy.

At the news publication level, the significant predictors that diminished perceived autonomy were gender, local homicides of journalists, and perceived insecurity associated with the lack of security guarantees by the Colombian state to practice journalism; these explained 15.9% of the total variance of perceived autonomy.

The substantial differences between significant predictors are observed in the standardized regression coefficients (see Figure 1), which indicate that some influences have great explanatory weight for autonomy with respect to others.



**Figure 1. Graph of the autonomy model with significant predictors.**

Given that there are internal (gender, number of journalists killed, lack of security guarantees to practice journalism, and aggression from manager/media director) significant predictors that decrease, and explain more strongly, journalistic autonomy, this provides further support for the first hypothesis. This means that these predictors are directly related to newsrooms and have higher regression values.

The preceding is evident when comparing the significant coefficients of the internal indicators of violence, insecurity, and inequality within the model with the external indicators, which have lower values and are mostly not significant (with the exception of civilian killings). In any case, it is important to emphasize at a general level that the internal aggression of managers or media directors is the variable that most influenced the decrease in journalistic autonomy.

Predictors of economic inequality related to low salaries of journalists, monetary poverty, and inequitable distribution of income in the cities where they work, as well as external aggressions against journalists from civilians, organized crime, and the actors of armed forces of the Colombian internal conflict (public force, guerrillas, and paramilitaries), did not significantly influence journalists' perceived autonomy to develop and publish news.

To answer H2, various models of mediation were constructed to separate the organizational, political, and economic influences in journalism (mediating variables) that intervene in the decrease of journalistic autonomy perceived in Colombia (dependent variable) from the influence of gender and aggression from managers or media directors (independent variables).

The values obtained in Mediations 3 and 6, shown in Table 2, allow us to establish that economic and political influences intervene significantly in the relationship between the aggressions of managers or media directors and the decrease in journalists' perceived autonomy to develop news. This could be inferred because the literature indicates that the indirect effects are significant when the lower limit (BootLLCI) and the upper limit (BootULCI) of the confidence interval of the mediation models do not include the zero value (Hayes, 2013).

The organizational influences of editorial policy and pressure from bosses or superiors did not show any intervention in the relationship between the aggressions of the manager or media directors and perceived autonomy. On the other hand, economic influences from profit expectations and pressure from advertisers and advertising interests intervened directly (Mediation 3) and together in this relationship in the hands of government officials, with their political influence in journalism (as revealed by the values obtained in the confidence interval of Mediation 6).

Although being a woman was a significant predictor of decreased perceived autonomy to develop and publish news, the values of the lower (BootLLCI) and higher (BootULCI) limit of the confidence intervals of each of these models include zero value when gender is selected as an independent variable; this indicates that this decrease is not the product of the organizational, political, and economic influences perceived in newsrooms in Colombia.

**Table 2. Mediation Models Used to Explain the Relationship Between Perceived Autonomy to Develop News and Managers' or Media Directors' Aggressions.**

Models with mediating variables	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
<i>Mediation 1: Organizational influences</i> Effect of manager aggressions on autonomy mediated by editorial policy and pressure from bosses or superiors.	.0023	-.0033	.0064
<i>Mediation 2: Political influences</i> Effect of manager aggressions on autonomy mediated by pressure from politicians and government officials in newsrooms.	.0082	-.0265	.0054
<i>Mediation 3: Economic influences</i> Effect of manager aggressions on autonomy mediated by expectations of profit and pressure from advertisers.	.0090	.0004**	.035**
<i>Mediation 4: Organizational and political influences</i> Effect of manager aggressions on autonomy mediated by editorial policy and pressure from bosses or superiors, politicians, and government officials.	.0007	-.0006	.0020
<i>Mediation 5: Organizational and economic influences</i> Effect of managers' aggressions on autonomy mediated by editorial policy, expectations of profit, and pressure from bosses and advertisers.	.0003	-.0007	.0004
<i>Mediation 6: Political and economic influences</i> Effect of managers' aggressions on autonomy mediated by profit expectations and pressure from government officials and advertisers.	.0018	.0001**	.073**

\* Significant indirect effects of the mediating variables

In general terms, the proposed mediation hypothesis is accepted in the case of labor aggressions by managers or media directors that significantly affect autonomy, but not in the case of the relationship between gender and the decrease in journalistic autonomy; this is because the political, organizational, and economic influences evaluated do not intervene or explain this relationship significantly.

## Discussion

In Colombia, some reports have indicated a gradual de-escalation of violent actions by the actors of the internal armed conflict since 2004. This was due to the peace processes between paramilitaries and the FARC (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015). This decrease partly explains the reason that, in this study, aggressions against journalists by public force, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and crime organizations did not show a significant influence on the professional autonomy perceived by the surveyed Colombian journalists.

However, it was possible, through this study, to confirm two important hypotheses. In the first, it was established that violence, insecurity, and inequalities influence the professional autonomy perceived by Colombian journalists and tends to diminish it more strongly when these structural problems are internally related to newsrooms. In that sense, it was found that the number of journalists killed, the aggressions of media executives (managers or directors), the lack of state security guarantees for work, and gender inequalities were the internal variables that decreased autonomy with the greatest force.

The second hypothesis indicates that the political, organizational, and economic influences in journalism intervene in the relationship between perceived journalistic autonomy and the structural problems of inequality and violence that affect newsrooms internally. In this case, it was possible to establish that these influences in journalism explain the reasons that labor aggressions from managers or media directors occur and the way in which this type of internal violence decreases autonomy, but does not explain the relationship between inequalities of gender and the decrease of journalistic autonomy.

The killing of civilians and journalists in this type of violent context is an important factor that affects freedom of expression (Horsley, 2016) and that decreased the autonomy that surveyed journalists perceived they had to develop and publish news in Colombia. These findings coincide with the report from the organization Reporteros sin Fronteras (2014) and the study by Roldán, Giraldo, and Flórez (2008), which respectively show how armed conflicts diminish press freedom and how in Colombia, the internal conflict has left deep traces of fear, pain, and intimidation in journalists, which in turn threaten and restrict freedom of information and the press.

As shown in this study, the Colombian panorama is even more critical for journalism; autonomy is also affected by the perception that the state is not capable of protecting and guaranteeing journalism. Indeed, the Colombian state has not reduced the high levels of impunity in crimes against journalism (Velásquez, 2003). Moreover, other studies indicate that the increase in insecurity (Zovatto, 2018) and homicides has led to a decrease in confidence in the democratic institutions (Relly & Hutchens, 2019). It is also important to mention the allegations against state agents who joined the illegal armed actors to commit crimes (Amnistía Internacional, 2008) and threaten and illegally monitor journalists (Dávila, 2017).

The findings regarding insecurity and violence against journalists in Colombia are related to what Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez (2018) reported in Mexico. It is known that threats against journalists inhibit journalistic work and reduce journalists' perceived autonomy to develop news (Hughes et al., 2016). It is also known that, in insecure contexts, homicides are committed by armed actors as a strategy to intimidate and generate great fear that limits press freedom: journalists' fear of losing their lives (Cabezas, 2015).

This fear among journalists leads to a docility that does not allow for reflection on the essence of the profession (Rius, 2016).

Another important aspect to discuss is related to the negative influence of aggression from managers or media directors on the autonomy perceived by journalists to develop news. Labor violence generates an asymmetric relationship in newsrooms, which leaves the journalist with no alternatives to protect his or her autonomy. This is one of the most important findings of this study, given that reports from various national and international organizations (FLIP, 2013, 2018; Reporteros sin Fronteras, 2014) emphasize that threats and aggressions against journalists come more often from actors outside the work environment.

The regression coefficients of each of the significant predictors found in this study showed that aggressions from managers are the most negative predictor regarding the impact on perceived autonomy. In this order of ideas, the analysis of statistical mediation permitted establishing that the economic and political factors in these labor aggression influences in journalism came from government officials, profit expectations, and the pressure from advertisers and advertising interests. Therefore, there is no autonomy in the newsroom when there is no editorial and financial independence from political and commercial power (Becerra & Waisbord, 2015).

The preceding findings are aligned with what Sapiezynka and associates (2013) previously pointed out: Critical political studies have long highlighted that a major limitation for journalistic autonomy stems from the economic structure of the media and their close link to the political sector. In this case, it was empirically determined that the greatest threats to autonomy in Colombia are not external, but internal, from the media themselves, and that this type of influence at the economic and political level in the media not only decreases autonomy, but also is an important risk factor that potentiates workplace aggressions.

Findings from this study indicate that internal violence in newsrooms has a stronger impact on perceived autonomy by journalists. This is not because there was a greater presence of workplace assaults—in fact, the percentage of and frequency associated with the attacks suffered internally by the media were lower when compared with the percentages of external violence—but rather because internal violence significantly increases the perception of professional insecurity. This finding is particularly important given that media, like governments, should protect journalists and not attack or restrict their freedom.

The second current refers to the political economy, where communication is considered a public good and emphasizes aspects such as public space, access to speech, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. For the political economy, the main limitations to journalistic autonomy arise from the economic structure of the media, its concentration, its sources of income, and its close link with the political sector.

The negative impact on the perceived autonomy of political and economic issues is mentioned in several studies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, Hanitzsch et al., 2012, Stetka & Örnebring, 2013, Waisbord, 2013) and reaffirms the growing interest in profit that surrounds newsrooms (Hanitzsch et al., 2010). This causes information to be seen not as a public good, but rather as a business that favors the interests of the elite, to the detriment of press freedom and, therefore, democracy.

In that sense, the labor aggressions are a threat against the freedom of the press, and they are usually little denounced because journalists fear being fired if they go against the media's economic interests. These interests are more evident in Colombia; currently, the great circulation media do not belong to families with a rich tradition in journalism (Cano, Santos, Ospina, López), but rather to large economic conglomerates with close ties to political power (Grupo Sarmiento Angulo, Grupo Ardila Lulle, and Grupo Santo Domingo) and with various commercial interests within the banking, industrial, and construction sectors.

Economic issues and political pressure against journalists are connected to each other in Colombia. In fact, because the Colombian state is one of the largest advertisers, complaints often arise against public officials who intimidate journalists with the threat of not renewing advertising contracts if they criticize the government and public institutions (FLIP, 2013). Likewise, the Colombian state owns the electromagnetic system and therefore authorizes licenses and regulates information. There are documented cases of nonrenewed licenses and closed spaces for those media that have criticized or questioned the national government.

It is important to close this discussion by analyzing how inequalities affect journalistic autonomy. The data from our study indicate that in Colombia, economic inequalities related to journalists' salaries, and poverty and income distribution rates in cities did not significantly influence perceived autonomy, but gender inequality did. In fact, women journalists were less likely to perceive autonomy to develop and publish news, in comparison with male journalists. This finding is consistent with studies by Shareef and Khanum (2015) and North (2014), which reveal how women journalists face more restrictions and coercions and tend to not participate in important editorial decisions because of the segregation and division of tasks in newsrooms.

The statistical mediation analysis used in this study also established that the negative effect of gender inequality on perceived autonomy is not the product of the evaluated organizational, political, and economic influences that surround journalism. Some related research shows that in Colombia, gender inequalities in journalism are associated with serious sociocultural problems linked to sexist competition (Ramírez, 2018). In this regard, Carreño and Guarín (2008) documented several cases of women journalists who reported feeling intimidated and discriminated against in their work when producing content and aspiring to advance; promotions depended on sponsorship relationships with editors or managers or on belonging to families of intellectuals, politicians, or media owners.

There are documented cases in Colombia in which gender issues also transcended the sociocultural sphere and became an aspect linked to the violence of the armed conflict. Armed actors have used sexual violence against women as a weapon of war to repress, and generate individual and collective terror (Rodríguez, 2014). For instance, a case that received national attention, involved journalist Jineth Bedoya (who headed the #NoEsHoraDeCallar campaign). Bedoya was the victim of torture, kidnapping, and sexual abuse by paramilitary groups for covering news. The case occurred in Bogotá in 2000, and no judicial developments occurred for several years.

Thanks to media pressure and complaints to international organizations, the case of Jineth Bedoya was reactivated, and more than a decade later, it was possible to convicted two members paramilitaries who were involved—although those who ordered the crime remain unpunished. Reducing gender inequalities in newsrooms is essential for women journalists to strengthen their professional autonomy and participation in decision-making scenarios in mass media.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This research has established that political and economic influences intervene in the relationship between aggressions against journalists and the decrease in journalistic autonomy. This decrease is strongest when violence comes internally, from the work environment, and when gender inequalities, homicides, and insecurity are connected to newsrooms.

Political and economic influences play a role in aggression against journalists within newsrooms in Colombia, decreasing the professional autonomy perceived by journalists. This finding, together with the negative impact of journalist killings, indicates that the closer the violence is to the newsrooms, the lower the professional autonomy perceived by journalists. The level of perceived autonomy is much lower when inequalities in interpersonal relationships occur, and women journalists, who tend to perceive less autonomy than men, are more strongly affected. Hence, addressing issues of gender equality and labor nonaggression pacts is a pending task for Colombian journalism.

The damage to journalists' perceived autonomy caused by direct violence in the newsroom allows us to suggest—before the current stage of post-peace agreements between the paramilitaries and the FARC—that the Colombian state needs to think not only about individual reparation processes in favor of journalist victims of violence, but also about a collective and institutional reparation, to measure the collective damage generated and to reach agreements with journalists' organizations. This process also requires the Colombian state to assume a more serious and effective commitment to reduce impunity in the face of crimes against journalists and to provide greater guarantees of security for journalists to carry out their work.

One of the limitations of this study is the exclusion in the sampling (for security reasons) of those journalists working in rural or provincial areas; these individuals face greater risks and threats because of the strong presence of organized crime and guerrillas in these territories, and the state's slow response capacity to reach these places. However, this work is one of the first attempts to study journalistic autonomy in contexts affected by internal armed conflicts and from the multicausal influence of mediating variables and structural factors related to direct and structural violence.

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