

Colombia

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of journalism in Colombia, drawing on data collected between 2021 and 2023 as part of the third wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS3). This period coincided with a significant political transition from the presidency of Iván Duque to Gustavo Petro, marking the first left-leaning administration in Colombia's modern history. The shift occurred amidst post-COVID-19 recovery, institutional uncertainty, social fragmentation, and ongoing debates about journalism's role in a democracy characterized by persistent inequality and unresolved armed conflict.

Despite legal protections for freedom of expression, Colombian journalists face increasing challenges. The Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP, 2022–2024) reports ongoing legal intimidation, public discrediting, and regions where reporting is nearly impossible due to security risks. These pressures are compounded by restricted access to public information, weakened institutional safeguards, and financial instability, particularly for local and independent media.

The Colombian media landscape is dominated by national conglomerates, while regional and digital outlets struggle with resource constraints. However, digital initiatives have diversified voices, especially in underserved areas. According to the Digital News Report 2022 (Reuters Institute), mobile news consumption is prevalent, but trust in media remains low, and few Colombians pay for news, exacerbating sustainability challenges. This report examines how journalists navigate these dynamics, focusing on their backgrounds, roles, epistemologies, ethics, autonomy, and influences.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Of the Colombian journalists sampled, 60.4% identified as male, 39.3% as female, and 0.3% as another gender category. The average age was 48.8 years (SD = 13.1), indicating an experienced workforce. Education levels were high: 48.5% held a bachelor's degree, 40.9% a master's degree, and 1.6% a doctoral degree, with fewer than 10.0% lacking a completed university degree. Most (93.7%) had formal journalism training, primarily through university programs (92.1%), supplemented by apprenticeships (72.7%) or short-term courses (80.6%), reflecting a blend of academic and practical preparation.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Colombian journalists operate in a diverse media ecosystem, with 21.8% employed in organizations focused on newspaper publishing, 21.6% in internet-native outlets, 18.9% in radio, 13.5% in television, 3.8% in news agencies, 2.4% in magazines, and 0.8% work for an outlet with a telecommunications background (N = 379). Notably, 10.0% reported no primary employer, reflecting the rise of freelance and multi-platform work. Media outlets vary in scope: 34.2% are regional, 34.0% national, 19.5% transnational, and 10.7% local, highlighting a balance between centralized and decentralized journalism.

Journalists averaged 20.8 years of experience (SD = 12.2), with 72.8% adopting a generalist profile, adapting to the demands of a fragmented media market. Only 42.0% were affiliated with professional associations, suggesting limited collective representation. Employment conditions remain precarious: 43.3% held full-time permanent contracts, 11.1% fixed-term contracts, and 38.0% were freelance or self-employed. The average workweek was 43.2 hours (SD = 21.30; for those in full-time employment), but 50.1% relied on non-journalistic income, underscoring financial instability. This precarity, coupled with the shift to digital platforms noted in the Digital News Report 2022, pressures journalists to diversify skills and revenue streams, often at the expense of in-depth reporting.

Work-related stress was significant, with 31.5% experiencing it "very often" and 19.2% "often" in the past six months. These stressors, linked to job insecurity and external threats (FLIP, 2022–2024), challenge journalists' resilience in a polarized socio-political context, shaping their professional practices and mental well-being.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Table 1 details threats experienced by journalists over the past five years. Verbal and reputational threats were most common: 46.0% faced demeaning or hateful speech, and 32.0% public discrediting. Digital threats included surveillance (21.9%) and hacking attempts (22.2%). Legal actions affected 12.0%, while physical attacks (7.0%) and sexual harassment (8.0%) were less frequent but notable. Coercion (14.5%) and intimidation targeting family (11.8%) further underscored risks.

Work-related concerns (Table 2) were significant: 93.9% agreed that those who harm journalists face little accountability (M = 4.53, SD = 0.79). Emotional and mental strain concerned 70.5% (M = 3.77, SD = 1.27), while physical well-being (45.9%, M = 3.04, SD = 1.43) and job stability (52.5%, M = 3.27, SD = 1.45) were also notable issues.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	379	6.6%	11.6%	27.7%	26.1%	28.0%
Public discrediting of your work	379	5.3%	8.4%	18.7%	24.8%	42.7%
Surveillance	378	3.4%	6.3%	12.2%	22.0%	56.1%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	378	3.2%	4.2%	14.8%	17.5%	60.3%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	378	0%	1.6%	0.5%	3.2%	94.7%
Legal actions against you because of your work	379	1.6%	2.1%	7.7%	15.6%	73.1%
Stalking	379	2.4%	2.6%	9.5%	14.8%	70.7%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	379	2.4%	6.1%	13.5%	22.4%	55.7%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	378	1.1%	1.6%	5.6%	5.0%	86.8%
Other physical attacks	378	0.8%	1.1%	5.0%	10.1%	83.1%
Coercion	378	2.1%	4.2%	8.2%	17.5%	68.0%
Questioning of your personal morality	378	4.0%	6.9%	13.0%	19.0%	57.1%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	378	1.9%	1.9%	4.0%	9.8%	82.5%
Others disseminating your personal information	377	1.6%	4.2%	7.7%	15.9%	70.6%
Workplace bullying	378	4.0%	3.2%	12.4%	18.3%	62.2%
Abductions	379	0.0%	0.3%	1.1%	3.4%	95.3%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	378	0.5%	0.5%	2.4%	4.0%	92.6%
Intimidation that targets family	378	0.5%	0.5%	5.0%	6.3%	87.6%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	379	52.5%	3.27	1.45
Concerned about physical well-being	379	45.9%	3.04	1.43
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	379	70.5%	3.77	1.27
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Colombia go unpunished	379	93.9%	4.53	0.79

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Journalists prioritized roles such as identifying social problems (94.2%, M = 4.60, SD = 0.69), countering disinformation (92.8%, M = 4.57, SD = 0.71), promoting peace and tolerance (90.5%, M = 4.52, SD = 0.75), educating the public (87.8%, M = 4.47, SD = 0.76), and enabling diverse viewpoints (90.7%, M = 4.47, SD = 0.75) (Table 3). Supporting government policy (49.6%, M = 3.46, SD = 1.13), conveying positive images of leaders (41.7%, M = 2.97, SD = 1.38), and providing entertainment (41.2%, M = 3.18, SD = 1.22) were considered less important, reflecting a focus on social and informative functions rather than emphasis on promotional or entertainment-driven ones.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	379	86.3%	4.27	0.92
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	379	83.1%	4.19	0.91
Shine a light on society's problems	379	94.2%	4.60	0.69
Motivate people to participate in politics	379	43.0%	3.14	1.24
Provide analysis of current affairs	379	89.7%	4.36	0.78
Let people express their views	379	90.7%	4.47	0.75
Provide information people need to form political opinion	379	85.2%	4.30	0.95
Advocate for social change	379	79.9%	4.11	0.98
Influence public opinion	379	64.2%	3.77	1.09
Set the political agenda	379	39.3%	3.12	1.19
Promote peace and tolerance	379	90.5%	4.52	0.75
Educate the audience	379	87.8%	4.47	0.76
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	379	79.4%	4.12	0.95
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	379	83.4%	4.24	0.96
Support national development	379	76.5%	4.08	1.01
Support government policy	379	49.6%	3.46	1.13
Convey a positive image of political leaders	379	41.7%	2.97	1.38
Provide entertainment and relaxation	379	41.2%	3.18	1.22
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	379	69.6%	3.89	1.04
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	379	60.7%	3.65	1.13
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	379	78.4%	4.14	0.95
Support efforts to protect public health	379	79.7%	4.14	0.96
Counteract disinformation	379	92.8%	4.57	0.71
Discuss future implications of current events	379	77.8%	4.04	0.95

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Most journalists agreed that interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts (75.5%, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.04$) and that facts should speak for themselves (68.9%, $M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.08$) (Table 4). Objective reality was deemed representable by 67.8% ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.10$). Fewer believed personal beliefs are unavoidable in reporting (44.1%, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.20$) or that truth is binary (38.2%, $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.36$). Only 15.6% agreed that truth is shaped by power ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.11$). Transparency was valued: 83.1% supported alerting audiences to untruthful claims ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.01$), and 71.3% favored making standpoints transparent ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.16$). Intuitive approaches, such as trusting instincts (27.9%, $M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.22$), were less endorsed. Overall, the distribution of responses reflects a pattern that prioritizes factual reporting, transparency, and distance from purely intuitive or relativist approaches.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	379	75.5%	3.93	1.05
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	379	15.6%	2.21	1.12
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	379	44.1%	3.07	1.20
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	379	38.2%	2.89	1.36
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	379	67.8%	3.69	1.11
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	379	27.9%	2.6	1.23
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	379	24.8%	2.53	1.19
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	379	68.9%	3.74	1.08
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	379	27.9%	2.67	1.23
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	379	71.3%	3.76	1.16
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	379	83.1%	4.07	1.01

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Journalists strongly favored professional standards in ethical decision-making (86.0%, $M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.94$), with low support for situational (18.8%, $M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.29$), circumstantial (25.1%, $M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.31$), or personal judgment-based approaches (28.7%, $M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.43$) (Table 5). Controversial methods were rarely justified: hidden recording (50.7% justified on occasion) and unauthorized use of documents (39.3%) had some acceptance, but practices like paying sources (18.2%), deception (21.1%), or publishing unverified content (5.8%) were widely rejected (Table 6). Journalists tend to draw a clear line when ethical risks involve intrusion, manipulation, or factual uncertainty.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	379	86.0%	4.32	0.95
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	379	25.1%	2.4	1.31
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	379	18.8%	2.09	1.29
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	379	28.7%	2.47	1.44

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	379	1.1%	21.1%
Using hidden recording devices	379	1.3%	50.7%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	379	6.1%	39.3%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	379	3.2%	40.6%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	379	0.3%	20.6%
Paying people for confidential information	379	1.1%	18.2%
Accepting money from sources	379	0.8%	1.1%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	379	2.1%	33.5%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	379	1.1%	15.0%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	379	0.85	5.8%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Journalists reported high autonomy in selecting news stories (74.9%, $M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.92$) and emphasizing story aspects (73.1%, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.88$). However, only 18.1% perceived a great deal of media freedom in Colombia ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.81$) (Table 7), highlighting a gap between individual discretion and systemic constraints.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	379	74.9%	4.07	0.92
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	379	73.1%	4.08	0.88
Media freedom in Colombia	374	18.2%	2.82	0.82

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Internal factors dominated editorial influences: journalism ethics (87.5%, $M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.96$), access to information (71.3%, $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.12$), and audience feedback (58.6%, $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.05$) were highly influential (Table 8). Editorial policy (57.4%, $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.38$), higher editors (55.1%, $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.32$), and news-gathering resources (56.7%, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.26$) also shaped decisions. External actors like politicians ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.32$), religious groups ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.10$), or criminal groups ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.33$) had lower influence.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	344	34.3%	2.93	1.20
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	347	55.0%	3.38	1.33
The business managers of the news organization	342	35.1%	2.79	1.42
The owners of the news organization	331	41.4%	2.96	1.48
Editorial policy	350	57.4%	3.42	1.38
Advertising considerations	350	30.3%	2.7	1.36
Profit expectations	353	25.8%	2.5	1.35
Audience research and data	363	44.1%	3.14	1.31
Availability of news-gathering resources	370	56.8%	3.46	1.26
Time limits	363	55.4%	3.4	1.27
Journalism ethics	376	87.5%	4.31	0.96
Self-censorship	366	34.4%	2.85	1.32
Personal values and beliefs	374	52.7%	3.36	1.33
Colleagues in other media	362	15.7%	2.33	1.12
Friends, acquaintances and family	360	15.3%	2.23	1.13
Feedback from the audience	372	58.6%	3.54	1.05
Competing news organizations	361	29.9%	2.71	1.25
Media laws and regulation	370	46.5%	3.21	1.25
Access to information	370	71.3%	3.81	1.13
Government censorship	360	27.2%	2.51	1.38
Government officials	359	22.0%	2.36	1.33
Politicians	357	21.0%	2.29	1.33
Business people	357	29.7%	2.47	1.32
Public relations	364	29.7%	2.71	1.31
Relationships with news sources	365	30.5%	3.13	1.31
Police	356	19.6%	2.22	1.26
Issue advocacy groups	355	9.9%	2.22	1.13
Religious groups and institutions	355	9.9%	1.93	1.10
Military	357	17.4%	2.15	1.28
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	352	16.5%	1.98	1.29
Organized crime and criminal groups	351	17.4%	2.00	1.33
Terrorist groups	356	14.9%	1.86	1.27

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)