

El Salvador

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INTRODUCTION

El Salvador has transitioned toward a hybrid-authoritarian regime characterized by the progressive weakening of the rule of law and institutional checks and balances, consolidating a personalized model of governance based on political, judicial, and communicational control, under a punitive security narrative. President Nayib Bukele began a second period through an unconstitutional re-election, within the framework of a State of Exception that has remained in effect permanently since 2022, compromising civil liberties and due process. Broad sectors of the population support the president due to the drastic reduction in homicides; however, this outcome appears to have been achieved through negotiations between the government and the country's main gangs.

Traditional journalism in El Salvador has historically been aligned with economic and political elites; however, in the postwar period, a form of autonomous digital investigative journalism emerged as a form of oversight over de facto powers and critical counterbalance.

During the fieldwork for this study (between 2022 and 2024), Salvadoran journalists have been exposed to constant hate speech, physical surveillance, espionage through Pegasus software, and financial difficulties caused by both international and national factors, such as administrative persecution and the approval of various laws. Press freedom has deteriorated, and the Salvadoran Association of Journalists (APES) reports a yearly increase in violations and infringements by the government, military, and police against journalistic practice.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The sample of journalists was somewhat gender-balanced, with 46.8% of respondents identifying as female and 53.2% as male. Journalists were fairly young, with a mean age of 36.9 (Median = 36, SD = 8.8). Most respondents had a bachelor's degree or the equivalent (65%), and more than a quarter combined had a master's degree (25.1%) or doctorate (2%). Nearly all (94.6%) said they had received formal education or professional training in journalism. That training was most often received at a university or college (95.8%), as well as via short-term courses (92.7%) and journalism apprenticeships/internships (86.5%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Salvadoran journalists who responded to the survey said they had a mean of 12.3 years of experience working as a journalist (Median = 10, SD = 8.0). On average they worked 48.2 hours per week (Median = 44, SD = 11.6; for those in full-time employment), which is just slightly more than the standard workweek of 44 hours. More than three-fourths said they worked full-time on a permanent contract (64.4%) or full-time on a fixed-term contract (13.5%). Just under 10% (8.7%) said they were freelancers or self-employed. More than a third (37.1%) of respondents said at least some of their income came from work outside of their jobs as journalists.

In terms of the background of their main employers, most surveyed journalists worked at a digital-native news outlet (36%), followed by newspapers (28%), magazine companies (12%), radio outlets (9.5%), TV organizations (8%), and news agencies (6%). The media outlets respondents worked at were mostly national or transnational in their reach (81.8%) as opposed to local or regional (17.7%). These outlets were primarily private or commercial (81.7%), although some respondents also worked for community media (6.4%), non-profit media (5.4%), and state-run media (5%).

The typical journalist surveyed had no management role (41.3%), while 35.8 worked in middle-management roles and 22.9% in top-management roles. Most (68.8%) said they did not cover a specific beat or subject area.

Only about a quarter (26.7%) of surveyed Salvadoran journalists said they belonged to a union.

Notably, journalists overwhelmingly said they very often (54.9%), often (18.9%) or sometimes (20.9%) felt stressed out because of their work. Only 1% said they never felt stressed out from work.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Salvadoran journalists’ survey responses underscored the risk of exercising their profession in a context of deteriorating press freedom. While arrests, abductions, office raids, and other types of physical attacks mostly never happened (see Table 1), the threats that most journalists had experienced at least sometimes were related to demeaning or hateful speech (64.8%), as well as public discrediting of their work (59.6%). Journalists also said they very often, often, or sometimes experienced surveillance (42.3%) hacking or blocking of social media accounts (27.9%), and other types of threats and intimidation (35.6%). It follows, then, that the vast majority of journalists were concerned about their emotional and mental wellbeing (69.2%), physical wellbeing (69.2%), and impunity in crimes against journalists (91.8%) (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	208	13.9%	21.6%	29.3%	18.8%	16.3%
Public discrediting of your work	208	13.9%	19.7%	26.0%	17.3%	23.1%
Surveillance	208	11.1%	7.2%	24.0%	16.3%	41.3%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	208	3.4%	9.1%	15.4%	15.9%	56.3%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	208	1.0%	0.0%	1.4%	4.3%	93.3%
Legal actions against you because of your work	208	1.4%	1.0%	7.7%	7.7%	82.2%
Stalking	208	2.9%	6.3%	20.2%	18.3%	52.4%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	208	4.8%	10.1%	20.7%	20.7%	43.8%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	208	1.9%	4.3%	13.0%	9.1%	71.6%
Other physical attacks	208	1.4%	1.0%	7.2%	10.6%	79.8%
Coercion	208	1.0%	3.4%	5.8%	12.0%	77.9%
Questioning of your personal morality	208	5.3%	13.5%	21.6%	20.7%	38.9%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	208	0.5%	0.0%	4.8%	9.6%	85.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	208	1.9%	0.5%	14.4%	12.5%	70.7%
Workplace bullying	208	1.0%	4.3%	11.1%	15.4%	68.3%
Abductions	208	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	2.4%	96.6%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	208	0.0%	1.0%	2.4%	5.8%	90.9%
Intimidation that targets family	208	0.5%	2.4%	6.3%	8.7%	82.2%

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	208	50.0%	3.21	1.43
Concerned about physical well-being	208	69.2%	3.77	1.15
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	208	83.2%	4.18	1.01
Concerned that those who harm journalists in El Salvador go unpunished	208	91.8%	4.64	0.68

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

Most surveyed journalists saw their main roles as shining a light on society’s problems (94.2%) and counteracting disinformation (94.2%) (see Table 3). They also emphasized the importance of roles related to monitoring and scrutinizing power (85.6%), analyzing current affairs (87.5%), providing information so the public can form a political opinion (87%), letting people express their views (88%), educating the audience (86.1%), and speaking on behalf of marginalized voices (87.5%). It’s interesting to note that roughly the same percentage of respondents who said it was very or extremely important to be a detached observer (77.4%) also said it was important to advocate for social change (75.5%), indicating that journalists don’t necessarily see these two roles as mutually exclusive.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	208	77.4%	4.05	1.04
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	208	85.6%	4.41	0.89
Shine a light on society’s problems	208	94.2%	4.61	0.69
Motivate people to participate in politics	208	39.4%	3.09	1.32
Provide analysis of current affairs	208	87.5%	4.33	0.80
Let people express their views	208	88.0%	4.39	0.83
Provide information people need to form political opinion	208	87.0%	4.40	0.86
Advocate for social change	208	75.5%	4.06	0.97
Influence public opinion	208	64.4%	3.80	1.04
Set the political agenda	208	40.9%	3.09	1.31
Promote peace and tolerance	208	80.3%	4.21	0.88
Educate the audience	208	86.1%	4.38	0.83
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	208	79.8%	4.13	0.93
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	208	87.5%	4.41	0.94
Support national development	208	66.8%	3.85	1.11
Support government policy	208	30.8%	2.75	1.35
Convey a positive image of political leaders	208	26.9%	2.48	1.44
Provide entertainment and relaxation	208	22.6%	2.54	1.29
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	208	52.9%	3.57	1.17
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	208	37.5%	3.05	1.27
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	208	57.2%	3.65	1.12
Support efforts to protect public health	208	75.0%	4.02	0.99
Counteract disinformation	208	94.2%	4.64	0.72
Discuss future implications of current events	208	82.7%	4.19	0.87

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

The need for journalists to alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful emerged as a top belief among surveyed journalists (see Table 4), with three-fourths (75.6%) agreeing that it was key to do so. Only about half (52.7%) agreed that objectivity in reporting is possible, while more than half said journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work (61.5%), and 66.8% said journalists should let the facts speak for themselves.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	205	62.9%	3.56	1.14
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	205	9.8%	2.07	1.06
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	205	34.1%	2.96	1.17
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	205	38.0%	2.94	1.34
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	205	52.7%	3.39	1.10
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	205	14.1%	2.31	1.03
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	205	15.6%	2.36	1.07
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	205	66.8%	3.85	0.96
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	205	20.5%	2.58	1.10
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	205	61.5%	3.67	1.08
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	205	75.6%	4.04	0.99

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

Surveyed Salvadoran journalists indicated they uphold professional journalistic standards (see Table 5). Most (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that ethical considerations should always be based on professional standards, regardless of the situation or personal judgment. Very rarely did respondents say that controversial reporting methods were always justified (see Table 6). However, when it came to controversial techniques often used in investigative reporting, it was more typical for journalists to say these techniques were sometimes justified: more than half (52.4%) said the use of hidden recording devices was justified on occasion, as was using confidential business or government documents without authorization (50%).

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	208	88.0%	4.38	0.87
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	208	32.2%	2.75	1.23
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	208	22.1%	2.41	1.31
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	208	19.2%	2.26	1.27

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	208	1.4%	37.5%
Using hidden recording devices	208	3.4%	52.4%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	208	13.5%	50.0%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	208	8.2%	51.9%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	208	0.5%	15.9%
Paying people for confidential information	208	1.0%	12.0%
Accepting money from sources	208	0.0%	0.5%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	208	1.0%	11.1%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	208	0.5%	7.7%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	208	0.5%	0.5%

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

Most surveyed journalists said they had individual autonomy when it came to editorial decisions (see Table 7). More than two two-thirds (68.1%) said they had complete or a great deal of freedom to choose the news stories they covered, and 62.3% said they were free to decide what aspects of a story to emphasize. However, responses painted a different picture when it came to media freedom generally: Only 8.3% said there was complete or a great deal of media freedom in El Salvador.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	207	68.1%	3.90	0.96
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	207	62.3%	3.76	1.03
Media freedom in El Salvador	207	8.3%	2.59	0.75

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

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Journalism ethics (88.2%) and practical constraints like time limits (56.4%) and access to information (75.2%) emerged as the top editorial influences from Salvadoran journalists' perspective (see Table 8). Owners of the news outlets also were identified by most journalists (51.5%) as very or extremely influential on editorial processes. Nearly half (48.8%) of respondents said government censorship was influential, and about a third named government officials (33.5%), politicians (28.1%), and media laws and regulation (35%).

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	203	37.4%	2.97	1.20
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	203	68.0%	3.73	1.06
The business managers of the news organization	199	38.7%	2.94	1.33
The owners of the news organization	196	51.5%	3.24	1.40
Editorial policy	203	65.0%	3.64	1.18
Advertising considerations	193	24.9%	2.36	1.40
Profit expectations	194	17.5%	1.98	1.36
Audience research and data	202	38.1%	3.07	1.23
Availability of news-gathering resources	205	62.0%	3.59	1.18
Time limits	204	56.4%	3.38	1.28
Journalism ethics	204	88.2%	4.38	0.81
Self-censorship	204	29.4%	2.75	1.35
Personal values and beliefs	204	39.7%	3.0	1.38
Colleagues in other media	200	9.0%	2.02	1.07
Friends, acquaintances and family	200	8.0%	1.88	1.05
Feedback from the audience	201	34.5%	2.46	1.23
Competing news organizations	201	18.4%	2.46	1.23
Media laws and regulation	203	35.0%	3.07	1.23
Access to information	202	75.2%	4.01	1.05
Government censorship	201	48.8%	3.32	1.30
Government officials	200	33.5%	2.80	1.40
Politicians	196	28.1%	2.64	1.36
Business people	198	19.2%	2.26	1.34
Public relations	197	22.3%	2.41	1.34
Relationships with news sources	204	46.1%	3.20	1.26
Police	198	13.6%	2.15	1.22
Issue advocacy groups	195	13.8%	2.09	1.25
Religious groups and institutions	194	7.7%	1.74	1.09
Military	197	12.7%	1.96	1.19
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	196	12.2%	1.76	1.17
Organized crime and criminal groups	198	13.1%	1.94	1.23
Terrorist groups	193	9.8%	1.72	1.14

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.)