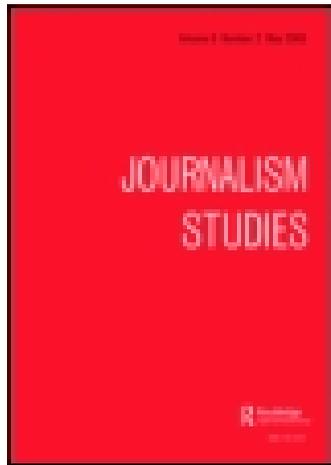


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# PROFESSIONALISM UNDER THREAT OF VIOLENCE

## Journalism, reflexivity, and the potential for collective professional autonomy in northern Mexico

Celeste González de Bustamante and Jeannine E. Relly

*Mexico is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, as more than 100 journalists have been murdered between 2000 and 2014, with almost half of those killed in the country's northern states. Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with journalists in northern Mexico, this qualitative study examines the relationship between an environment of violence and journalists' perceptions about professionalism. Utilizing the concepts of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy, the authors analyze and discuss the complexities and contradictions of professional identity among journalists during a time of unprecedented violence.*

**KEYWORDS** collective professional autonomy; journalists; Mexico; news media; professionalism, reflexivity; United States–Mexico border; violence

### Introduction

In April of 2011, in response to a wave of violence that enveloped Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, a group of female journalists created *la Red de Periodistas de Juárez* (The Juárez Journalists Network). Through its website, the organization states that it was established in a context of a “social emergency” attributed to the war between battling drug-trafficking groups. Headed by veteran reporters and editors, the network lists among its fundamental objectives, continued professionalization of journalists in the city through various activities such as workshops on investigative journalism skills, editing, writing, dealing with victims, and increasing safety among reporters.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of this group and another in 2012 at the state-wide level in Chihuahua, known as *la Red Libre Periodismo* (Network of Free Journalism), represents a change in the old guard type of press organizations that were many times linked and supported by the government (González de Bustamante 2011). Further, the creation of organizations such as *la Red de Periodistas de Juárez* and *la Red Libre Periodismo*, in the midst of unprecedented violence in the state of Chihuahua, demonstrates a clear and assertive response by a professional journalism community to ameliorate the situation affecting the news media in the country's northern states, where almost half of the journalists who were murdered between 2000 and 2013 were working (Special Prosecutor for Attention of Crimes Against Freedom of Expression 2014).

The recent formation of organizations such as *la Red de Periodistas de Juárez* allows scholars to examine questions about professionalism in conflict regions, where according

to reports and academic studies, journalists have been silenced (Arana and Guazo 2011; Correa-Cabrera and Nava 2013; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). The authors argue that the existence of and the strategies employed by these organizations also provide evidence of *professional reflexivity* and the potential for *collective professional autonomy*, two concepts that are central to this study.

Using data gathered from in-depth interviews with journalists working in northern Mexico, the authors examine the relationship between a heightened level of violence and professionalism with a goal of explaining the complexities and contradictions of professional perceptions and identity in this region. The northern states of Mexico also are particularly salient, given the transnational environment in which journalists work, and that the United States–Mexico border region can be thought of as both contiguous, yet distinct, depending on which part of the border is being examined (Correa-Cabrera and Staudt 2014; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a).

Professionalism is defined, like journalism itself, as a project under constant construction (Libby 2006). The authors submit, as have other scholars, that the project of professionalism may manifest itself in three ways, as discourse, ideology, and as an unwritten social and moral contract (Aldridge and Evetts 2003).

This research utilizes the conceptual framework of *professional reflexivity* to interrogate the ways in which journalists perceive the current state of professionalism in Mexico's north (Ahva 2013). In addition, the paper introduces the concept of *communities of collective professional autonomy*, to investigate the potential for collective action among journalists in the north, such as the case of la Red de Periodistas de Juárez (Kasher 2005).

## Background

Over the past decade and a half, residents and journalists in northern Mexico have undergone dramatic economic, political, and technological upheaval. In 2008, businesses, including news organizations, experienced one of the worst economic crises in the past century, largely because of a global financial crisis (Olson, Shirk, and Wood 2014, 4). At the same time, rival criminal organizations plagued cities in the north, as they battled over transnational drug and illicit trade routes that led northward into the United States and beyond. A technological revolution, driven by online advances, also swept through the region, representing a third dimension to rapid change. Together, these three “hot moments” or societal shifts influenced the way that journalists practiced their craft and inhibited their ability to fulfill their duty to inform and serve the public (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Meneses 2011).

In the midst of the grand changes underway, Mexico became one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. The increase in violence against journalists coincided with an overall spike in violence beginning in the 2000s, but more precipitously during former Mexican President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's administration, and after his decision to confront organized crime through more active military engagement—a strategy that shifted from interdiction of drugs to the capture of the leaders of criminal organizations (Camp 2010). One consequence of this strategy was an increase in human rights violations, including violence and aggressions against members of the news media (Edmonds-Poli 2014). Between 2006 and 2012, 33 journalists were murdered in Mexico's northern states (Special Prosecutor 2014).

The representative from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has noted that the mounting violence against journalists at the hands of members of organized crime who sought to control both territory and media-driven messages about their respective organizations in such a direct and open way represented a new phenomenon (Antonio Mazzitelli, personal interview, November 20, 2013). Under the country's new chief executive, Enrique Peña Nieto, the situation has not improved for journalists, and in some cases such as in the state of Veracruz, it has worsened (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014).

A globally networked society has added further to the constraints and risks that journalists face. In 2011, in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, four media workers were killed after they reportedly blogged about criminal organizations (Edmonds-Poli 2014). At the same time, because of a lack of coverage about organized crime at longer-standing news organizations in the region (Arana and Guazo 2011), social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide opportunities for journalists and citizens to inform themselves (Cave 2011; Correa-Cabrera and Nava 2013). This situation presents an additional challenge for journalists who attempt to confirm the veracity and accuracy of information coming across such informational feeds such as Twitter and Facebook. Yet, these circumstances have generated opportunities for "collective action" via social media, as journalists and citizens on both sides of the border circumvent organized groups, and in some cases, the state, in their quests to seek and disseminate information (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a).

In the midst of the extreme challenges that Mexican reporters must confront while covering the country's north, our qualitative study examines journalists' perceptions about professionalism in a region experiencing heightened levels of violence. The study is based on an analysis of 39 interviews gathered in fall 2011 in 11 cities with news media outlets in the north.

## Literature Review and Theory

### *Professional Reflexivity*

Given the complexities of an ever-changing media landscape and culture, an attempt to examine questions of perceptions about professionalism and professional identity can be much like trying to nail the ubiquitous piece of "Jell-O to the wall." To make this a more fruitful exercise, the authors suggest that the concept of professional reflexivity can be useful in advancing our understanding about professionalism in a region such as northern Mexico, where journalists have had to alter dramatically the way they practice their profession (Edmonds-Poli 2014; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). Professional reflexivity can be defined as "journalists' capacity for self-awareness; their ability to recognize influences and changes in their environment, alter the course of their actions, and renegotiate their professional self-images as a result" (Ahva 2013, 792). The ability to be self-aware and the significance of professional reflexivity has become a matter of life and death for journalists in Mexico's north, who, in some cases must wait for a "green light" from members of organized crime before publishing information (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014b). By focusing on how journalists reflect on the subject of professionalism in northern Mexico, this study contributes to the literature about journalism and professional culture in zones of conflict (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa 2008). In addition, the study adds to research that explores, for Mexican journalists in particular, the contradictions between professional ideals and daily practice, or those "conflicts between thinking and acting" (Márquez Ramírez 2012, 132).

### *Communities of Collective Professional Autonomy*

As a way to adapt to an environment of violence, journalists in northern Mexico have banded together both on the ground and online as means to decrease insecurity (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). Our research and that of others has shown that journalistic autonomy, a barometer of professionalism, in the liberal American-model historically has been, and currently remains, severely hampered by economic, political, and societal factors in Mexico (González de Bustamante 2012; Hughes 2006; Lawson 2002; Márquez Ramírez 2012; Meneses 2011).

Nevertheless, the recent establishment of organizations such as la Red de Periodistas de Juárez, and growing participation in them, demonstrates a level of community resiliency (Olson, Shirk, and Wood 2014), which could signal the existence of a collective form of autonomy. This research seeks to interrogate the concept of “communities of collective professional autonomy,” as a possible phenomenon occurring in the nation’s north (Kasher 2005). Kasher presents three types of collective professional autonomy, which we present with adaptations to the field of journalism: (1) *framework autonomy* refers to freedom of a professional community to maintain or develop “what is it to be a professional practice, in general” (89); (2) *social autonomy* refers to independence with respect to constraints “imposed on it by the normative nature of its societal envelope” (91), such as legal guidelines and constraints under which journalists must work; (3) *conceptual autonomy* refers to the ways in which journalists conceive of their profession, and “the freedom to operate on its own conception of its distinct vocation” (90).

This study concentrates on *conceptual autonomy* as it relates to a professional community, as it is the most relevant, and the area in which journalists are most likely to have influence, given the existing societal constraints. The study extends work on conceptual autonomy by employing the concept of *collective professional autonomy*, and expands upon the work of scholars such as Hanitzsch et al. (2011) who argue that “critical change agents” represent one of the four prevailing types of journalists, and Hughes (2006), who referred to journalists as “change agents,” particularly in the north through newspapers such as *El Norte* and later *Reforma*, and other news outlets which were influential in moving the profession toward a more civic-minded type of journalistic practice.

### *Professionalism in the Global South*

As with most scholarly literature on journalism, and other disciplines for that matter, most of the work about professionalism and professional identity has focused on developed countries. Much less has been published on countries with emerging democracies, including those in Latin America. That is not to say scholars have ignored questions about professionalism in the region (Hernández Lopez 1999; Hughes 2006; Lawson 2002; Mellado and Lagos 2014; Waisbord 2000). Our study furthers the literature concerned with journalists’ self-perceptions and professional identities in Latin America, by concentrating on Mexico’s northern states (Arroyave, Gill, and Blanco 2007; Hallin 2000; Hanitzsch 2006, 2007; Herscovitz 2004; Márquez Ramírez 2012; Mellado et al. 2012; Waisbord 2013).

“Ideal-type” journalistic values and roles have been operationalized and analyzed (Deuze 2005), and consensus has been drawn around certain values (Hafez 2002) and the role of journalism (Himmelboim and Limor 2011) in cross-national studies. For decades, Weaver and colleagues (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986; Weaver and Wu 1998; Weaver et al.

2007; Weaver and Willnat 2012) have studied US journalistic values and role perceptions as they have evolved and others have subsequently studied professionalism around the world and in the region (Herscovitz 2004; Hughes 2006; Mellado et al. 2012; Pintak and Ginges 2008, 2009; Pintak and Nazir 2013) using modified models. However, in reflecting on studies of journalists in 31 countries and territories from around the world, Weaver and Willnat (2012, 544) concluded there are many differences across countries in the profession and “the patterns of similarities and differences are not neatly classifiable along some of the more common political or cultural dimensions.”

This study acknowledges the growing literature that advances that “a borderless journalistic worldview remains elusive” (Pintak 2014, 489) and that the diffusion of a host of professional norms more likely will lead to “hybrid professional cultures” (Waisbord 2013, 229). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out that the concept of professionalism has “different levels of meaning,” in the hierarchy of influences model; and in a global context, Reese (2001, 174) writes, “professionalism is a problematic concept, consisting of many values held in tension, which different national groups balance in their own way.” Further, “not only does seeing journalism as culture force attention to the cues by which journalists think about journalism and the world, but it presumes that what is explicit and articulated as that knowledge may not reflect the whole picture of what journalism is and tries to be” (Zelizer 2008, 88).

Scholars have noted the political, economic, societal, and cultural heritage and context in a country, in part, shapes journalistic values and professional role perceptions (Hanitzsch 2006, 2007; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Pintak 2014; Waisbord 2013). Also “given this panoply of co-existing journalism cultures,” deeper analysis of “more fine-grained secondary differentiation within larger social units” serves to address this variation (Hanitzsch 2006, 182).

### *Professionalism in Zones of Conflict*

Latin American journalism, long before it became commonly referred to as a profession, was a venture fraught with risk and violence (Ferreira 2006). This study builds upon scholarship about the profession in the midst of crisis reporting in developed nations (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013; Carter and Kodrich 2013; Fahmy and Johnson 2005; Libby 2006). However, other studies largely focus on foreign journalists’ perceptions of reporting in zones of conflict, rather than domestic journalists. Though foreign correspondents are certainly at risk, their level of safety is greater than journalists who must live and work in the country in crisis, which, whether in the Middle East or Latin America, can lead to a working environment that is more professionally and ethically challenging (Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008; Rodelo 2009). This study also falls in line with Brooten’s (2006) argument about journalists in Burma; that they are not always on the outside of political conflict. Further, in the Mexican case, journalists might even take part in conflicts through collective action and building “community resiliency” (Edmonds-Poli 2014).

In Mexico’s north, the zones of conflict have been quite mercurial, especially during the time that this study was conducted, with violence shifting from the northwest and central northern states, including Baja California and Chihuahua, toward the northeastern state of Tamaulipas. The shifting violence has been attributed to the nature of warring organized crime groups as well as the government’s response to organized crime and

violence (Molzahn, Rodriguez, and Shirk 2013). These ebbs and tides of violence sweeping the north have resulted in shifting practical responses and changing safety concerns (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). Given the fluid situation, the study aimed to seek how journalists in various parts of the north reflected on the concept of professionalism.

### *Mexico's Move Toward Professionalism*

Few would dispute that journalism training is critical in zones of conflict (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Carter and Kodrich 2013; Fahmy and Johnson 2005; Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008), though the literature is mixed on the importance of a formal journalism education as it relates to levels of professionalism (Adam 2001; Dates 2006). Though the first school of journalism in Mexico, Carlos Septién, was opened in 1949 and two years later a bachelor's program in journalism was founded at the National Autonomous University followed by the University of Veracruz's journalism school three years later, there was a movement by the 1960s to change the curricula to degrees in more heterogeneous areas, such as communication studies (Hernández Ramírez and Schwarz 2008). The move was recommended by UNESCO, along with the International Center of Superior Communication Studies in Latin America, in a measure aimed to shift programs away from the "formation of mere 'simple' journalists to that of 'social communicators'" (212), watering down journalism education in many cities in the country.

Control of the Mexican media has a long history that dates to the *Porfiriato* (1876–1911), yet rather than overt repression through state ownership and direct censorship, the state more frequently has used heavy subsidies, government advertising, and rigged broadcasting concessions in order to create a malleable and manipulable press (González de Bustamante 2012; Lawson 2002). According to Hughes (2003, 94–95), journalists functioned as messengers communicating information between governmental groups and the ruling party, and "Few journalists questioned publishing information just as it was supplied in government press releases or given in pack interviews with ruling party politicians because most reporters did not view their role as including the questioning of political authority."

In spite of a co-opted press, from the 1970s through the 1990s, "independent journalism began to go well beyond acceptable limits, becoming an increasing source of strain and irritation for Mexico's 'perfect dictatorship'" (Hughes 2006, 58). The transformation of the Mexican press gained strength in the 1990s as the ruling party began to lose its grip on power, along with a renaissance of civil society (Lawson 2002). Further, Hughes' (2006, 113) research chronicled how the force of a number of intrepid journalists transformed newsrooms in the northern states and throughout the country, "including direct retraining, cross-fertilization with established civic newspapers and publications, formal and informal associations where common values and concerns were discussed, and the implementation of regulations guiding journalists' relationships with sources and advertisers." Olsen (2014, 234), too, writes about sustained investigative journalism training in Mexico and the northern states since the 1990s and the more recent challenges of violence that put "investigative reporting at risk" there. Yet, despite these inroads into more independent journalism, other recent work has demonstrated that some journalists in northern Mexico believe they do not have the necessary skills and training required to deal with an increasingly corrupt and violent environment (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014).

In light of the literature, this study aims to answer the following questions related to those journalists working in the country's northern states:

**RQ1:** Given the heightened levels of violence in northern Mexico, and other societal constraints on journalists in the region, to what extent do journalists exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity?

**RQ2:** Do journalists' perceptions about professionalism signal the presence of collective professional autonomy along the border?

## Methodology

This research focuses on journalists working along the country's northern border because journalists outside of capital cities in some countries are at greater risk of violence (Estévez 2010; Waisbord 2002). We focus on the northern states based on several phenomenon present at the time of our research: (1) the northern border of Mexico is the location of major drug-smuggling and human-trafficking routes, and scholars have noted there was heightened violence at the time of our research (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Carter and Kodrich 2013); (2) regions far from the country's political and economic power center have been noted to be at greater risk; and (3) Mexico's news media in the capital are known to have greater resources than those outside of the country's center (Estévez 2010; Hughes 2006).

Our purposive sample was drawn from major markets in the following six border states from the northwest to northeast border of Mexico: Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Journalists included in the study represented all news media platforms (newspapers, magazine, online, radio, and television). There is wide variation among the 11 media markets included in the study, from large, robust markets in Chihuahua and Baja California to smaller and less aggressive news markets in Sonora and Tamaulipas.

We contacted representatives from four organizations (Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Inter American Press Association, the Binational Association of Schools of Communication, and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists) to construct our list of news organizations and journalists in 11 media markets (Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California Norte; San Luis Río Colorado, Nogales, and Hermosillo, Sonora; Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila; Monterrey, Nuevo León; and Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas) (Figure 1). The US-based organizations were contacted because of their long-standing outreach efforts and training activities in Mexico, including the northern states.

The researchers developed a list of security protocols to ensure the safety of participants. These included: limiting e-mail and phone conversations with subjects; meeting in secure locations; conducting interviews in secure locations; having subjects select the locations for interviews; and granting anonymity to participants.

We utilized Kim and Hama-Saeed's (2008) list of items to develop a modified version of that questionnaire that they used to study journalists in a war zone. The questionnaire used in this study was piloted with six journalists. Forty-five Mexican journalists from the country's six border states (Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas) were invited to participate in the study and 39 agreed to interviews that were conducted in-person, with a response rate of 86.67 percent.

Interviews were conducted by the researchers in Spanish along the border from September 17, 2011, through December 16, 2011. Participants granted permission to audio-record interviews, which included items about journalists' perceptions about professionalism. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with reporters, photographers, videographers, editors, and producers who all requested anonymity. The audio recordings were translated from Spanish into English and transcribed. Research questions were used as the framework to conduct the analysis of the data. The researchers independently coded the transcripts and compared themes that emerged from the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

## Findings

Twenty-seven of the 39 journalists in the study were men (69.23 percent) and 12 were women (30.77 percent). Journalists' ages ranged from 25 to 56 years; the mean age was 39.6 years ( $SD = 7.89$  years). The study's participants had experience in the field that ranged from 3 to 35 years. The mean journalism experience was 16.49 years ( $SD = 7.37$ ). Journalists in the study had education that ranged from holding a high school diploma to holding a master's degree. Nearly three-fourths (18 out of 25, or 72 percent) of the reporters with degrees held bachelor's of arts in communication or communication science and one said he held a bachelor's degree in journalism (4 percent); six reported that they held degrees in other fields; seven said that they had attended some college or trade school; and five held high school diplomas. Most of the journalists in the study with college or university education in the field of communication indicated that the theoretically driven degrees did not have a sufficient number of journalism courses to prepare them for the field, much less for the conditions that they encountered at the time of the study.

As anticipated, there was wide variation among the results, depending on the state, and sometimes variation existed between cities in the same state. At the same time, journalists from all six of the states exhibited characteristics of professional reflexivity.



**FIGURE 1**

Map study area: cities in black are those included in the study

Reflexivity concentrated in three areas of professionalism. First, with respect to professional reflexivity and professional identity, the subjects were extremely aware of numerous contradictions between the ideals of the journalists, and the challenges they faced to put those principles into practice (Ahva 2013; Márquez Ramírez 2012). Second, our findings indicated that heightened levels of violence appeared to spark an increased commitment to the importance about the core values of journalism, such as truth and accuracy. Third, regarding the question about the existence of collective professional autonomy, findings suggest that the states of Tamaulipas and Chihuahua remain at opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to potential opportunities for collective professional autonomy, with the former appearing to be the least likely locale for developing a sense of collective professional autonomy and the state of Chihuahua appearing to be a space for collective opportunities to emerge (see Figure 1). The following sections detail the three major findings.

### *Contradictions Between Professional Ideals and Practice*

One of the principles of quality journalism in the liberal democratic model is to include a variety of sources, and report the story without bias, which should give readers a fair and fuller understanding of the subject that is being reported (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Waisbord 2013). Many journalists throughout the northern states identified with this principle. For example, a Tijuana print editor stated:

I think journalists have to inform people, giving them a full panorama of a situation, so that people can come to their own conclusions. I mean, give them all the angles of a news story and let people come to conclusions. Journalists shouldn't have leanings one way or another.

In practice, however, especially at news organizations that have been threatened, reporters are told they must only use official sources when reporting on crime. The contradiction between including a variety of sources as an ideal, and not being able to employ this principle in practice, was evident as the same Tijuana editor stated:

We publish what they [the government] give to us, what they hand to us. That's how it is. Sometimes, for example, we'll get information by e-mail ... When I get things like that I send them to the attorney general's office, and that's it. And maybe they'll say "you know what, your information is right. Everything that was written is correct." And I say "oh, okay but I'm not going to publish it unless you tell me that officially."

Despite the desire to do investigative journalism or report on criminal organizations, many news organizations have made a decision not to, reflecting another contradiction between the ideal and on-the-ground circumstances. An editor at a news outlet in Tamaulipas talked about the need to constantly alter journalism practice in the midst of changing threats and violence against his organization:

One gets used to it. That's what makes humans different from animals. You adapt or you die. Of course we always have a candle lit with the hope that things change. In all honesty, we're hoping that the federal government will be able to put organized crime in its place where it belongs.

From Baja California to Tamaulipas, journalists consistently noted a difference in the kind of reporting that should be produced, and what should be covered, and what is produced

and covered. Throughout the region, journalists were critical of the news content, noting that it lacked quality.

One Juárez journalist spoke about the relationship between lack of quality and the paper's duty to inform:

We've let our readers down. We've let them down because we're not giving them the information they require. The excuse is safety, well yes, but readers are not receiving the total information that they require. We're giving them partial information because we're taking care of ourselves. News organizations take care of themselves and their personnel, but the cost of doing this is giving incomplete information. This is—many journalists will never accept that this is the case. But I think it's the main problem right now.

In Tamaulipas, where journalists were working under the greatest constraints, and where violence had shifted during our study, reporters were quite critical of the quality of journalism that was being produced in that state, which indicated a disconnect between how reporters would ideally like journalism to be practiced and how it was being practiced. A radio reporter from Reynosa stated:

There's no imagination. The media in Tamaulipas don't have direction. The media in Tamaulipas is all about seeing what happens day by day ... They don't focus on their own stories they all go for the same ones.

When asked how he would rate the quality of journalism, he stated:

The journalism we are forced to practice in Mexico now is of low quality. We can't maintain quality. We can't maintain ethics. We can't maintain anything. We have to turn in information that is lacking that doesn't grab people's attention. The content of the coverage is poor, and there is no way to make it better. We're doing mediocre journalism due to the lack of security ... On a scale of 1–10 Tamaulipas is a "zero" because nobody is doing anything.

Another contradiction emerged in the area of professional training and skills. Despite the fact that most of the participants interviewed had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, many journalists felt that either they, or their colleagues, did not receive the training or education necessary to report in zones of conflict. A Juárez online journalist stated:

We're still lacking a lot of training on how to handle this type of conflict. I mean there aren't specialists who might come and tell you "you know what, the war works like this." We've talked a lot about the fact that we're in a war, we're journalists at war, we're war correspondents, but in reality we don't have experience. We've learned to survive and to bear the situation, but that doesn't mean that we're okay, or that things can be done right. They can be done better, I think.

Our findings revealed that the level of professional training varied from state to state, and sometimes from news organization to news organization. One Sonora print journalist stated that he received adequate training after one of his colleagues was disappeared, but that journalists at other news outlet might not receive the same training, and he added, "Other news organizations don't train their people. They don't give them courses. They don't give them any of this."

### *Commitment to the Profession and Professionalism*

Despite the heightened levels of violence, many journalists throughout the region remained deeply committed to the field, and many talked about journalism as being a “very noble” profession. Some saw the trying times as an opportunity to improve their craft.

A multimedia journalist who covers Reynosa, Matamoros, and Monterrey, and who has been threatened and kidnapped, stated:

It's a daily struggle, not to struggle against ourselves, but to challenge ourselves, because every day we need to be more professional ... I think that it's a profession that's very, very noble, that implies a lot of sacrifice but when you see that your message has been transmitted, and when you see that it got to people, that's your pay, no? More than, than what they can give you. Because you say, “I did something for them.”

Another Tamaulipas journalist noted that despite the constraints in which this reporter worked, she was not contemplating leaving the profession:

I like this profession. And now I feel, I know I'm not going to change things, but I think someone has to say them. I think that an informed public is a protected public. And one has to do his part. Someone has to do it. No one is going to Mexico, to cover stories in Mexico, none of the people here. Why? Because they're forbidden to by their media outlets. Because they're scared, because they don't know who's responsible if something happens to their reporter.

Asking journalists about what sorts of advice they would give to young people who might want to become journalists in Mexico elicited sentiments about professional commitment.

A Sonoran radio reporter talked about the importance of commitment when asked what advice would be given to an aspiring journalist:

Get a lot of training. Read a lot. Try to do something for society. As a means of communication, you can do many things for society, all of us united. And, in the case of the border, you have to really be careful.

### *Collective Professional Autonomy*

Our study found that, similar to other results (Hughes 2006; Márquez Ramírez 2012), there was wide variation in either the existence of or the possibilities for the manifestation of collective professional autonomy.

In Mexicali, reporters complained of a lack of solidarity, noted a hesitancy to participate in professional organizations, yet they stressed the need for collective action. One Mexicali reporter stated, “I'm not in the habit of being a part of that. But lately I think that it's really necessary. It's necessary. Because it's a part of being united, you know. And, to work to move forward because we can't do it alone.”

In Tamaulipas, some journalists indicated that although they might like to become part of a professional organization, there was not a culture of collaboration in that state.

As an example of the lack of professional collaboration, a Tamaulipas reporter recounted an anecdote about a colleague who was kidnapped, and instead of his co-workers supporting him they criticized him for getting picked up. The reporter added, “That's an example of there being no solidarity, and that, when it's about the bad guys or someone picking you up, or something happens, no one is going to say anything.”

Interviews with journalists revealed the highest level of potential collective professional autonomy in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua's largest city, and the lowest level of potential for collective professional autonomy in the state of Tamaulipas.

As has been mentioned, it was in Juárez where journalists formed an organization whose mission is to "teach and constantly professionalize the journalists of this city."

A Juárez news editor and member of la Red de Periodistas de Juárez explained how the organization, which has been modeled after the Mexico City-based professional organization Periodistas de a Pié, got its start:

Juárez journalists discovered a need and desire among journalists in that city. So, when we discovered that hunger, in the middle of all of this, we said, "As a network we have to do it." It's our commitment to others, instead of, "Okay I'm going to stay here, holding on to everything I have. We're going to share it! We're going to get it out there! For the profession, beyond the needs of news companies.

This same editor called for more collective action beyond the city of Juárez:

I think that in order to continue practicing the journalism that Mexico requires, we have to work more toward unity as journalists, in order to strengthen ourselves and give ourselves greater security. I mean people in Mexico City have to understand what people on the border are living. And, people on the border have to understand what people in Mexico City are living. We need greater integration, greater unity.

Another Juárez journalist noted the level of solidarity in that city compared with parts of Tamaulipas:

Juárez is a great exception and at the same time it's a great example, because in Juárez—what hasn't happened in Tamaulipas and what I feel hasn't happened in other states—has managed to happen. Reporters in Juárez, despite being in a more dangerous city or what's considered a more dangerous city and what's considered a bigger risk for work, reporters have decided to unite and use the model that Colombia used. In Colombia, as I understand it, news organizations decided to deal with the situation in front of them with "let's all cover it. They can't hit everyone. And if they hit one we're going to continue covering it. They can't eliminate all of us."

## Discussion

The methodology of semi-structured interviews with journalists who worked in 11 media markets in the northern Mexican states allowed for the gathering of data about professional reflexivity, lending itself to analysis of journalists. Despite an overt presence of professional reflexivity among journalists in the six border states, the wide variation of findings regarding journalists' professional reflexivity are consistent with previous scholarship about journalists working in northern Mexico (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014).

Our analysis found numerous instances of contradictions between principles and practice, which is consistent with what other scholars studying Mexico and Latin America have found (Herscovitz 2004; Márquez Ramírez 2012). In a zone of conflict, the divide between the real and ideal seemed to take on greater significance where one's life could be at risk if normative principles are, or are not, applied, depending on the situation (González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014).

Despite the constraints, journalists were quick to share their thoughts about being a committed reporter or editor, given the responsibility to the public.

On the question of the potential for collective professional autonomy, there were distinct perceptions that varied from state to state about the need for collective action in the form of journalism professional organizations. The variation in professional identity reaffirms what others have found in previous studies on Mexican journalists: that there was no dominant professional model that journalists adhere to (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Hughes 2006; Márquez Ramírez 2012). In other words, some could be viewed as “change agents,” or receptive to collective professional autonomy, while others were more hesitant to join formal institutions such as journalism organizations. Yet we recognize, in some small ways, journalists pulling together, even if informally, and less expansively.

Journalists from Chihuahua and Tamaulipas appeared to stand in opposition regarding the question of collective autonomy. The distinction between these two states can be partly explained by the journalism culture that existed prior to the recent wave of violence in those two parts. Historically, the press in Tamaulipas has been less aggressive than in other northern states (Arana and Guazo 2011; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). The authors recognize also that the relative size of the media markets may influence professional perceptions. At the same time, other societal forces, including the presence of the criminal organization known as Los Zetas, represents another factor that distinguishes Tamaulipas. Members of this organization have been particularly brutal in their quest to secure trade routes for drugs and other illicit goods, and part of the group’s strategy includes controlling the news media (Antonio Mazzitelli, personal interview, November 20, 2013).

It should also be noted that there is wide variation among professional organizations. Some of the organizations to which journalists referred in Baja California Norte are those that receive support from or have some sort of ties to the government, which could explain why some journalists in that area of the north were hesitant to join these organizations. The journalism networks (*redes*) created in Chihuahua, by contrast, are civil society organizations that have been created by and run by journalists themselves.

Lack of solidarity among journalists has long been an issue for journalists throughout Mexico (González de Bustamante 2011; Estévez 2010; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014a; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). The emergence of groups such as la Red de Periodistas de Juárez, which has participated in joint actions with the Mexico City-based la Red de Periodistas de a Pié (Network of Journalists on Foot) such as protests against violence and aggressions against journalists (*El Universal* 2014) and training, could signal a shift toward more collective action, and perhaps the strengthening of the existence of collective professional autonomy, at least at the conceptual level (Kasher 2005). As has been mentioned, collective professional autonomy refers to the freedom of a group to determine what it means to be a member of that profession.

We submit that those involved with la Red de Periodistas de Juárez have extended the concept of professional journalism as a public service, to something that goes beyond reporting and publishing. The Juárez editor’s comment about disseminating knowledge about journalism, and that “We’re going to share it! We’re going to get it out there! For the profession,” indicates a tendency toward activism and vision far beyond the newsroom. Far from operating on “the outside” of conflict, these journalists are confronting it head on, as Brooten (2006) found in another geopolitical and ethnic context.

In the midst of violence, and in part because of the persistent aggressions toward members of the media, at least in Juárez, a community of collective professional autonomy has emerged, which has implications for the level of professionalism in the normative sense, as well as for the very construction of the meaning of journalism as a profession (conceptual autonomy). Whether the presence of these communities of collective autonomy represent a heightened level of professionalization, or whether they help to create and foster professionalization, goes beyond the scope of this study, as interviews alone are not enough to explain why this has occurred in Chihuahua and not in other Mexican states.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

The study is a cross-sectional piece of qualitative research, and therefore not generalizable. We suggest longitudinal research is necessary to address whether our findings point to a temporary response to a variety of seemingly untenable circumstances and constraints, or a phenomenon that signals journalists *cum* activists as a characteristic of journalism professionalism in northern Mexico that will define journalism in the region for decades to come.

This study focused on the northern Mexican states, laying the groundwork for future comparative work. For example, Veracruz, on the eastern coast of the country, and another peripheral region to the capital, in 2014 had replaced the northern states to become the most deadly place for journalists in Mexico. Future studies could examine how violence against journalists in that state has influenced perceptions about professionalism? Future research also should compare these questions between journalists at the center (i.e. Mexico City) and the periphery. In addition, the comment that one journalist made that in Ciudad Juárez they have followed “the Colombian model” as an effort to improve journalist safety, and quality of journalism, points to the need for comparative research between Mexican journalists and those in Colombia.

### **Conclusion**

The shifting nature of violence in the country’s north, coupled with historical circumstances that have influenced the practice of journalism in the region, demonstrate that with respect to questions of professionalism, and collective professional autonomy, there are “multiple” journalism cultures, similar to the “multiple borders” that divide the United States and Mexico (Correa-Cabrera and Staudt 2014). Therefore, when embarking on a project that examines journalism phenomena in frontier regions, scholars would be wise to acknowledge historical and contemporary distinctions.

The study remains significant also because it advances our understanding of conceptual professional autonomy in what some journalists in some of the northern states have likened to working in a “war zone.” Despite the challenges, and in some cases as a result of them, the limits on freedoms of the press have prompted journalists to continue to define what it means to be a journalist, at least on a conceptual level.

Finally, one of the strengths of our study is found in its power to illustrate that even in the midst of the harshest working conditions, such as those journalists who cover Tamaulipas, journalists in zones of conflict often can, and sometimes frequently do, reflect upon their professional values and ideals. These actions of professional reflexivity comprise

one of the many tools and responses to working in an environment of fluid and unpredictable violence, and quite possibly are what have allowed some journalists to stay alive as well as continue practicing journalism.

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## NOTE

1. From the Red de Periodistas de Juárez website (<http://reddeperiodistasdejuarez.org/>).

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