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RISK AND FORMS OF VIOLENCE IN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM WITHIN DIGITAL NATIVE MEDIA:

a study of quinto elemento and periodismo de barrio[1]

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ABSTRACT – Journalism poses inherent dangers for its practitioners and discomforts for those in positions of power around the globe. In response to this concern, this article examines the sources of risk, its manifestations and consequences in Periodismo de Barrio and Quinto Elemento, two digital media outlets focused on investigative journalism in Latin American contexts with distinct political, media, and journalistic risk structures: Mexico and Cuba. Through qualitative interviews with journalists from both outlets, the multidimensional nature of risks is unveiled, alongside the complexity of threats ranging from physical to symbolic violence. The conclusions underscore the dynamic interplay between risk factors and violence against journalists at the social level, the experiential nature of shared perceptions regarding this phenomenon, and the significance of investigative journalism in comprehending the diverse manifestations of violence against journalists.
Key words: Risks. Violence. Journalism. Cuba. Mexico.

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RISCOS E FORMAS DE VIOLÊNCIA NO JORNALISMO INVESTIGATIVO NA MÍDIA DIGITAL NATIVA: os casos do quinto elemento e do jornalismo de vizinhança

RESUMO – O jornalismo a nível global é uma profissão perigosa para os seus praticantes e desconfortável para os poderes constituídos. Em resposta a esta preocupação, o artigo examina as fontes de risco, suas manifestações e consequências no Periodismo de Barrio e no Quinto Elemento, dois meios digitais orientados ao jornalismo investigativo em contextos latino-americanos com diferentes estruturas políticas, midiáticas e de risco para o trabalho jornalístico: México e Cuba. Através de entrevistas qualitativas com jornalistas de ambos os meios de comunicação, é revelada a natureza multidimensional dos riscos; bem como a complexidade das ameaças, da violência física à simbólica. As conclusões destacam a inter-relação dinâmica entre os fatores de risco e a violência contra jornalistas a nível social, a natureza experiencial das percepções partilhadas sobre este fenômeno e a relevância do jornalismo de investigação para compreender a manifestação de múltiplas formas de violência contra jornalistas.
Palavras-chave: Riscos. Violência. Jornalismo. Cuba. México.

RIESGO Y FORMAS DE VIOLENCIA EN EL PERIODISMO DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN MEDIOS NATIVOS DIGITALES: los casos de quinto elemento y periodismo de barrio

RESUMEN – El periodismo a nivel global es una profesión peligrosa para sus practicantes, e incómoda para los poderes. En respuesta a esta preocupación, el artículo examina las fuentes de riesgo, sus manifestaciones y consecuencias en Periodismo de Barrio y Quinto Elemento, dos medios digitales orientados al periodismo de investigación en contextos latinoamericanos con diferente estructura política, mediática y de riesgos para el trabajo periodístico: México y Cuba. A través de entrevistas cualitativas a los periodistas de ambos medios se revela la naturaleza multidimensional de los riesgos; así como la complejidad de las amenazas, desde la violencia física hasta la simbólica. Las conclusiones destacan la interrelación dinámica entre factores de riesgos y violencias contra los periodistas a nivel social, el carácter experiencial de las percepciones compartidas sobre este fenómeno y la relevancia del periodismo de investigación para entender la manifestación de las múltiples formas de violencia contra los periodistas.
Palabras clave: Riesgos. Violencia. Periodismo. Cuba. México.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, journalists, news organizations, and the institution of journalism have faced increased levels of risk and uncertainty. This trend has been documented worldwide. For the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), journalism has become a dangerous profession, and "the threats faced by journalists are numerous and far-reaching" (Unesco, 2020, p. 1).

This study addresses this global issue and adopts a comprehensive and relational approach to risk (Hughes et al., 2017) in two Latin American contexts. The first, Mexico, has the highest number of murdered or disappeared journalists in the region, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The second, Cuba, ranks the lowest in press freedom, according to the annual global ranking by Reporters Without Borders (RFS).

Mexico and Cuba have different political histories and media systems. Mexico is characterized by a heterogeneous media system in geographic and cultural terms, where both liberal or democratic and authoritarian practices coexist (González & Echeverría, 2018), acting in a wide degree of ambiguity, regulatory inefficiency, and (neo)clientelism (Guerrero & Márquez, 2015). For its part, Cuba has a media system with a Soviet structure, where political-partisan-state intervention and legal deregulation predominate (Olivera & De Maio, 2023).

The relationship between context and threats to journalism has been previously examined in both cases, but particularly in the case of Mexico (Brambila & Hughes, 2019; Celecia, 2020; Garcia, 2019; Gómez & Celecia, 2022; González-Macías & Reyna-García, 2019; Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014; Salazar, 2019). These previous studies have confirmed that "greater support for democratic roles for journalism increases the likelihood that a journalist will be threatened" (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018, p. 16).

In line with this approach, this study focuses on two investigative journalism outlets: Periodismo de Barrio (PB) in Cuba and Quinto Elemento (QE) in Mexico. In both outlets, journalists challenge a broad range of risk factors and manifestations due to the political and social contexts in which they operate and the nature of their investigative journalism.

This study aims to identify the sources of risk, threats (as manifestations of risk), and consequences that, based on the experiences and perceptions of journalists from both organizations, affect the practice of quality journalism in their respective contexts. Accordingly, the questions that have guided the construction of knowledge are posed as follows: what are the sources and manifestations of risk in the exercise of journalism in PB and QE; and what are their consequences, concerning the possibility of producing quality journalism in their respective contexts?

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This study primarily relies on interviews and adopts an analytical approach centered on integrative analysis, drawing on the frameworks of Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023) and González (2021), as well as the open/axial coding of interviews.

The following sections will cover theoretical and methodological aspects. Then, the results were organized into four sections. The first is dedicated to the risk factors for the practice of journalism. The second, focused on the forms of violence. The third and fourth are referred to the consequences at the individual, organizational, and social levels. Finally, the conclusion section discusses these results, along with their theoretical and methodological implications for this field of study, and suggests a new research agenda.

2 Theoretical review: notes on the study of risks and violence in journalism

Studies on journalist safety and violence have historically focused on journalistic work in conflict and war zones (Ashry, 2019; Düsterhöft, 2013). However, in an increasingly systematic manner, the violence and risks of practicing journalism in multiple contexts associated with physical violence (harassment, imprisonment, bodily harm, arrests, killings, and so on) have been documented (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014).

Violence against journalists has become an emerging and relevant field of study internationally, particularly in high-risk contexts, including insecure democracies, authoritarian, and 'post-authoritarian' countries (Brambila & Hughes, 2019; Hughes et al., 2017; Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). However, as a multidimensional object of study, its analysis is problematic.

Part of the research on this topic has tended to focus on particular aspects (e.g., political influences) (Dunham, 2017) or on "objective" parameters (e.g. number of journalists killed) (IFJ, 2018; Unesco, 2008). Other studies have aimed to develop more comprehensive and integrative perspectives, both through comparative analyses (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018) and conceptual frameworks and developments (Brambila & Hughes, 2019).

Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023) have recently proposed a holistic conceptual framework on the safety of journalists.

In their model, they integrate risk factors; threats impacting physical, psychological, financial, and digital well-being and safety; consequences; and coping or response strategies of journalists. From their perspective, "power is the fundamental dynamic that underpins the safety of journalists" (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 3), and it is this power that manifests itself in risk factors, that generate threats, stress, and self-preservation efforts.

Risk factors for the practice of journalism are defined as variables that influence the way (material or perceived) in which threats manifest themselves (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Among these, they distinguish social (macro level), organizational or institutional (meso level), and individual (micro level).

In general, "macro-level risk factors are interrelated" (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 8) and range from political, economic, and cultural to technological and legal risks. In addition, they may intervene in the well-being and safety of journalists in conjunction with organizational (e.g., working conditions) and individual (e.g., professional experience) factors.

Risk factors, as mentioned, influence how threats to journalists, as individuals and institutional actors, manifest themselves (Brambila & Hughes, 2019). Manifestations or threats are both material and objective, and perceptual and subjective (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023), although they are also often classified as direct and indirect aggressions (Brambila & Hughes, 2019).

The former includes physical violence (murder, torture, imprisonment, assaults, detentions, kidnappings); while the latter includes cultural, symbolic, and psychological violence such as intimidation, hate speech, coercion, and public delegitimization, among others (Brambila & Hughes, 2019; Garcia, 2019). However, authors also refer to digital (Posetti, 2018), financial (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023), and legal threats (Carroll, 2021; Unesco, 2008, 2015).

Casede (2020, p. 42) identifies connections between certain actions and their perpetrators. Police, public officials, and organized crime are linked to intimidation, threats, judicial harassment, violent aggression, espionage, and digital surveillance. Impunity is linked to judicial bodies, and labor precariousness to media organizations and labor laws. These patterns are influenced by each country's historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics.

Violence and threats aim to alter the behavior of journalists and media outlets, thereby suppressing criticism, denunciation,

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and public scrutiny. The consequences for journalistic practice, democratic quality, and the well-being of journalists is an area that requires further research (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2018). However, González (2021) proposes a triple set of impacts of violence against journalists: individual, organizational and social.

At the individual level, González (2021) identifies psychological, personal, and professional repercussions, including stress, anxiety, social dysfunction, depression, fear, low self-esteem (Zúñiga, 2017), alteration of personal dynamics (e.g. change of city/country), self-censorship (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014), increased use of technologies, among others. At the organizational level, the alteration of newsroom practices (e.g. the decline of investigative journalism and limitations to professional autonomy) (Hughes et al., 2017; Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014); while at the social level, it includes misinformation, erosion of trust in the media and government, and other factors that limit the right to information and the consolidation of democratic societies (Gonzalez, 2021).

The risks, violence, and their impacts on journalists and the media are influenced by contextual factors. Therefore, it is important to consider the historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural elements of the media systems in Mexico and Cuba to better understand the theoretical discussions on this topic.

Mexico follows a federal political model with an electoral democracy and a highly pluralistic media system dominated by the private sector, with a large and unequal media market, vast cultural and regional diversity, and irregular modernization (González & Echeverría, 2018). The origins of violence against journalists in Mexico are associated with the authoritarian legacy and the implementation of a model of state control over the media derived from the hegemonic party system that shaped the country throughout the twentieth century. More recently, the growth of criminal groups associated with drug trafficking and the social violence unleashed since 2006 with the failed security policy of President Felipe Calderon, seem to mark the increase in violence against journalists, whose number of murders since 2000 is 167, according to the organization Article 19 (2022).

In Mexico, factors such as corruption in local and subnational governments and police forces - which act in a broad framework of impunity -, together with criminal violence, are associated with the risks most frequently reported by both journalists and researchers (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, 2018). Clientelism among political

and economic elites and criminal organizations exerts indirect influence and control over the media and journalism. Conditions of general insecurity pave the way for politically targeted violent actions against journalists (Bartman, 2018).

On the contrary, in Cuba, the media system is subordinated to the single-party political system, where subsidy and state ownership, verticality in decision-making, as well as informative-propagandist and educational-cultural functions predominate. In general, the intervention of multiple extra-media mechanisms in the functioning of the media has been documented in relation to official-state journalism. However, the limits of this model have been challenged for approximately two decades due to the increase in internet access and the emergence of digital media independent of the state, which despite not having legal status in the country have expanded the political diversity of the public space (Olivera & De Maio, 2023).

Notably, the following risk factors have been identified for the practice of journalism in Cuba case: working in an independent media outlet from the government and the state – critical of these powers; the functional (or not) positioning of the media before the strategies of political change by the U.S., which make them the target of attacks by both the government and political opposition groups; and the legal limitations to political plurality in the press and in society, which enables the centralized action of the state in the journalistic field (Garcia, 2019; Somohano, 2020).

3 Methodology

The study comprised two digital native media developing investigative journalism in Latin America, located in countries with different political histories and media systems: Cuba and Mexico (Guerrero & Márquez, 2015; Olivera & De Maio, 2023). The selection of the countries took into consideration such differences in terms of state structure and political system (multiparty, single-party), as well as regarding their media systems (liberal, Soviet), ensuring the selection of cases in the most distinct contexts possible (Levy, 2008). The selection of both countries also considered the presence of risk factors – varying in nature and intensity – that restrict independent journalism from political authorities (Garcia, 2019; Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; Salazar, 2019); as well as the historically instrumental

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relationship of the State with the press and the naturalization of violence against journalism.

On the other hand, the selection of journalistic organizations considered that in Cuba the only media independent from political power oriented to investigative journalism is PB (founded in 2015). Then, it was identified that this media had ascription and recognition in The Global Investigative Journalism Network (https://gijn.org/member/), as well as QE[2] (created in 2017), the only Mexican media in this network. Subsequently, it was verified on the respective websites that both media outlets had published work related to investigative journalism, and that they had made public complaints about situations of violence (espionage, arrests, surveillance) against their journalists.

The research method consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews, although it was supported by a guide of questions previously elaborated on the following dimensions of journalistic cultures: motivations for pursuing journalism in these media outlets, learning, differentiating features of journalism in the media, conception, and perception of journalistic roles, risks in the professional practice, challenges and future of journalism. This article deals with the analysis associated with the dimension of risk in professional practice.

Data collection[3] took place in April 2022 at QE through face-to-face interviews, and between January and February 2023 at PB via online interviews conducted through Google Meet. At QE, all the journalists were interviewed, six in total. At PB, it was decided to interview a sample with a similar number and composition to facilitate the integration of the information, considering the time of work of each one in the media and their functions.

Seven women (four from PB) and five men (two from PB) were interviewed, performing journalistic (three per media outlet), editorial (one per media outlet), and managerial (two per media outlet) roles. At QE, the interviewees are older and have more years of professional experience than PB; at the same time, half of the interviewees from PB do not reside in the country.

In both cases, the confidentiality of the data was guaranteed through various protocols, including the application of the questionnaire by different researchers, the anonymization of the transcripts, the establishment of passwords for the files and their identification by means of codes. Similarly, when publishing the results, careful

attention was given to the distinct contexts of each media outlet, and any data that could identify the testimonies was omitted.

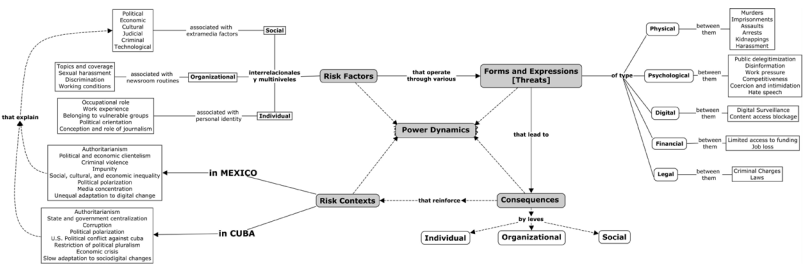
The processing and analysis of the information was carried out using NVivo software (version 12Plus), which allowed the identification of frequencies and relationships between words, codes and cases; as well as the use of representational resources of knowledge, which allow distinguishing common analytical orders and socializing conceptual articulations (Arellano & Santoyo, 2009) on risk in journalism.

The core components of the information comparison and integration were: (a) risk factors (social, organizational, and individual), (b) risk manifestations (physical, psychological, digital, financial, and legal violence), and (c) consequences (individual, organizational, and social).

The resulting analysis and interpretation model proposes a relational, multidimensional, fluid, cumulative and comprehensive perspective of risks in the practice of journalism (figure 1). For this purpose, it considered the theoretical review, specifically those proposed in Gonzalez (2021) and Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023), and incorporated the results of the open and axial coding of the interviews, following an inductive logic from the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mayring, 2000).

Figure 1

Model of analysis on risk in journalism focused on the description of factors, threats, and consequences



Source: own elaboration based on Gonzalez (2021), Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023), and open/axial coding of interviews.

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4 Risk factors for the practice of journalism: a dynamic and contextual perspective

The risk factors identified by journalists from both news outlets primarily operate at a social (systemic) level. Therefore, they are related to the contexts of insecurity for the independent journalism practice in Cuba and Mexico, which were briefly described in the previous sections.

In the case of PB, the risk factors identified by the interviewees are fundamentally linked to the political-state power, that is, to the structure of the political system, to the government (PB_03; PB_06), and, specifically, to its most repressive institutions (PB_02; PB_04). The interviewees also highlight the severe economic and social crisis that Cuba has faced since the covid-19 pandemic (PB_05; PB_06), which limits the resources needed to do journalism (PB_02) and leads to a significant migratory flow, including professional migration, because "people do not want to do journalism" (PB_06).

Furthermore, they highlight the factors associated with socio-technological transformations and their particular expressions on the island, ranging from access and quality of internet connection (PB_03) to changes in audiences and professional skills (PB_06).

The QE interviewees assert that the primary risk factors for journalism in Mexico include political and economic power, as well as organized crime groups and their clientelist networks. (QE_03; QE_06), since they perceive that "political power is intertwined with organized crime" and that "in some areas, they are one and the same" (QE_06). Likewise, they point out "the corporate control of the big media" (QE_04) and, together with this, labor precariousness (QE_01; QE_04; QE_06).

The environment of societal violence, particularly politically motivated violence against journalists, is another factor that generates "a very strong perception of insecurity (...), which was previously limited to certain regions and now is much more widespread" (QE_01). Likewise, the interviewees from this media outlet warn that the erosion of journalism's professional legitimacy is another key risk factor because, on the one hand, "society [...] does not care about what we do" (QE_06), and on the other hand, people get information from sources "that do not have a rigorous job", nor do they do "a good journalistic job" (QE_04).

The testimonies and analyses provided by the interviewees reveal not only the fluid and contextual nature of the sources of risk;

but also, the interrelated way in which they operate and reinforce each other as power dynamics.

From the perspective of PB interviewees, the economic risk factor in Cuba is inextricably linked to "the centralization of power" (PB_03) and the fact that the State does not "recognize the work you do" (PB_04). Meanwhile, for QE journalists, the delegitimization of journalism in society would be linked to "an imprint of rejection" (QE_06) resulting from an accumulation of decades in which the press cared more about power than citizens; as well as the political discourse on journalism, especially the one exercised from the Presidency of the Republic (QE_04; QE_06).

At the social level, in both case studies, the judiciary emerges as the institution where the dynamic and multidimensional interconnection of power structures is most evident as both a source and manifestation of risk to journalism.

Several PB interviewees indicate that legal risks give rise to additional economic, organizational and professional risks and consequences (PB_01; PB_04; PB_05), for example, the limitations of access to information sources. In addition, they point out that in Cuba a fundamental risk is the lack of a regulatory framework for independent journalism, which remains illegal (PB_04; PB_05; PB_06), and the politicization in law enforcement resulting from the U.S. political conflict against the country.

Interviewee PB_06 explains: "I allow you to exist, but I do not grant you legal recognition. I do not recognize your existence because since my relations with the United States change, for me you begin to be a problem [...] [and consequently] there are people who cannot return to Cuba".

In the case of QE, in the Mexican context, impunity is a fundamental risk factor (QE_01; QE_02; QE_03), as expressed by the interviewees, because "the fact that anyone can kill a journalist with impunity, that puts you at risk and makes you vulnerable" (QE_02). In addition, the promotion of legal initiatives that limit the operation of the media, or more commonly, judicial harassment through lawsuits, constitutes legal risks whose maneuvering comes "from the economic power, from the political and the criminal power" (QE_02).

In both case studies, the wide range of extra-media risk factors (at the social level) are also interrelated, to a lesser extent, with organizational and individual factors. Among the former, there are staff shortages and the absence of a sustainable financial model

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(QE_02; PB_06); while among the latter, there is the need for training in new professional skills (QE_06; PB_06).

Additionally, a strong emphasis on the values of investigative, civic, and watchdog journalism increases journalists' exposure to various sources of societal risk. Interviewee QE_03 at Quinto Elemento puts it this way: "the agents of power, let's say, political or economic power, can see us as a team of journalists who reveal irregularities or findings".

In this context, the interviewees tend to describe risk factors (or sources), their manifestations or forms of threats, and their consequences in an integrated manner. Sometimes it is not without methodological difficulties to distinguish between them because, after all, the risks in the exercise of journalism are felt and perceived from a personal dimension, although they account for social relations in general. In turn, power dynamics, on many occasions, tend to be woven through opacity and in a fragmented manner, which makes it more difficult to establish the relationships between sources of risk and their manifestations.

5 The diverse intersections of forms of violence against journalism

The primary narrative framework through which journalists discuss risk focuses on its psychological consequences at the individual level. However, the manifestations of risk vary depending on the context of each media outlet. Therefore, for PB we will first comment on psychological, symbolic, and discursive violence or threats, and then other more direct forms such as physical, economic, and legal violence. In contrast, for QE we will start with the forms of physical violence and then describe the rest.

It is important to note that the interviewees describe a collective experience, in which not all of them have been direct targets of the forms of violence described. However, they provide accounts of how they experience and perceive it, and specifically, they comment on those that have been denounced in the platforms of each media.

Among the manifestations of symbolic violence reported by PB members, the following stand out: harassment and intimidation (of the journalist, his family, friends, co-workers), surveillance and

infiltration, interrogation and blackmail, publication of personal data, defamation, disqualification and public stigmatization, temporary detentions, limitations to move within and outside the country, exile, and with all this, isolation from the rest of the social structures (PB_02; PB_03; PB_04; PB_05; PB_06).

Symbolic forms of risk also include gender-based violence, involving blackmail and "direct attack on individuals' gender identities and sexual orientations" (PB_04); digital violence, such as "attempts to hack personal accounts, emails, social profiles" (PB_04); economic violence, by leaving families with no means of income (PB_04); and legal threats, through arguments aimed at disqualifying the journalistic organization, such as receiving unauthorized funds, "which may be punishable by law" (PB_04).

The intersections between different forms of violence are particularly evident within the legal framework, which enables the non-recognition of independent journalistic work (PB_01), the impossibility of suing people who harm journalists (PB_04), restrictions on returning to the country (which is in practice an exile), imprisonment (PB_04; PB_05; PB_06), among others. Likewise, the people interviewed in this environment point out that detention and interrogation frequently involve physical violence. However, they indicate that such forms as murder or torture have not been identified in the Cuban context (PB_02; PB_05).

The risks for journalism developed by a media outlet such as PB in Cuba, according to the interviewees, have increased in recent years. The "level of escalation, non-recognition, and absence of dialogue [...] with respect to the independent media, and [...] all the manifestations of repression that this has had [...] I feel it, very violent, very unthinkable" (PB_06).

In contrast, QE journalists primarily report experiencing physical violence, including murder, kidnapping, enforced disappearances, and attacks (QE_01; QE_02; QE_03; QE_04; QE_05; QE_06), "because we live in the most lethal and dangerous country in the world to do journalism" (QE_02). This situation is perceived as much more serious due to the levels of impunity, where, in many cases, rather than the State, "journalists themselves are often responsible for investigating these deaths" (QE_02).

Physical security affects both individual and organizational levels of media operations (QE_01), given the risk that a team member could become a victim of such an event (QE_05). Therefore, the

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context of general violence has an impact on the way psychological, symbolic, discursive, digital, or other forms of violence are perceived and felt, since they activate emotions associated with the possibility of escalation in the type of physical violence. "It's not that I don't want to, but it's that I know they are going to do something to me. [...] It is very dangerous. I mean, all the time thinking that they are going to do something to me" (QE_05).

Among the symbolic violence, the pressures, the limitations to do fieldwork, the surveillance of journalists and their families, or the espionage to which several members of the media have been subjected, stand out (QE_01; QE_02; QE_03; QE_04; QE_05; QE_06). According to the interviewees, the latter has manifested itself through forms of digital violence, due to the fact that "they have been spied on with Pegasus malware" (QE_03). In addition, in the digital space they indicate other forms of violence such as harassment, verbal attacks on social networks, insults (QE_01) and other manifestations of hate speech. "Sometimes, when we post things, strange trolls suddenly appear", remarks interviewee QE_05.

Specifically, the members of this media agree in pointing out the forms of discursive violence such as the stigmatization and disqualification of journalism and certain journalists by the President of the Republic. These manifestations contribute to creating "a cascade effect" (QE_02) and "placing them at risk" (QE_06). In turn, the denial of facts or the concealment of information by public officials, also tends to limit the journalistic practice: "We have found that the authorities deny the existence of certain events, even when we know they do" (QE_04).

In a similar way to PB, at QE the intersection between the forms of violence in the legal sphere is appreciated. In this case, not only because of the general context of impunity, but also because of what they call "judicial harassment" (QE_02) due to the establishment of lawsuits against journalists and the organization (QE_01; QE_02), or the promotion of tax reforms (QE_03; QE_06). As a result, the organization also faces economic risks due to legal expenses and limited access to funding sources. Interviewee QE_02 notes that they nearly lost their "registration as an authorized grantee, and we were close to shutting down".

This increases the risk of financial instability given the precarious working conditions journalists face in the country, who receive low salaries (QE_01) and many of them work "without

contracts, without social security, without economic benefits" (QE_03).

Based on the evidence presented, it appears that the structures of violence against journalists and the dynamics of power that generate them are more complex, diverse and multifaceted in Mexico than in Cuba, and in Quinto Elemento than in Periodismo de Barrio. While acknowledging the severity and irreversible consequences of murder and other forms of physical violence against journalists in Mexico, the sophisticated and interconnected nature of violence in both cases suggests comparable effects at the individual, organizational, and social levels.

6 Violence and its multiple consequences for journalists

Previous sections highlighted that risk factors in journalism and their manifestations are dynamically interconnected. This section will explore their multiple and cumulative consequences on individual well-being

The consequences of risks in the practice of journalism for the people interviewed include aspects such as emotional stability and stress, destabilization of social ties, social isolation, and self-censorship, among others.

The risks pointed out affect, in the words of journalists from both media, stability and emotional well-being (PB_05; PB_06; QE_05). Despite the satisfactions related to the type of journalism they do, "the emotional cost is too strong" (QE_05) and "in terms of mental health [...] it has been very painful, it has been very difficult" (PB_06).

Among the interviewees, it is common to express a sense of fear linked to the perception of exposure to risks. In QE, one of the members of his team points out that "every time a journalist is killed, it terrifies us... it shakes everyone... it affects many, and it impacts the entire country" (QE_05). For his part, a journalist from PB specifies: "I have been lucky that it has not happened to me, and yet, [I have] the fear that at any moment it can happen [detention, interrogation] and it affects me at certain times" (PB_05).

The situation described also affects family and support networks, since "fear begins to spread" (QE_02) and they are questioned to do "something safer" (QE_02). Notably, PB interviewees emphasize that one of the main consequences of violence against

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journalists is the destabilization of social relationships. One of them poses this dilemma as follows: "What do you do [...] to survive? Especially when you are outside any structured system in society that allows you to survive" (PB_04). In turn, another reflects on the multidimensionality of the situation of isolation, which is usually associated in the Cuban case with strong moral coercion:

> When you reach a point of such extreme social isolation that you withdraw because your family views you with suspicion, your colleagues distance themselves, you can no longer find work in any state institution, or your boyfriend is told he must leave you because you are a dissident (PB_06).

Social isolation and the feeling of responsibility in relation to family or other emotional ties, which are exposed to similar risks, is a trigger for decisions to migrate, and with it, even not to try to return, according to PB members. "People do not want to move back to a country where their family will be harassed" (PB_03).

In addition to the family, the responsibility for the safety of other people also includes one's co-workers, subordinates, and sources, according to QE journalists (01; 05).

It is crucial to understand that these consequences are interrelated and cumulative. For instance, job instability and precariousness, which themselves result from economic, legal, and political risks, exacerbate stress, feelings of uncertainty, and overall well-being (PB_01; QE_02).

Another consequence of the risks for people working in both environments is the implementation of personal security strategies (individual and organizational). Self-censorship has serious professional and emotional implications. This is a consequence associated with the awareness of risk conditions, complemented with the application of different safety and editorial work strategies aimed at preserving both personal condition and the ability to continue doing journalism.

Some testimonies of the interviewees better illustrate this situation: "I have stopped doing complicated stories so as not being singled out socially" (PB_03); "there are colleagues who have preferred not to do things or not to ask questions because they know that this could put them in the public eye for an issue of scorn" (QE_04); "when we were less aware, we took greater risks [...] as persecution intensified and the environments in which we could operate changed, we had to become more cautious" (PB_04); 'we do not call it self-

censorship, because it seems to us... because of the conditions... it is not that I do not want to, but it is that I know that they are going to do something to me' (QE_05). One interviewee also describes how "the stories chosen to be told must be reported from specific secure spaces" (PB_04).

At the individual level, journalists also adopt other protective strategies, which further highlight the psychological impact of these risks. For example, an interviewee from PB comments on his personal strategy of mental blocking: "I have not done it because of an issue such as continuing to protect myself from it, somehow I feel that it is like a defense mechanism, as the less you know about this, the less it will happen to me" (PB_05).

Interviewees also implement protection strategies focused on safeguarding information and equipment, along with adapting reporting practices. The measures aimed at preserving information and equipment applied by journalists from both media are: protecting work accounts, making several recordings and information backups, using secure messaging platforms, encrypting data and storage devices, having more than one work team, using disposable phones during coverage or cell phones instead of professional cameras (PB_01; PB_03; PB_06; QE_01; QE_04).

Likewise, interviewees report having adapted their reporting strategies, implementing measures such as avoiding solo coverage, researching locations in advance, maintaining communication with colleagues, expanding sources of information, refining investigative methods, minimizing public exposure for certain periods, and temporarily relocating (PB_03; PB_05; PB_06; PB_06; QE_02; QE_05; QE_06).

The time, energy, and financial resources required to implement these strategies also limit journalists' ability to focus on their work, leading to frustration and negatively impacting their well-being.

The data presented so far indicate the multiple consequences for journalists' mental and physical health of stress, fear, social isolation, job instability, self-censorship, and the need to incorporate protective strategies in daily life. However, these must be observed in their relationship with the structure and functioning of both media (organizational level), and their societies in general (social level).

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7 The consequences for quality journalism and society as a whole

In general, the interviews reveal a network of interconnected consequences stemming from risks and threats, affecting key areas such as newsroom operations (PB_01) and investigative journalism practices (QE_03). Thus, for example, both QE and PB journalists identify as a direct consequence of the risks: a) restrictions in access to information sources, especially official and government sources, b) the application of security protocols, and in association, c) the transformation of editorial routines, d) the use of economic resources and personnel in functions not associated with journalistic production, among others.

In the case of QE, the refusal of officials to grant interviews and the rejection of public information requests by government agencies obstruct investigative efforts (QE_03; QE_04). Likewise, they add the presence of "sources you don't know if you can trust" (QE_04), the elimination of relevant information from platforms (e.g. YouTube videos), and the impossibility "to do field work, due to insecurity concerns in multiple regions" (QE_03).

For PB, the limitations in accessing information sources have broader implications. On the one hand, they do not have access to government sources (PB_01; PB_02; PB_03; PB_06), as they "lack official recognition and legal channels to engage with institutions, authorities, and officials" (PB_06), and have stricter restrictions "to move around the country" (PB_03). On the other hand, the social stigmatization of the media limits journalists' ability to engage with local sources (PB_04; PB_06). One of the interviewees explains it this way:

> As soon as people hear that you are from Periodismo de Barrio – which, of course, is disclosed immediately as part of professional ethics – they decide not to talk to you [...]. They fear collaborating with the media and facing reprisals, which they see being exposed daily on social media (PB_05).

As a result of these restrictions, "practicing independent journalism has become increasingly complex and difficult" (QE_06) for both media organizations. Another direct consequence has been the implementation of organizational security protocols and journalist training programs, which have significantly altered editorial workflows and personal routines.

Media security protocols include a broad set of measures, including avoiding exposure to risk situations (PB_04; QE_04) and working in teams (PB_04; QE_05). Additionally, they involve limiting the public presence of journalists (PB_06), providing strategies for journalists to change their residence, even to other countries (PB_01; PB_04; QE_02), using VPN (PB_05; QE_02), encrypting (QE_02), backing up (PB_04; QE_04) and compartmentalize information (PB_06), establish alliances with organizations and specialists to verify equipment (PB_05; QE_03), install surveillance systems ("with cameras and alarms") (QE_03), store equipment in protective neoprene cases (QE_05), use secure messaging platforms (QE_02), establish keywords in communications (QE_01), systematically report the location of journalists in the field (QE_02), among others.

Alongside security protocols, QE and PB have implemented psychological support programs, including individual and group therapy (PB_05; QE_05); legal support, for the defense (hiring of lawyers) against lawsuits (QE_02; PB_03); and economic support, to acquire new equipment (PB_03). These actions, although they demonstrate both media outlets' adaptability (which will be addressed in the next section), negatively impact their operations, since they require the use of resources and personnel in processes that are not directly aimed at journalistic production.

Additionally, PB interviewees highlighted disruptions in the organization's internal stability, particularly affecting journalist retention, which in turn compromises the quality of reporting. In general, they have "lost personnel due to these processes [persecution, harassment, surveillance]" (PB_06) and due to the wave of external migration, including internal professional migration, that the country is experiencing. As a result, "we are running out of people who want to write, so we cannot perhaps do the work we want to do" (PB_05).

The testimonies of the interviewees also help to distinguish how direct consequences have specifically translated into editorial consequences. For QE it has been through measures with a relatively minimal impact on the standards of journalistic work, such as the protection of the identity of journalists (QE_04) and the reinforcement of investigative methods (QE_02). The members of this media agree that "so far we have not refrained from reporting on any topic" (QE_02).

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However, for PB the consequences on the quality of journalism have been broader. According to the interviewees, it has affected the depth of investigations (PB_04), "the standards of verification" (PB_06), the coverage of topics of interest to the media, the availability of "stories to tell" (PB_05), and how stories are told (PB_04).

Finally, PB and QE team members also identify consequences at the social level. The first is the decrease in credibility and professional legitimacy of journalism, which affects access to public information and social debate. As one of the interviewees suggests: "I think that in the end the stories do not end up reaching the people, and in some cases, when they do reach them, they run up against a wall, against the official narrative" (QE_04).

A second social consequence, as described by other interviewees, is the "normalization of violence", fear, and impunity – so severe that it has led to the acceptance of acts such as an "act of repudiation at my grandmother's house" (PB_06) or "a reality where killing someone is easy and goes unpunished" (QE_02). Both consequences, it is worth noting, erode the guarantees of fundamental rights, including the right to life, non-discrimination, access to information, and freedom of expression, while also limiting the democratic possibilities of Cuban and Mexican societies.

8 Conclusions

This article aims to identify the sources of risk, their manifestations, and their impact on journalism, as perceived by the members of PB and QE, organizations oriented to investigative journalism in high-risk environments in Latin America.

The contexts of the two media, Cuba and Mexico respectively, are differentiated by their political and media structures, as well as by the risks that have a greater impact on the practice of journalism. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate the interconnected, multidimensional, and dynamic interplay of power structures in shaping journalism.

The first question of the study sought to situate and describe the sources and manifestations of risk for each news organization. In this sense, it was found that the main source of risk for PB is political power, which also operates through and within economic, judicial, and even technological powers. For QE, however, the complicity –

and struggles – between the political, economic, judicial and criminal powers constitute a fluid framework of uncertainties and risks.

In both cases, power structures operate in an interconnected way, with political power manifesting in judicial harassment, physical violence, surveillance, and other forms of repression. Therefore, the combination of diverse sources that generate risks for journalism also enables multiple and interrelated forms and manifestations of threats and violence against journalists.

Furthermore, in both media, some journalists have directly suffered some type of violence (e.g. surveillance, judicial harassment, interrogation, forced migration), while others have experienced it indirectly. Such data coincide with what has been pointed out by previous research in relation to the situation of journalism independent of State structures in the contexts of the two countries, where manifestations such as aggressions, arrests, dismissals, surveillance, confiscation of work equipment, interrogations, judicial harassment, forced migration, among others, are recorded (Casede, 2020; Celecia, 2020).

While PB and QE work teams have not directly experienced the most extreme forms of violence recorded in their contexts – murder in Mexico and imprisonment in Cuba – the perception of risk is shaped by collective awareness and a sense of potential threat, as expressed by interviewees.

The results, therefore, seem to suggest that the relevance and peripheral position of both news organizations in relation to their respective media systems could have a bearing on the relative moderation of violence against their journalists. This should be understood with caution, given that, on the contrary, investigative journalism is often considered a predictor of threats to the profession. At the end of the day, attacks (on journalists) serve as evidence that certain journalism fulfills its role: exposing popular discontent, investigating the dark folds of power, revealing lies and propaganda (Waisbord, 2021).

The second research question examined the impact of risk on the feasibility of producing high-quality journalism in each media context. In this sense, the research corroborates what has been pointed out by the preceding literature, by reporting on the relationship between risks, violence, and consequences such as self-censorship (Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017, 2018), professional migration (González-Macías & Reyna-García, 2019), personal well-

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being, professional routines, among others (González, 2021; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

The multiple and cumulative consequences of risks and violence affect, in the first place, the well-being of PB and QE journalists, affecting their emotional stability, increasing stress, and social isolation. Likewise, they enhance self-censorship and the implementation of security strategies aimed at preserving both personal conditions and the ability to continue doing journalism.

At the organizational level, interviewees recognize several direct consequences, including restrictions on access to sources of information, transformation in newsroom routines, high staff turnover, rising costs related to non-journalistic activities, and changes in the quality of news content. Likewise, at the social level, they distinguish two fundamental consequences: the decrease in the credibility and professional legitimacy of journalism, and the naturalization of violence. All this substantially affects public debate and the right of access to information.

Despite the risks and challenges faced by both media outlets, their commitment to critical and investigative journalism remains – contrary to findings in other studies (Hasan & Wadud, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of violence and threats, which are intended to coerce journalists and media outlets, and thus suppress critical reporting, investigative journalism, and public scrutiny, does not seem to have been fully achieved in these cases.

However, this analysis must acknowledge that both news organizations remain vulnerable to political, economic, technological, and cultural pressures that could ultimately threaten their survival. Therefore, it would seem that the type of quality journalism they develop is done at the limit of what is possible, demanding additional organizational, material, and psychological efforts beyond the usual ones of this profession. All this seems to confirm what international projects on journalism in the context of the so-called Global South have been pointing out, in relation to the multilevel dynamics of risks and threats to journalism, and their consequences. While it is inspiring to document the resilience of digital-native media and their survival strategies, it also raises concerns regarding their long-term sustainability (Sembramedia, 2021).From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study have significant implications for the field of journalism studies. The first implication concerns the importance of understanding

how journalists perceive and experience risk – primarily through its psychological consequences. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to contextualize the diverse factors and manifestations of risk, recognizing their direct and indirect connections to violence. The second implication is the need to highlight the complexity of evolving relationships between consequences, manifestations, and risk factors. The interconnected manifestations of experienced and perceived risks allow for a comprehensive identification of both cumulative consequences and the opacity of related multilevel factors. The third, and no less important, is the precarious and shifting relationship between journalism's role in democratic societies, differentiated and selective exposure to violence, the peripheral position of independent media within the broader system, and the relative survival of investigative journalism projects in high-risk environments.

Likewise, the analytical framework developed in this study integrates and refines the recent theoretical proposals of Gonzalez (2021) and Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023), while providing empirical support for a relational, comprehensive, and multidimensional understanding of risk in journalism. This approach is grounded in a methodological strategy focused on analytical integration, comparing similar cases across highly contrasting contexts.

In general, it is recommended to compare these findings with the perceptions of journalists working in other media in Cuba and Mexico, as well as expanding the sample of digital-native investigative media in other contexts. This would enable a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between risks affecting quality journalism, its actual practice, and its ability to challenge power structures. In addition, it is necessary to explore the unintended consequences of risks and threats to journalism associated with resilience, which in the framework of the present study will be the subject of another publication. Finally, and just as crucial, this analysis underscores the need to refine theoretical frameworks to better explain the relationship between risk and quality journalism in the Global South, considering the intersection of deeply entrenched inequalities, authoritarian traditions, and cultural-structural constraints that shape the possibilities for critical and investigative journalism.

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2 Legally, Quinto Elemento is an independent, non-profit organization whose team engages in journalism, as well as other activities such as training and advising investigative projects. For the purposes of this study, it will be treated as a media outlet.

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