



Ecuador: Journalistic Ethics and Freedom of Expression at a crossroads

Saudia Levoyer 

Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Av. Toledo N22-80, Quito 170525, Ecuador
saudia.levoyer@uasb.edu.ec

Abstract. This work is a current diagnostic study of journalistic ethics, involving three hundred journalists from Ecuador. They described the environment in which they perform their activities and the ethical difficulties these conditions provoke. Compliance with ethical principles based on their self-regulations was also evaluated, and alternatives for improving journalism quality understood as a key element for democracy, were discussed. Methodologically, a mixed method was used: participant observation, focus groups, content analysis, and interviews. The work concludes with some recommendations that could be implemented by organizations linked to the press, the government, and academia. Violence, low wages, political polarization, and misinformation form the backdrop where Ecuadorian journalists practice their profession. This environment leads to information characterized by immediacy, superficiality, lack of context, and verification. This quality issue, linked to ethics, comes with additional problems such as self-censorship and payments for activities like image promotion for politicians or support for disinformation campaigns.

Keywords: Press, ethics, freedom of expression, democracy.

1 A Context of Latent Challenges

Please Misinformation, according to Olmo and Romero [1], can be defined as "the intentional dissemination of unsubstantiated information that seeks to undermine public trust, distort facts, transmit a certain way of perceiving reality, and exploit vulnerabilities with the aim of destabilizing". The goal is to gain political advantages, undermine democratic values, and spread a narrative that changes reality.

To achieve this, social media plays a central role due to the ease with which content can go viral. UNESCO [2] highlights the importance of verified information and the need to differentiate between erroneous information, misinformation, problematic journalism, and journalism that meets professional standards.

Cavaller [3] reminds us that journalism is responsible for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating current events. Its practice is a communicative process that references facts, legal norms, a code of ethics, and business aspects that frame its activity. "If there is quality journalism, its measure must be made based on these dimensions that mark or determine its limits, restrictions, and requirements".

Colombia, Mexico, and Ecuador are three of the countries facing the most challenges due to the presence of organized crime. According to the Citizen Council

for Public Safety and Criminal Justice¹ [4], 17 of the 50 most dangerous cities in the world are in these two countries, specifically referring to Guayaquil in Ecuador.

Meanwhile, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, in its 2023 report [5], highlights that illicit activities in the Americas include, in addition to cocaine, heroin, and cannabis trafficking, human trafficking, extortion, illegal collections, arms trafficking, counterfeit products, crimes against flora, fauna, and non-renewable resources, financial and cyber-crimes, and synthetic drug trafficking.

These risks imply increased personal dangers for journalists in their work. The Committee to Protect Journalists² [6] report indicates that Ecuador's political unrest and security crisis impact journalists and freedom of expression, causing self-censorship due to potential reprisals. Consequently, more communities lack information on issues that affect them.

Reporters without Borders (RSF), in May 2024, reported that Ecuador fell 30 places in the global ranking, ranking 110th out of 180 countries, placing it in the "difficult situation" category for the free exercise of journalism. They cited the live takeover of a television channel (TC Televisión) by an organized crime group on January 9, 2024, as an example of what is happening [7].

Before this latest report, local organizations like the Andean Foundation for Media Observation and Study (Fundamedios) and Journalists Without Chains Foundation³ reported increasing attacks against journalists. Fundamedios noted that there were 356 cases in 2022, the highest number since 2018 [8], while Journalists Without Chains Foundation reported that from 2021 to August 2023, 659 journalists were attacked: 131 in 2021; 408 in 2022, and 120 up to April 2023 [9].

In 2018, the Ecuadorian press felt the violence of organized crime with the execution of three journalists from El Comercio by the Oliver Sinisterra group, based in Esmeraldas (specifically in Mataje), and dedicated to drug trafficking [10]. By 2023, Journalists Without Chains Foundation [11] reported that nine journalists had to leave the country due to threats from criminal groups.

Between 2007 and 2017, the process of media precariousness accelerated, not only due to the rapid technological changes in the industry or the lack of foresight by some media outlets but also due to political and economic pressures on the media from the executive branch [12] [13]. By May 2023, the Peripheries project of the Journalists Without Chains Foundation presented an advance of its work, finding that in 10 of Ecuador's 24 provinces (Carchi, Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Esmeraldas, Guayas, Loja, Los Ríos, Manabí, Pichincha, and Santo Domingo), journalists work in conditions they considered precarious: 48% earn the unified basic salary, 27% lost their jobs during the pandemic, 27% work part-time in a media outlet, 49% are freelance, and 54% do not have health insurance [14].

The same study indicates that journalists and media outlets are co-opted by political power and organized crime in various cities [15]. This must be added to what Mitchelsen and Boczkowski [16] called the competition for clicks and the consequent immediacy, affecting journalism's quality. Javier Darío Restrepo, in an article by the Gabo Foundation [17], pointed out that immediacy is a commercial value.

¹ Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal

² Comité de Protección de Periodistas

³ Fundación Periodistas Sin Cadenas

The Gabo Foundation [18] grouped approaches to address ethical doubts in journalism into two paths. The first is solving it through rules and principles, a problem-solving ethics approach. The second is formulating a way of living both professionally and personally. In Ecuador, the first approach is the most widespread. Nila Velázquez Coello [19], at the beginning of the millennium, indicated that it was necessary to establish codes and continually discuss the challenges journalists face. By 2008, the current Constitution in the country established communication as a right and guaranteed the search, receipt, exchange, production, and dissemination of "truthful, verified, timely, contextualized, plural information without prior censorship about facts, events, and processes of general interest, with subsequent responsibility" [20].

Other guarantees established in this norm include the clause of conscience, professional secrecy, and source confidentiality, in addition to the right to rectification, reply, or response. Prior censorship is only permitted during a state of emergency [21].

There are also all international norms around Human Rights, specifically in the sections on the exercise of freedom of expression and press: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the Declaration of Chapultepec, the Declaration of Salta, among other instruments.

The Organic Law of Communication [22], reformed in 2022, included an article for the voluntary regulation (self-regulation) of media outlets and guarantees for the exercise of journalism. Media outlets assumed the responsibility of publishing their codes of ethics or conduct on their websites, and these must include at least 11 principles: recognition of freedom of expression and opinion as a fundamental and inalienable right and a requirement for the existence of a democratic society; freedom of expression and press not limited to the work of communicators; freedom of expression and press encompasses cultural, artistic, religious, political expressions; the limits to freedom of expression and press can only be imposed by organic law; media outlets will promote the right to communication for minors; no person disseminating information of general interest will be forced to reveal their source, but this does not exempt them from subsequent responsibility; those engaging in communication activities cannot be forced to reveal secrets entrusted to them; journalists and communicators have the right to the clause of conscience; the State will guarantee the exercise of journalism, the safety, and life of communication workers and their families; the State will promote respect for journalists, establishing protective measures for those exposed to extraordinary or systematic risks, and international human rights instruments and the norms of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on the exercise of freedom of expression and press will be binding.

2. Methodology

This study is based on a mixed methodology, which began with participant observation in 12 out of the 24 provinces of the country. The insights gained from these observations were used to generate a non-representative survey. The survey results provided quantitative data on the behavior of journalists, which were then discussed in focus groups. In total, around 300 journalists participated. This comprehensive information also helped generate the questions for discussions with journalistic representatives, including both media owners and a foundation for freedom of expression.

The research question posed was: What are the main ethical doubts of Ecuadorian journalists in the digital era? The general objective was to analyze the main ethical difficulties of Ecuadorian journalists in the digital era, improve professional practice, and propose new questions in light of new scenarios. The objectives were to determine the main ethical problems faced by journalists in traditional and digital media in the digital era and to propose new questions for the emerging scenarios.

This work was conducted over a year, starting in January 2022 and finishing on July 2023, during a series of journalism ethics training workshops promoted by the Journalists Without Chains Foundation. A total of 12 workshops were held, but starting from the third, similar responses regarding the work environment and ethical doubts faced when addressing information became evident.

From this observation, it was decided that the workshops in Carchi, Cotopaxi, El Oro, Imbabura, and Pichincha, where approximately 150 participants were involved, would be used to confirm initial impressions about the environment in which they operate and the main ethical concerns they face in journalism. It is worth noting that another reason for choosing these locations is that they are peripheral areas, meaning they collaborated with journalists with little or no connection to Quito and Guayaquil, the largest cities in the country and where the most traditional media outlets are located.

Through participant observation, field journal recording, and meeting recordings, data were obtained, which then served as the basis for structuring a non-representative, random sample survey with 12 questions conducted via WhatsApp. In it, recurring problems found in the five workshops were listed, and participants could mention other difficulties. A total of 102 journalists participated in this survey.

Based on these results, two focus groups were structured, one in Cuenca and another in Santo Domingo, both on September 2023, to discuss the survey results and establish alternatives. Additionally, four media outlets (two digital, such as La Calle and Primicias.ec, and two traditional but with an online presence, Teleamazonas and El Comercio) were selected to analyze the content of their publications or broadcasts in random samples from July and August 2023 and determine whether they comply with their published deontological codes.

The work concluded with two interviews: one with the executive director of the Ecuadorian Association of Newspaper Editors⁴ (AEDEP) and another with the programmatic deputy director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation⁵ from Colombia (FLIP), given that country's experience in covering criminal violence.

3. Results

The political, economic, and social crisis, aggravated by the pressure from criminal gangs, is the context in which journalists work. Alongside this challenge are those inherent in competition generated by social media: immediacy, misinformation, and polarization.

Journalists from the five workshops affirm in their testimonies that the pressure for immediate publication causes content to lack contrast, verification, and context.

⁴ Asociación Ecuatoriana de Editores de Periódicos.

⁵ Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa

Additionally, two things are added. The first is that news agendas are centralized in Quito and Guayaquil, translating into the reproduction of official statements (press conferences, pronouncements, among others), making it difficult to position information from their localities. The second is the need to focus their media on specific topics and not compete with national ones, leading to the necessity for more training in various subjects, as well as in national and specific press regulations.

The need to diversify income sources without compromising information quality and ensuring journalists have dignified salaries is another problem. Politicians, local authorities, and even individuals suspected of belonging to organized crime being the main advertisers affect the credibility and independence of journalists. From this perspective, the urgency to diversify their income sources is highlighted. According to workshop participants, this could also curb discrediting campaigns against the press, especially when freedom of expression is manipulated to attack democratic institutions.

The three groups of questions in the survey participated in by 102 journalists covered their education, years of experience, and the type of media they work for; their ethical doubts (with closed questions); and their training needs.

Participants included 58 men, 41 women, and 3 LGBTIQ+ individuals, aged between 19 and 75 years. They come from twenty-three cities (in 11 provinces), with 51.9% of journalists working in cyber media, 27.4% in radio, 10.7% in television, and 9.8% in print media. The majority, equivalent to 68.62%, have a degree in Social Communication or Journalism, while the rest do not. Among the latter, 15% have completed secondary education and 3% primary education.

34.3% have more than 20 years of experience in journalism, 15.7% between 16 and 20 years, 12.7% between 11 and 15 years, and 27.5% between less than a year and 5 years of experience.

The list of ethical problems consisted of thirteen items, from which they could choose up to 5 and if any proposed ones were not relevant, they could write it. The results were: 12.7% admitted lack of contrast or verification; 22.5%, little planning; 44.1%, lack of time; 27.5%, violent environment; 38.2%, self-censorship; 3.9%, receiving money from public figures for image promotion; 8.8%, victim of prior censorship; 56.9%, obstacles to accessing public information; 9.8%, workplace harassment; 1%, sexual harassment in the workplace; 22.5%, low income forcing work for sources; 19.6%, lack of professional training; and 5.9%, use (forced or not) of fake social media accounts to spread content.

In both focus groups, once again, the economic problem of journalists was highlighted, emphasizing their need for additional jobs and how advertising management is used to reward or punish the media. This was also linked to the issue of the press's credibility and prestige and attempts to establish narratives that discredit other journalists.

Another topic was content plagiarism and reproductions of leaks without verification. Immediacy and the lack of internal quality controls, due to a lack of resources for trained editors, also weighed in on this. Another specific mention was the abuse of source anonymity to spread misinformation and propaganda.

In both focus groups, there were criticisms of the lack of access to public information, even though legal requests, under the pretext that authorization depends on

Quito or Guayaquil. Additionally, there is a lack of interest from authorities in responding to sensitive or vital local issues, which constitutes a barrier to investigative journalism. This is compounded by security problems due to the presence of organized crime and pressures from media owners or private and public financiers.

The lack of training and education for provincial journalists is another weakness. Those in Santo Domingo spoke of the lack of knowledge of legal frameworks, while those in Cuenca pointed out the presence in academic spaces of professors promoting unfair competition and immediacy instead of quality. They also mentioned the lack of updates in the content taught and the disconnection with digital tools.

In the content analysis of nationally reaching media, part of the description of ethical problems is evident. In Radio La Calle, the news and interview program La Ventana showed that 68.75% of the information is loaded with critical and disqualifying personal opinions against Guillermo Lasso's

To maintain their position, if necessary, they used social media comments (sometimes just one) to confirm their personal and political stance. Around 31% of the information partially complies with the principles set by their code. In these cases, it is sometimes due to the interviewees who broaden the conversation spectrum. In the case of written texts, they achieve this when they have more context information that is probably not obtained from social media, but rather from being direct witnesses. In most cases, the information records are copies of the official version.

In the case of Teleamazonas, the information cataloged as their own, that is, produced with more planning, is of quality. In news reports, there are difficulties related to a lack of verification, seeking sources beyond social media, or relying exclusively on an official source's version. Fifty percent of the information fully complies with their professional standards. Twenty percent presents serious difficulties, and 30% has some flaws. It is a constant that the informational records, that is, timely notes, presents the most difficulties.

In the case of Primicias.ec, when it comes to original topics, meaning prepared by the editorial team, there is 100% compliance with their code. In informational records, understood as daily news, the level of compliance drops: 15% did not comply or 20% partially complied.

In the case of El Comercio's website, which is part of an international media group in Latin America (Grupo Albavisión), it was not possible to conduct a measurement because a strike began, which was supposed to end three days after the observation started. It is worth noting that there was an update on August 9 when presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated, after which the strike continued until April 2024.

What should be done about this? Francisco Rocha, executive director of the Ecuadorian Association of Newspaper Editors (Aedep), says that financing cannot be isolated from the pressures of social, economic, and especially political sectors, which are already linked to national and international criminal organizations. Ethics becomes a topic that must be addressed from a human condition perspective: daily coexistence has become difficult, but it must be faced by maintaining the limits that journalists and media have upheld. Ethics will always be part of the distinction between media and social networks.

In Europe, specifically Spain and France, they have opened funding lines through the state, with the approval of regulations that allocate a budget for state information to society. It is not about advertising or propaganda, but about money to finance investigations by the media. This has sparked a debate about what constitutes media, with the consensus that a single person cannot be considered a media outlet. Essentially, Rocha says, it is about society and businesses learning to continue advertising and financing media through advertising so that they can provide better information and professionalism. In contrast to Ecuador, the public sector has increased communication teams for advertising and propaganda.

César Paredes, programmatic deputy director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation from Colombia (FLIP), says that job insecurity alone does not constitute a reason to jeopardize the ethical foundations of journalistic work, as there are many examples worldwide showing that serious and responsible work can be done even using new technologies and communication advances.

The pressing problem lies in the economic sustainability of communication and journalism models. Civil society and its organizations, as well as private businesses, must take active responsibility in designing financing mechanisms for journalistic projects that protect public interest information as a collective good, as is done in Chile with the digital outlet Ciper, whose main source of funding is more than 6,000 member-readers.

Regarding the need to strengthen newsrooms, Rocha says that experienced people (editors) are needed to analyze what is happening in society, knowing the social, political, and public actors. Media and journalists must define the topics they will cover and inform about, which relate to the development of society, both public and private, and civil society. They must demand compliance with regulations like the Public Information Access Law, which guarantees journalists access to what they need. If this possibility is blocked, it must be reported immediately, working with organizations that support the press. The idea that denying access to information on sensitive topics has become normal cannot be maintained. If this happens, it must be investigated why.

Paredes asserts that "ethical failures" in journalistic practice do not respond to a single causal explanation but to different perspectives. His analysis uses public interest and its weakening against a communication and journalism model imposed by private interests as a core concept. The increasing privilege given to the breaking news model, due to the immediacy proposed by the information flow on the internet, is related to this scenario of financial precariousness, but above all, with the focus on quantitative impact to the detriment of qualitative information production.

Both interviewees agree that serious journalism and journalists who want to survive the business avalanche should do what they know how to do: investigate, produce content in context, and conduct in-depth investigations, and not abandon this for the sake of attention because attention is captured by algorithms that function on their own.

Regarding training, Rocha suggests that despite the growth in communication offices and the number of collaborators, there are no trained people to transform, for example, technical reports into information and simultaneously know how to provide it to users. Communicators in the public sector have learned to work on content for

confrontation and the militants of a political project, for propaganda, and this must be changed, he said.

This is associated with training. In his opinion, there is an excessive number of communication faculties and journalism schools nationwide. Although some have closed in Quito and other cities in the country over the past two years, the career must be restructured. Universities cannot continue offering a career with no professional prospects. This restructuring should prioritize training in humanities, with an emphasis on rights and democracy. They should also teach how to work with society and collectives, which is complex but a reality that those who choose this career will encounter. It should be considered to make it profitable and, if necessary, think of it as postgraduate education.

For Paredes, academia has neglected the need to qualify information. In Colombia, which shares similarities with the reality of several countries in the region, including Ecuador, communication and journalism schools have adapted their study programs to respond to the contemporary technological model and the pace it imposes on the profession, that is, in obtaining quantitative returns. In this sense, the communication market has displaced critical thinking and neglected the demand that the academic community should direct, on one hand, to the media themselves in demand for quality information, and on the other hand, to the audiences responsible for acquiring knowledge responsibly.

Regarding violence, both agree that the presence of criminal groups forces teamwork, networking, self-care training, security protocols for journalistic coverage designed based on identified threats, early warning mechanisms to alert of possible risks, and training in Human Rights. Paredes asserts that Ecuador can learn from the experience of journalists in Colombia who have been covering violent contexts for a long time, provided they start by identifying the type of violence being established and the types of risks journalists face.

4. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the challenge faced by the Ecuadorian press is immense, as it has not been able to provide an effective response to the challenges generated by technology. According to conversations with journalists, it seems that there was no preparation to face the industry's changes, neither from media owners, academia, nor the journalists themselves. What has happened is an attempt to learn on the go and adapt to the industry's evolution.

Journalists also see precarious conditions as an argument to explain the ethical failures they are aware of in their work. However, it is clear—and they admit—that quality should not be tied to a higher or lower salary. Nor should it be tied to the speed of publications, which is why they are aware that they need to work more on planning and thematic agendas in their media outlets. Figures show that 23% of journalists acknowledge that there is little planning in their work, and 13% admit that the verification and/or fact-checking in their publications is deficient or non-existent. This means that 36% of the content they generate has a degree of improvisation, which is unprofessional.

It is important to create funding mechanisms for media that come from citizen initiatives, thereby reinforcing transparency as a fundamental value in the exercise of the press. Hyper-local media should be considered as a mechanism to avoid the informational gaps that are being generated in the country, especially in areas far from Quito and Guayaquil.

The lack of time and poor planning are realities that affect journalism and impact its quality. This also highlights the weaknesses in journalists' training and the need for editors in newsrooms to help train journalists. A coverage and publication plan not only guarantees the quality of information and its dissemination but also a constant self-learning process, which includes understanding their operational capacity, knowing their audience, and learning about information selection, verification, the selection of human and documentary sources, and ensuring that their product can be verified by third parties, starting with the audience itself.

Journalist protection systems should be designed based on human and financial capacities, as newsroom security is a way to safeguard their independence and transparency.

Improving the quality of content automatically creates barriers to misinformation and polarization, but this requires an effort from society to demand quality in informational content and to self-educate in the use of social media.

References

1. Olmo y Romero, J. A., <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/desinformacion-concepto-y-perspectivas/>, last accessed 2024/01/08.
2. Unesco, <https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/es/resources/desinfodemia-descifrando-la-desinformaci%C3%B3n-sobre-el-covid-19-policy-brief-1?language=fr>, last accessed 2024/01/15.
3. Cavaller, V.: ¿Qué es el periodismo de calidad?. In: COMeIN Revista de los Estudios de Ciencias de la Información y de la Comunicación 86, (2019).
4. Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal, https://geoenlace.net/seguridadjusticiaypaz/archivo/d86357_e0cc9ce8f0.pdf, last accessed 2024/01/30.
5. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Criminal, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/ocindex-2023/>, last accessed 2024/01/07.
6. Comité para la protección de Periodistas, <https://cpj.org/es/reports/2023/06/ecuador-en-vido-la-paralisis-politica-y-el-aumento-del-crimen-plantan-nuevas-amenazas-a-la-libertad-de-prensa/>, last accessed 2024/02/10.
7. Reporteros sin Fronteras, <https://www.rsf-es.org/clasificacion-mundial-de-la-libertad-de-prensa-rsf-2024-analisis-general-el-periodismo-bajo-las-presiones-politicas/>, last accessed 2024/04/27.
8. Fundamedios, <https://www.fundamedios.org.ec/alerts/>, last accessed 2024/03/28.
9. Periodistas sin Cadenas, <https://www.periodistassinadenas.org/la-prensa-sobrevive-en-ecuador/>, last accessed 2024/01/28.
10. Levoyer, S.: Los desafíos de la cobertura del crimen organizado en el periodismo ecuatoriano. In: #PerDebate, 3(1), 70–87, (2019).

11. Reporteros sin Cadenas, <https://www.periodistassinadenas.org/la-prensa-sobrevive-en-ecuador/>, last accessed 2024/01/28
12. Montúfar, C.: *Las reglas del silencio. Análisis de la Ley Orgánica de Comunicación del Ecuador*. 13 ediciones, Quito (2013).
13. Levoyer, S.: *Prensa y Populismo: 30 de septiembre de 2010. Cuando el gobierno quiso imponer su verdad*. Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar y Corporación Editora Nacional, Quito (2020).
14. Reporteros sin Cadenas, <https://www.periodistassinadenas.org/la-prensa-sobrevive-en-ecuador/>, last accessed 2024/01/28
15. Reporteros sin Cadenas, <https://www.periodistassinadenas.org/la-prensa-sobrevive-en-ecuador/>, last accessed 2024/01/28
16. Mitchelstein, E. y Boczkowski, P.: *Quién marca la agenda informativa. La tiranía del click*. Revista Anfibia (2015).
17. Fundación Gabo, <https://fundaciongabo.org/es/consultorio-etico/consulta/2140>, last accessed 2024/02/15.
18. Fundación Gabo, <https://fundaciongabo.org/es/consultorio-etico/consulta/669>, last accessed 2024/02/15.
19. Velázquez Coello, N.: *Ética, comunicación y periodismo*. In: Roldós Aguilera, L. (coord.) *Ética para todos. Construir una sociedad mejor desde el ejercicio profesional*. Planeta (2004).
20. *Asamblea Constituyente: Constitución de la República del Ecuador*. Registro Oficial No. 449, Quito (2008).
21. *Asamblea Constituyente: Constitución de la República del Ecuador*. Registro Oficial No. 449, Quito (2008).
22. *Asamblea Nacional: Ley Orgánica de Comunicación. Segundo Suplemento Registro Oficial No. 188*, Quito (2022).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

