



# Violence Against Journalists in Mexico and the Digital Conversation on Twitter/X: Implications for Highlighting the Vulnerability of Journalism

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Violence against journalists in Mexico has become a structural problem that affects both the safety of journalists and access to information. In this context, digital platforms—particularly Twitter/X—have served as spaces where such violence is reported and discussed. However, not all cases receive the same attention in the digital conversation. This study examines how the visibility of murdered journalists varies depending on their professional profile and their networks, highlighting inequalities in the prominence given to certain cases within the digital ecosystem. **Methodology:** An analysis was conducted of more than 2.5 million posts on Twitter/X between 2012 and 2021. The study combines network analysis, data mining,

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and digital ethnography to identify discursive patterns, the most frequently used hashtags, and forms of hashtag activism. **Results:** The findings show that the visibility of a case is influenced by factors such as the journalist's career history, their ties to national media outlets, solidarity among colleagues, and their centrality within professional networks. **Discussion:** A typology of profiles of murdered journalists is proposed, which can be grouped into three categories: a) Journalists with media visibility due to their professional background and collaboration with national media; b) Local journalists with a recognized track record and strong professional ties; and c) Liminal journalists with weak professional ties. **Conclusions:** The results underscore the need to critically analyze how relevance is constructed in the digitally mediated conversation about violence against the press. It is essential to develop strategies to give visibility to lesser-known journalists and to understand the mechanisms that perpetuate their invisibility.

**Keywords:** Violence against journalists; Twitter/X; visibility; vulnerability; digital conversation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Starting in this century, homicides in Mexico tripled: from 8 murders per 100,000 inhabitants annually between 1992 and 2007, the figure rose to 24 between 2008 and 2011 (Bataillon, 2015). In this context of violence, attacks against journalists also increased: between 1970 and 2000, 78 journalists were murdered (Díaz Nosty, 2016), while from 2000 to 2024, the figure doubled to a total of 168 journalists killed (ARTICLE 19 Mexico and Central America, n.d.). This constant increase in attacks placed Mexico, since 2004 and repeatedly, as the most dangerous country to practice journalism in Latin America (Comité para la Protección de los Periodistas<sup>2</sup> [CPJ], 2005), second only to Colombia, which led the list during the last decade of the last century (Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión<sup>3</sup>, 2008).

From 2000 to June 20, 2025, the closing date of this investigation, ARTICLE 19 México y Centro América (n.d.) documented 172 murders and 31 disappearances of journalists in the country. This violence occurs on the margins: territories where the State cannot guarantee the rule of law and where cartels fight for control (Ríos, 2012). In these territories, journalists carry out their work without any protection, caught between political and criminal interests. Furthermore, they face precarious working conditions, multiple jobs, and various pressures (Márquez-Ramírez & Hugues, 2017), which compromise their professional independence. Mexico and Cuba have been identified as the countries with the worst conditions for journalists in Latin America (Reporteros sin Fronteras<sup>4</sup>, 2017).

There is a correlation between the number of journalists killed per year and the overall context of violence in the country. In 2013 and 2014, years with the lowest figures for journalist homicides (4 and 5, respectively), the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants was also below 20; conversely, in 2016 and 2017, with 11 and 12 journalists killed, there was an increase in overall violence, with 25 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía<sup>5</sup>, 2018).

The murder of journalists is a problem that transcends presidential terms and that the governments of the PAN, PRI, and Morena parties have failed to resolve. Journalists do not die while covering news stories or in armed confrontations: they are murdered because they “take a stand on events that directly affect their communities. They are killed when they question those in power, and not only when they dispassionately and objectively expose wrongdoing” (Ibarra Chaoul, 2023, p. 32). For this author, the murder of journalists represents more than censorship; “it is a form of punishment, domination, and intimidation intended to stifle a growing social

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<sup>2</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists

<sup>3</sup> Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression

<sup>4</sup> Reporters Without Borders

<sup>5</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Geography

critique from citizens interested in participating in public debates and demanding accountability” (Ibarra Chaoul, 2023, p. 205).

Veracruz, for example, is a paradigmatic case: it has had five governors from different political parties, “without putting an end to impunity, without ensuring that justice prevails, and above all, without stopping the flow of blood—saturated with ink, images, and honest sounds,” journalists from that state expressed in an open letter published in early August 2019 (*Crónica de Veracruz*, August 6, 2019). Del Palacio and Olvera (2018) point out that the main factors contributing to violence against journalists, especially in the state of Veracruz, are the importance of territorial power and the empowerment of organized crime, the intensification and generalization of violence, the constant lack of protection for journalists, and the disinterest of media owners regarding the issue, among others. Del Palacio (2023) developed the notion of “border journalists” to define those who operate on the physical, political, economic, cultural and technological margins of a territory, being the most affected by violence due to their exposure to multiple inequalities and risks specific to the local and border environment.

Violence against journalists in Mexico has become a systemic and multidimensional phenomenon that affects not only those who practice journalism, but also the information ecosystem and the democratic fabric of the country. Far from being isolated incidents, attacks against journalists are framed within a logic of censorship imposed by state actors as well as organized crime groups, which seek to control the public narrative (Jiménez Badillo & Solano Ramírez, 2024). This violence manifests itself in murders, forced disappearances, threats, displacement, and forms of digital aggression, but also in forms of job insecurity (Rodelo et al., 2024; Reyna, 2021).

Gonzalez (2021) analyzes how systematic violence against journalists in Mexico has affected not only journalists themselves, but also newsrooms and society in general, concluding that this crisis demands a national and international response to restore the minimum conditions for journalistic practice. González and González-Galván (2024) directly link the deterioration of press freedom to the country's democratic stagnation. Based on a structural analysis, the authors argue that the Mexican political regime, although formally democratic, has high levels of violence, impunity, and corruption that prevent the full exercise of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression.

Given the landscape of attacks against the press, the institutional response has been inadequate. The Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE) has an effectiveness rate of less than 15%, and the Federal Protection Mechanism faces severe operational limitations and a lack of trust among journalists themselves (De León Vázquez et al., 2018). This situation has led to an environment of structural impunity that exacerbates the vulnerability of the press and fosters self-censorship. In response, subpolitical forms of organization and agency have emerged, such as networks of independent journalists and resistance collectives (Ramos Rojas, 2022, 2024), which not only denounce these attacks but also seek to influence public policy and contribute to building a collective memory in the face of institutional amnesia (De León Vázquez et al., 2018).

At the same time, the digital transformation of journalism has generated new forms of exposure and risk. On the one hand, social media allows for the visibility of attacks and the creation of solidarity networks; on the other, it increases the potential for harassment and digital violence, especially against women journalists (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017).

Academic literature on violence against the press in Mexico has been growing. However, there are not many studies that address the issue of violence against the press in digital conversations; therefore, it is necessary to approach this particular phenomenon to understand the scope of the discussion generated on Twitter/X. The

questions guiding this research are: Why do some cases of murdered journalists generate more relevance in posts and reposts on the social network Twitter/X, while others go unnoticed? To this main question, two secondary questions have been added: What has the discussion on this network been like from 2012 to 2021 regarding murdered journalists? and What factors influence the relevance of some cases in the conversation on X?

### **1.1. Violence Against the Press and Social Media Platforms**

Faced with the violence they endured, journalists began using social media not only to disseminate news, interviews, and reports, but also to express their concerns regarding working conditions, risks, and professional satisfaction. Among the variety of social platforms, Twitter/X has become a key ally for journalists, facilitating the promotion of issues that aim to exert public pressure. In 2015, following the Narvarte massacre in Mexico, journalists and activists used social media platforms to report the story before traditional media outlets, demand justice, and disseminate alternative narratives that challenged official versions (Melgar & Borzacchiello, 2019). These networks functioned as spaces for collective memory, action, and denunciation.

For its part, Signa\_Lab (2022) analyzed more than a decade of attacks on journalists in Mexico based on data from ARTICLE 19 Mexico y Centroamérica, noting that the main aggressors are government actors and that the most common forms of violence are intimidation and harassment. Journalists covering corruption, human rights, and security are especially vulnerable. The report also showed an increase in digital violence, particularly against women journalists, and documented that threats such as the one suffered by television host Azucena Uresti generated spikes in online conversation and the formation of online communities.

These studies demonstrate that Twitter/X not only amplifies the visibility of attacks, but also enables the articulation of public pressure, solidarity, and mobilization in defense of freedom of expression. Furthermore, its use contributes to the documentation and digital archiving of cases, facilitating investigations through social network analysis. In this context, hashtags become disseminators and amplifiers of protest marches, statements, and demands directed at officials.

Hashtags and emerging digital trends seek to influence the real world; in this case, to prevent Mexican journalists from continuing to appear on lists of those murdered. In these conditions of insecurity, journalists have had to reconcile their work as reporters with activism in defense of their rights and their lives. From the digital world—where they publish articles, take sides, and express their disagreements—they have had to move to the streets and public squares to highlight their vulnerability and lack of protection, and at the same time, to point out the State's unfulfilled agenda. This has been called "hashtag activism," understood as a way to "generate public support through social media for a cause" and "to generate sociopolitical change" (Pratim Goswami, 2018). However, governments, even authoritarian ones, have also used this network to limit public discourse and frame content to the detriment of democracy.

Aware of these paradoxes, journalists have used these platforms to leverage the potential of *hashtags* to create trends. As conversational tools, *hashtags* establish agendas and discursive frameworks "that can be used to create shared collective identities" (Sinpeng, 2021), by thematizing content and expressing "voices that have not been sufficiently represented by the traditional media system" (Bernard, 2019, p. 49). Jung and Moro (2014), as well as D'heer and Verdegem (2014), analyzed posts on the platform following the debates in the 2012 Belgian presidential elections and detected this pattern. In Mexico, the #YoSoy132 movement is an example of how students have used these tags as markers of identification (García & Treré, 2014; Rovira Sancho, 2014). Although hashtags are functionally capable of producing audiences, in mobilization contexts they also allow guiding the focus of the conversation (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

Since its emergence in 2006, Twitter (now X) was quickly adopted by journalists as a tool for finding sources, reporting, distributing content, and connecting with audiences, becoming a natural part of their professional routines (López Meri, 2015). Among social media platforms, Twitter/X stands out for its ability to generate public conversations that transcend the digital realm and for being a key space in times of crisis, where traditional media maintain a hegemonic presence (Masip et al., 2019). Accounts on this network reflect both the institutional and individual voices of journalists, and studies reveal that interactions tend to produce homophily: journalists primarily connect with colleagues of the same gender, media outlet, or geographic area (Hanusch & Nölleke, 2019).

In Latin America, the use of Twitter has been analyzed in contexts of violence against journalists. According to Cuellar and Chaher (2020), this network has become a space where aggression is reproduced, especially against women journalists, leading to self-censorship and negative emotional effects. These attacks, often systematic, even originate from accounts linked to governments. Beltrán and Ramírez (2023) found that digital violence increases during disruptive social events and disproportionately affects certain profiles, such as women or journalists from vulnerable media outlets. Mitra et al. (2019) introduced the concept of “media-specific threats” to explain how local conditions, such as media ownership or cultural norms, exacerbate the risks faced by journalists. This is also reflected in Latin America, where online and offline threats coexist in contexts of impunity.

Hashtags not only establish a stance on an event but also unfold as forms of action capable of attracting the attention of other users (Wang, Liu & Gao, 2016), transforming into an “amplified collective cry” (Bernard, 2019, p. 53). A nuanced way of understanding the use of hashtags as a resource for collective action is to view them in the way proposed by Blevins et al. (2019), who consider them markers with at least two functions —of the many possible ones—: on the one hand, they allow users to understand the event to which they refer (conceptual markers), and on the other hand, they allow them to take a position on it (ideological markers)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, hashtags make topics visible and position them in public discourse due to their ease of information sharing and promote certain forms of digitally mediated action (López-Robles, 2022). They can function simultaneously as frames for collective topics and as forms of agency. Furthermore, reposting (or retweeting) is, within this swarm of texts, an expression of solidarity with the causes presented, fostering the creation of “affective audiences” (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015) that emerge from linguistic, emotional, and shared meaning affinities (López-Robles, 2022).

Another characteristic of hashtags is that they produce online conversation communities that can shape discussion and motivate mobilization; conversely, this can generate a degree of homophily among users (Xu & Zhou, 2020). In the case of violence against journalists, this can be interpreted as an effect of professional affinity: the natural tendency to show solidarity with colleagues or peers in the face of grievances and attacks that threaten their safety (López-Robles, 2022). Although counterpublics exist, in a topic as sensitive as the murder of journalists, antagonists rarely appear, and when they do, they are usually questioned or held accountable —if they are public officials— for failing to fully carry out their duties.

In short, hashtags group topics, organize the conversation, and facilitate the creation of communities where relevant users amplify messages through original posts or retweets. In 2012, when the American Dialect Society chose the term “hashtag” as its word of the year, journalist Regina Martínez, who worked as a correspondent for *Proceso* magazine in Veracruz, was murdered. That event became a turning point in the violence against journalists in Mexico, sparking protest marches and discussion forums about the safety of reporters. Since then,

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<sup>6</sup>Since hashtags can serve various functions, distinguishing them as tools for creating meaning and taking a stance from other possible uses can be important for describing and understanding the complex discussions that take place in social media spaces. For a study that illustrates this type of strategy, see Flores Mérida’s (2022) work on the mobilization following the 2017 earthquakes in Mexico.

the hashtag #ReginaMartínezPérez has supported the actions of journalists demanding security and justice for their murdered colleagues.

The purpose of this article is not to analyze violence against journalists, but to describe and quantify the conversation on this topic in X. To that end, the work is structured as follows: the first section analyzes violence against journalists in Mexico and the importance of the hashtag. The first section outlines the approach to positioning this topic and generating connected action; the second details the methodological approach; the third presents the results of the analysis of 2,500,777 publications, complemented by a digital ethnography. Finally, a typology of journalists working in contexts of violence is proposed.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

### General Objective

To analyze the factors that explain the differentiated visibility of journalist murders on the social network Twitter/X between 2012 and 2021.

### Specific Objectives

- 1) To describe the evolution and characteristics of the conversation on Twitter/X about journalists killed in Mexico during the period 2012–2021.
- 2) To explore the elements that influence which cases become more relevant than others in the digital conversation.

Following Del Palacio's (2023) discussion, a tentative answer is that, although all the journalists who have been victims were in vulnerable situations, structural conditions affect those who fall into the category of border journalists (whether due to their territorial, professional, or political marginalization) in a differentiated way, making their cases more volatile in the digitally mediated discussion. In contrast, those journalists with greater centrality, that is, those who were not border journalists, tend to gain greater prominence in the digital conversation on Twitter/X.

This approach seeks to distinguish, based on how the issue is discussed in the socio-digital sphere, the differences between journalists, but under no circumstances does it intend to produce a normative or any other kind of assessment that ranks the importance of cases of journalist murders. On the contrary, the position here is that all cases deserve equal treatment and consideration, and that any analysis should help in understanding the structural phenomenon, identifying its causes, and, consequently, contributing to the development of viable solutions.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

For this analysis, an observation period from 2012 to 2021 was selected. First, cases of murdered journalists were retrieved, and second, data from Twitter/X was collected. This second corpus of information consists of 2,500,277 Spanish-language posts that used terms related to the murder of journalists. Additionally, an ethnographic approach was used by navigating the platform itself to identify names and hashtags related to specific cases.

The posts were retrieved from a search string using the terms '(periodista asesinado) OR (periodista asesinada) OR (asesinan periodista) OR (asesinato periodista) OR (asesinatos periodistas)<sup>7</sup>'. Of the total corpus<sup>8</sup>, 582,113 are original posts, while the rest are retweets covering the period from January 1, 2012, to December 31, 2021. This timeframe was chosen to capture the 2012-2018 presidential term of Enrique Peña Nieto and at least the first three years of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration (2018-2021). The period prior to 2012 was excluded because, although Twitter activity was already present and even had some influence, the number of users was still limited. Some data suggests that from 2011 to 2012 the number of Twitter accounts in Mexico that exceeded 10 million users doubled.

The corpus was collected using academic access to Twitter's v2 API (now obsolete) via the 'academicwitter' library (Barrie & Ho, 2021) in the 'R' programming language (R Core Team, 2022) and the R Studio environment for macOS (Posit Team, 2023). For data post-processing (calculations and generation of a new database), the 'readr' (Wickham, Hester & Bryan, 2023), 'dplyr' (Wickham, François et al., 2023)<sup>9</sup>, and 'tidyr' (Wickham, Vaughan & Girlich, 2023) packages were used.

Once the overall corpus of publications was obtained, it was divided into one-year periods to analyze how message production patterns were configured. Additionally, a second analysis was performed, relating each username of an original tweet to the hashtags present in their published messages. This produced an adjacency matrix that was visualized in the Gephi software (Bastian et al., 2009). This visualization allowed for the identification of the most centrally used labels in the total corpus, which were then explored to identify those referring to cases of journalists murdered in Mexico. The following sections present the analysis and discussion of the data corpus mentioned here, followed by the digital ethnographic analysis and the findings obtained.

Regarding the digital ethnographic analysis, hashtags related to journalists murdered between 2012 and 2021 were examined, as well as the discussion generated on Twitter/X. The context of the murder, the section, and the media outlet where the journalists worked were also recorded. This analysis allowed for an assessment of the media visibility of the cases, considering the journalists' professional career, their union affiliations, and the recognition they received from their colleagues—elements that are crucial for positioning and demanding the clarification of a murder.

For this reason, iterative explorations were carried out on the Twitter/X platform, searching for the names of murdered journalists as hashtags. This strategy made it possible to identify how certain names and cases have become relevant in the conversation, facilitating the collective construction of frameworks and positions around the phenomenon.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Patterns of Discussion: Conversation Volume and Density**

To characterize the conversation and describe how the discussion surrounding fatal violence against journalists unfolded, a series of processes were performed on the data. These processes first allowed for the identification of message-generation patterns and, second, enabled an exploration of how hashtags were used to construct

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<sup>7</sup> (murdered male journalist) OR (murdered female journalist) OR (journalist is murdered) OR (murder journalist) OR (murders journalists)

<sup>8</sup>The search string and the data extraction logic used in this study were inspired by the work of Signa Lab (2022), which covers the period from December 2015 to February 2022. Unlike that study, however, in addition to the broader time frame, five keyword combinations were added to reduce the loss of data.

<sup>9</sup> See GitHub repositories: readr - <https://github.com/tidyverse/readr>; dplyr - <https://github.com/tidyverse/dplyr>

the meaning of interactions surrounding this phenomenon.

By dividing the corpus into annual periods, it has been possible to observe the pattern of posts addressing the murder of journalists. Table 1 shows the number of user accounts that posted messages in Spanish containing any of the previously identified search terms. This data reveals a steady increase in the number of people who engaged in the discussion. While in 2012 the number of accounts exceeded 31,000, by 2018 this figure was six times higher, with more than 187,000 accounts. The “takeoff” in the conversation occurred between 2016 and 2017, when the number of accounts participating in the topic rose from 83,000 to 151,000.

Table 1 explores the proportion of original messages within the conversation. As previously noted, the total data sample comprises 2.5 million posts; however, only one-fifth of these are original, while the remainder are retweets. In this regard, the Twitter/X conversation surrounding the murder of journalists shows that, over time, the number of users producing original messages decreases, although the number of users supporting the conversation through retweets expands: while in 2012, 40% of those participating in the discussion produced original messages, this proportion fell to 8.6% in 2021. In fact, the last column of Table 1 demonstrates that, as the period progresses, the proportion of retweets gradually increases, rising from 42% of total posts in 2012 to 88% in the final year of the observed period. This confirms the propensity to participate in the discussion through a practice that requires little time and resources, such as reposting. Regarding the raw volume of messages, the year with the highest number of posts was 2018, when 489,000 tweets using one of the aforementioned terms were published. Again, the data shows that the conversation grew from the beginning of the period, but experienced a significant jump from 2016 (with fewer than 200,000 messages) to 2017 (when more than 429,000 messages were published). However, after 2018, there was a slowdown in content production, although the number of messages never fell below the levels recorded before 2016.

**Table 1.** *Percentage of users who create, amplify, or engage in both practices related to the messages in the corpus*

Year	Single Accounts	Percentage of Original Content Creators	Total Posts	Retweet %
2012	31,189	0.4079	64,542	42.43
2013	42,256	0.3835	69,973	48.93
2014	68,124	0.3057	131,429	53.04
2015	82,075	0.2765	184,589	56.78
2016	83,913	0.2138	195,734	66.12
2017	151,349	0.1213	429,597	78.75
2018	187,529	0.1094	489,582	82.70
2019	167,839	0.0987	364,177	85.56
2020	140,233	0.1007	258,692	86.31
2021	164,956	0.0868	311,962	88.01

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors based on data from the Twitter/X API v2.

Once the message production dimension was explored, data processing was performed to obtain the relationships of each account with the hashtags used in its messages. The result is an adjacency matrix that allows for the visual exploration of these interactions. Because not all messages contain hashtags, the result is a set of 66,984 nodes and 127,126 edges, where each node has an average of 1.89 interactions (i.e., the average degree of the node). It is important to note that, due to the method of data collection (the words chosen in the



Once the 1,000 most prominent hashtags were identified, a manual coding process was carried out to establish their uses in messages about murdered journalists: hashtags are used to designate a *place* where the crime of a journalist has occurred, highlighting first the federal entity and secondly, the city; also to designate a *person*, almost always a political figure, institution (government agencies, law enforcement and political parties) and organizations. This use is related to another, that of the *demand*, in which the hashtag appears as a slogan that in this case denounces the violence towards journalists and sometimes is directed towards identified political figures.

The usage of interest was a variant of *person*, which in this case refers to instances where the name of a journalist who has been a victim appears. Upon exploring the data, it was found that, in addition to national *journalists*, cases from other countries also appear; therefore, a decision was made to distinguish them. Finally, the hashtag can also refer to a media outlet, in this case as a source of information about a case, a topic related to the users, and other uses that have been coded as *unrelated*, such as hashtags used as greetings that do not provide information.

Table 2 shows how the data was distributed. The most common tags refer to locations (28.6% of this subset), identifying countries, states, and cities where cases of lethal violence against journalists are mentioned; followed in frequency by topic hashtags (25.7%) which, in the manner of conceptual markers according to Blevins et al. (2019), represent how digitally connected audiences interpret the topic (some examples refer to #asesinato (#murder), #violencia (#violence), #inseguridad (#insecurity) although certain topics refer to other aspects). Next in importance are protest hashtags (15.4%), which function as ideological markers, that is, statements of position regarding the events; some of the hashtags in this group include #niunomas (#notonemore), #nosestanmatando (#theyarekillingus), #prensanodisparen (#dontshootthepress), #bastaya (#enough), among others.

Next are *person*-related hashtags (7.55%) which, as previously mentioned, typically refer to the target of the *protest*, and *media*-related hashtags (6.36%) which almost always refer to the outlets reporting the cases. The names of *journalists*, in the case of domestic journalists, accounted for 5.47% of the hashtags, and those of *international* journalists for 5.47%. It should be noted that Table 2 provides a descriptive overview, showing how hashtags are used and how much of their significance stems from the frequency of their use.

**Table 2.** *Most used hashtags in the conversation about murdered journalists and the type to which they belong*

Hashtag Type	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Place	288	28.6
Media	64	6.36
Journalist	55	5.47
International Journalist	25	2.49
Person	76	7.55
Protest	155	15.4
Topic	259	25.7
Unrelated	84	8.35
Total	1,006	99.93

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors based on data from the Twitter/X API v2

It is worth noting that, in the network analysis data used to identify these hashtags, the *location* hashtag #mexico is the most prominent in the overall data sample, indicating that, despite the phenomenon's international dimensions, the country remains the focal point when it comes to the murders of journalists. The *topic* hashtags #periodista (#journalist) and #asesinato (#murder) are the most frequently used after the country's name (*location*). And, regarding the names of *journalists* murdered in Mexico, #JavierValdez and #MiroslavaBreach are the most frequently mentioned.

#### 4.2. A Multi-Sited Observation of Violence Against Journalists on Twitter/X

Analyzing big data from platforms does not replace qualitative and ethnographic approaches to digital mediation spaces. Analyzing the interactions between what happens online and offline allows for the construction of *multi-sited* approaches that contribute to understanding the complexities between digitally mediated communication practices and the phenomena to which they are ascribed (Rodríguez Cano, 2022; Sued, 2022), in this case, violence against journalists. Ethnographic approaches to platforms highlight the need to view these technologies as environments that intertwine, on the one hand, "physical" reality and, on the other hand, the various digital contexts and spaces (Hine, 2004). In this case, immersion in the platform is not only complementary to the research but fundamental for producing a situated and contextualized explanation of the phenomenon we seek to explore. In the case of hashtags, and following Postill and Pink (2012), as well as Pink and Horst (2019), social media ethnography involves identifying the relationship between the digital and the analog social, to use the terms, but also understanding the collective experience that is generated in the discursive practice of participating in a specific conjuncture.

As a result of this observation phase, the cases of murdered journalists have been characterized and can be grouped into three types: a) Journalists with media visibility due to their professional career and collaboration with national media; b) Local journalists with a recognized career and strong union ties; and c) Liminal journalists with weak union ties.

In this initial classification, two journalists stand out during the analyzed period: Miroslava Breach and Javier Valdez, as shown in Figure 1. Regina Martínez and Rubén Espinosa, although not included in this analysis, could be placed in this category due to their visibility through contributions to national media, their professional prestige, and their collaborative networks that extended beyond their workplaces. To this day, hashtags such as #ReginaMartinez and #RubenEspinosa continue to be used in reports of attacks against journalists, as do those generated by the murders of Breach and Valdez, which fueled the digitally mediated conversation with hashtags like #MiroslavaBreach, #CallarEsComplicidad (Silence Is Complicity), #SOSPrensa (SOS Press), #MalaYerba<sup>10</sup>, #MalaYerbaNuncaMuere (*Malayerba* Never Dies), #JusticiaJavierValdez (Justice for Javier Valdez), #AquiNadieTeOlvida (No One Forgets You Here), #NiBorrónNiCuentaNueva (No Fresh Start), and, of course, #JavierValdez.

Another factor that has intensified the conversation surrounding these cases has been professional solidarity, based on the bonds forged by the attacked journalist and the professional affinity generated by so-called "affective audiences." This applies to most of the murders of journalists who, although they worked for local media outlets, managed to establish significant connections with other colleagues .

The murder of Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz (February 11, 2014) falls into this second category. From this case onward, in addition to hashtags with proper names, hashtags began to be used with the names of the states and cities where the crimes occurred. The most prominent, also identified in Figure 1, were Veracruz, Sinaloa, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Guerrero, Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Chiapas, but it should be noted that 22 states

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<sup>10</sup> (Bad Influence). Also the name of a column written by Javier Valdez to speak out for victims of drug trafficking and denounce impunity, especially in Sinaloa.

and 57 towns were the scene of the 79 journalists murdered during this period. Another tactic, besides hashtags, was the direct mention of authorities using the @ symbol, such as: @FGEQuintanaRoo, @VelascoM, @HectorAstudillo, @FGEGuerrero, among others. The death of Moisés Sánchez Cerezo, highlighted by the hashtags #MoisesSanchezCerezo and #MedellíndeBravo, mobilized journalists in Veracruz. In this section on professional solidarity, it was possible to find the murder of Francisco Pacheco, which occurred in Taxco, Guerrero, on April 25, 2016. Tags such as #FranciscoPachecoBeltrán, #Justicia (#Justice), #NiUnoMás (#NotOneMore), and #JusticiaParaPacheco (#JusticeForPacheco) motivated protests in Mexico City and Chilpancingo.

The violent death of Salvador Olmos was brought to light through the hashtag #SalvadorOlmosGarcía, which sparked reactions, retweets, and statements from social and journalistic organizations. Among the most shared tweets were: “We must not forget. That early morning, they came for me too” (Sé Másatl, 2020), and “The #Rabias are sprouting #SalvadorOlmosGarcia; those winds you rode never cease to blow, and soon they will set the prairies ablaze” (Lekoko, 2017). The murder of Cecilio Pineda Birto (March 7, 2017) it was widely discussed on Twitter, not only due to professional affinity, but also because Edward Snowden had reported that this journalist appeared on the list of phones infected by Pegasus (Snowden, 2021). Pineda was the director of the newspaper *Tierra Caliente Debate* and a crime correspondent for *El Universal*. The deaths of Ricardo Monlui and Luciano Rivera also sparked protests in Veracruz and Baja California, respectively. *ARTICLE 19 México y Centroamérica, Derecho a Informar, FotorreporterosMx, Ni Uno Más de Michoacán, Ojos de Perro vs. la Impunidad, Red de Periodistas de a Pie, Red de Periodistas del Noreste, Red de Periodistas de Sonora, Red Libre Periodismo de Chihuahua, Unión de Periodistas de la Ciudad de México and Voces Irritas A.C. de Coahuila y Durango* encouraged the protests.

The death of Cándido Ríos Vázquez also sparked protest marches and public letters from journalists. PEN International, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, and Emilio Álvarez Icaza, former executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, joined the movement (Pablo, 2017). The same occurred with the murder of Carlos Domínguez, which prompted demands for justice from groups such as Periodistas de a Pie<sup>11</sup> and Periodistas Desplazados México<sup>12</sup> (Periodistas Desplazados México, 2018).

The most common hashtags in this digital campaign are: #NoSeMataLaVerdadAsesinandoPeriodistas (Killing journalists does not kill the truth), #NiUnPeriodistaMás (No More Journalists), #SOSPrensa (SOS Press), #LibertadDeExpresión (Freedom of Expression), #DíaMundialDeLaLibertadDePrensa (World Press Freedom Day), #NoAlSilencio (No to silence), #NosEstánMatando (They Are Killing Us), #NiUnoMás (Not One More), #PeriodismoEnRiesgo (Journalism at Risk) and #YoDefiendoelPeriodismo (I Stand Up for Journalism).

A third, smaller category includes murdered journalists who went virtually unnoticed in the digital conversation. These were hyperlocal, liminal journalists with little visibility and few professional connections. For example, as Chava (2016) states, “#ElidioRamosZarate is not anyone, no media outlet mentions him. Don't his life and work matter?” To this, Pascal Beltrán del Río added (Pascal, 2016), “Silence on social media surrounding the murder of journalist Elidio Ramos Zárate.”

Starting in 2018, tweets from counter-publics began circulating, criticizing those who demanded justice and defending the government. However, in general, these types of messages did not garner significant support, likely due to the sheer brutality of the events themselves. One example was the case of Israel Vázquez Rangel: following his murder, the mayor of Salamanca blamed the journalist “for covering crime news at an inappropriate time and in an unsafe location” (Fabián, 2023).

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<sup>11</sup> Journalists on Foot

<sup>12</sup> Displaced Journalists in Mexico

In summary, the murders that generated the greatest impact on social media were those of journalists with a national presence, such as contributors or correspondents; in contrast, those who worked in local media, managed their own portals, their murders had less impact on the public discussion.

During the period covered by this investigation (2012-2021), *ARTICLE 19 México y Centroamérica* (2025) documented 79 murders of journalists in 22 states across the country. Veracruz reported 22 homicides, followed by Oaxaca (10), Guerrero (7), Sonora (5), and Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Tabasco, and Quintana Roo, with 3 each; Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Chiapas, Baja California Sur, and Morelos each reported two cases. Finally, Baja California, Michoacán, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Nayarit, and the State of Mexico each reported one murder.

Of the 79 journalists murdered, the analysis shows that 35 (44.3%) covered police beat or were associated with the security desk; 19 were owners of their own media outlets (generally news websites); 12 were broadcasters; 8 were correspondents; 6 were photojournalists; and one was a columnist. Most of them were local journalists whose reporting focused on municipal or regional issues. A total of 72 (88%) were men. This could indicate not only that there are more male journalists but also, in the words of Ibarra Chaoul (2023), “in a macho society like Mexico’s, men are taken more seriously as relevant voices and potential social leaders, but they are also taken more seriously as threats to the dominant discourse of the power elite” (p. 8). The murders of Regina Martínez, Miroslava Breach, Anabel Flores, Pamela Montenegro, Norma Sarabia, and María Elena Ferral demonstrate that women journalists are also targeted in these attacks.

Although these journalists covered very local news topics, only 5 (7.5%) were murdered in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants; the 50% of them worked in towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Of the 66 cities where journalist murders were reported, 8 (12%) are state capitals: Mexico City, Chihuahua, Culiacán, Xalapa, Tepic, Villahermosa, Oaxaca, and La Paz.

The victims were typically between 30 and 40 years old and worked for local media outlets. As Guerra (2019) points out, “few work for subsidiaries of national media outlets. Local companies have enormous political importance at the regional and municipal levels” (p. 231). The murdered journalists carried out their work in territories disputed by local criminal and political powers. Chiapas, for example, had not reported any journalist murders since 1993 until it began to emerge as a battleground for cartels; Mario Gómez was murdered in 2018, and Fredy López Arévalo in 2021. In contrast, Yucatán did not record any journalist murders during those years. Since 2008, the Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión<sup>13</sup> (2008) identified that the murders occurred “in areas with a strong presence of drug cartels and other forms of organized crime” (p. 48).

The above reveals at least two dimensions that appear to influence the visibility of certain cases in the public discourse in general, and the digital discourse in particular. On the one hand, there is the degree of prominence of the journalist who is the victim of aggression, and on the other, and related to the former, their vulnerability. The way in which these two dimensions interact creates a distinction between journalists who are on the front lines and those who are not. From the combination of these factors and in light of the findings of this study, the following typology emerges:

- **Protected Senior Journalists:** These are journalists who work in large cities and for national media outlets, who have gained access to certain advantages and resources —professional and organizational— that allow them to practice their profession with minimal vulnerability. Although they may be targets of attacks on freedom of expression, they do not appear in the cases of journalist murders analyzed here. One example would be that of journalist Azucena Uresti, who has been threatened but works for a national media outlet. Another example would be that of Ciro

<sup>13</sup> The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression

Gómez Leyva.

- **Unprotected Senior Journalists:** These are journalists working in major cities, sometimes with correspondent ties to national media outlets, but also to regional ones. Their position has allowed them access to certain professional and organizational networks, and the locations where they work also provide access to support and monitoring institutions and organizations. Due to their relative lack of protection, they are vulnerable to constant attacks, and in some cases, they are victims of fatal violence. Javier Valdez and Miroslava Breach are examples of this type of journalist.
- **Regional Journalist with Connections:** The border journalist with the least access to protection compared to Type II. They work in regional media outlets (state or local) with some access to professional support networks and organizations. When they are in areas with high levels of insecurity, their relative vulnerability can be exacerbated. Examples of this type include Anabel Flores, Leobardo Vázquez, Cándido Ríos, and a large majority of those analyzed here.
- **Hyperlocal Liminal Journalist:** The most vulnerable border journalist carries out their work under conditions of continuous job insecurity and without access to professional or organizational support networks. They often lead or are part of independent journalistic projects with local or micro-local reach, and their vulnerability is extreme in areas of high insecurity. In these cases, when they are victims of attacks, the visibility of their stories is reduced. Examples of this type include Elidio Ramos and Juan Carlos Huerta.

This framework helps to understand the dynamics of targeting journalists in digital environments and highlights structural inequalities, where the ability to generate public pressure and solidarity in the face of an attack depends, to a large extent, on the victim's symbolic capital and established relationships.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The data explored in this research reveals at least three key aspects in the case of journalist murders and the discussion they have generated on the Twitter/X platform. First, the issue has become an ongoing and steadily growing discussion, which, however, seems to have stabilized somewhat since 2018. Second, the discussion surrounding these cases appears to have activated digitally mediated networks that, in general, simultaneously report the tragic events and produce stances, condemnations, and demands directed at those in political power. Finally, certain cases have gained significant prominence, even becoming benchmarks when discussing fatal violence against journalists (Javier Valdez, Miroslava Breach, Rubén Espinosa, among others).

While attempting to address our main question —why some cases carry greater weight than others in digitally mediated discourse— a key factor is the fact that violence against journalists is an ever-present phenomenon in which the murders of journalists have become the rule rather than the exception. To address this, the inquiry was divided into two secondary questions.

Regarding the question of how the digital conversation about the murders of journalists unfolds, it was observed that the phenomenon has an intense and growing digital presence. Each year during the observed period, the production of messages increased, reaching its peak in 2018, after which it slowed slightly but maintained an undeniable level of importance. Not only have the messages increased, but there has also been a shift in their production: the data shows that fewer accounts are producing original messages, while more accounts are increasing their reach through retweets.

One way to interpret this regularity is that the platform allows for rapid participation in the conversation through an accessible resource such as repost. This enables the topic to quickly rise to the digital public sphere, capturing the attention of online audiences and keeping the phenomenon in the political spotlight, both online and offline.

When exploring the messages, it was decided to use hashtags to try to answer the second question: which cases have gained the most prominence in the conversation. What the network analysis showed in the previous section is that, while the names of journalists who have been murdered become hashtags, at the same time, users produce messages that combine those names with demands —slogans seeking to draw attention to the need for justice and protection for journalists— and that these are directed at political figures deemed responsible, by action or omission, for the crimes. Hashtags serve both to interpret events and to take a stance on them; that is, they fulfill conceptual and ideological functions that construct a dense and complex web of meanings around the cases. One way to interpret these results is that the cases of journalists, by becoming hashtags, turn into a center of gravity —temporary in most cases and constant in those that become more relevant— allowing digitally connected audiences —not only users but also organizations, professional networks, and the victims' personal networks— to collectively build digital action and advocate for their demands.

One element that the analysis reveals is that certain names have become more prevalent over time, others have had a significant but temporary presence, while still others appear only rarely and marginally. It is this aspect that the central question of this research seeks to address. To this end, digital ethnographic research provides some elements of the analysis.

Qualitative analysis of messages on Twitter/X reveals that the degree of centrality of the murdered journalists is associated with the relevance of their cases in the public discourse. Miroslava Breach, Javier Valdez, and others practiced border journalism in the sense that their geographic and professional location placed them in the category described by Del Palacio (2023), but their professional connections with national media outlets and, in some cases, with journalists' organizations or activist networks, gave them greater centrality than other cases. The digital discussion also appears to have been important regarding certain forms of border journalism characterized by being more local or regional, but with more or less defined organizational and professional ties. Meanwhile, the cases of murdered journalists who appeared marginally in the conversation all represented information workers dedicated to hyperlocal media —municipal, independent digital, emerging— who also lacked the professional and organizational support networks that could have amplified their demands as in the previous cases.

The data shows that the most relevant cases correspond to border journalists who acquired a certain centrality thanks to their relationships with national media and organizations; at the level of discussion, those regional journalists followed who had, for the most part, ties and alliances in their own regions and with professional organizations; and the cases least present in the conversation belonged to these liminal and hyperlocal journalists whose disconnection made it impossible for the crimes they suffered to acquire density in the conversation.

In conclusion, and based on the discussion above, a characterization is proposed that aims to explain why certain cases of crimes against journalists gain public relevance in digitally mediated collective conversations and actions, while others do not. Drawing on certain empirical characteristics abstracted from the cases explored here, four types have been formulated that allow for the identification of two dimensions of journalists' vulnerability. These typologies are constructed from the data, but also from the theoretical elements from which they originate (McKinney, 1968), and aim to answer our central question while also serving as a model and analytical resource for the underlying phenomenon: violence against journalists.

When it comes to vulnerability, the starting point is that, even though it is present in the journalism profession, it is unevenly distributed. While certain journalists enjoy greater job and physical protection —whether because they are based in safer parts of the country, have more favorable contractual terms, or have access to or are even part of professional and advocacy networks— other journalists lack one or more of these

advantages. Although organizational and working conditions matter, a journalist working for a national media outlet in the capital is undoubtedly more protected than one working for an independent digital portal created independently. Thus, protection is a dimension of vulnerability and reflects a difference in degree across the broad spectrum of journalists' professional activities.

Furthermore, the centrality of a journalist varies for similar reasons: practicing the profession in the country's major cities allows access to resources such as support networks, professionals, and guarantor organizations and institutions, which reduces (though not eliminates) vulnerability. Even among journalists in border regions, some are more prominent than others. In other words, this dimension of vulnerability is always relative, meaning that even within the same country, certain journalists may be more prominent and, in this sense, relatively less vulnerable than others within the same context, although they may remain vulnerable on a broader scale.

It is important to stress that, despite the level of "protection" and prominence that these types of journalists seek to project, vulnerability in the journalism profession in Mexico affects everyone —albeit in different ways— and that this vulnerability has wide-ranging and varied effects. However, in the case of deadly violence, there is an implication in the analysis. While journalists with a higher degree of prominence and protection become emblematic cases in the struggle and collective action for freedom of expression, liminal journalism remains an almost invisible victim of this type of violence. At the same time, it can be said that the first three types generate the most public discussion and conversation, while the last type remains unacknowledged, and its name is merely a number in the tally of journalists murdered in Mexico.

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