

# COVID-19 Impact on Latin American Journalism: Between job insecurity and psychological consequences

## Impacto del COVID-19 en el periodismo latinoamericano: entre la precariedad laboral y las secuelas psicológicas

*Impacto do Covid-19 no jornalismo latino-americano: entre insegurança no trabalho e consequências psicológicas*

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**ABSTRACT** | COVID-19 has created a new global challenge in terms of journalist safety. The focus of the pandemic shifted to Latin America in June 2020, where ignorance about the coronavirus, along with the plurality of political responses and the diversity of mechanisms put in place by the media and communication companies have directly affected professional practice. This article aims to analyze the main labor and emotional consequences for information professionals from Mexico to Argentina during the 100 days of the virus in the region, through a questionnaire distributed among the 18 affiliated organizations of the International Federation of Journalists in Latin America, belonging to 16 countries (N=95). The aggravation of the structural weaknesses of Latin American journalism, together with precariousness and self-care, have been some of the main results of the study, which will be discussed with other similar ones conducted nationally in Argentina and Brazil. The conclusions of this research will offer future lines of research that should be considered to improve the protection protocols for freelance journalists and those dependent on public, private and community media in Latin America.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19; pandemic; journalists; Latin America; International Federation of Journalists.

### HOW TO CITE

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**RESUMEN** | *La COVID-19 ha generado un nuevo desafío global en términos de la seguridad de los periodistas. El epicentro de la pandemia se trasladó en junio de 2020 a América Latina, donde el desconocimiento sobre el coronavirus, unido a la pluralidad de respuestas políticas y la diversidad de mecanismos puestos en funcionamiento por los medios y las empresas de comunicación han afectado directamente al ejercicio profesional. Este artículo busca analizar las principales consecuencias laborales y emocionales para los profesionales de la información desde México hasta Argentina durante los primeros 100 días de la COVID-19 en la región, por medio de un cuestionario distribuido entre las 18 organizaciones afiliadas de la Federación Internacional de Periodistas en América Latina, pertenecientes a 16 países (N=95). El agravamiento de las debilidades estructurales del periodismo latinoamericano, unido a la precarización y a los efectos del teletrabajo han sido algunos de los principales resultados del estudio, que será discutido con otros similares realizados a escala nacional en Argentina y Brasil en futuras investigaciones. Las conclusiones de este trabajo, que representa a un grupo determinado de estudio, ofrecerán futuras líneas de investigación para un proceso y universo más amplio, que deberán ser tenidas en cuenta para mejorar los protocolos de protección de los periodistas freelance y dependientes de medios públicos, privados y comunitarios en América Latina.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** COVID-19; pandemia; periodistas; América Latina; Federación Internacional de Periodistas.

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**RESUMO** | *A Covid-19 criou um novo desafio global em termos de segurança para jornalistas. O foco da pandemia mudou-se para a América Latina em junho de 2020, onde o desconhecimento sobre o coronavírus, juntamente com a pluralidade de respostas políticas e a diversidade de mecanismos implementados pela mídia e as empresas de comunicação, afetaram diretamente a prática profissional. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar as principais consequências trabalhistas e emocionais dos profissionais da informação desde o México até a Argentina durante os 100 dias da Covid-19 na região, utilizando um questionário distribuído entre as 18 organizações afiliadas da Federação Internacional de Jornalistas da América Latina, pertencente a 16 países (N = 95). O agravamento das fragilidades estruturais do jornalismo latino-americano, juntamente com a precariedade e os efeitos do teletrabalho, foram alguns dos principais resultados do estudo, que será discutido com outros semelhantes realizados nacionalmente na Argentina e no Brasil em futuras pesquisas. As conclusões desta pesquisa, que representa um grupo determinado de estudo, oferecerão futuras linhas de investigação para um processo e universo mais amplo, que deverão ser levadas em consideração para a melhoria dos protocolos de proteção para jornalistas freelancers e dependentes de mídia pública, privada e comunitária na América Latina.*

**PALABRA CHAVE:** COVID-19; pandemia; jornalistas; América Latina; Federação Internacional de Jornalistas.

## INTRODUCTION

Journalism is a basic pillar of democracy, as it contributes to generating public opinion and keeping citizens informed on matters of general interest, which is even more important in the context of the unprecedented global health emergency caused by COVID-19, with serious health, economic, and social repercussions. In this context, “journalism is key to supplying credible information within the wider ‘infodemic’, and to combating the myths and rumours. Without it, false can run rampant” (Unesco, 2020, p. 2).

This leading role has been observed since the 19th century, but globalization, the massification of communications, and the development of technologies in the 20th and 21st century have promoted a democratization, contributing to strengthen freedom of expression in the world (Soengas-Pérez, 2018; Díaz Nosty, 2018; Castells, 2009). Such essentiality of journalism is also relevant in the perception of risk by citizens, since it is the perception –and not the risk itself– that determines the response to the crisis (Glik, 2007).

Although detailed studies on the role of the media in the COVID-19 pandemic have not yet been conducted, it is striking to see how respondents in the only country in the region analyzed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020) in a survey of Internet users in six countries –Germany, Argentina, South Korea, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom (N=8,502)– are the most skeptical about the role of the media not only in understanding the crisis but also in reacting to it (Retegui & Becerra, 2020).

The right to information and freedom of expression are two of the pillars of the professional practice of journalism. They are included in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (La Declaración Universal..., 1948), Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Pacto Internacional de Derechos..., 1966), as well as in subsequent regional normative developments, such as Article 13 of the Pact of San José (Convención Americana Sobre Derechos Humanos..., 1969), and national ones. They are also recognized in goal 16.10 of the Sustainable Development Goals promulgated by the United Nations. However, information professionals encounter difficulties linked to plurality, independence, media concentration and journalists’ own safety during their professional practice (Unesco, 2019).

Such four aspects, which articulate the conceptualization of media development and freedom of expression for Unesco (2018), have an extensive development in the academic literature (de Frutos & Giannone, 2018; de Frutos, 2014). The spread of the coronavirus has promoted an unprecedented challenge in these variables, which has not yet been scientifically addressed. Since the World Health Organization

(WHO) defined COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, Latin American political responses have been diverse, which has directly affected journalistic coverage in each country.

Historically, communication studies have tended to focus on the analysis of messages and cultural products, also in times of pandemic (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020; La et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). This paper aims to make up for that lack of academic studies on the consequences of coronavirus on Latin American professional practice by examining the economic and occupational impact on the profession, as well as the psychological and physical effects of professionals who have covered COVID-19. The relevance, interest, and innovation of this research are particularly relevant in examining the situation of Latin American journalism during the pandemic.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Since January 2020, media outlets worldwide increased their coverage of the coronavirus, focusing attention on the medical-scientific community (Papapicco, 2020). The first infections in late 2019 in the Chinese town of Wuhan quickly moved by air to Europe and, subsequently, to America. This spread of the virus “has generated a complicated situation at the health, economic, and social level, which requires a fundamental communication work for society to understand and collaborate with the measures taken” (Costa Sánchez & Lopez García, 2020, p. 1), with journalistic work taking precedence even more. In a context of strong uncertainty, the emergence of fake news and hoaxes evidenced the need for a journalism “more local and with the requirement of forming a citizenry that requires to know the truth, especially in times of health emergency” (Rodrigo Cano & Ruiz-Alba, 2021, p. 27).

The arrival of the first case of coronavirus in the Latin American region on February 26, 2020, via Brazil (BBC News Mundo, 2020) generated a modification not only in professional practices, but also in media business policies and in public policies on communication; some countries considered journalism as essential work and, therefore, endowed it with certain privileges, such as circulation permits during the population lockdown. It should be noted that the Latin American media reality is extremely complex, given the great cultural diversity and the different national media markets and political systems that exist in the region, coupled with the specificities of national media ecosystems, and the factors that affect them in each country (Unesco, 2019).

The different public policies in the region for the mitigation of the virus –or their absence– have marked not only the journalistic discourse and practice, but

also the media agendas and the working conditions of information professionals<sup>1</sup>, even leading to death during their professional practice<sup>2</sup>. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (*Pandemia y Derechos Humanos...*, 2020) requested that States respect international law in times of pandemic, protecting those essential, among which are freedom of expression and the right to information. This essential nature of journalistic activity has been respected in the regulatory frameworks derived from the social and health emergency of the pandemic in some countries<sup>3</sup> in the region, while others have violated this principle<sup>4</sup>.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) explained in their report *Las oportunidades de la digitalización en América Latina frente al COVID-19* (The opportunities of digitalization in Latin America in the face of COVID-19) that “it is rare to find cases of countries where the relative success in the control and mitigation of COVID-19 is not largely explained by the use of mobile applications and information systems supported by digital technologies” (CEPAL & CAF, 2020, p. 18). However, several civil society organizations (VV. AA., 2020) warned of the danger of this type of controls linked to privacy and data protection of citizens in general, and of human rights defenders and journalists in particular.

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1. The Global Network Resilience platform (#REG4COVID) is a space designed by the International Telecommunications Union (2020) for regulators and other stakeholders to share information on different measures.
  2. The study by Punín and colleagues (2021) alludes to the causes of the deaths of 38 Ecuadorian journalists between March and December 2020, which, according to the authors, show the precarious work conditions, professional intrusion and disregard for the minimum safety standards for coverage, which has provoked a reaction from civil society and professional associations.
  3. In Argentina, the *Decreto de Necesidad y Urgencia* 297/2020 (Decree of Necessity and Urgency), which established mandatory preventive social isolation as of March 20 and was extended until June 28, 2020, referred to various essential activities that were exempted, including media workers.
  4. On February 10, the Honduran Government decreed a State of Health Emergency (Decree PCM-005-2020) and on March 16, under PCM 021-2020, a decree of suspension of constitutional guarantees for seven days restricted the right to freedom of expression, provided for in Article 72 of the Constitution, a measure that was revoked by Executive Decree PCM-022-2020. Various human rights organizations, such as the Committee for Free Expression (2020) denounced the limitations on the freedom of movement of journalists, as well as their difficulty in obtaining permits to travel, and even greater aggressiveness on the part of the State security forces towards the press. Finally, 30 protocols were generated for different professional sectors for the reopening of the country and none of them referred to journalism work.

As stated by Estrada-Villaseñor and Moreno-Marquez (2021, p. 111), “the impact of COVID-19 has been very high in the daily work of these journalists and some trends detected before the pandemic can be identified, such as the use of telematic resources, labor precariousness that has intensified in this period, as well as alternative sources to the official ones”. In accordance with this idea and referring to the Latin American case, Navarro Zamora stated in her emerging descriptive study that “the profile of journalists and their working conditions have an impact on the development of the activity and, consequently, on the fulfillment of the citizens’ right to information, as expressed by them” (2021, p. 237), especially during the pandemic. According to the author, among the two situations that most affected the journalistic profession are the low job security in hiring –which other studies directly related to the deregulation of labor markets and the increase in flexibility, even before the pandemic, promoting dynamics of moonlighting, low salaries, and precarious and flexible conditions in the journalistic profession (Caminos, 2020)–, and the scarce protection for professionals in charge of field coverage, to which should be added the challenge of teleworking and the digital development of the profession.

Considering this third aspect, in the region under study there was a dominant trend in recent years related to the growth of access to digital content (greater access to the Internet<sup>5</sup>, greater penetration of social networks, and persistence of the digitalization process, although with heterogeneous impact by areas), which had generated consequences in traditional media derived from the migration of content from television, press, and broadcasting to digital platforms, in addition to infocommunication concentration processes (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009, 2017; Mastrini & Becerra, 2006). The fear of coronavirus contagion and the implementation of the first sanitary measures in Latin America since March 2020 evidenced the importance of journalistic work and digital technologies to counter isolation, disseminate prophylactic measures, and facilitate the functioning of economic systems. According to the Development Bank of Latin America (Banco de Desarrollo de América Latina, 2020), the clearest indicators of their relevance were precisely the exponential increase in Internet traffic, the importance of teleworking, and the need to keep supply and distribution chains of goods active. These three indices had an impact on all professional activities, including that of journalists.

In this context, the objectives of the research are to analyze the main labor and emotional consequences for information professionals from Mexico to Argentina

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5. . “Access to the Internet constitutes a sine qua non for the effective exercise of human rights today, including especially the rights to freedom of expression and opinion, association and assembly, education, health and culture” (Lanza, 2017).

during the first 100 days of COVID-19 in Latin America, contributing to describe the profile of journalism at the beginning of the pandemic, specifically in terms of their working and psychological conditions.

This research is relevant, as it shows a regional assessment of professionals affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and timely, as a dialogue has been generated with similar studies at the global (Federación Internacional de Periodistas, 2020) and also national level, such as the research conducted by the Andalusian Union of Journalists (Sindicato de Periodistas de Andalucía, 2020) or the Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2020), but there was a lack of analysis at the regional level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Latin America was chosen as the geographical setting for this study for three reasons. First, the region was already one of the most dangerous for practicing journalism (Unesco, 2019) before the pandemic. Secondly, since June 2020 the focus of the impact of COVID-19 at the international level was concentrated in the region: “Four of the 10 countries with the highest number of daily infections are Latin American: Brazil, Peru, Chile and Mexico”, assured on June 1 the director of emergencies of the World Health Organization (OMS, 2019) <sup>6</sup>, Michael Ryan. Unlike other parts of the world, the socioeconomic characteristics of Latin America have a specificity that accentuates the spread of the virus: the concentration of housing in particularly impoverished neighborhoods. Thirdly and finally, the collaboration of the International Federation of Journalists at the Latin American level in this research transversalizes its results, which will be used not only for academic but also for professional purposes, to generate recommendations for future developments of the virus.

This article attempts to remedy the absence of scientific research on the effects on the working conditions and psychological aspects of Latin American journalists during the first 100 days of the pandemic in the region (February 26 - June 5, 2020), crossing this information with the literature review of public policies for the mitigation of the virus in each of the states of the region, and with two national surveys conducted with the same objective, in Brazil and Argentina.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 for information professionals, considering their working conditions and psycho-emotional

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6. <https://www.who.int/es/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

environment. In this regard, the research design attempts to respond to the following hypotheses:

*H1.* The pandemic and social isolation have aggravated the structural problems of Latin American journalism, deepening the already existing labor precariousness.

Two secondary hypotheses are derived from this hypothesis:

*H2.* Teleworking has increased the precariousness of journalists' work in the region, implying a heavier workload, and greater responsibilities.

*H3.* Isolation measures have had an impact on Latin American journalistic practices, affecting not only professional work, but also psychophysical integrity through conditions such as stress, anxiety, or difficulties to rest.

The methodological design of this research included the following phases: a literature review on labor precariousness; the lack of protection and the digital development of journalism during the pandemic, and the application of the questionnaire provided to the 18 affiliated organizations of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in Latin America, located in 16 countries of the region. In addition, a subsequent discussion of the results with two other national studies contemporaneously in Brazil by the *Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas* (2020) and in Argentina by the *Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires* (SiPreBa, 2020). The questionnaire (N=95) was conducted online<sup>7</sup> in three languages –Spanish, Portuguese, and French– considering the background of those carried out by IFJ (2020) and an affiliate (*Sindicato de Periodistas de Andalucía*, 2020), and there was informed consent and a link to access the questionnaire online. The responses were received between May 15, 2020 and June 5, 2020, forming a non-probabilistic sample, given that the universe of Latin American journalists under study was too vast and, therefore, to survey them in their entirety would imply a sort of regional census that is not related to either the scope or the objectives pursued by this research. It was agreed with IFJ that the minimum floor of the research would be at least 50 responses, a number almost doubled. Given the accessibility of the data, the proximity of the researchers, and the absence of a national and regional census of information professionals (Garcés-Prettel et al., 2020), it was decided to use this type of sample and to discard the probabilistic method, which would require other requirements in terms of costs and structure.

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7. The questionnaire is available at the following link: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15st3Th66Mx0PjdlPjRdE0EOgmchJRa9VwmMrCZCIZlw/viewform?edit\\_requested=true](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15st3Th66Mx0PjdlPjRdE0EOgmchJRa9VwmMrCZCIZlw/viewform?edit_requested=true). Accessed June 11, 2020.



<b>Employment status</b>	
Hired as a full-time employee.	Hired on a part-time basis.
Temporary full-time contract.	Temporary part-time contract.
Freelance for a media.	Freelance for various media.
I work in a media (public, private or community). Specify.	I work in several media (public, private or community). Specify.
Retired from journalism or communications.	Other.

**Table 1. Employment status of the sample***Source: Own elaboration.*

<b>Potential change in employment status resulting from the pandemic</b>	
Suspension.	Termination.
Obligation to take vacations.	Reduction of working hours.
Notice of non-renewal of the labor contract.	Decrease in labor demand.
Elimination of collaboration or others.	

**Table 2. Change in the employment status of the sample as a result of the pandemic***Source: Own elaboration.*

It should be noted that Brazil was excluded from the research because the IFJ's affiliated organization, the *Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas* (Fenaj), prepared a similar nationwide survey, so it was decided to compare the macro-regional data with the micro data of this country in the discussion section. Likewise, a dialogue is established between our own results and the survey conducted in Argentina by the Press Union of Buenos Aires (*Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires*, SiPreBa) in those comparable categories related to labor precariousness and digital protection and development, mainly oriented to teleworking.

To find out whether there had been changes in the perception of Latin American journalists regarding their work situation and professional practice and, if so, which ones, during the first 100 days of the coronavirus in the region, we prepared a three questions block. First, we asked about working conditions prior to the first case of coronavirus and the implementation of social prevention measures, obtaining ten possibilities (table 1).

Subsequently, the situation during the pandemic was evaluated by giving seven options related to a possible change in the informants' work situation and, in the case of affirmative answers, asking them to detail their situation (table 2).

**Information on COVID-19 protective measures**

Yes, adequately.
Yes, belatedly.
Yes, although insufficiently.
No.
Other.

**Table 3. Information provided by the media outlet or media company to the journalist during the pandemic**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Flexible working hours.
Reduced working hours due to child or elderly care.
Possibility of teleworking.
Provision of sufficient equipment to perform the work at home.
No measure.
Other.

**Table 4. Measures related to work-life balance and teleworking**

*Source: Own elaboration based on International Labor Organization categories (Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2020).*

In line with these considerations, we asked whether the company had informed the worker about the protective measures concerning COVID-19, giving the possibility of five responses (table 3).

Given the importance of work-life balance and teleworking evidenced by various international organizations during the pandemic (OMS, 2019; Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2020), this modality was specifically asked about, using six different options (table 4).

To delve deeper into the perception of teleworking, we observed whether this modality had increased or decreased the workload of the informants, who could choose among six answers (table 5).

Given this description of journalism during the pandemic, both on an international scale (Unesco, 2020) and in the legislation derived from the prevention of the coronavirus in various countries of the region, we studied the difficulties encountered in professional performance, with six multi-response possibilities (table 6).

### Working hours

I work longer than before.
I work less than before.
I work the same number of hours, but I distribute my time better and I do it more calmly.
I work the same number of hours, but the organization of the work becomes more difficult.

### Perception of this remote work method

I believe it is an effective modality.
I believe that it is a modality that has a negative impact on the results of the work.
Other.

**Table 5. Perception of teleworking during the pandemic**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Transportation difficulties.
Difficulties in accessing institutional sources.
Difficulties in accessing other types of sources.
Lack of equipment for professional development.
Lack of telework training.
Other.

**Table 6. Difficulties during professional performance**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

It was also essential to inquire into the journalists' perception of whether social isolation and the measures adopted had had an impact on the quality of their work. To this end, we designed a dichotomous question which, if affirmative, should be explained in an open response. Regarding the safety measures made available by the media and media companies, we asked what supplies and provisions the companies had provided, with a multi-choice answer (table 7).

Similarly, we gathered information on possible restrictions during professional practice linked to the pandemic. In the case of having suffered them, a space was offered that, by means of open answers, allowed for a free response.

Finally, and considering the third hypothesis of the research, we specifically asked whether they had suffered emotional affections derived from the journalistic coverage of the coronavirus and, if so, of what type, giving the possibility of thirteen different answers (table 8).

Alcohol gel.
Gloves, goggles, PPE.
Masks.
Social distancing measures.
Luminous clothing for working on the streets.
Accreditations or certificates to legally circulate on the public roadways.
Other.

**Table 7. Security measures made available by media and communication companies**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Difficulty sleeping and resting.	Fear of loss of employment.
Mourning.	Personal insecurities in the face of the new paradigm.
Anxiety.	Emotional instability.
Stress.	Trauma (emotional shock or impression).
Exhaustion.	Vulnerability.
Fear of contagion.	Other.

**Table 8. Emotional affections developed by the sample components derived from the COVID-19 journalistic coverage**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Two difficulties of the study stand out. Firstly, the time at which the research was conducted made it difficult to contrast the data with other academic references, given the absence of these studies at the time this work was carried out. Therefore, we decided to use the results of the *Fenaj* and *SiPreBa* studies, also developed with the support of journalists’ unions. However, it should be noted that the object of these studies was not exactly the same, so only the data relevant to this research were used. Secondly, the heterogeneity of the evolution of the virus in the different countries of Latin America promoted a regional approach for this research, which will be deepened by means of national analyses in future works.

**RESULTS**

The sociodemographic results of the survey made it possible to design a first descriptive approach to the profile of journalists during the pandemic in Latin

America, based on the increase in job insecurity, the lack of social and health protection, both physical and psycho-emotional, and the challenge of teleworking during the first 100 days of COVID-19 in the region. It should be noted that the research was based on an online questionnaire developed ad hoc for this study, completed by a sample of affiliates of the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean of the International Federation of Journalists. The questionnaire was designed for journalists and communicators from journalism trade union organizations. Specifically, within the sample of 95 responses, 25 people responded from Peru, representing 26.6%, while the second country with the most responses was Mexico, with 19, i.e., 20.2% of the total.

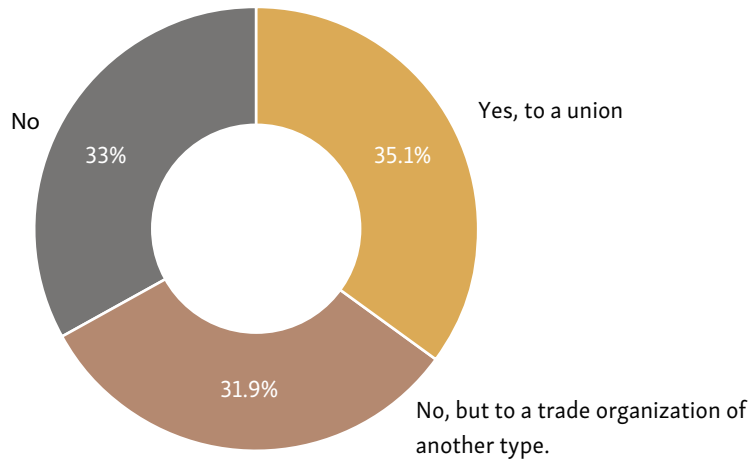
As for the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, 60% of the questionnaires were answered by men and the remaining 40%, by women. Ages were between 25 and 60 years, with the majority of responses being in the 50s. Likewise, trade union or professional affiliation was practically divided into thirds, between those who belong to a trade union, those who do not, and those who adhere to another type of trade union organization (figure 1).

A general trend that can be deduced from the results is that the impact of the coronavirus, along with the economic recession that some countries in the region have been suffering, has deepened the precariousness of work in Latin American journalism. By combining and considering different variants related to dismissals, 15% of informants had suffered a termination of their professional activity during the 100 days of COVID-19 existence in Latin America. This category includes the elimination of collaborations, the non-renewal of temporary contracts, job cuts, and direct dismissals in a dependency relationship. In addition, 16.7% of the informants reported having been subject to suspensions, which heralds a possible increase in the number of dismissals (figure 2).

Regarding the ownership of the media outlet, most of them work in private media (57.8%), while only 11.1% provide services in public media. The rest of the sample is divided into services to cooperatives, community media, institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and even political parties.

The freelancer deserves special attention in this research (12.2% of freelancers or independent journalists, and 8.9% included in another type), since the consequences of a pandemic economy have had a special impact on freelance journalists. Before the declaration of the state of alarm or social emergency in some Latin American countries, the percentage of this figure was 35%, with a notorious decrease these days: only 12%.

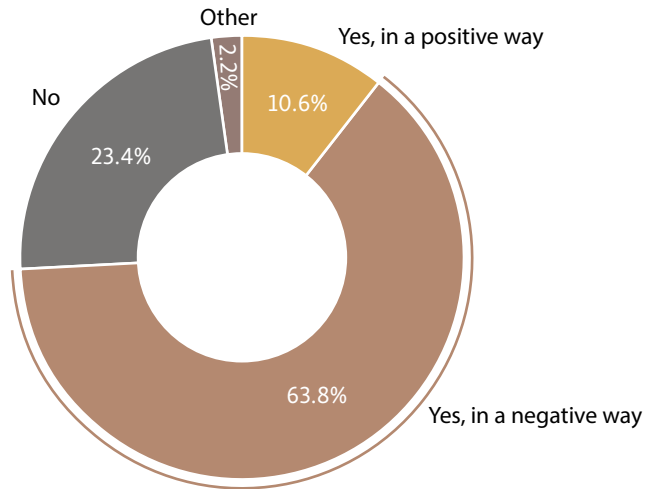
**Figure 1. Are you a member of a union?**  
94 answers



**Figure 1. Union membership or affiliation to trade union organizations of Latin American journalists**

Source: Own elaboration.

**Figure 2. Has your work situation changed because of the isolation status?**  
94 answers



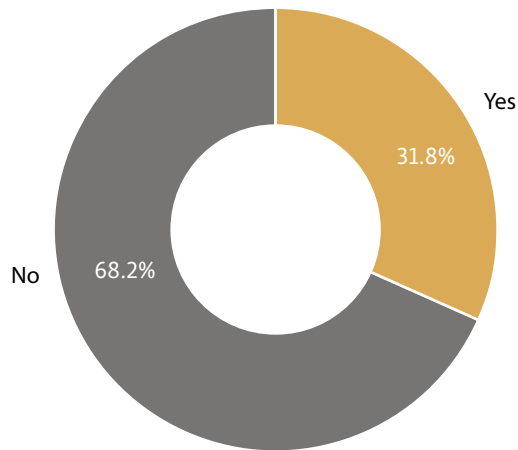
**Figure 2. Changes in the employment status of Latin American journalists during the pandemic**

Source: Own elaboration.

Another challenge that emerged from the survey is that of freedom of the press. Sixty-eight percent stated that they did not suffer restrictions in their professional performance related to the coronavirus. In the case of the 31.8% who did report being affected by restrictions, these ranged from personal issues, such as the relationship with the authorities (health and security, mostly), to structural ones, such as prohibitions on movement or access to information (figure 3).

### Have you experienced any restrictions in your work as part of your coverage of the current pandemic?

85 answers



**Figure 3. Constraints on journalistic performance during the pandemic**

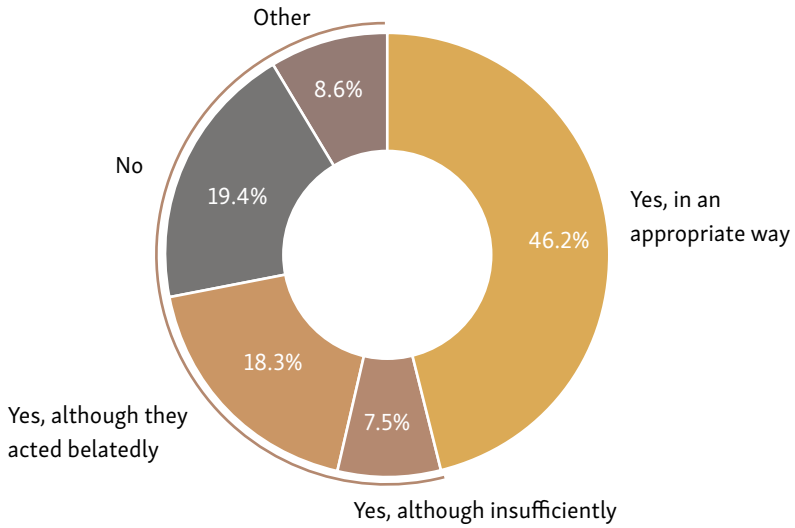
*Source: Own elaboration.*

There is also what we could conceptualize as labor reconversion, i.e., the immense number of journalists who were forced to perform their tasks through teleworking. Regarding the first secondary hypothesis (H2. Teleworking has increased the precariousness of journalists' work in the region, implying a heavier workload, and greater responsibilities.), the results show three distinct trends. In the first place, one third of the companies have maintained unaltered the labor relationship of their workers, while another third has encouraged teleworking, and the remaining third has tried different ways of reducing working hours, either by eliminating tasks or by not providing adequate equipment for remote work. If we analyze in detail the percentage of responses linked to teleworking, 32.4% of the informants work longer than before, against 13.5% who do so to a lesser extent; 16.2% feel that they work the same as before, but with greater complications in the organization of work, and only 8.1% consider teleworking as an effective and productive modality.

When considering whether Latin American journalists had had access to health prophylaxis and prevention measures during the pandemic, almost half had received adequate information from their company, while the other half were divided between late, insufficient, and other types of irregularities, with almost 20% reporting a complete absence of the necessary information (figure 4).

**Has your company informed you about COVID-19 prevention measures?**

93 answers

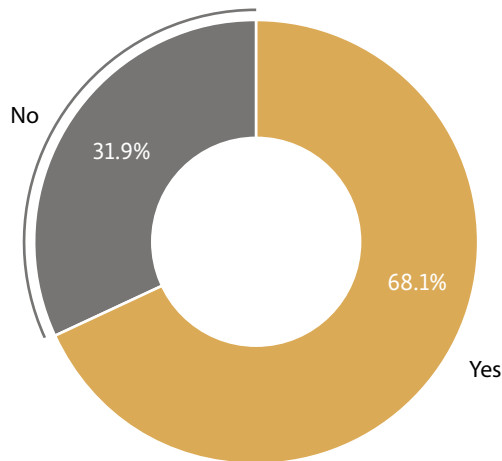


**Figure 4. Access to COVID-19 prevention measures**

Source: Own elaboration.

**Have you suffered or are you suffering from any psycho-emotional effects due to COVID-19 and the consequent isolation?**

91 answers



**Figure 5. Psycho-emotional consequences on Latin American journalists due to COVID-19**

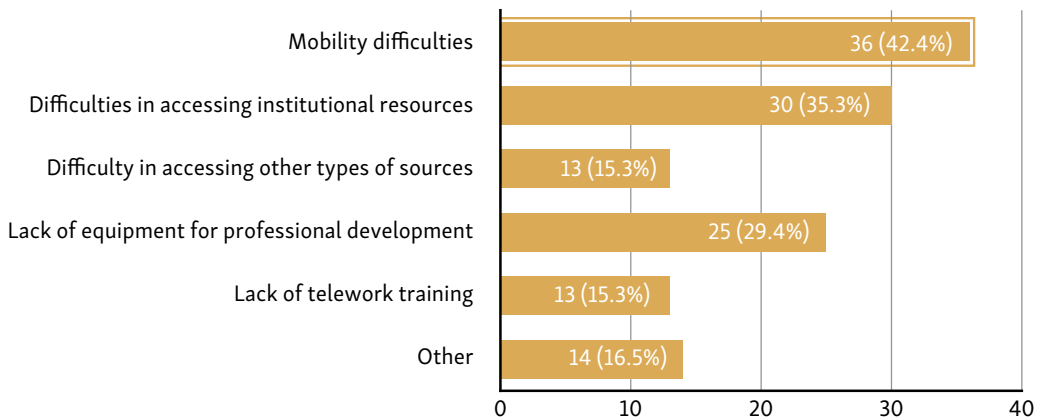
Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, we inquired about the psycho-emotional conditions derived from the socio-occupational climate generated by COVID-19. With regard to suffering from some type of condition, almost 70% responded that they were affected, while a little more than 30% did not state any condition (figure 5).



**Regarding the declaration of the state of isolation by COVID-19 and the measures adopted, what difficulties are you encountering in performing your reporting duties?**

85 answers



**Figure 6. Difficulties in reporting due to COVID-19**

Source: Own elaboration.

When asked about the difficulties in conducting the work of reporting, more than half confessed to difficulties in mobility or access to sources. The rest of the informants were divided between lack of equipment, lack of training for teleworking, or difficulties in accessing other types of tools (figure 6).

## DISCUSSION

Once the results of the research have been broken down, the discussion will contrast the data on a regional scale with those of two countries where similar surveys have been conducted in the same period analyzed, Brazil (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2020) and Argentina (Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires, 2020), to analyze the confluences and divergences of the three proposals. The *Fenaj* survey (N=451) was conducted from May 20 to June 10, 2020. Despite having a considerably smaller population than that of Argentina (N=700), and differing in its specificities and ordering, certain trends can be traced regarding the regional scale data.

First of all, it is important to see the job security of journalists during the coronavirus pandemic in Latin America. In Brazil, 79.2% of journalists reported having observed layoffs in their company, while in Argentina the number is reduced to 18%, according to data from *SiPreBa* (Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires, 2020). The survey at Latin American level shows 1.5% of dismissals and 13.7% of workers who did not have their temporary contracts renewed or their collaborations

eliminated, as well as 16.7% of suspensions, which augurs an uncertain professional future for more than 31.5% of the informants.

Regarding teleworking during the pandemic, in Brazil (75.2%) and Argentina (75% during and 10% before) this option far exceeds the regional data (32.6%). This could derive from greater formality in the two South American countries compared to others in the region, but this would be a hypothesis for future research.

When asked specifically about the impact of these modes of work, the three surveys illustrate growing forms of labor precariousness through teleworking and the use of new technologies: 55% of Brazilian journalists stated that their workload had increased due to the reduction of personnel. In the Argentine survey, 82.5% of journalists responded that they did not have the necessary equipment, which hindered their professional work. At the regional level, 32.4% worked longer than before the coronavirus, while 29.4% indicated a lack of adequate equipment. All this reveals a worrying context of precariousness of the workforce with the excuse of remote work, possibly used by employers as a cover for layoffs and suspensions.

Finally, there is a trend regarding the psychological consequences of COVID-19 coverage and, on many occasions, of the working conditions imposed by the media companies. More than half of the Brazilian journalists (55.5%) have been emotionally affected, citing episodes of stress or work overload, while their Argentine colleagues referred to greater work pressure. On a regional scale, these data reach almost three out of four informants (68.1%) who state that they are suffering from emotional afflictions such as the aforementioned stress, sleeping difficulties, or anxiety. Lastly, it is worth recalling the energetic call to guarantee the transcendental role of the press in pandemic contexts, in accordance with Resolution 1/20 on Pandemics and Human Rights issued by the Inter-American Commission, that both the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression (RELE, 2020) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the United Nations Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (Unesco, 2018) point out the importance of prevention and protection of journalists, including adequate training to minimize risks in journalistic coverage.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research has allowed us to verify that the first 100 days in Latin America of the COVID-19 pandemic have aggravated structural problems of journalism in the region. Although the professional diversity in the area and the limitations of the research justify the particularities of a sample with a specific profile, it also

allows us to discern some strong ideas about the collective, which will be deepened in future lines of research. In this regard, working conditions have become even more precarious and, as a consequence, psychological disorders have reached a high percentage of press workers.

After critically analyzing the data resulting from the survey of members of the International Federation of Journalists in 16 countries of the region and contrasting them with national studies of countries that have had different public policies on pandemic prevention –Brazil and Argentina– the first secondary hypothesis has been verified, which alluded to an accelerated labor reconversion in the sector due to the impact of the pandemic. This can be seen in two main phenomena: the reduction of personnel has been consolidated as a constant at regional level between March and June 2020 through layoffs, elimination of collaborations, non-renewal of professionals, or suspension of payments and, as a consequence, Latin American journalists who continue to work on staff are experiencing a considerable increase in workload, in many cases derived from a pernicious and abusive use of teleworking.

Finally, the impact of the coronavirus and the worsening of labor precariousness have caused seven out of ten Latin American professionals to experience severe psychological sequelae, thus verifying the second and last secondary hypothesis of the research. In the face of this, the individual and collective self-protection of information professionals has led them to take their own security measures, which has had repercussions on a large number of types of emotional disorders.

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