



# Trust and Journalistic Performance: Towards a Typology of Media-Audience Relations Beyond Western Democracies

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**Abstract.** There has been a recently renewed interest in exploring the relationship between journalists and citizens. However, most studies have only focused on public trust in the media (Kohring and Matthes 2007; Hanitzsch et al. 2015), with few analyzing how journalists perceive their audiences and how it affects their performance. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for a virtuous convergence between the media and civil society, particularly in contexts of violence and instability where mutual support cannot be taken for granted. In this study, we present a conceptual-descriptive typology (Collier et al. 2012) that categorizes journalists' perceptions of their audiences into three scenarios: full trust, partial trust, and mistrust. Our goal is to analyze how each scenario is related to journalistic performance. Based on 93 semi-structured interviews with journalists from 23 states in Mexico and an original database of local newspapers' contents, we argue that scenarios where journalists have full or partial trust in their audiences are associated with more assertive journalistic content, while scenarios where journalists lack support from their audiences lead to self-censorship.

**Keywords:** Journalism · Anti-press Violence · Trust · Mexico

## 1 Introduction

How do journalists perceive their audiences and how does this impact their journalistic practices? Based on previous research on civil networking coalitions (Brambila and Lugo Ocando 2019), trust and journalists' risk perceptions (González and Reyna 2019), and strategic alliances between the media and civil actors (Salazar 2019), this study has a dual goal: to propose a conceptual-descriptive typology (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012) to assess journalists' perceptions of their audiences, and to explore the journalistic practices associated with these perceptions, specifically regarding the media's tendency to publish content related to corruption, government misconduct, and violence.

In this context, we argue that understanding the perceptions that Mexican journalists hold of their audiences is crucial to shedding light on the strategies they employ to carry

out their work (González and Reyna 2019; Hughes and Márquez 2018). We hypothesize that Mexican journalists who perceive a lack of support or even mistrust from their audiences are more likely to engage in self-censorship, and to avoid reporting on topics that might be perceived as controversial or that could put them in danger. Conversely, journalists who perceive support or trust from their audiences may be more likely to take risks and publish investigative reports on sensitive topics.

## 2 Media-Audience Relation and Trust

Traditionally, the bonds between the media and their audiences have been understood in terms of the trust that the latter grant to the former, which is conceptualized as “the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms.” (Fukuyama 1995, 26). Thus, the process involves expectations about the performance or behavior of a certain actor or institution, generated on the basis of previous experiences by the side that places trust and the side being trusted (Hanitzsch et al. 2018, Strömbäck et al. 2020).

All over the world, mistrust in institutions has been growing, especially in political terms. This situation also affects the media, because they are also considered political institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Riedl and Eberl, 2020; Nelson and Kim, 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Toff et al., 2021). A possible explanation lies in the increasing “anti-elitism” that affects political actors, the media included (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Although it is a global phenomenon, there is indeed a clear trend for mistrust to be more frequently found in populist regimes, whose leaders constantly accuse journalists of diffusing fake news (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Nelson and Kim, 2020). Finally, another factor that affects trust in the media, governments, and political parties is the constant negative coverage that the media provide of the other institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Echeverría and Mani, 2020).

Moreover, rather than being the result of rational choices and decisions, news consumption is shaped by all kind of experiences, media literacy levels, and even ideological affinities (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Riedl and Eberl, 2020; Toff et al., 2021). Let alone that not all of the receivers simultaneously trust in every single news outlet, because – in practice – they only trust some of them, and not others (Nelson and Kim, 2020).

The audience’s characteristics and the media factor pose challenges when examining trust in journalism. The literature often makes the mistake of lacking precision and using ambiguous terms. To address this, it is important to differentiate between trust in the press as a fourth estate (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995); in journalism as a profession (Blöbaum, 2014); journalistic roles (Blöbaum, 2014; Mellado, 2015); the media system as a set of news organizations (Hallin and Mancini, 2004); individual news outlets (Nelson and Kim, 2020); media platforms (newspapers, radio, television, or news sites) (Strömbäck et al., 2020); journalists as professional individuals (Toff et al, 2021); news content (Bloom and Courtemanche, 2019); and sources of information (Blöbaum, 2014).

Despite the increasing interest in analyzing public trust in political institutions, it has been an issue the lack of consensus regarding the measurement of trust in the media (Kohring and Mattes 2007). The majority of studies on the factors that affect trust in the

media have been conducted in Western democracies, and it is uncertain whether they can account for the differences observed in countries of the Global South (Tsftati and Ariely 2014).

Notwithstanding all its complexities, there is another aspect that should be taken into account when trying to explain media trust: the relationship between journalists and their audiences. The expectations that journalists have of their audiences go beyond consumption patterns and include recognition for their journalistic work. However, this relationship remains largely unexplored, particularly in non-Western democracies, where the bonds between journalists and society are defined by multiple elements beyond consumption alone.

### 3 Strategic Allies and Journalistic Roles

While the study of the relationship between journalists and audiences has been gaining increasing attention amongst academics, most inquiries focus on the audiences' perspective rather than on that of the journalists (see for instance Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Riedl and Eberl, 2020; Toff et al., 2021). Even less clear is how the two perspectives are reflected on journalistic performance.

However, previous research has insisted that the media rely on other actors to enhance their functions (Salazar, 2019; Brambila and Lugo Ocando 2019). These insights are relevant when exploring the relationship between journalists and their audiences, particularly within non-consolidated democracies, where the convergences between the media and other actors might promote actions that run parallel to formal institutional processes which, in these particular contexts, are generally defective and inefficient.

Regarding civil actors, Segura and Waisbord (2016) hold the view that social movements may reshape media systems by promoting pluralism and providing a counterweight against corporatism and elite dominance. Also, there is evidence that these organizations may denounce anti-press violence and become a key force in pushing for transformations in media governance.

All these convergences suppose that there is a virtuous link between the media and their audiences (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Moreover, these insights are built on the assumption of mutual support between both actors, which, in the particular case of journalists, goes beyond their professional labor (Bloom and Courtemanche, 2019; Riedl and Eberl, 2020). For this reason, trust as a concept does not fully describe the expectations and the ties that lie behind their interactions.

The relationship between journalists and their audiences has broader effects. Here we stress the influence that these bonds exert over journalistic performance, which is affected by the perception journalists have of their audiences. According to Mellado (2015), the assessment of journalistic performance should be based on the manifestation of attitudes and values in actual news items.

According to previous research, the presence or absence of bonds between journalists and their audiences affects their performance, either positively or negatively. For example, González and Reyna (2019) found that Mexican journalists tend to perceive a general lack of support from society, which undermines their work and demotivates journalists from continuing to assume the risks of reporting on controversial matters, such as organized crime or government corruption.

Similarly, Salazar (2019) has demonstrated that, although society, in general, may not openly show support for Mexican journalists, the presence of nongovernmental organizations, supportive of journalistic labor, may be able to neutralize the pervasive effect of anti-press violence. On the contrary, in the absence of civil networks, self-censorship of the press is more likely to occur.

These insights support the relevance of exploring the ties between audiences and journalists more thoroughly. These expectations vary considerably across time and space. In the following section, we offer a typology to help better grasp these variations.

## 4 A Proposal for a Conceptual Typology

A typology can be understood as an “organized system of types” that is able to “make crucial contributions to analytic tasks” (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 217). Typologies are very useful for organizing scattered evidence, but also for concept formation, by establishing common or contrasting features of the evidence and delimiting meanings and relations.

According to Collier et al. (2012) a typology has three components: a) the overarching concept, b) the dimensions of the concept, and c) the “types”, derived from combining the attributes defined by the conjunction of the concept’s dimensions. Our proposal builds on these models, but simplifying the dimensions in order to disaggregate the concept of journalists’ perception of their audiences into three types<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1):

1. Perception of generalized mistrust: Journalists perceive a full disconnection with society. Civil society groups are very rare or inactive, and it is not possible to turn to them for support. Journalists feel isolated and perceive their work as unrecognized and undervalued by society. Reactions demanding justice for attacked or outraged journalists are non-existent or very limited.
2. Perception of partial trust: Journalists perceive limited support and reliability from specific groups of civil society. According to this position, only specialized organizations are willing to provide support to vulnerable journalists. A widespread passivity of society is perceived.
3. Perception of full trust: Journalists perceive support and reliability from civil actors in general. According to these perceptions, society in general recognizes and values journalistic work. Society will be willing to support and/or defend attacked journalists.

This typology allows us to formulate the following hypotheses, that associate each scenario with specific features of journalistic performance:

H1: The perception that citizens fully trust journalists is related to a vigilant role for the press, that is willing to publish news stories on crucial matters.

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<sup>1</sup> This typology was established according to journalists’ perceptions of the social trust in them (see next section for the methodological aspects). Drawing on the principles of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), we grouped interviewees’ answers into the three types. As the following pages will show, the rationale for considering which Mexican states belong to each type was regulated by the trend of the informants’ opinions collected there. That is, the sense of the majority of the answers in each state determined its classification.

**Table 1.** A typology of the relationship between journalists and society

Actors		Society at large	Organized citizens	No actor
Journalists' expectations	Active support	Full trust (3)	Partial trust (2)	Mistrust (1)
	Passive or symbolic support	Partial trust (2)	Partial trust (2)	Mistrust (1)
	No support	Mistrust (1)	Mistrust (1)	Mistrust (1)

H2: The perception that citizens have partial trust in journalists is related to a vigilant role in partial terms. Journalists are willing to publish some news stories on crucial matters, but simultaneously some pro-government pieces will be produced.

H3: The perception that citizens have no trust in journalists is related to a compliant role by the press. Journalists will not be willing to produce defiant pieces that could provoke retaliation from powerful actors.

## 5 Methodology

To test the aforementioned hypotheses, we propose to conduct an inquiry with an exploratory scope. Thus, the aim of this document is to make a preliminary assessment of the sense, logic, and robustness of the arguments on the relation between journalistic performance and the degree to which journalists trust their audiences. In so doing, it is built upon two independent studies: the first study makes a direct approach through a first-hand account of news workers' perceptions of the social trust in them, and the second study stems from the actual content of the news, which might be understood as a proxy for journalistic performance.

We conducted 93 semi-structured interviews with Mexican journalists between February 2017 and August 2018, which reveal how journalists perceive their bond with media audiences. Also, we perform a content analysis of local newspapers, which reveals the actual journalistic performance. The sample of the former – 62 men and 31 women – included local reporters and state correspondents of the so-called national media (located in Mexico City) such as *Proceso*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *El Universal*, *Televisa*, *TV Azteca*, and *Imagen Televisión*. It also included journalists from prestigious local and regional news outlets: *El Informador*, *El Siglo, A.M.*, *El Diario de Juárez*, *Zeta*, and *Río Doce*, to mention just a few. Members of independent hyper-local online news sites were considered too, as well as staff of national and international news agencies (for instance, *Notimex*, *EFE*, and *AFP*).

The aim of this study is to provide a national scope. For this reason, 23 of the most violent states were selected, following Article 19's 2017 report on aggressions against Mexican journalists. The selected states are Baja California (9 interviewees), Chihuahua (6), Sinaloa (6), Sonora (5), Coahuila (3), Nuevo León (4), San Luis Potosí (4), Tamaulipas (4), Aguascalientes (1), Guanajuato (2), Jalisco (6), Michoacán (7), Zacatecas (3), Mexico City (4), State of Mexico (2), Guerrero (2), Morelos (1), Puebla (8), Chiapas (3), Oaxaca (3), Quintana Roo (4), Tabasco (1), and Veracruz (5).

We have classified journalists' perceptions of their audiences<sup>2</sup> according to the three scenarios described in the previous section of this paper, and subsequently, associated each scenario with elements related to journalistic performance, as revealed in the news content analysis (Mellado 2015). Given the importance of subnational heterogeneities, we decided to consider local newspapers.

To test the proposed hypotheses, we infer the performance of the journalistic role as reflected in the news content of the Mexican local press. Thus, we considered:

1. Newspapers' tendency to publish criticism against the government: We classified as critical content any news item that contained any condemnation or denunciations of state government, including public policy failures, political scandals relating to the governor, his staff, and/or ministries; or denunciations of liberties or human rights violations perpetrated by state officers. In contexts of institutional weaknesses or authoritarian trends, this kind of content usually entails violent retaliation against critical journalists or against their outlets.
2. Newspapers' tendency to publish content on criminal violence: We also considered news items that report or mention activities attributed to organized crime, such as violent deaths or clashes involving criminal bands and/or members of the army. Also, we considered under this category any news item regarding statistics and figures on public security. Usually, this kind of content is very controversial and might foster retaliation from the government (who do not like their state to be portrayed as a dangerous location) or, even worse, from the organized crime itself.
3. Newspapers' tendency to publish pro-government content: We considered as pro-government content any news items emphasizing positive aspects of public policies, supporting the government narratives, and/or denying criticism against the governor or his staff. This kind of content is typical of politically captured outlets.

Once we had codified all the 1,217 headlines according to the above categories, a double-blind coding was performed to ensure reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha = .693). The percentage of each category over the total number of headlines was calculated per year and state. We calculated the national average for each category, resulting in 9% for the national average of headlines criticizing any aspect of the local government; 10% for the average number of headlines regarding organized crime and local violence; and 24% for the average number of headlines with pro-government content.

## 6 Discussion of the Findings

In this part, we present a series of elements associated with each of the types of relationships discussed in the previous section, drawing on evidence that applies to the Mexican case. We chose Mexico to focus our analysis on because this country provides a very illustrative example of how journalists perform their job within an unconsolidated democracy, which is, at the same time, one of the deadliest countries for journalists. (González de Bustamante and Relly 2021; González, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire included nine questions focusing on three broad topics: Origins of anti-press violence in Mexico, impacts of the attacks, and digital security. The specific question used in this document belongs to the second bloc, and says "What is the impact of anti-press violence on society?".

In Table 2 we present the distribution both for the perceptions of journalists regarding their audiences, as revealed by the interviews and for the categories of journalistic performance. Results are presented by region and state. We highlighted both states presenting scenarios of limited or full trust, as revealed in the interviews. Also, states presenting contents above the national averages are highlighted for any of the three considered categories.

### 6.1 Full Trust Scenario

According to the interviewed journalists, only two states belong in this scenario: Chiapas and Morelos. It is not surprising that this is the rarest category, given that – in general terms – the relation between journalists and their audiences has been deteriorating. Nonetheless, as a female freelance reporter from Chiapas said, “prestigious journalists are always backed up by society in case of an attack”. Another female editor from this

**Table 2.** Type of journalist-audience relationship and local newspaper content analysis

Content Analysis					
Region	State	Type of journalist-audience relationship (1 = no trust, 2 = partial trust, 3 = full trust)	% of critical headlines against the government (Nat. Avg = 9%)	% of headlines on organized crime activities (Nat. Avg = 10%)	% of pro-government headlines (Nat. Avg = 24%)
Northwest	Baja California	1	0%	10%	33%
	Chihuahua	1	0%	2%	14%
	Sonora	2	7%	17%	29%
	Sinaloa	1	14%	12%	38%
Northeast	Coahuila	1	14%	26%	14%
	Tamaulipas	1	7%	31%	21%
	Nuevo León	1	24%	24%	5%
	San Luis Potosí	2	12%	2%	31%
West	Michoacán	1	5%	2%	12%
	Zacatecas	2	5%	10%	48%
	Guanajuato	2	7%	10%	33%
	Aguascalientes	2	2%	5%	60%
	Jalisco	1	26%	7%	10%
Center	Guerrero	2	0%	36%	19%
	Puebla	1	12%	0%	17%
	Morelos	3	17%	0%	17%
	Estado de México	2	5%	7%	26%

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Content Analysis					
Region	State	Type of journalist-audience relationship (1 = no trust, 2 = partial trust, 3 = full trust)	% of critical headlines against the government (Nat. Avg = 9%)	% of headlines on organized crime activities (Nat. Avg = 10%)	% of pro-government headlines (Nat. Avg = 24%)
Southeast	Veracruz	1	7%	5%	24%
	Oaxaca	1	7%	0%	33%
	Chiapas	3	12%	5%	24%
	Quintana Roo	1	0%	12%	7%
	Tabasco	2	10%	7%	10%

state explained that “prestige and credibility are a journalist’s main assets. Thus, in the case of a potential aggression, social support is vital in order to raise the political consequences for the perpetrators”.

As reported by Cemefi (2015), Chiapas has the highest number of human rights NGOs in Mexico with 57, while Morelos also has a notable presence of 14 such organizations. This suggests that journalists in these areas may feel supported by organized civil society. However, in situations of complete trust, journalists may also sense general societal support, not just from specialized groups, but from the wider population. In such circumstances, journalists may believe that if they are targeted, their work will be backed not only by NGOs, but by the entire state. However, according to the Mexican National Census of 2019, both states present a GDP below the national average, both in general and in per capita terms, which might challenge the assertion that a relationship of trust between journalists and citizens is necessarily associated with better material conditions.

Hypothesis H1 is supported by the content analysis, indicating that a scenario of full trust leads to a greater tendency to publish critical content against the government. In states where journalists perceive a supportive society and a general recognition of their work, they are more likely to investigate sensitive issues. Morelos and Chiapas are two such states, with both having a higher percentage of critical headlines than the national media average. In Morelos, 17% of the analyzed headlines were critical, while in Chiapas, 12% of the total analyzed headlines were critical. The findings suggest a reciprocal relationship between society and the press, where a vigilant press covering issues of social importance and questioning official narratives can be perceived by society as being “on their side”. In turn, citizens may offer their support and back the work of journalists.

It is interesting to note that headlines regarding violence practically do not appear in this scenario (Morelos 0% and Chiapas 5%), thus confirming the intuition that audiences will support a vigilant role of journalism that puts checks on the government, but not necessarily one that reports on criminal violence. In fact, the pervasive notion

that journalists who report on issues of insecurity might be related to criminal actors, prevails among several groups. These reporters are usually regarded with suspicion and rarely gain social support (González de Bustamante and Relly 2021). Another possible explanation is that, in most violent places, civil society is as shy as the press of showing discomfort with public insecurity and criminality.

Regarding pro-government content, findings are not conclusive for this scenario. While Morelos does not present a tendency towards pro-government content, Chiapas equals the national average, with 24% of local headlines presenting this type of content.

## 6.2 Partial Trust Scenario

The second rarest category is partial trust scenarios, which account for eight out of 23 states. This type is characterized by journalists perceiving support from some citizens but feeling reluctant and skeptical about receiving general recognition for their work. They believe that society, in general, is disconnected from journalism and shows apathy towards public manifestations supporting journalistic work. In this scenario, journalists perceive support only from specialized civil society groups involved in the defense of freedom of expression or human rights. The following answer exemplifies this issue:

Regular citizens are the least interested in what happens to journalists. In many senses, we have an apathetic society. I believe that society at large does not understand journalism's relevance in terms of useful information that helps people to make better decisions. However, there are a few organized civil groups that support us and join our protests (TV anchorman from San Luis Potosí).

States that fall into this category are Sonora, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, Guerrero, Estado de México, and Tabasco. All these states present a high or intermediate number of specialized organizations working on human rights defense, oscillating between 56 and 6. The exception is Zacatecas, which has only one specialized NGO working on human rights defense (Cemefi 2015).

Based on the content analysis, it appears that in scenarios of partial trust, there is a lower propensity to publish critical and controversial content, which supports hypothesis H2. Only 25% of the states in this category had a number of critical headlines above the national average, and only two out of eight states had a substantial amount of reporting on criminal activities. In contrast, six out of eight states had an above-average amount of pro-government content. This suggests that in scenarios of partial trust, journalists may be more cautious about publishing content that could be seen as too critical or controversial, due to a perceived lack of general societal support for their work.

## 6.3 No Trust Scenario

According to the interviews that we conducted, the most common type of relation between journalists and their audiences is one of low or inexistent trust. In this scenario, journalists perceive a lack of support from both the general public and organized civil society. This excerpt illustrates the point:

As an organized group, we [journalists] have to get close to society, because journalism has been traditionally close to elites and far from society. There is this gap (...) Therefore, people assume that all reporters are corrupt. We have to bear this stigma. We have to build an alliance with society (Female reporter from Sinaloa).

Twelve out of the 23 states analyzed belong in this category (Sinaloa, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Jalisco, Puebla, Tamaulipas, Quintana Roo, Baja California, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Chihuahua, Michoacán).

The findings on journalistic content are not definitive. Contrary to expectations, five states (41%) (Sinaloa, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Jalisco, and Puebla) in the category of limited trust have a higher rate of critical content than the national average, while five states (35%) have a higher rate of content on criminal activity (Sinaloa, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Quintana Roo). Additionally, four states (33%) (Baja California, Sinaloa, Veracruz, and Oaxaca) have a higher rate of pro-government content than the national average. This distribution makes it difficult to distinguish a clear pattern of journalistic content or a predominant journalistic role. Thus, hypothesis H3, which suggests a relationship between pro-government content and a lack of trust between journalists and society, cannot be confirmed at this point. However, one possible explanation for this dynamic is the growing political polarization among media audiences, which delegitimizes and stigmatizes critical journalism.

Another possible explanation is the variation in the strength of NGOs and the density of societal bonds. Recent research has shown that NGOs in some contexts have collaborated with other informal groups, such as families of disappeared persons, artists' collectives, or musicians, to denounce anti-press violence (Salazar, 2019, 2022). In addition, some active journalists as well as killed journalists have become emblematic figures who bring together civil society.

## 7 Conclusions

Our analysis of the Mexican case has revealed that the relationship between media and their audiences in the Global South is more complex than previously thought. We have found that this relationship is bidirectional, and that social support is crucial for the press to continue playing a watchdog role. Therefore, we argue that the unique characteristics of the media-audience relationship have a significant impact on journalistic performance.

Using a descriptive typology, we presented three scenarios that depict the various forms of the relationship between media and audiences. Each scenario is associated with a particular journalistic performance in terms of the published content. We argued that scenarios in which journalists express complete or partial trust in their audiences are linked with more assertive journalistic content. Conversely, scenarios in which journalists perceive a lack of support from their audiences are associated with self-censorship being more prevalent.

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