

Clickbait, anonymity and “selfie recorded testimonial”: fear as a factor of change in journalistic practices¹

Clickbait, anonimato y “cuña selfie”:
*el temor como factor de cambio en las
prácticas periodísticas*

Clickbait, anonimato e “citação selfie”:
*o medo como fator de mudança
nas práticas jornalísticas*

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This research examines how fear, in the digital environment, acts as a factor of change in professional practices and in the relationship of journalists with audiences and sources. Through 91 in-depth interviews, it identifies the transformations and repercussions of this evolution and the role that fear plays in audience attraction practices such as clickbait, in actions to protect journalists such as self-censorship and anonymity, as well as the emergence of new reporting dynamics such as the “selfie recorded testimonial”.

KEYWORDS: Journalism, clickbait, audiences, digitization, journalistic practice.

Esta investigación examina cómo el temor, en el entorno digital, actúa como factor de cambio en las prácticas profesionales y en la relación de los periodistas con audiencias y fuentes. Mediante 91 entrevistas en profundidad, se identifican las transformaciones y repercusiones de esta evolución y el rol que el temor juega en las prácticas de atracción de audiencia, como el clickbait; en acciones de protección de los periodistas, como la autocensura y el anonimato, así como la emergencia de nuevas dinámicas de reporteo como la “cuña selfie”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo, clickbait, audiencias, digitalización, prácticas periodísticas.

A investigação analisa a forma como o temor, no ambiente digital, actua como fator de mudança nas práticas profissionais e na relação dos jornalistas com as audiências e as fontes. Através de 91 entrevistas em profundidade, identifica as transformações e repercussões desta evolução e o papel que o medo desempenha em práticas de atração de audiências, como o clickbait; em ações de proteção dos jornalistas, como a autocensura e o anonimato, bem como na emergência de novas dinâmicas de reportagem, como a “citação selfie”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornalismo, clickbait, audiências, digitalização, práticas jornalísticas.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, journalism faces a series of unprecedented transformations (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2021) driven by the rise of social networks and advancements in technology. This paradigm shift has re-defined both the nature of journalistic content and the ways journalists interact with audiences and sources (Focás, 2023; López-García & Vizoso, 2021). Amidst these changes, a significant challenge has emerged: the growing fear associated with the unpredictable dynamics of the digital environment (Quandt, 2023).

Journalists today must deal with the anxiety of keeping up with viral online trends and the pressure to maintain their status as a trusted reference source, demanding audience (Minotakis & Avramidis, 2022), many of whom now have the capacity to disseminate their own content (O'Boyle, 2022). The opportunities, mediated by technology (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021), simultaneously open up new avenues for interaction with audiences and sources, yet they also expose journalists to hostile reactions and personal attacks (Waisbord, 2022).

The case of Chile exemplifies these challenges in a uniquely compelling way. Over the past five years, marked by intense social movements and the Covid-19 pandemic, media outlets have been forced to adapt their content and practices to ensure the safety of their workers while maintaining their role as relevant social actors amidst a deep crisis of trust in journalism (Anderson, 2021). The global and local contexts have accelerated newsroom technological modernization and triggered multiple changes in professional dynamics and routines, all in an atmosphere of profound uncertainty, anxiety, and fear.

This study uses a qualitative approach and examines how fear, within the digital environment, intervenes as a factor of change in professional practices and the relationships journalists have with their audiences and sources. Based on the axial analysis of 91 in-depth interviews conducted with journalists and editors from both traditional and digital media in Chile, we explore the main changes and consequences linked to this sense of fear, as perceived by media professionals over the past five years. The findings highlight the influence of widespread use of metrics and clickbait in content production processes; the development of

protective strategies, such as anonymity, to combat digital harassment and threats; and the emergence of new engagement practices with sources, like the “selfie recorded testimonial”. This paper aims to understand how journalism is adapting to these changes and to explore the implications of these phenomena for the future of the profession. We seek to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the evolution and future of journalism in the digital age and its societal impacts by identifying emerging challenges and practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Journalism in the digital environment

The digitization of journalism offers a set of “new opportunities to gather and analyze reams of data, to inform comprehensively, to investigate power, to engage with multiple publics, and to tell multi-sided stories” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 357). However, this digital transformation has also shifted perceptions around journalistic roles, creating an environment where journalism is increasingly seen as something anyone can practice (Quandt, 2023). Consequently, journalists and traditional media organizations have lost their exclusive position as gatekeepers of information (González Trujillo et al., 2021) to a new category of content “producers” who generate vast amounts of information (O’Boyle, 2022).

The evolution of journalism in this digital environment has accelerated due to increased investments in new technologies, the migration of traditional media to digital platforms, and the integration of tools such as artificial intelligence and big data into newsrooms (Fernandes et al., 2023). Social networks, in particular, have revolutionized media-audience interaction, enabling a dynamic and bidirectional flow of information where public reactions to news content can be monitored in real time (Blassnig & Esser, 2022). The positive side of these advances is mainly related with the democratization of information (Chan, 2014), by facilitating access to more perspectives and voices in public discussion (Mellado & Scherman, 2021). Journalism has expanded its reach and efficiency (Lopezosa et al., 2021), while digitization has contributed to greater transparency in news reporting and

promotion of accountability (Karlsson et al., 2017), as well as faster and broader dissemination of information across geographical and temporal barriers (Jin & Liu, 2022). However, these benefits coexist with significant challenges. One pressing concern is the spread of disinformation and informative disorders (Rosenberg et al., 2023), which can make it difficult for the public to distinguish reliable information from false or misleading content (Yang et al., 2019). As competition intensifies among various actors –many of whom are not bound by journalistic ethics or verification standards (Chakraborty et al., 2019)– the pressure on established media outlets to remain relevant has led in certain cases to compromise its depth and rigor, further undermining journalism’s credibility (Karlsson et al., 2016).

This phenomenon is partly driven by the rising emphasis on performance metrics. Many media organizations now rely heavily on indicators such as click-through rates and time-on-page to gauge success and guide editorial decisions (Focás, 2023). To boost these metrics, news outlets increasingly employ strategies like clickbait –an editorial tactic that uses attention-grabbing headlines to attract users and prompt clicks (Potthast et al., 2016). While effective in drawing immediate audience interest, this practice often sacrifices informational depth, prioritizing sensationalism over substantive content (Bazaco et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of online disinhibition –the idea that anonymity and invisibility online embolden users to behave in ways they might avoid in face-to-face interactions– poses additional challenges for journalism (Suler, 2004). This disinhibition can influence both how audiences and sources interact with media content and how news organizations engage with the public. Although the digital environment enables journalists to access experts and witnesses more directly and quickly (Broersma & Graham, 2013), it has also reshaped traditional interaction dynamics, particularly with regard to interviews (Lecheler & Kruike-meier, 2016). Additionally, anonymity and online disinhibition have emboldened audiences to criticize and even harass journalists more openly, exacerbating online harassment and fostering a culture of unfounded criticism (Alarcón Luco et al., 2022). These changes contribute to a volatile environment where fear –fueled by

insecurity and the potential for virtual reprisals– has become a constant concern for media professionals (Waisbord, 2022).

Fear as a factor of change

Fear is a complex, fundamental emotion triggered by the perception of a threat, whether real or figurative (Hanns, 1996). This emotional response plays a critical role in survival, activating physiological and psychological mechanisms to react to potentially dangerous situations (Moscone, 2012). Within journalism, fear is not uncommon, as professionals often confront situations –such as covering disasters, conflicts, crimes, or sensitive issues (Puente et al., 2013)– that can provoke this response due to direct exposure to risk. Fear can also arise indirectly when journalists face threats, undue pressure, or the risk of retaliation from powerful individuals or organizations (Freedom House, 2016). Additionally, the fear of job loss is exacerbated by conditions of job insecurity, mass layoffs, financial pressures, and growing instability within the industry (González Macías & Cepeda Robledo, 2021; Grassau et al., 2021).

In these contexts, fear may act as a self-protective mechanism, encouraging journalists to be more cautious and meticulous (Hoiby & Ottosen, 2019). However, it can also negatively impact the integrity and quality of reporting by constraining freedom of expression and the pursuit of truth, leading to self-censorship (Harlow et al., 2023; Waisbord, 2022). Fear may prompt journalists to avoid controversial topics or sources or modify their approach to a story (Vargas, 2018).

The exposure and vulnerability (Martin, 2018) associated with the digitization of journalism have positioned a new source of fear: the audience. The immediacy and anonymity of the Internet have enabled new forms of attacks, harassment, and threats that include hacking, doxing, misinformation, and digital surveillance (Alarcón Luco et al., 2022). Moreover, in the digital environment, fear and anxiety may stem from the pressure to publish content quickly (Lee, 2015), alongside concerns over audience engagement and the possibility of eliciting strong, negative reactions from dissatisfied readers (Fürst, 2020).

This fear is often intensified by concerns about credibility and trustworthiness (Molyneux et al., 2020), especially given the risk of disseminating misinformation on fast-moving digital platforms, where pressure for rapid updates is constant. Collectively, these factors create an environment where fear significantly influences journalists' work, decision-making processes, and their ability to adapt to an increasingly challenging landscape. These issues pose a threat to journalistic integrity and press freedom, underscoring the importance of understanding these pressures and the protective measures needed to mitigate their effects.

Chile's situation: changes in the context of successive crises

Over the past five years, Chile has experienced significant transformations in its socio-political and technological landscape, profoundly affecting journalism and the media. This shift intensified dramatically with the social outbreak of October 2019—a large-scale movement that arose in response to a variety of social issues, such as economic inequality and dissatisfaction with the political system (Proust et al., 2024). The protests, notable for their magnitude and persistence, challenged the country's social and political structures and tested journalism's ability to cover complex, rapidly evolving events amidst an explosion of misinformation (Bachmann et al., 2022). This period of social outbreak was soon followed by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which imposed new restrictions and obstacles that forced journalists to adapt their work methods. Remote work became the norm, and access to information was limited by social distancing and health risks (Grassau et al., 2023).

In this context of crisis and transformation, Chilean media faced growing pressure to produce content that was not only informative and reliable but also engaging for an audience that had become increasingly oriented toward digital platforms (González-Trujillo et al., 2022). This period was marked by heightened fear and perceived violence among journalists. Reporters noted a raise in physical risks associated with covering events, including physical and verbal assaults, arbitrary arrests, and, in one case, the death of a colleague (Callejas et al., 2020). Similar dynamics of violence were observed in the digital sphere (Harlow et al., 2023), with a rise in incidents of cyber-attacks, online harassment,

sexual violence, defamation, stigmatizing discourse, restrictions on access to information, and discrediting campaigns (Observatorio del Derecho a la Comunicación, 2024).

Anonymous virtual attacks, which are often difficult to trace, have contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, affecting journalists’ approaches to their work (Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Disinformation campaigns not only erode public trust in the media but also contribute to a climate of polarization and social distrust (Valenzuela et al., 2021).

This hostile environment underscores the need to study how journalists are coping with threats and fear, as well as to explore the skills and strategies they are developing to protect themselves while continuing to uphold journalism’s social role. Therefore, this study aims to understand how fear within the digital environment acts as a factor of change in professional practices and in the relationship between journalists and their audiences and sources.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014), which seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do digital audiences impact journalism strategies or professional practices, and what role does fear play as a factor in this dynamic?
- RQ2: What are the main personal fears expressed by journalists regarding the new possibilities for interaction and direct relationships with audiences?
- RQ3: How has fear impacted reporting processes as a result of the new dynamics of interaction with audiences and sources?

The information was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of participants through narratives (Jensen & Jankowski, 1993). To obtain a representative sample, in terms of proportionality of interviewees, a census of all existing media

in Chile in 2019 was conducted. From this universe of 1757 media outlets, a purposive sample was selected using quotas that included 91 professionals: 41 practicing journalists and 50 media editors. The quotas for both groups were defined based on geographic location (with proportional distribution between media located in the capital and those in regions throughout the country) and media format (including traditional media –TV, press, and radio– and digital media).

For editors, the selection criteria was that they were in office at the time of the interview, either as general editors of the media or in the political or national news sections. For journalists, quotas were established to ensure proportional distribution of gender (between men and women) and years of experience (three groups were established: less than five years, between five and ten years, and more than ten years). Although a quota criteria specifically related to the thematic area they were working in at the time of the interview was not considered, we prioritized contact with journalists who mainly covered political or national news sections.⁶

The interviews were conducted between December 2019 and April 2022 via Zoom. They lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded for subsequent transcription. The interviewees signed an informed consent form, and the entire process was regulated by the ethics commission of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. This consent explicitly stated the commitment to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees and to eliminate any references that could identify them. Therefore, in the results section, only quotations are provided for illustrative purposes, without any specific reference to the speaker.

⁶ This decision was made because in many cases –particularly in the regional media– there is no thematic division of functions, but rather small teams are in charge of all the coverage. Moreover, during the period in which the interviews were conducted, between the social outbreak and the pandemic, in most of the media their professionals were redistributed to cover the topics associated with these crises, leaving aside particular thematic sections.

The open-ended questions in the interview guide addressed issues such as work routines, political, economic, technological, and cultural risks faced by the profession, the impact of these risks, adaptation strategies, and their consequences. Data analysis was conducted from a socio-critical perspective (Loza Ticona et al., 2020) and included the complete transcription of the interviews. Spiggle’s (1994) approach was followed as a guide to achieve a deep, comprehensive, and synthetic interpretation of the data, which were categorized into significant groups, elements were compared within and between categories, and dimensions were defined. This process was carried out using an axial coding matrix (Spiggle, 1994), which allowed the identification of general thematic units related to different areas where fear can impact journalism.

RESULTS

Likes Save the Queen: Clickbait as a Response to the Impact of Digital Audiences on Journalistic Practices and Strategies

In January 2020, just three months after the onset of the social outbreak in Chile, one of the first in-depth interviews revealed the challenges faced by journalists working for traditional media outlets’ web platforms. These journalists were reluctant to cover stories on the sociopolitical crisis. The reason was that they preferred to cover topics such as the British royals, which guaranteed “more visits” and, therefore, higher payment. As one journalist stated:

Anything about Queen Elizabeth, I don’t know what; the princes and who they’re dating; whether they’re getting married or not; the first child they had and the first photo. That was going very well, and they had millions of visits and generated a lot of money (journalist, female, radio, national scope).

What might seem like an anecdote became evident as a trend as the research progressed and helped address the first research question (RQ1) regarding how digital audiences impact journalistic strategies or professional practices and the role fear plays in this dynamic.

The interviews reveal a pervasive perception and concern among journalists that the criteria for evaluating a story's success on the Internet are increasingly tied to the number of online interactions it generates. This situation is frequently cited as a trigger for fear and job insecurity among professionals, who feel that digital audiences are no longer viewed as the target audience to be informed, but rather as actors who influence editorial decisions in real time. Metrics derived from their interactions –such as the number of clicks, views, likes, comments, time spent on platforms, and reposts on social networks– affect how the media prioritize and value stories. Often, this results in a focus on those that generate higher online traffic, giving rise to various actions associated with the phenomenon of clickbait, where headlines, photos, phrases, and posts are designed to capture the public's curiosity, encouraging them to click on the story. In the words of a newspaper journalist:

Traditional media have used technologies, social networks, and metrics tools to determine what people want to read and try to target ... and offer the hashtag of the day or the trend of the day ... to help the media get clicks. And then all the content is adapted to that (journalist, male, print media, national scope).

This trend is further reinforced with concern in various interviews, showing that the work in newsrooms occurs on two fronts: on one hand, through on-site reporting of current events, and on the other, by monitoring the media's website and the main topics trending on social networks. A journalist from a digital media outlet remarked:

I found it terrible because it was a system to see in the background which news was performing better in real time ... [The media] already has a hit counter when you enter the page, and you could see how you were going up or down, and based on that ... we had to start inventing [stories] related to that story (journalist, male, digital media, national scope).

The use of performance metrics as key indicators of success is also linked in interviews to another trend associated with clickbait: covering

entertaining or interesting topics at the expense of more important but less attractive or harder-to-understand ones. Journalists and editors acknowledge that this dynamic presents significant challenges, especially when the impact of a story affects the compensation professionals receive for it. When constant pressure is placed on journalists to produce viral or highly shareable content, it can lead to a focus on sensational or superficial topics, often at the expense of more in-depth or investigative reporting. The example of stories about the British royals versus the social outbreak was cited by interviewees from various outlets as an illustration of this phenomenon: “The outbreak story got X tweets, or X likes, versus a Meghan and Harry story that got thousands. And the Harry and Meghan story gets paid, I don’t know, a thousand times what they pay for the outbreak story” (journalist, female, TV channel, national scope); “They were fighting over the royalty stories because, in the end, they were paid based on how many people saw the story or clicked on it. ... So nobody wanted to do stories about [for instance] science (journalist, female, digital media, national scope).

The data also suggest that the competition generated among journalists due to these practices fosters a work environment where newsroom members are viewed as rivals rather than collaborators. One journalist reported:

[The editors] used to make a ranking of the best and worst stories ... “You are the favorite this week because your article has been the most read”. This demand was something that we talked about loudly, and the whole newsroom knew about it (journalist, female, print media, national scope).

Stories like this illustrate how the drive to climb the statistics ladder leads to a decrease in collaboration and the exchange of ideas among colleagues, which are essential for producing high-quality work. Competition and pressure to perform can lead to professional burnout, creating a less supportive and more stressful work environment. As another journalist mentioned: “If for six months you are writing something that is not clickable, you’re going to have problems” (journalist, male, digital media, national scope).

In addition to the consequences of the pressure to achieve high engagement metrics on their own web platforms, another key finding of this research is the anxiety and pressure felt by interviewees when faced with the need to produce content that generates a high impact on social networks. This phenomenon reflects a shift in how success in journalism is perceived and measured, traditionally linked mainly to the quality of the information delivered. An editor from an online media outlet noted: “Journalists have never been so concerned about getting likes and ingratiating themselves with people who think like them politically” (editor, male, digital media, national scope). While a journalist from a traditional newspaper reflected: “News itself is becoming a consumer product today, immediate and disposable ... We are becoming more than actors in an information industry; we are becoming actors in an entertainment industry” (journalist, male, print media, national scope).

Furthermore, it is no longer a matter of creating a news story for a single platform but rather of covering multiple formats simultaneously. One TV journalist explained: “It’s no longer just doing a story for TV; it’s doing a story for TV, writing a tweet, recording ... a live stream on Instagram” (journalist, female, TV channel, national scope). This expansion of responsibilities increases the workload while instilling a sense of fear related to the pressure to stay relevant and engaging in an ever-changing media landscape. Added to the concern that this multiplication of tasks may compromise the quality of journalistic content is the fear and uncertainty felt by more experienced professionals, who worry about being displaced by younger journalists, more tech-savvy in new technologies and platforms like TikTok, creating a gap within teams.

In this context, the interviews also revealed that maintaining credibility has become an increasingly significant concern. In the digital environment, particularly on social networks, content is disseminated rapidly, often without the verification processes typical of journalism. This can lead some media outlets, eager to compete with the immediacy of other actors, to question whether they should sacrifice rigor and depth for the sake of speed in their content. As one journalist from a regional media outlet stated: “You are very concerned about

likes, ... visits, and generating the most striking headline, but there is not necessarily a journalistic work ethic behind it. I think the speed of the digital has affected a lot in that sense” (journalist, male, TV channel, regional scope).

From the perspective of the editors interviewed, the pursuit of public attention often leads media outlets to publish more sensational or superficial content. This diminishes substance and depth, further threatening to erode the public’s already weakened trust in the media. As one editor pointed out: “They publish a lot of biased images and ideas, which are not even from this year, and in some cases, they are often from other countries” (editor, male, radio, national scope). This dilemma highlights a central conflict in contemporary journalism: balancing the pursuit of broad online scope with the need to maintain integrity and truthfulness. As another editor stated: “They don’t believe you anymore; sometimes people don’t believe you, because they say ‘if I saw it on Facebook, then it must be true’” (editor, male, digital media, national scope).

*Anonymity, self-censorship, and fear of attack:
audiences as a source of personal fears*

To answer the second research question (RQ2), the analysis results indicate that the phenomenon of fear related to new possibilities of interaction and direct relationships with audiences in the digital environment is intensified among journalists and editors due to the speed with which social media users can spread both praise and criticism. Among the interviewees, there is a shared perception that an error, perceived bias, or controversial position can trigger a broad and severe negative reaction, potentially damaging the reputation of the media outlet and the integrity of its professionals. This dynamic manifests primarily in fears related to what is often called “cancel culture”, invasion of privacy, loss of boundaries, online threats, and offline violence.

When interviewees speak of fear regarding cancel culture, they refer to the fear of facing a disproportionate negative reaction as a result of published content, which may lead to being canceled on social networks, pressured to leave the media outlet, or professionally discredit-

ed. The interviews reveal a growing concern to be excessively cautious with every word published, with the awareness that any misstep could trigger significant adverse reactions. This concern is shared across media formats, regardless of their size or scope, as demonstrated by a journalist from a traditional regional outlet: “The pressure from social networks, when they put a *funa*⁷ on you [from] a completely different public who does not agree with what you are saying, is what I am most afraid of” (journalist, male, print media, regional scope).

Regarding comments on virtual platforms, a journalist from a digital outlet said:

There comes a moment when you think, “Oh, it doesn’t matter, they are just commentators, nobody reads them”, but then you realize, at night, that it does matter. Especially because we all sign our articles, so the comments are [addressed] to someone by name (journalist, female, digital media, national scope).

According to the interviewees, this fear of being canceled for the content or perspectives published can lead to a process of self-censorship, where journalists avoid dealing with sensitive issues or expressing opinions that might be perceived as controversial. They argue that this inhibits freedom of expression and reduces the diversity of voices in public debate, especially on politically charged topics or stories involving corruption, for example. A newspaper editor expressed concern, saying that, in some cases, “You’re not entirely convinced of what you’re saying, but you’re trying to protect your image on social media rather than focusing on what should matter the most for a journalist, like freedom of expression” (editor, male, print media, national scope).

Alongside the fear of cancel culture, interviewees expressed anxiety over the double-edged nature of connecting with audiences

⁷ Chilean term that refers to “a public act of aggravation or accusation against one or more persons, to make known a reproachable situation or alert more people about it. The *funa* is independent of the veracity of the fact, or whether the person is innocent or guilty of it” (Garcés, 2023).

via social media. While these platforms bring journalists closer to their audience, they also allow the audience to approach journalists directly. This proximity, they argue, opens the door for interactions that may cross professional boundaries, such as receiving calls or messages at inappropriate times or being approached with personal information or irrelevant requests. One journalist shared: “I’ve had to make my networks private. I also get WhatsApp messages from people I don’t know, and I’ve had to ask people to notify me if they are going to contact me, so I know who is reaching out” (journalist, female, TV channel, national scope).

The analysis shows that constant access and the expectation of immediate response blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, invading journalists’ private spaces. This not only adds stress but also raises serious concerns about privacy and the ability of journalists to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Several journalists shared experiences that highlight an even more serious problem of digital interaction: harassment. For example, one journalist from a digital outlet shared how a colleague alerted her to an online forum where strangers made unpleasant and offensive comments about the sexual orientation and physical appearance of a journalist friend. The most disturbing part was that someone had posted confidential details about her daily routine: “They said ‘I’ve seen her at [home address] and that’s where she lives. Just so you know, she passes by every day at 6:30’, ... and all for writing an article” (journalist, female, digital media, national scope).

Although interviewees generally agree that most online stalkers do not act on their threats, the mere possibility that they could do so remains a constant source of concern and stress. One journalist expressed her anxiety in this way:

These people, most of the time, don’t do anything. But just imagine if a crazy person says something to you on the subway, where you pass by every day. It’s super violent. ... With that uncertainty, at any moment something could happen. It only takes one person to get angry over something you said, and everything becomes public (journalist, female, digital media, national scope).

Thus, this is the account of actions perceived as a form of violence that generates an atmosphere of fear and anxiety, particularly for those whose personal information is publicly available.

The data also shows that this atmosphere of fear impacts individual journalists, extending to the newsroom and influencing editorial decisions and press freedom. For instance, a journalist shared that when covering a controversial case about cyberbullying, she insisted on not signing her name to the stories due to personal safety concerns. She explained: “I walk home alone and take the same route every day, which is super dangerous” (journalist, female, digital media, national scope). However, she faced resistance from her superiors: “I felt bad for her because I was the perfect person to cover the story, but they were not willing to protect my name”. This case underscores how concerns over personal safety can affect coverage decisions, and how, especially for female journalists, these threats can limit or silence voices. Ultimately, the story was not published, a decision that reflected the management’s lack of understanding of the digital risks, particularly for female journalists.

Agenda-setter audiences and the “selfie recorded testimonial” dilemma: the impact of fear on interaction with sources and audiences

In January 2024, Chilean writer Francisco Ortega posted on X (formerly Twitter) the following sentence: “In the era of clickbait and reading only the headline, we are 5 seconds away from interviews being pure ‘I don’t know, I don’t have an opinion on that topic’ so as not to be crucified on social networks” (Ortega, 2024). His comment serves to introduce the answer to the third research question (RQ3) and illustrates a new dynamic on how interaction with audiences and sources has impacted the reporting process. The interviewees report that during the social outbreak, as a measure to protect the physical safety of journalists, many Chilean media outlets adopted the practice of avoiding field trips. This change, they say, led to an increased reliance on social networks and technology to interact with news and sources. Instead of exposing themselves to potentially dangerous situations in the field, journalists turned to digital platforms and technological tools to gather information, communicate with sources,

and stay abreast of developments, thus transforming the way events were covered.

Over time, this adaptation led many sources –including authorities, official sources, and experts– to opt massively for what, based on what was described in the interviews, we will refer to here as “selfie recorded testimonials.” This concept refers to “selfies”, i.e., photographs that people take of themselves with their mobile phones without the need for a photographer. In this case, a “selfie recorded testimonial” is an answer or statement recorded by the source in video or audio that does not allow interaction or counter-questioning by journalists. In the words of a radio journalist, the dynamic is as follows:

I need a testimonial. Now, you call [an authority] and say “Look, I’m doing a story about this weekend’s elections and I need to know what you think [gives an example]”. And it’s hard for me to talk to you like that, without you looking at me and me not And a little while later, he sends it to you and tells you what he wants. And there is no possibility of anyone saying, “Hey, but what about this?” ... There is no possibility of counter-questioning. And I think that [the counter-question] is part of the reporting. That’s what I hate [that it is no longer done] (journalist, male, radio, national scope).

This practice not only remains in force but has become widespread. The interviewees state that it is becoming increasingly difficult for sources to be willing to interact with a journalist. This has allowed informants to prepare and record their answers in advance, focusing on the topics they prefer and avoiding those they find uncomfortable or challenging. There is consensus among journalists and editors that this form of one-way communication has affected the quality of content and altered the traditional dynamics of interviews, diminished the quality of journalistic dialogue, and restricted the ability to elicit spontaneous and revealing responses. An editor of a regional media outlet pointed out that this practice has also lowered the quality of the contents broadcast:

Because we were no longer doing it with professional cameras, nor with professional cameramen, but each person was giving his video, his selfie, as

he could ... Journalists were losing ground in the right we have to counter-question ... because the spot was already prepared in 30, 40 seconds (editor, male, TV channel, regional scope).

Along with the decrease in the possibilities of interaction with traditional sources, the interviews revealed a deep discomfort among journalists and editors in the face of the power that audiences and sources have as agenda setters. This discomfort does not point to the possibility that issues of public relevance emerge from the citizenry that should be covered by the media, but to the fact that they feel pressure to include in their agenda issues or points of view that are being discussed on social networks despite the fact that they do not consider them relevant, valid, or even verifiable. The social explosion and the pandemic turned social networks into a space for “reporting”, where users referred to facts, situations, and positions that the media, for different reasons, did not consider themselves in a position to cover directly. Given the speed and ease offered by virtual platforms to gather opinions and trends, journalists said they felt inclined and pressured to use them as sources, although this practice is not risk-free. A journalist states about the coverage of the social outbreak that, in order to cover a story about, for example, human rights violations, “it was enough for us ... a complaint on social networks. There was a person who identified himself and had made a complaint to the Public Prosecutor’s Office. We are with the story and that’s it” (journalist, male, radio, regional scope).

The growing possibility that such content might not be truthful has increased professionals’ fear of falling into disinformation. However, the pressures to keep audiences happy have also become a source of fear. Empowered and more active than ever, audiences can demand the inclusion of certain issues in the media agenda. Sometimes these demands are accompanied by threats to the prestige of the media if their expectations are not met. Despite these challenges, according to statements made by editors during the interviews, information verification strategies are being adopted, such as fact-checking, both to counteract disinformation emerging from other sources and to prevent the to prevent the unintentional dissemination of inaccurate or outright false content. This media response reflects an effort to maintain

journalistic integrity in the face of the complex dynamics imposed by audiences in the digital age. In the words of one editor:

If we find out about something through social networks, our number one duty is to check it, report it, have access to sources before publishing it. We cannot fall into the irresponsibility of publishing anything simply because it came out on social networks. Then, sometimes the times of social networks are much faster than the times of the media, and that has obviously influenced and generated a conflict with audiences who think that the media hide issues, when in fact that is not the case (editor, male, TV channel, national scope).

CONCLUSIONS

This research was proposed as a reflection on the idea of fear (Moscone, 2012) and the ways in which this emotion acts as a factor of change in journalistic practices in the digital environment (Freedom House, 2016; González Macías & Cepeda Robledo, 2021; González-Trujillo et al., 2022). Its goal was to discuss the fears felt by reporters, as well as those who fulfill the role of editor, in the face of the changes that digitization has triggered in their relationship with audiences and sources. For this purpose, Chile was used as a case study, focusing particularly on the changes journalism has experienced in the last five years in the context of two consecutive crises: the social outbreak of 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The findings reveal a series of pressures that media professionals face, many of which derive from the excessive use of metrics as indicators of success for their content on digital platforms. The results confirm what has been suggested by the literature (Focás, 2023), insofar as they show that, in many cases, there is a tendency to prioritize successful content in terms of virality over the relevance and depth of the stories. Traditionally, such success was measured by the quality of information, accuracy, depth of research, and the ability to inform the public in a timely and balanced manner (Pellegrini et al., 2011). Success with the audience was analyzed with respect to the whole product, based on the circulation of newspapers, the rating of a newscast, or the reputation

of the media outlet. However, the results show that these traditional indicators have begun to be intertwined –and even eclipsed– by the need to generate content that resonates on social media and has a high immediate reach.

The impact of this phenomenon on the quality of journalism is serious if it involves questionable practices such as clickbait (Potthast et al., 2016) and an abuse of sensationalist resources in pursuit of obtaining more likes. The relentless pressure to produce engaging material and avoid disapproval from social media users can lead to superficial approaches and negatively impact the work environment. The competition among peers to generate the most popular content increases the stress in journalism, which alternates with anxiety about the consequences of these measures on the credibility and relevance of their content.

More direct interaction with audiences, while beneficial in some respects (Chan, 2014; Karlsson et al., 2017; Lopezosa et al., 2021; Mellado & Scherman, 2021), has blurred the line between work and personal life. The invasion of privacy, along with the risk of online harassment and threats (Alarcón Luco et al., 2022; Waisbord, 2022), has become a constant concern affecting both news coverage and personal safety of journalists –especially women– who report being fearful of the real risk of becoming victims of attacks by members of the audience. In this sense, this work allowed for the identification of self-protection measures by professionals, such as the preference for the anonymity of the author of a story or self-censorship on certain topics or news approaches, especially in the political sphere. Although these practices emerge as strategies to avoid adverse reactions from audiences, such as being canceled, they pose risks to freedom of expression and the role of journalism. These practices create pressures that constrain the search for controversial stories or unpopular approaches to news.

Something similar happens with the massification of remote reporting, the use of social networks as sources, and the consequent challenges of information verification. Technology has distanced traditional sources from journalists, massifying practices such as the so-called “selfie recorded testimonial”, a concept proposed here that refers

to a response or statement recorded by the source in video or audio that does not allow interaction or counter-questioning by journalists. This phenomenon has affected the quality of content and compromised the depth of journalistic dialogue by limiting the ability to confront the sources, which in many cases turns the media into mere reproducers of those statements. Likewise, the concern of professionals about the ability of audiences and sources to direct certain aspects of journalistic guidelines and agendas generates deep discomfort, as this possibility is associated with additional pressure to cover irrelevant or unverifiable topics or perspectives.

Chilean journalism is in a stage of adaptation and redefinition, seeking a balance between protecting journalistic integrity and adapting to the demands of a digital and socially complex environment. Although this research has limitations inherent to its qualitative approach, the breadth of the interviews and the methodological rigor applied ensure the validity of the results. This study not only provides a valuable perspective to understand the challenges faced by journalism in Chile, but also offers a deep understanding of the fears associated with working in this environment at a global level, contributing to our understanding of the current dynamics of journalism in a constantly evolving digital world.

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