

Conditions and routines of digital investigative journalism in El Salvador under a state of exception

Condiciones y rutinas del periodismo de investigación digital en El Salvador bajo el régimen de excepción

Condições e rotinas do jornalismo de investigação digital em El Salvador sob regime de exceção

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ALEXIA RAQUEL ÁVALOS RIVERA¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6954-563X>

How are the routines of digital investigative journalism being reconfigured under the state of exception in El Salvador? This study draws on the theory of journalistic routines and investigative journalism. From a qualitative and interpretive approach of an inductive nature, in-depth interviews with journalists from digital investigative media were analyzed. The findings identify criminalization, surveillance, information opacity, and intimidation of sources, which have led to editorial adjustments, changes in the use of sources, and defensive routines to sustain publication.

KEYWORDS: Investigative journalism, journalistic routines, censorship, El Salvador, journalists.

Este trabajo busca responder cómo se reconfiguran las rutinas del periodismo de investigación digital bajo el régimen de excepción en El Salvador. Este estudio se apoya en la teoría de las rutinas periodísticas y el periodismo de investigación. Desde un enfoque cualitativo e interpretativo de carácter inductivo, se analizaron entrevistas a profundidad a periodistas de medios digitales de investigación. Los hallazgos identifican criminalización, vigilancia, opacidad informativa e intimidación de fuentes, lo que ha derivado en ajustes editoriales, cambios en el uso de fuentes y rutinas defensivas para sostener la publicación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo de investigación, rutinas periodísticas, censura, El Salvador, periodistas.

Este trabalho busca responder como as rotinas do jornalismo de investigação digital se reconfiguram sob o regime de exceção em El Salvador. Este estudo baseia-se na teoria das rotinas jornalísticas e no jornalismo de investigação. A partir de uma abordagem qualitativa e interpretativa de caráter indutivo, foram analisadas entrevistas aprofundadas com jornalistas de veículos digitais de investigação. Os resultados identificam criminalização, vigilância, opacidade informativa e intimidação de fontes, o que resultou em ajustes editoriais, mudanças no uso de fontes e rotinas defensivas para manter a publicação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornalismo de investigação, rotinas jornalísticas, censura, El Salvador, jornalistas.

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¹ Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and the Humanities (CEIICH), National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico.
alexiaa87@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Salvadoran digital investigative journalism faces increasingly adverse conditions, especially since the establishment of the state of exception in March 2022. This measure, promoted by the government of Nayib Bukele on the grounds of combating gang violence, has led to the weakening of the rule of law and the erosion of basic democratic guarantees, with indirect but significant effects on journalistic practice. In this context, digital investigative outlets such as *El Faro*, *Revista Factum*, *Gato Encerrado*, *Focos TV*, and *Voz Pública* have been subjected to systematic strategies of stigmatization, harassment, and surveillance.

This article aims to answer two research questions: first, what are the conditions faced by journalists from digital investigative outlets under the state of exception? Second, what routine strategies have they developed to continue publishing in this context? The central interest does not lie in analyzing the state of exception as a security policy or legal device in itself, but in examining its effects on journalistic routines, particularly in outlets characterized by high levels of professional and financial autonomy (Ávalos Rivera, 2023), which do not depend on private or state advertising (González & Echeverría, 2022).

The declaration of the state of exception came after an unprecedented weekend of violence and killings in March 2022 (Rauda et al., 2022) and has been extended for 47 consecutive months through February 2026 (Mondragón & Jordán, 2026). During this period, fundamental rights such as the presumption of innocence and due process have been suspended, more than 87 000 detentions have been documented—many of them arbitrary—with reports of torture, forced disappearances, and deaths in state custody (Amnesty International, 2024; Beltrán Luna, 2024).

Beyond these executive measures, the approval of legal reforms that have restricted freedom of expression and journalistic practice, including amendments to the Penal Code and the *Ley de proscripción de maras y pandillas* (Law Banning Maras and Gangs). These reforms are synthesized in what has been referred to as a “gag law”, established through Decree No. 350, which prohibits the reproduction of messages or communiqués produced by gangs in the media (Asamblea Legislativa, 2022). In parallel, journalistic investigations documented

negotiations between the Bukele government and criminal organizations (Martínez, 2022; Martínez et al., 2025), which have strained the official security narrative and intensified the confrontation with investigative outlets.

The relevance of this research is grounded in recent empirical evidence. Between 2019 and 2024, the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador-APES) documented more than 1 300 aggressions against the press, many of which occurred during the state of exception. These aggressions include digital harassment, public stigmatization, and restrictions on journalistic practice, affecting both independent and traditional outlets (APES, 2024).

These findings coincide with those of the Worlds of Journalism Study, which documents how Salvadoran journalists perceive and experience professional risks in authoritarian contexts. A significant percentage of journalists report having faced public discrediting, surveillance, and threats that affect their emotional well-being and safety (Harlow, 2026; Harlow & Ávalos Rivera, 2025). Furthermore, the study reveals persistent tensions between professional autonomy and external pressures, which is consistent with the conditions analyzed in this article.

In terms of academic background, studies on the state of exception in El Salvador have focused primarily on its analysis as a public policy and security strategy (de los Reyes, 2024; Sánchez González, 2024; Serafin Martínez, 2025), on its legal and constitutional dimensions (García, 2024; Muñoz, 2024; Portilla, 2024), and on the study of the political narrative and communication of the regime (Rivera & Cristancho, 2024). However, a distinct gap exists regarding the empirical analysis of the relationship between journalistic routines and the state of exception, particularly in the field of digital investigative journalism. This article seeks to fill that gap.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This work organizes the literature around three analytical clusters: 1) contributions on journalistic routines and conditions of news production; 2) studies on investigative journalism and its watchdog function; and 3) the practice of journalism and freedom of expression in authori-

tarian contexts. This delimitation guides both the theoretical dialogue and the subsequent analysis of findings.

This study draws on the sociology of news production (Alsina, 1989), particularly on approaches that analyze journalistic routines as socially constructed practices that organize news production. From this perspective, routines are neither neutral nor merely technical procedures, but rather the result of the interaction among individual, organizational, economic, cultural, and political factors that shape what is newsworthy (Atton & Wickenden, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Witschge & Harbers, 2018). Schudson (1997) similarly conceives routines as consensus-based processes within the journalistic profession that provide stability and predictability to news work.

In the digital environment, specific conditions such as technology, time pressure, and fragmented audiences mediate these routines (Beauvais, 2022; Boczkowski, 2004). In investigative journalism, routines tend to be less conventional (de León, 2018), as they require more time, in-depth work, and access to documents or sources under conditions of anonymity –distinguishing them from daily journalism (García & Gómez, 2020).

Scholars have argued that, in essence, any journalistic practice should carry an investigative dimension (Klein, 2001; Martínez-Sanz & Durantez-Stolle, 2019; Parra, 2017). However, specific definitions for investigative journalism exist: one which is oriented toward the watchdog role (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2024) and is committed to accountability (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020), and whose central practice consists in seeking out and publishing information deliberately concealed by public or private actors (Anderson & Benjaminson, 1976). This type of journalism typically associates with specific dispositions in terms of professional values, skills, commitment to the public interest, and a willingness to assume risks in adverse contexts (Camino, 1997; Martínez-Sanz & Durantez-Stolle, 2019; Waisbord, 2001).

The literature on journalistic production in restrictive and authoritarian contexts shows that the conditions of professional practice depend not only on technical or organizational factors, but also on political structures that can restrict autonomy, access to sources, and the articulation of editorial agendas (Rodríguez, 2021; Somohano

Fernández et al., 2025). In these scenarios, investigative journalists tend to reconfigure their routines, giving rise to practices that combine adaptation and resistance (de León, 2018; Witschge & Harbers, 2018).

Freedom of expression, surveillance, and indirect censorship

Freedom of expression and access to public information constitute fundamental rights recognized in international normative frameworks and are essential conditions for the practice of journalism in democratic systems (Abramovich & Courtis, 2000; Bastons & Eliades, 2008). In contexts of democratic deterioration and authoritarianism, however, these rights can face restrictions through direct censorship or through more subtle forms of state control.

State surveillance can produce a chilling effect on freedom of expression by generating fear, uncertainty, and self-regulation (Masferrer, 2023), a dynamic that extends to journalists and their sources as well. While in some cases there is no explicit prohibition on publishing, an environment of risk emerges that discourages investigation and limits contact with sources, prompting self-censorship as an adaptive response to contexts of threat (Cepeda, 2017; Merchant, 2018).

Restrictions on access to information can also operate as a mechanism of indirect censorship. Institutional opacity, information withholding, and lack of transparency limit journalism's capacity to scrutinize power and fulfill the watchdog role characteristic of investigative journalism (Ávalos Rivera, 2025; Klein, 2001). International reports document how these mechanisms contribute to the weakening of democratic guarantees (Freedom House, 2022).

Another element that complicates journalistic practice is the systematic circulation of disinformation, which political discourse and state propaganda promote and amplify in numerous contexts (Rivera Magos & González Pureco, 2024) –as in the Salvadoran case (Ávalos Rivera, 2025)– alongside the proliferation of “pseudo-outlets” that imitate the forms, languages, and styles of professional journalism (Palau-Sampio, 2023). Studies indicate that disinformation impacts the credibility of journalism (Frau-Meigs, 2022); journalists also perceive that its expansion strains their relationship with audiences, compelling them to adopt new verification routines not only to counter false or misleading infor-

mation, but also as a strategy aimed at restoring trust and legitimacy (García & Buitrago, 2022).

As Waisbord (2001) has noted, in authoritarian contexts or those marked by growing concentration of power, critical press outlets tend to become targets of both symbolic and material attacks. Journalism, however, is not a passive actor; faced with these scenarios, journalists deploy strategies of agency, adaptation, and resistance that can re-configure their professional routines and their relationship with power (Cottle, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on exploratory research with a qualitative approach and an interpretive perspective (de Arnoux, 2009). The study adopts a case study design, understood not as an exercise in statistical generalization, but as an analytical strategy that allows for an in-depth examination of a situated phenomenon: the conditions and routines of digital investigative journalism under the state of exception in El Salvador. This design responds to the need to understand processes, practices, and meanings; the relevance that each particular case contributes to the broader study; and specific criteria such as temporal availability, diversity of perspectives, and accessibility of informants (Rodríguez et al., 1999), attending to their specific political and professional context.

The study focused on journalists from independent digital investigative outlets (Ávalos Rivera, 2023). In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 journalists between March 2022 and August 2023, as part of a broader research project from which emergent themes arose, a process consistent with qualitative research approaches (Charmaz, 2006). Participant selection followed a chain sampling strategy (snowball sampling), a technique well suited for accessing professional communities operating in high-risk contexts; this strategy has also been used in other journalism studies.

To reduce potential homogeneity biases associated with this technique, epistemological safeguards guided case selection: multiple network entry points rather than a single one. Despite sharing certain

contextual similarities –such as the situation of violence– the network mapping drew from distinct social groups (trajectories, profiles, positions, ages, and gender); theoretical and network saturation was reached; information was validated through triangulation (detailed below) and an inclusion criteria log was maintained to ensure the sample remained aligned with the object of study.

Fieldwork involved several sequential phases: the design and validation of the interview instrument via a pilot test with journalists; initial outreach conducted over the encrypted application Signal; and the interviews themselves. These interviews were conducted in person in El Salvador during the author's fieldwork visits at locations chosen by the journalists to ensure their own security. Finally, the process concluded with data transcription and subsequent qualitative analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured and formed part of a broader instrument designed for a larger doctoral research project. For the purposes of this article, five specific items were selected for their theoretical relevance; these explored participant perceptions regarding: 1) risk conditions, 2) changes in professional routines, 3) protection strategies, 4) relationships with sources, and 5) editorial decisions.

The thematic coding procedure aimed to identify patterns, recurrences, and contrasts across the accounts (Charmaz, 2006). This process was operationalized via a coding matrix organized around two core analytical dimensions: the conditions of professional practice under the state of exception, and the routine strategies developed to sustain journalistic production, both structurally aligned with the specific interview items.

Given the surveillance and risk conditions that characterize the Salvadoran context, the study incorporated specific ethical considerations. Participant anonymity was guaranteed; interviews took place with prior consent, at the time and location of each journalist's choosing; consent to audio record was requested (in some cases participants requested off-the-record moments, which were respected); and careful information management was maintained, keeping audio files away from any online system, application, or software in order to prioritize participant security.

Complementary contextualization strategy

As a complement to the interviews, a contrastive triangulation and contextualization strategy was employed for the empirical data, understood not as an autonomous analytical technique, but as an auxiliary analytical resource (Charmaz, 2006; de Arnoux, 2009). This strategy included three components: a) systematic monitoring of the journalists' public activity on the social media platform X; b) monitoring of content published by the digital outlets under analysis; and c) a documentary review of reports produced by human rights institutions (University Human Rights Observatory, Cristosal, Office of the Human Rights Advocate), the journalist's association (APES), and official documents (Legislative Assembly, President's Office).

These materials were used exclusively for contextualization and contrast with the accounts obtained in the interviews, without constituting an independent analytical corpus or an in-depth analysis in their own right. Document selection followed criteria of thematic and temporal relevance (March 2022 - August 2023).

Drawing on this methodological design, the research sought to answer the following questions: what are the conditions faced by journalists from digital investigative outlets under the state of exception, and what routine strategies have they developed to continue publishing in this context?

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Conditions faced by digital investigative journalists under the state of exception

As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explain, from the perspective of sociology of news production, journalistic practices are shaped by multiple levels of influence: individual, organizational, political, and cultural. From the analysis of interviews conducted with journalists from digital investigative outlets in El Salvador, four structural conditions emerged that reconfigure their professional routines: the risk of criminalization, permanent surveillance, informational opacity, and intimidated sources.

Risk of criminalization

The reform to the Criminal Code linked to the Law Banning Maras and Gangs, referred to by the journalistic community as the “gag law”, introduced an ambiguous regulatory framework that could broaden judicial discretion and place investigative journalism in a potential zone of illegality. The reform drew criticism due to the ambiguity of its wording and, as APES (2022) warned, it allows journalistic coverage of gangs to be interpreted as “glorification of crime”, effectively turning journalistic work into a potentially criminal act and undermining freedom of expression.

The testimonies collected show that journalists internalize this condition as a constant threat, describing their work in terms of illegality and criminal risk. This perception aligns with Waisbord (2001), who argues that, in authoritarian contexts, state power instrumentalizes mechanisms of symbolic and material control over critical press outlets. In this sense, criminalization does not necessarily operate as formal censorship, but rather as a device of preventive coercion, one that can inhibit the investigation and publication of sensitive topics, setting a precedent that extends beyond gang-related coverage to potentially other subjects as well.

Now there is a gag on journalists. We live on the edge, if you talk about gangs, they can put you in prison for 15 years ... if you interviewed a gang member, it's illegal (personal communication with journalist).

The reading of who is producing messages about gangs is arbitrary, and a judge can decide that covering gangs could constitute glorification of crimes (personal communication with editor).

In these interviews, both reporters and editors describe their work as something potentially illegal, framing it as a crime and viewing it as acts of censorship and coercion against the profession. The recurring term *mordaza* (gag) functions as a discursive marker (Ducrot, 1986) that condenses the experience of journalistic restriction. In contrast, official discourse has employed euphemistic language that presents the measure as a necessary step to prevent the media from serving as

the “spokespersons” of criminal groups, thereby portraying journalists as speaking on behalf of gangs, a strategy of positive self-representation by those in power (van Dijk, 2005). This discursive tension reveals the indirect delegitimization and systematic stigmatization of critical journalism.

Permanent surveillance

State surveillance constitutes another central dimension of journalistic routines. As Masferrer (2023) argues, state surveillance mechanisms produce a chilling effect that encourages self-censorship and restricts communication with sources. This climate of surveillance has intensified in El Salvador through the militarization of public spaces and the strengthening of security apparatuses under the guise of citizen protection.

Reports from professional associations document multiple aggressions and acts of harassment against journalists, particularly by security forces (APES, 2023). This findings align with the Worlds of Journalism Study, which reports an increase in attacks on journalists by state actors (Harlow, 2026):

Yes, we are afraid ... you don't report the same way (personal communication with journalist).

Obtaining information is punished, if a police officer comes right now and searches my phone ... just by having it, not even publishing it (personal communication with editor).

The testimonies show that journalists perceive surveillance as a systematic practice that affects their daily, family, and professional lives. They highlight aspects such as fear, blockades, police intimidation, threats, and the illegality of carrying documentation the government considers classified or restricted. These experiences are consistent with the notion of unconventional routines in investigative journalism (de León, 2018), but they also add a further dimension. Not only do they depart from the productivist logics of daily news production, but

they are also redefined under extra media conditions of surveillance that shape practices ranging from information gathering to the protection of sources and journalistic materials.

Information opacity

The systematic restriction of access to public information constitutes another structural barrier. The co-optation of the Institute for Access to Public Information (Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública, IAIP) and the expansion of information classification have weakened formal accountability mechanisms (Ávalos Rivera, 2025; Guzmán et al., 2020). For investigative journalism, whose core function is to hold power accountable (Anderson & Benjaminson, 1976; Caminos, 1997; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2024), this institutional closure entails a profound transformation of journalistic routines.

Journalists describe a context in which official information remains permanently or under prolonged classification. Beyond the sheer inability to access official data, public institutions routinely avoid responding to information requests, while government sources are reduced to unidirectional press releases, limiting opportunities for data verification and the triangulation of information.

There is no access to anything, no expenditures, everything is classified (personal communication with journalist).

What are you left with? Collecting their statements, but there is no way to cross-check anything (personal communication with journalist).

The doors are completely shut, they don't even answer the phone (personal communication with journalist).

This situation undermines one of the core functions of investigative journalism: accountability. As Anderson and Benjaminson (1976) define it, in a country where everything has been placed under classification, carrying out this function becomes increasingly difficult, forcing the modification of routines previously consolidated within the profession.

I used to obtain information through various channels; today we cannot, there is only one source, and it is *Nuevas Ideas*. Whether executive, legislative, or judicial (personal communication with journalist).

And this is where I have reinvented myself: it is no longer a doctor from the Ministry of Health explaining things to me; instead, I go, I read, and I seek information from certified private doctors and other specialized sources (personal communication with journalist).

In response, journalists who had grown accustomed to certain routines, ways of accessing public information and modes of engaging with sources have diversified their information-gathering strategies, turning to alternative sources, leaked documents, and external specialists. This process of reinventing oneself—as one journalist put it—reveals a forced adaptation in which the commitment to holding power accountable is maintained, but under conditions of greater risk and informational precarity.

Intimidated and threatened sources

The weakening of the relationship between journalists and sources constitutes a direct consequence of the surveillance and criminalization dynamics outlined above. Sources constitute a structural component of the news-gathering process (Berkowitz, 2019; Hertzum, 2022); under the state of exception, however, they face threats, monitoring, and retaliation, drastically reducing their willingness to cooperate.

Testimonies point to canceled meetings, abrupt silences, and suspicions of possible government leaks, all of which contribute to a generalized climate of distrust. This dynamic affects both the quantity and quality of available information, reinforcing a model of direct control that restricts access to empirical evidence without the need for explicit censorship.

The primary focus becomes what are you trying to find out, and above all, whom are you talking to. Because at first, they won't come after you, they will go after the person who gave you the information. Not to kill them,

necessarily, but they will eventually threaten them (personal communication with editor).

Some sources are genuinely afraid. I had arranged to meet a source who told me she had everything ready and would hand over the documentation, but when the time came, she never responded. They know we are being listened to. This source knew they were being monitored simply for contacting me (personal communication with journalist).

From a discursive perspective, the executive branch contributes to the systematic delegitimization of independent journalism and, furthermore, avoids direct communication with journalists, thereby promoting media disintermediation with the press (Reyna et al., 2024) and reinforcing the construction of journalists as political enemies. This rejection extends to other state institutions and official sources that remain reluctant to provide public information. The result is a subtle form of control that simulates press freedom while emptying the right of access to information of its substantive content.

Despite these constraints, journalists have developed strategies of resistance and adaptation that demonstrate their agency (Cottle, 2000) and reaffirm the identity of investigative journalism, which is characterized by a strong adherence to its watchdog role, even in hostile environments (Anderson & Benjaminson, 1976; Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020).

Routine strategies in digital investigative journalism under the state of exception

The literature on journalism in Central America has documented the adoption of self-censorship practices as a response to contexts of violence (Benítez, 2020). The findings of this study, however, reveal a different pattern among journalists from independent digital outlets. Rather than abandoning their topics or their news work, these journalists have reconfigured their professional routines as strategies of adaptation and protection, without this implying substantive self-censorship.

These transformations confirm the centrality of external factors in news production (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and the close relationship between the political system and journalistic practices (Rodríguez, 2021; Somohano Fernández et al., 2025), particularly in a context of a prolonged state of exception where fundamental guarantees are suspended without specific safeguards for journalistic practice. Drawing on the analysis of interviews and documentary material, three routine strategies emerge: transnational articulation, the reconfiguration of the investigative structure, and defensive routines.

Transnational articulation

Articulation with peers at the transnational level emerges as a central strategy for addressing risk in the face of institutional vulnerability. Journalists have intensified collaborative work with counterparts in other Central American countries and Mexico, not only to broaden coverage, but as a mechanism of symbolic, professional, and security support. This practice aligns with prior studies identifying transnational collaboration as a resource for mitigating censorship and strengthening protection in restrictive contexts (Chacón & Saldaña, 2020; Palau-Sampio, 2018). Western literature conceptualizes this as a condition of the media and journalist diaspora in which collaborative work can reconfigure production processes (Heft et al., 2019; Konow-Lund et al., 2019). In the Salvadoran case, the findings reveal a process of cross-border digitalization of journalism, grounded in a collaborative culture among outlets facing similar authoritarian contexts.²

This is a project that seeks to cover authoritarianism, corruption, and inequality in Central America. It functions as an alliance of outlets and journalists, and it aspires to consolidate its operations (personal communication with journalist).

² These transnational connections have expanded coverage to regional topics, as in the case of *Redacción Regional* (RR), an alliance bringing together outlets such as *Dromómanos* (Mexico), *Focos* and *La Prensa Gráfica* (El Salvador), *Contracorriente* (Honduras), *Divergentes* (Nicaragua), and *No Ficción* (Guatemala).

However, this strategy also reveals the limits of the national arena. The administrative relocation of outlets such as *El Faro*, *Gato Encerrado*, and *Focos* outside of El Salvador illustrates how transnational articulation is not merely an editorial choice, but a response to persecution, surveillance, and judicial pressure. Institutional mobility and the decentralization of operations thus become embedded in routines as measures of organizational survival.

First came Pegasus, and then the judicial persecution began. They publicly accused us of money laundering, the Ministry of Finance audits started, and that completely changed the way we work (personal communication with journalist).

Reconfiguration of the investigative structure

The digital investigative outlets analyzed deliberately distance themselves from the logic of immediacy and simplification associated with conventional digital journalism. Instead, they prioritize investigative routines centered on long-form, in-depth reporting and, in some cases, elements of the Latin American *crónica periodística* –narrative journalism that combines literary techniques with rigorous reporting– thereby reinforcing their professional and editorial identity.

This structure rests on high levels of editorial and financial autonomy, as these outlets depend neither on public funds nor on commercial advertising (Ávalos Rivera, 2023; Harlow & Salaverría, 2016). This autonomy, however, introduces organizational tensions and compels newsrooms to develop administrative competencies that go beyond journalistic work, while also redirecting content toward topics such as politics, security, and migration –the only areas sustainably funded through international grants.

Over time we learned to seek out donors, but we regret not thinking about how to build a business model from the beginning (personal communication with editor).

We made journalistic bets that for us were a luxury, like sustaining journalists dedicated exclusively to cultural coverage, with the depth and respect we wanted to give that area. We ended up succumbing and pushing those journalists toward covering politics, migration, and corruption; because we have not yet found a funding path where cultural topics can translate into financing (personal communication with editor).

This restructuring of investigative practice also manifests in adjustments to source management and editorial workflows. Specifically, newsrooms have incorporated legal counsel to navigate sensitive topics and strengthened pre-publication editorial filters. Testimonies reveal a greater use of leaked materials and anonymous voices, a shift that might affect journalistic credibility. The temporary departure from the country by some journalists ahead of a publication also emerged as a practice already internalized within editorial routines. At that point, this decision did not respond to the logic of exile, but rather to a preventive protection measure.

I was away, I remember being in a hotel for a week, desperate to go out and come back (personal communication with journalist).

The findings also show that this reconfiguration has reinforced two key traits. First, a strong commitment to the watchdog role, which journalists themselves conceptualize as “uncomfortable journalism”, reflecting a clear alignment between professional identity and journalistic genre. Second, faced with institutional opacity, a diversification of specialized sources external to the government has emerged, even as this increases the risks of criminalization.

Defensive routines

The third strategy identified corresponds to a set of defensive routines that cut across both the professional sphere and the everyday lives of journalists. The state of exception has generated a permanent state of alertness that translates into substantive changes in communication practices, mobility, digital security, and personal relationships.

They never taught us how to live under a dictatorship (personal communication with journalist).

There's a fear that something bad could happen to you, that you could be imprisoned for freely expressing your opinion, or for telling a truth that is uncomfortable for the government (personal communication with journalist).

These routines include the adoption of more secure technologies, the decentralization of files and documents, adjustments in public and social exposure, and training in digital and physical protection. Unlike earlier periods, these practices are no longer oriented toward mitigating risks associated with non-state criminal actors—such as gangs—but have shifted in response to a scenario in which the state itself produces the violations, despite its normative role as the guarantor of security and press freedom. Such practices confirm that risk is not confined to the media space but extends beyond it, affecting the emotional well-being and personal dynamics of journalists.

I wake up constantly throughout the night wondering if I am being followed, keeping the phone off, turning it on, and checking whether the VPN is active (personal communication with journalist).

I do not attend certain social gatherings. Not because I care, but because it can cause me to lose focus on my work, because that is what they want: to keep us distracted so we do not do journalism (personal communication with journalist).

While the literature has noted that journalists in contexts of violence tend toward self-censorship (Cepeda, 2017; Merchant, 2018), the findings of this study reveal a different picture: despite the fear, self-censorship has not been a predominant strategy, and journalists continue to demonstrate a strong social and professional commitment. Defensive routines, far from inhibiting news work, operate as adaptive mechanisms that sustain the practice of investigative journalism in a structurally hostile environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to answer two questions: first, what are the conditions faced by journalists from digital investigative outlets under the state of exception? Second, what routine strategies have they deployed to continue publishing in this context? Drawing on the empirical analysis, four structural conditions emerged that reconfigure journalistic practice under the state of exception: the risk of criminalization, permanent surveillance, informational opacity, and intimidated sources. In response to this scenario, journalists have deployed a set of strategies grouped around three analytical axes: transnational articulation, the reconfiguration of the investigative structure, and the adoption of defensive routines, all of which allow them to sustain news production without resorting, in any generalized way, to self-censorship.

While the state of exception, framed within the *Plan Control Territorial* (Territorial Control Plan), was not presented as a policy targeting the press, the analysis shows that state practices do not operate as mere collateral damage, but rather as indirect mechanisms of control that specifically affect those engaged in critical investigative work. The conditions identified function as disciplinary devices aimed at narrowing the scope of action available to investigative journalism.

The journalists interviewed have adopted a stance of resistance, reaffirming their watchdog role through adaptive practices suited to the current conjuncture. This disposition responds not only to governmental hostility, but is also deeply embedded in professional subjectivities strongly anchored in the defense of freedom of expression and its democratic function, a factor that partially explains the persistence of investigative work even in an environment marked by fear.

The findings also reveal, however, the limits of the profession's collective capacity for action. Professional association organization does not emerge as a recurring theme in the testimonies, nor as a consolidated strategy, and no evidence points to the construction of a strong collective capable of confronting state pressures. Moreover, the participants are journalists with high professional and symbolic capital, relatively less precarious than other sectors of the profession, particularly those located outside major urban centers. This reality underscores the need

for future research on local journalists and other types of outlets, whose production conditions and adaptive routines may differ significantly.

Although investigative journalism has historically maintained a tense relationship with political power, the current level of confrontation surpasses earlier periods predating Nayib Bukele's rise to the presidency, both in terms of the concentration of power and the sophistication of control mechanisms. This study demonstrates the existence of an openly anti-press state stance, in which any institution with critical traits can become the target of a spiral of violence promoted by political power.

During the fieldwork period, no cases of journalists being killed, imprisoned, or exiled were documented, which contributed to a perception of controlled tolerance toward journalistic practice. Subsequent reports from professional and international organizations indicate, however, that this tolerance is increasingly fragile. According to Reporters Without Borders (2025) and APES (2025), around 50 Salvadoran journalists have gone into exile in the past year. This figure –which emerged after data collection had concluded– reinforces the findings of this study by showing that the conditions described here have had direct effects on journalism.

While the literature warns that state surveillance can lead to self-censorship (Cepeda, 2017; Merchant, 2018), this study found no paralyzing effect among the journalists interviewed (Masferrer, 2023). On the contrary, a persistent willingness to continue publishing was evident, even under high-risk conditions, reflecting a professional ethic grounded in social and democratic commitment.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings connect with debates on competitive authoritarianism and the indirect control of the public sphere (Somohano Fernández et al., 2025), where there are not necessarily explicit prohibitions, but rather gradual mechanisms of surveillance, criminalization, and institutional attrition that can contribute to normalizing harassment practices. This occurs within an environment where press freedom remains formally intact. Journalism thus finds itself in a field of constant negotiation, continuously redefining its routines to sustain its function.

Finally, the Salvadoran case reveals a paradoxical environment: it operates within a context of high communicational saturation –marked

by a robust state propaganda apparatus (social media management, co-optation of public media, pro-government outlets and official web portals)—combined with deep opacity in access to public data, weakened accountability, and a deliberate disintermediation from journalism.

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PROFILE

Alexia Raquel Ávalos Rivera

Ph.D. in Social Sciences from the Metropolitan Autonomous University, Xochimilco campus (UAM-X), with a specialization in Communication and Politics. Postdoctoral researcher at the CEIICH-UNAM, supported by the Elisa Acuña fellowship. Her research focuses on press and journalism studies, populist political discourse, critical discourse analysis, disinformation studies, and polarization processes. She has collaborated with the *Worlds of Journalism Study* for El Salvador. She has taught at universities in Mexico and El Salvador and is a columnist at *Revista Factum*.