

Strategic Allies and the Survival of Critical Media under Repressive Conditions: An Empirical Analysis of Local Mexican Press

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Abstract

Why do some newspapers remain critical in contexts of antipress repression while others do not? It has been argued that aggressions against journalists generate a deterrence effect on the watchdog role of the press. However, evidence of the press remaining critical in hostile environments appears to defy this claim. In this paper, I explore the relationship between violent government repression and the critical function of the press. Using an original data set of local Mexican newspapers from 2011 to 2013, I examine the direct effects of violence on front-page headlines. I find that while repression does deter critical coverage, the ultimate effect is contingent upon the configuration of strategic press allies in the locality, reviewed here as nongovernmental organizations, opposition parties, and newspaper publishers.

Keywords

violence, authoritarianism, Latin America, media scandals, freedom of the press, civil society, repression

Journalism is an inherently hazardous activity. Some journalists witness violent events firsthand—international and domestic wars, revolutions, mobilizations, police repression, terrorist attacks, organized crime disputes—and may become casualties of the very conflicts they report on. Most of the time, however, antipress violence is linked

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to premeditated acts of retaliation. Aggressions against journalists are of particular concern if they result from systematic censorship by government officials, which can be considered a form of repression.

A repressive environment is naturally associated with a compliant press, mainly because “fear and sense of insecurity may lead to self-censorship” (Chalaby 2000: 22). In a similar fashion, researchers who associate violence with a decline in press freedom also assume that repression undermines the media’s ability to investigate and scrutinize (Adserá et al. 2003; Brunetti and Weder 2003; Fenton 2014; Hughes et al. 2017; Waisbord 2002). However, the literature fails to explain how some media outlets remain critical even within a context of violent repression.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that even in contexts of steady harassment, the media can successfully maintain a watchdog role. In Pakistan, where political journalists are commonly intimidated by public officials, newspapers have persistently denounced governmental wrongdoings. Recently, the Pakistani newspaper *The News* conducted an investigation into military intelligence, which led to the dismissal of the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, in July 2017.¹ Similarly, in Russia, where violent deaths of journalists allegedly orchestrated by public officials are not uncommon, some media outlets have still remained watchful of the authorities. As a recent example, the *Novy Petersburg*’s critical coverage of local governments before the legislative elections of 2016 is said to have negatively affected the electoral results of the incumbent party.² In Sinaloa, Mexico, the daily *Noroeste* constitutes another remarkable case. Despite having faced increasing harassment from local authorities, journalists from this newspaper have maintained a very critical editorial line on the coverage of government issues, particularly of the state’s governors.³

While antipress violence is gaining increasing attention among academics, most studies focus on its determinants rather than on its effects. “Statelessness” (Waisbord 2007), socioeconomic inequality, a weak rule of law (Von Holdt 2014), and impunity (Figuroa 2017) are described as the main enablers of violent repression. Physical aggressions and arbitrary detention of journalists are considered more frequent in weak democracies (Hughes et al. 2017), in contexts of local authoritarianism (Hughes and Márquez 2018), or when political leaders seek to expand their power (VonDoepp and Young 2012).

This study aims to assess the relationship between violent repression and the survival of the watchdog role of journalism. Following Waisbord (2015), the *watchdog role of the press* is understood as “putting the spotlight on wrongdoing and injustices with the expectation that they will cause public outrage and prompt legislative and judicial action” (p. 1). *Antipress repression* (APR) is here defined as the use of physical sanctions, actual or threatened, against an individual or organization whose work is related to news production, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring activities perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices, or institutions. Largely based on Goldstein’s (1978) definition of state repression, my conceptualization concentrates exclusively on violent attacks perpetrated by elected government officials and bureaucrats, excluding aggressions by police, military, organized crime, or private actors.

The specific inquiry that motivates this paper is “Why do some news outlets remain critical of the government in the context of violent governmental harassment while other news outlets do not?” I build on literature on interbranch conflict, which has provided evidence that the contextual configurations of checks and balances condition the effect of the confrontations between executives and other branches of government (Gartner and Regan 1996; Helmke and Staton 2011; Moustafa 2008). I also prove that the deterrence effect of APR is not equally distributed across different political contexts.

The analysis is focused on Mexico because it is one of the most violent countries for journalists, with more than five hundred documented aggressions in 2017 alone (Article 19 2018). At the same time, Mexico is one of the non-Anglo-Saxon countries whose journalists have explicitly embraced a watchdog role (Márquez and Hughes 2016).

Dynamics produced at the subnational level were chosen as the main object of study, owing to the persistency of “authoritarian pockets” (Gibson 2012; Giraudy 2010), where local politicians can abuse and intimidate other political actors, including critical press, with impunity. Furthermore, since most of the lethal attacks against journalists in Mexico have targeted local journalists (Boas 2012; Del Palacio 2015; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Singer 1993; Waisbord 2002), the subnational realm acquires particular relevance.

Barriers to the Critical Press and the Effects of Violence on Journalistic Practices

Attempts of control by government officials constitute one of the most important factors shaping the press’s role in a political system (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). This influence might be pursued through clientelist means such as contract allocation for advertisements. Studies on the political economy of the media have highlighted financial autonomy as a prerequisite for observing critical content in newspapers. While corporate advertising is necessary for professional autonomy (Hanitzsch 2011), clientelism and patronage undermine journalists’ ability to scrutinize public policies and government officials’ performance (Curran 1981; Di Tella and Franceschelli 2010; Guerrero 2009; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Hughes and Márquez 2018).

Political intervention on media content can also take the form of violent repression (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). The objective of APR is to discourage journalistic work that challenges government goals and power relationships, sending threatening signals to the whole sector. According to Waisbord (2002), “anti-press violence responds to the interests of individuals and organizations to muffle or eliminate an emergent critical press” (p. 99); thus, the ultimate goal of this kind of violence is to modify the conduct of journalists and editors, curbing their ability to express themselves freely, and making them less eager to write or publish sensitive content. Accordingly, APR promotes self-censorship and discourages the press’s critical function by means of fear (Chalaby 2000).

Political repression literature has focused on explaining why and how authorities use coercive power amid potential and existing challengers (Davenport 2007). While the repressor's resources and motives have been widely analyzed, there is no single, concise explanation of the effects of repression on the victims (De Jaegher and Hoyer 2019). Following the same logic, the literature on APR has endeavored to explain the determinants of the phenomenon rather than its consequences (Hughes et al. 2017). APR is expected to deter criticism but only a few studies have empirically tested its effects.

Only recently has this theoretical gap started to close. The dramatic increase in violent attacks against Mexican journalists in the last ten years has led to a growing body of researchers examining how APR has affected journalistic practices. One of the first empirical studies on the matter explored posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among journalists assigned to tasks related with violent events (Flores et al. 2012). Other studies focus on the effects of violence on journalists' attitudes and professional performance. Drawing on interviews, Relly and González de Bustamante (2014) show that violent events along the U.S. border have had profound emotional consequences for Mexican journalists.

Using surveys, Hughes et al. (2016) find that together with clientelism and social inequalities, working under conditions of harassment and physical threat sharply affects self-perceived autonomy. Hughes and Márquez (2017a) use the same empirical strategy to study Mexican journalists' practices intended to ameliorate risks in violent contexts. They argue that there is a strong positive relationship between perceived violence and resorting to self-censorship to avoid reprisals. This finding was reexplored by the authors in Hughes and Márquez (2017b), where they demonstrate that exposure to physical risks or political harassment leads to self-censorship.

Overall, these analyses demonstrate that antipress violence significantly undermines the press's ability to report autonomously and function as a watchdog. Nonetheless, the actual effect of antipress violence on news coverage is not precisely known. Moreover, studies have analyzed the effects of general violence against the press without distinguishing between political repression and criminal violence. As it has been argued that journalists are victims of targeted political violence, not just collateral victims of general criminal violence (Bartman 2018), APR should have a logic of its own.

Previous literature attributes an almost infallible deterrence power to violence, detached of the particularities of local context. Under this assumption, it is not possible to accurately explain scenarios where the critical press resists violent repression. Still, some studies have shown that watchdog media may survive under repressive authoritarian regimes. Stein (2013) for instance demonstrates that Brazilian media challenged governmental control of information during the military dictatorship despite political harassment. By analyzing surveys and trends in the coverage of Brazilian newspapers, the author proves that a defiant press was the first form of public dissent, though she does not investigate why the newspapers started publishing critical content. Similarly, Repnikova (2018) documented the survival of investigative

journalism in China and Russia despite systematic official repression, drawing on in-depth interviews with journalists, media scholars, and media regulators.

By conceptualizing the media as a political actor with capacity for agency (with interests and resources of its own) and by recognizing its ability to build relationships with other political actors, the proposed framework advances our understanding of the reasons why a watchdog press can survive under repressive conditions.

Although there is no single explanation for the upsurge of watchdog journalism across countries, its dynamics can only be fully understood by “examining the . . . relationship between journalism and political, economic, and social actors” (Waisbord 2015: 2). Thus, watchdog journalism needs to be studied within broader contexts, and to be conceived as a strategic endeavor which requires supportive conditions, both inside and outside the newsrooms.

The Contingent Effectiveness of Antipress Violence: The Enabling Power of Strategic Allies

The interbranch conflict literature has shed light on the survival of antigovernment institutions and organizations in repressive environments. The press’s watchdog role may be better understood in terms of the checks and balances it can exert as a Fourth Estate.

This literature helps explain the effects of government repression on media content by highlighting how certain agents (such as society, opposition parties, courtroom litigants, or public opinion) can provide support to the repressed and, by doing so, increase the political costs of repression (Gartner and Regan 1996). Such agents are expected to generate public backlashes against repressive authorities (Helmke and Staton 2011; Vanberg 2005). Acting as strategic allies for those under attack, they provide tactical resources for the repressed (demonstrations, public denunciations, independent litigation, fundraising or lobbying), which are useful to resist governmental intervention.

This literature’s insights have not been fully translated into media–government interactions, in part because when journalists confront authorities’ wrongdoings, they do it in a much less institutionalized way than government branches.

However, some authors have insisted that the media relies on other actors to enhance their functions. Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000) found that, particularly in nonconsolidated democracies, media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tend to exercise control on governments. Media intervention plays a fundamental part in societal accountability, inasmuch as the latter needs visibility to effectively expose abuses and wrongdoings. Thus, it can be assumed that there is a virtuous, almost natural, link between societal forms of control and the media, and that both actors support each other.

Similarly, Waisbord (2007) and Segura and Waisbord (2016) argue that citizens’ movements may reshape media systems in Latin America, by systematically denouncing malfeasances and promoting pluralism in a region characterized by elite-captured

policies and corporatism. As these organizations have also raised their voices against antipress violence and clientelist practices, they have become a key force supporting transformations of media governance.

Relly and González de Bustamante (2017) find that transnational and domestic organizations provide support against antipress violence by organizing public demonstrations, training journalists in security matters, and providing legal assistance. This view is shared by Brambila and Lugo Ocando (2018), who show that the so-called “civil networking coalitions,” integrated by civic actors, activists, and transnational organizations, may lobby or campaign in favor of vulnerable journalists.

Beyond civil society, other actors have been identified as potential media allies. In a classic study, Paletz and Entman (1980) analyzed how the political opposition can provide the press with strategic resources and support its watchdog role. Moved by their own interests, opposition politicians often leak key information to the press about government wrongdoings. In the case of the United States, these strategic leaks have triggered critical news reports on government actors.

Finally, it has been suggested that media outlets and journalists themselves can build support networks too. Relly and González de Bustamante (2014) show how journalists assigned to risky contexts promote teamwork, collaborative reports, and collectives as a self-protection strategy against violence and harassment. Nevertheless, this literature does not analyze the effects of support networks on media coverage.

Building on the scholarship on civic networks of support, along with insights provided by the literature on interbranch government conflict, I aim to show that attempts to silence the press might be curbed by the presence of strategic allies. I characterize “strategic allies” as actors that provide the media with support to fulfill its watchdog role. Whether formal constituted powers, NGOs (including independent litigant organizations), political opposition, or journalists’ networks, these allies may potentially diminish the pervasive effects of APR by (variously) raising social awareness, attracting broader backing, influencing policy making, monitoring aggressions, or providing training, legal assistance, shelter, and relocation assistance to journalists targeted by threats or violence. These forms of support can raise the visibility of repression and create strategic pressures on governments to end the violence. As a result, the press is expected to perform more confidently as a watchdog.⁴

Thus, this discussion leads to a series of hypotheses. First (Hypothesis 1), the magnitude of critical press coverage against the government decreases if we observe an increase in repressive actions against journalists. However, this effect is moderated by the presence of strategic allies, which leads to a general second hypothesis (Hypothesis 2): the larger the presence of potential strategic allies, the weaker the deterrence effect caused by APR.

This hypothesis may be articulated according to each strategic ally. Regarding NGOs, those specialized in defending human rights are central to the argument. Human rights defense organizations (HROs) may moderate the deterrence effects of APR by providing training, strategic information, protection, and visibility. I therefore

hypothesize (Hypothesis 2a) that the larger the number of NGOs, the weaker the deterrence effect caused by APR.

In a similar manner, the political opposition may moderate the deterrence effects of APR by exposing aggressions, creating political pressures, and leaking strategic information. Thus, I expect (Hypothesis 2b) that the stronger the presence of opposition parties in parliament, the weaker the deterrence effect caused by APR.

Finally, as documented by the literature, the creation of self-protection networks is a growing trend among journalists and may be an effective moderator of APR deterrence effects. Thus, I hypothesize (Hypothesis 2c) that the larger the number of journalists' networks, the weaker the deterrence effect caused by APR.

Antipress Violence and Press Markets in Mexico: An Overview

Over the last decade, Mexico has been consistently rated among the most dangerous places in the Western hemisphere to practice journalism (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ] 2012; Freedom House 2017; International Press Institute 2017). Article 19, a U.K.-based freedom of speech and freedom of information organization, recorded 2,533 incidents against journalists between 2011 and 2017, including threats, beatings, intimidation, cyber-attacks, and murders (Article 19 2018). According to a parliamentary report (Cruz 2016), impunity reigns in 99 percent of the cases, as only two out of eight hundred inquiries on these incidents led to a conviction.

Blended within the broader and more complex violence related to drug cartels, attacks against the press are commonly portrayed by authorities as a collateral damage of the militarization policy implemented since 2006. Yet, less than half of antipress aggressions are related to organized crime. As documented by Article 19, 60.5 percent of these aggressions are perpetrated by government officials or bureaucrats.

Figure 1 presents the subnational distribution of reports of APR by Mexican authorities between 2011 and 2013. According to Article 19's figures, government officials (not including police officers or militaries) perpetrated 230 aggressions. Veracruz appears as the most repressive state with thirty-four incidents, followed by Oaxaca (twenty-one), Coahuila (twenty-one), Baja California (twenty), and Chiapas (sixteen). At the bottom of the list, there are twelve states with less than three attacks for the same period, and Tabasco, Campeche, and Baja California Sur are the only states without any registered aggression.

The escalation of APR has motivated several forms of backlash. Local organizations have started working toward better security conditions for journalists, while international organizations, such as the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, and Article 19 have publicly denounced acts of Government repression. Parliamentary opposition has also organized demonstrations at the National Congress, demanding more security for journalists (Melín 2016).

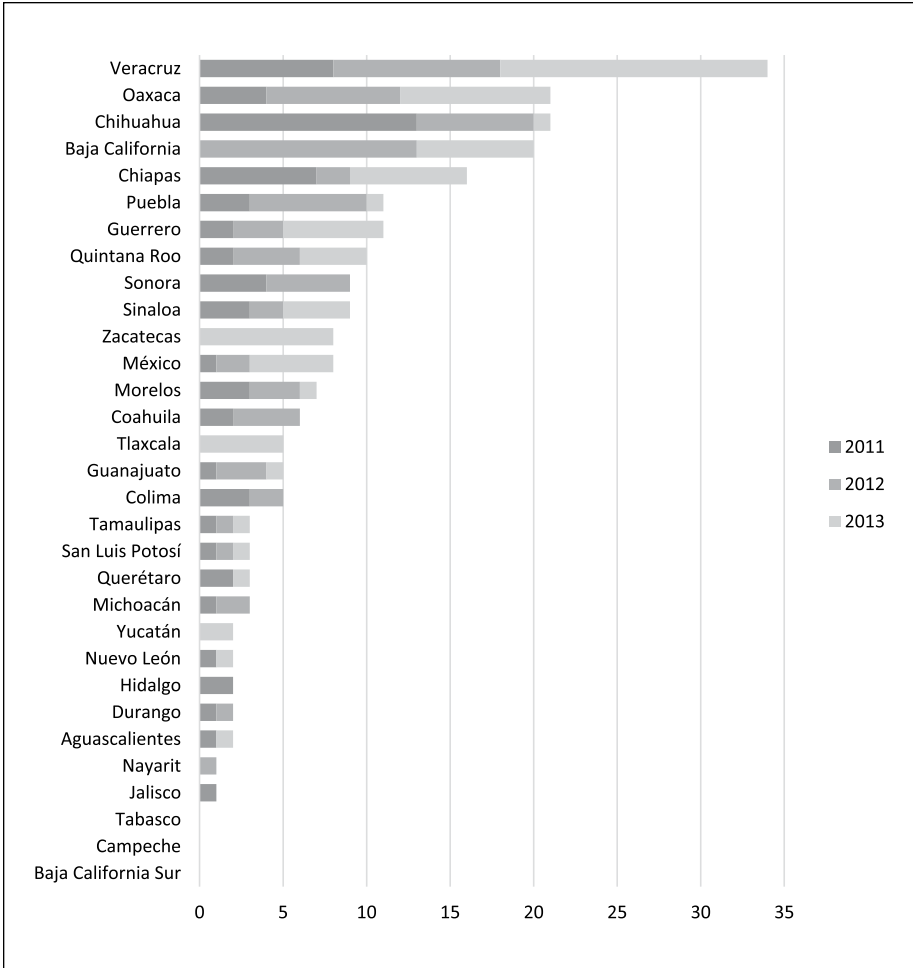


Figure 1. Antipress repression by states (2011–2013).

Source. Own elaboration based on Article 19 data.

Local news markets in Mexico can be described as fragile and unstable, with many publishers evidently linked to political groups (Salazar 2018) and with strong clientelist bonds. Numerous newspapers have had brief existence as political projects under the protection of specific political groups (Lawson 2002). Unable to adapt to market conditions and attract new audiences, most papers remain highly dependent on governmental advertising (Hernández 2010; Hughes 2003; Lawson 2002; Márquez 2015; World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers 2014).

Information on Mexican audiences and newspaper circulation is fragmented and incomplete (Fenton 2014). Likewise, due to financial issues, many papers

lack archives, either digital or physical. Consequently, there is no single digital resource that can aggregate comprehensive information concerning the local Mexican press.

To overcome this deficiency, I constructed an original data set of front-page headlines from the two newspapers with the highest circulation in each state between 2011 and 2013, with printed editions of sixty-two local newspapers included. This methodological decision was based on the assumption that a newspaper with low circulation in its state will not have substantial influence within the market, regardless of its critical orientation. It must be noted that reported newspaper circulation in Mexican National Print Media Registry is famously inflated. However, to date there is no other systematic source of information regarding newspaper circulation.⁵ Also, it can be expected that all papers tend to inflate their figures in more or less the same proportion (200 percent, according to Riva-Palacio 1997). A list of included newspapers can be consulted in Supplemental Appendix 1.

The Moderating Effect of Strategic Allies on APR

Using data on APR and press coverage in subnational Mexico from 2011 to 2013, I tested my hypotheses to find out if the negative effect of violence on critical coverage is moderated by the presence of different allies.

Method

To estimate the critical orientation of local newspapers, the stratified sampling technique proposed by Riffe et al. (2005) was followed to assess each year of content of daily newspapers. For each year, newspaper and state in the data set, I randomly reconstructed two weeks, yielding 1,217 front-page headlines to analyze.⁶ This strategy allows statistical inference of the yearly content of each newspaper, accounting for potential day-to-day variation without introducing dependence upon news from one day to the next. According to Riffe et al. (1993),

For a population of six months of editions, one constructed week was as efficient as four, and its estimates exceeded what would be expected based on probability theory. By extension, two constructed weeks would allow reliable estimates of local stories in a year's worth of newspaper entire issues. (p. 139)

The analysis is focused on front-page headlines to examine how APR affects newspapers' most strategic and important space, not only commercially but politically as well. Criticism issued in inside pages might still be considered defiant, but the highest level of defiance is found on the front page.

I considered as critical coverage headlines which contained any kind of condemnation of state government, including public policy failures; political scandals regarding the governor, staff, or ministries; or denunciations of civil liberties or political rights violations committed by state officers. Then, the percentage of critical front-page

headlines per year and state was calculated, with the resulting figure used as the dependent variable in the final estimation of the models. For reliability, a double-blind coding was performed (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .683$).

Only 14 percent of the 1,217 front-page headlines were critical toward local governments.⁷ Given this distribution, the parameters for a Poisson model were estimated through the method of maximum likelihood. Interaction terms were constructed to test the conjoint effect of APR and the presence of several groups of potential strategic allies.

Variables

Dependent variable: Newspapers' critical orientation. The outcome of interest is the critical orientation of newspapers in each state against the local government. The variable presents the percentage of critical front-page headlines published per state-year between 2011 and 2013, considering the total of analyzed headlines. Thus, while the unit of observation of the database is newspaper-day, the unit of analysis is state-year. A breakdown of states by level of criticism can be consulted in Supplemental Appendix 2.

Independent variables

1. Antipress violence: APR is measured by the number of physical attacks against journalists by state-year committed by government officials and bureaucrats according to data compiled by Article 19.⁸ All types of aggressions exerted by state officials are considered.
2. Strategic allies—Three local allies are included:
 - a. HROs: Measured as the number of social organizations engaged in promotion and denouncement of rights violation per one hundred thousand inhabitants in the state.⁹
 - b. Parliamentary opposition: Measured as the percentage of legislative seats controlled by the opposition parties in the local Congress.
 - c. Newspaper organizations in the state: Due to information gaps on local newspapers networks in Mexico, this variable considers that the propensity of having journalists' coalitions is higher where there are more papers in an area. This is measured as the "effective number of newspapers," employing the formula used to compute the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979), but considering the proportion of local market covered by each newspaper.¹⁰

Alternative hypotheses. To assess alternative factors that may affect the presence of criticism in news coverage, the following variables were incorporated in the models:

Financial autonomy (AHI). As previously stated, financial autonomy is needed for media to be able to provide greater critical coverage. Thus, a stronger newspaper read-

ership market should give newspapers the financial autonomy to be critical. The percentage of typical newspaper readers, ordered by state, was included, according to the Mexican Council for Arts and Culture (Conaculta 2010).

Violence attributed to organized crime (AH2). It can be assumed that criminal violence alone is sufficient to deter criticism. To assess its effect, the number of violent deaths, presumably perpetrated by organized crime, was included. The data comes from Phillips (2015).

Economic development (AH3). Classic modernization theory argues that material development is sufficient to lead to other desirable changes, such as a more vigilant press. Gross domestic product (GDP) is one of the typical measures to assess this argument. Local GDP comes from data reported by the Mexican National Institute of Geography and Statistics.

Clientelism (AH4). Given that Mexico's media system has been classified as "clientelistic" (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002) and the pervasive effects of patronage have been empirically demonstrated (Hughes and Márquez 2018), the potential effects of clientelism on press criticism must not be overlooked. Clientelism is measured by local government expenditure on advertising contracts divided by total public expenditure. Figures are taken from Fundar reports (a Mexican think tank) (Fundar 2015).¹¹

Results

Four Poisson models were estimated. The first one explores separately the effect of each strategic ally. Models 2 to 4 include an interaction to assess the combined effect of APR with the presence of each potential ally. Alternative hypotheses are included in every model to assess their explicative power.

All models confirm that APR inhibits the watchdog role of the press. Even when controlling for levels of financial autonomy, violence by organized crime, economic development, and clientelism, APR lowers the probability of publishing critical headlines by 3.9 to 7.7 percent for each additional aggression (Hypothesis 1), according to models' coefficients. Models show that, all else considered, strategic allies—HROs, political opposition, and other newspapers—have a positive and statistically significant effect on the propensity of the press to express criticism against the government.

The annual percentage of critical headlines rises as human rights organizations increase in a state. One HRO in the state is predicted to lead to 10.3 percent critical headlines per year, while thirty organizations will lead to 17.4 percent, and fifty-seven to more than 29 percent critical headlines per year in that state, according to marginal estimations for Model 1.

Press criticism also increases with the percentage of legislative seats held by the opposition. According to marginal estimations from Model 1, 10 percent of congressional seats controlled by the opposition will lead to 9.3 percent of critical headlines

Table 1. Poisson Models: Correlates of Critical Headlines and the Moderating Effect of Strategic Allies.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
APR	-0.077*** (.0129)	-0.0396† (.0251)	-0.0777* (.0462)	-0.0621* (.0320)
HROs	0.0184*** (.00226)	0.0223*** (.00316)	0.0184*** (.00226)	0.0184*** (.00226)
Parliamentary opposition	0.0095*** (.0026)	0.0097*** (.0027)	0.0095** (.0036)	0.0096*** (.0026)
Effective number of newspapers by state	0.0375*** (.0109)	0.0362*** (.0109)	0.0375*** (.0110)	0.0416** (.0134)
APR × HROs		-0.00136* (.0007)		
APR × Opposition			-0.0001 (.0008)	
APR × Effective Number of Newspapers by State				
Newspaper readership	-0.0089** (.0040)	-0.0092** (.0040)	-0.0089** (.0040)	-0.0021† (.0034)
Violent deaths	0.0006*** (.00007)	0.0006*** (.00007)	0.0006*** (.00007)	-0.0088** (.0040)
GDP per capita	0.00001 (.00001)	0.00001 (.00001)	0.00001 (.00001)	0.0006*** (.00007)
State expenditure on advertising	-0.224** (.0802)	-0.226** (.0803)	-0.224** (.0806)	0.00001 (.00001)
Constant	2.107*** (.287)	2.059*** (.289)	2.107*** (.323)	-0.229** (.0808)
Pseudo R ²	.1957	.1985	.1957	2.063*** (.299)
N	74	74	74	.1959

Note. One-tailed tests were conducted. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. $N = 74$ due to missing data on newspapers readership and state expenditure on advertising. The p value $< .15$ is also considered due to the low number of observations. These thresholds for reporting statistical significance were proposed due to the low number of observations ($N = 74$). The upper boundary of $p < .15$ was used likewise by Schedler (2013) in his study of authoritarian practices, including repression, where he also dealt with a small sample ($N < 100$). APR = antipress repression; HROs = human rights defense organizations; GDP = gross domestic product.

† $p < .15$. † $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

per year in that state, while control of 60 percent of legislative seats by the opposition will lead to 15.1 percent of critical headlines.

Something similar happens with the third strategic ally, the local press. Based on marginal estimations from Model 1, when there are two effective newspapers in the state, the annual percentage of critical headlines is predicted to be 12.1 percent, while in states with 14 newspapers, 18.9 percent of headlines are predicted to be critical.

Regarding alternative explanations, first, a larger number of readers in the state seem to *decrease* the criticism against the local government. This seemingly counterintuitive result may be a consequence of the clientelist nature of the Mexican media market, in which governmental advertisements alter the relationship between audiences and newspapers. Violent deaths attributed to drug cartels do not reduce the number of critical headlines in any of the models. On the contrary, this variable slightly increases the percentage of critical headlines, confirming the idea that anti-press violence follows a different logic than broader violence (Bartman 2018). Also, better socioeconomic conditions seem to have a small positive effect on the publishing of critical headlines, but the relationship is not significant. Finally, clientelism significantly quells criticism, but the deterrence power of APR is maintained in all models even controlling for levels of clientelism. However, the interaction between clientelism and violence deserves further exploration insofar as these intervention strategies might be used as substitutes, as proposed by Hughes and Márquez (2018).

Model 2 shows that the deterrence effect of APR is reduced when HROs interact with repression. Although the model's results show that aggressions remain negatively and significantly associated with press criticism, the marginal predictions demonstrate that the proportion of critical headlines is always higher in the presence of HROs, which supports Hypothesis 2a. Two scenarios were set, which can be seen in Figure 2a: one for the minimum number of HROs found in the data set (one, thinner line, Zacatecas) and one for the highest number of HROs (fifty-seven, thicker line, Chiapas). Then, the predicted percentage of critical headlines for the entire range of aggressions in the data set (0 to 16) was estimated. Up to sixteen aggressions, the percentage of critical headlines fluctuates between 39 and 6 percent if the number of HROs is set to the maximum, and between 11 and 5.8 percent if HROs are set to the minimum.¹² Both lines tend to converge as aggressions increase, which shows that although HROs can moderate the deterrence effect of repression, this effect cannot ameliorate situations of extreme violence, where both the press and civil society will probably be too intimidated to defy the government.

According to Model 3, the press is less prone to self-censorship in the presence of a stronger political opposition, even under APR, but the interaction term representing this relationship is not statistically significant.¹³ However, political opposition remains significant throughout the four models.

According to Model 4, the higher the number of effective newspapers in the state, the higher the percentage of critical headlines, and the higher the number of newspapers, the lower is the deterrence effect of APR, which supports Hypothesis 2c. Analogously to the HRO analysis above,¹⁴ two scenarios were set (Figure 2b): one for the lowest number of newspapers by state (one, thinner line, Baja California Sur) and

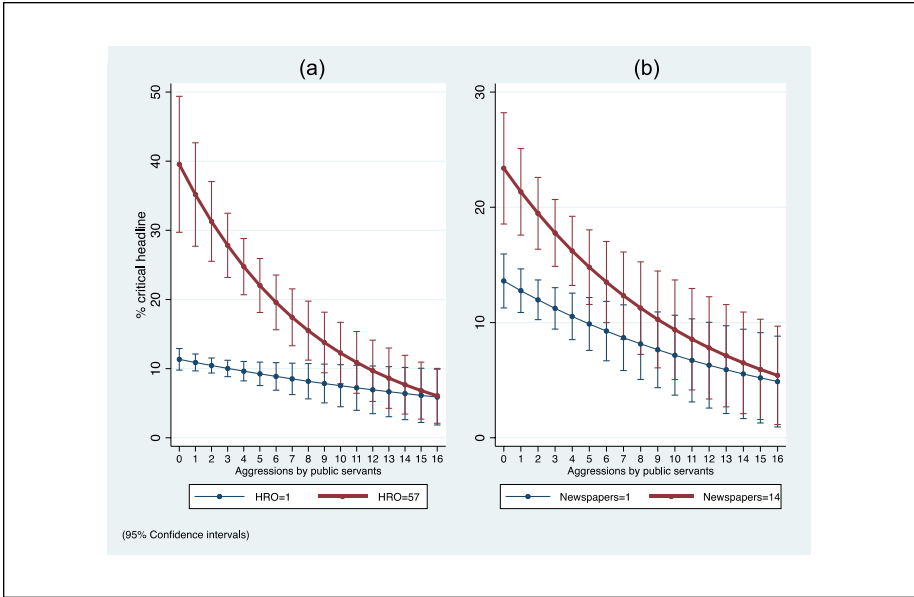


Figure 2. Predicted yearly percentage of critical headlines against local government.

Source. Own elaboration from Model 2 in Table 1.

Note. HRO = human rights defense organization.

another for the highest number of newspapers (fourteen, thicker line, Tamaulipas). The effect for the full range of aggressions was tested, verifying that the percentage of critical headlines is always higher when more effective newspapers are present in the state. Up to sixteen aggressions, the percentage of critical headlines fluctuates between 23 and 5.4 percent if the number of local newspapers is set to their maximum, but critical headlines fluctuate between 13 and 4 percent if local newspapers are set to the minimum value of 1.¹⁵ Again, the lines tend to converge as aggressions increase; thus, the support of this ally, while important, is only significant under low levels of APR.

Conclusion

The effect of antipress violence on newspapers' editorial line has not been fully explored nor empirically tested so far. The approach developed here aims to help close this empirical gap. The statistical models confirm two ideas: (1) APR has a deterrence effect on the watchdog role of the press, but (2) this effect is contingent upon the contextual configuration of political and societal press allies. Deterrence fluctuates depending on the presence or absence of local actors that allow the existence of a critical press even under conditions of repression.

This paper has sought to advance academic understanding of the dynamics of APR, distinguishing it from other types of violence, mainly associated with organized crime.

The empirical analysis highlights that, in the absence of strategic allies, about 7 percent of critical headlines per state are “lost” each year because of a single act of repression (Model 1).

In this article, I have asserted that the press must be conceived as an actor capable of generating alliances, making strategic choices, and resisting blows and attacks. As an actor with agency capability, it will not automatically retract when repressed. This study has shown that the press can take advantage of strategic resources provided by other actors and thus continue publishing content that criticizes the government.

As the results demonstrate, APR has different implications for news content in the presence of specific potential allies. The effectiveness of repression is neither guaranteed nor uniform, as it is contingent on the local context. Although previous studies have demonstrated how violence affect journalists’ health and attitudes toward their work, here I provided empirical confirmation that violent repression also has important consequences for actual press content, measured directly via newspapers’ critical coverage. Although more empirical evidence is needed to determine if criminal violence reacts differently to strategic allies’ presence, these findings provide insights into the dynamics of different types of violence and their implications for news content.

However, the statistical results need to be interpreted with caution. In the absence of reliable information on the number and localization of journalists’ networks, the findings on the role of the press as a strategic ally need to be read carefully. Although there seems to be a strong relationship between the number of newspapers in the state and the issuance of criticism, further data collection is required to determine if this is due to actual mutual support among journalists, or rather if interpress competition is driving the exposés. Similarly, the lack of press archives of many local newspapers forced me to work with the most important dailies in terms of circulation. The high likelihood of these dailies being read by (and influencing) citizens and political actors justifies their prioritization, but the diversity of the local press in terms of circulation and size demands further exploration.

Regarding the recent literature on “civic networking coalitions,” the results confirm the theoretical intuitions of Segura and Waisbord (2016), Waisbord (2009), and Brambila and Lugo Ocando (2018) about the importance of NGO support networks in overcoming the pervasive effects of violence. The two forms of coalition considered in this study—NGOs but also newspaper networks—appear to follow similar logics in terms of strategic support.

A recent study by González and Reyna (2019) found that Mexican journalists tend to perceive a lack of general social support, which seems to contradict the results presented here. One of the main reasons for this apparent inconsistency may be attributed to the fact that the authors’ approach is based on journalists’ *perceptions* of citizen support. Also, González and Reyna (2019) consider a broader definition of society including citizen organizations, while my argument takes into account only specialized civil society groups (assumed to be more aware of and sensitive toward journalistic perils). This notwithstanding, it would be of great interest to assess the different implications of these two logics of social support on newspaper content, particularly in new democracies, where verbal or physical targeting of journalists by political

leaders are more frequent. All these insights broaden the research agenda inasmuch as each particular ally may deserve more detailed examinations of its specific contributions to the preservation of the watchdog role of the press.

In Mexico, public programs for protecting journalists from violence have not been effective. The theory of strategic allies can make a contribution to strengthening these policies by suggesting broadening alliances with other actors that would be critical for the policy process. This would help not only to provide more legitimacy to current protection mechanisms but also to procure access to new strategic resources. Press freedom is more vulnerable where counterbalancing forces to political repression are ineffective. Conversely, the press can fulfill its fundamental contribution to democracy when strategic allies are active and willing to support the watchdog role of the media.

However, this study cannot encompass the entire range of antipress violence dynamics. First, I have focused on aggressions perpetrated by state officers, drawing on studies that claim that political and criminal actors may collude, yet each follows different logics and pursues divergent goals (Holland and Ríos 2017). This emphasized the need to study each phenomenon separately, even if no distinction was made here between different types of attacks. Although we know that the authorities generally resort to beatings while criminals are generally behind journalists' assassinations, the effects of different types of repression should be subject to further analysis to explore if harsher attacks are more effective in deterring journalists from criticizing the government.

Second, this study does not engage with hypotheses derived from the newsrooms' organizational culture or from individual support toward any journalistic model. The state-level perspective adopted here does not allow to assess the role of values or attitudes at the newspaper or individual level. Thus, more research supported by multi-level analysis is needed to enrich our understanding of resilience to repression and violence, including individual factors such as journalists' own concerns and support for watchdog journalism (Hughes and Márquez 2018).

Third, although my statistical models empirically demonstrate that neither clientelism nor repression lose their dissuasive effects when considered simultaneously, a broader discussion of the different strategies is needed to understand whether they are substitutes or complements and how they may interact. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the full range of government strategies to quell criticism, including clientelism, bribes, and patronage. Similarly, findings regarding support from the legislature have to consider that the political opposition has its own interests and strategies, which may include bribing newspapers to attack the government. These potential clientelistic interactions should be explored with further detail, beyond violent dynamics.

Finally, the expansion of the strategic allies theory to other latitudes is desirable. Although Mexico presents particular features—an increased climate of antipress violence along with weak newspaper markets and a fragile political opposition—this study's approach may be applied to similar contexts of consolidating democracies where journalists lack support from formal institutions and have to rely on civil

society, not only press-oriented organizations (the FLIP, Foundation for Press Freedom, in Colombia, for example; or APES, Salvadorans Journalists' Association, in El Salvador) but also those related with human rights, transparency, freedom of information and expression, civic culture, and so forth. In Latin America, there have been several cases in which these particular types of NGO have embraced journalists' causes, such as the Civil Rights Association (Argentina) or CPAL (Provincial Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean; Peru). Detailed exploration of these cases exceeds the extent of this work, but extending the scope of this article toward cross-national comparison would allow an enriching of our understanding of the logic and effects of APR.

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Notes

1. Salman Masood, "Gang Attacks Pakistani Journalist Critical of Military," *New York Times*, October 27, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/pakistan-journalist-ahmad-noorani.html> (accessed February 7, 2018).
2. Jon Sharman, "Russian Journalist and Putin Critic Dies after Being Beaten up by Strangers," *Independent*, April 19, 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-putin-critic-nikolai-andrushchenko-dies-after-beaten-up-by-strangers-a7691461.html> (accessed January 3, 2018).
3. Ernesto Villanueva, "Malova Y Los Ataques a Noroeste." *Proceso* (Mexico City, Mexico), April 21, 2014. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/370192/malova-y-los-ataques-a-noroeste> (accessed November 14, 2017). Also, Ernesto Villanueva, "'Noroeste' culpable." *Proceso* (Mexico City, Mexico), April 12, 2014. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/369558/noroeste-culpable> (Accessed November 14, 2017).
4. This theoretical approach is exclusively intended to assess the press's reactions toward state repression. Although the analysis of other sources of violence exceeds the purposes of this paper, it can be expected that attacks perpetrated by drug cartels are motivated to dissuade the press from exercising an investigative role, rather than a watchdog role, which places emphasis on governmental exposés (Holland and Ríos 2017). Although the motivations for these different sources of violence might overlap, it is necessary to distinguish one from the other. Not only do governments and cartels generally respond to different motivations, they also favor different forms of violence: State actors usually resort to beatings and threats, whereas drug cartels often directly execute journalists (Article 19 2015).
5. Figures may be contrasted with newspaper rankings in commonly consulted sites, such as *Prensa Escrita* (see <http://www.prensaescrita.com>).
6. Excluding eighty-five cases of issues which were impossible to track down in digital and physical archives.

7. Some examples of critical headlines are “Civil society demands the governor to take energetic action” (*El Sol de Tampico*), “Bridge problem confirms governor’s incompetence” (*Diario de Colima*), “Let the people decide whether governor remains or resigns” (*Diario de Colima*), and “Dummy corporations receive payments from local government” (*A.M. León*).
8. The organization records aggressions according to the “Protocol of recording, documenting and tracking of attacks against the press” (available at <http://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/27412.pdf>), which states that reported aggressions must be triple-checked in social networks, local press, and members of Article 19’s local networks. Although Article 19 provides a reliable measure of antipress attacks, the same models were conducted by using the number of judicial inquiries related to aggressions against journalists, as reported by the Office of the General Attorney of the Republic. The problem with this second measure is twofold: First, it does not allow us to distinguish who presumably carried out the aggression; second, not all cases of aggression reach this federal office. For these reasons, these figures were used only as an instrument of reliability and not as the main measure of the variable. The results of this alternative model are available upon request.
9. According to the Directory compiled by the Mexican Center for Philanthropy (Cemefi 2015), which distinguishes ten different activity areas. Although not all nongovernmental organization (NGOs) deal with antipress violence, human rights defense organizations (HROs) are used to denounce abuses; thus, they may potentially include support to the press in their everyday work or transfer their expertise to this specific area.
10. Effective Number of Newspapers (ENN) = $1 / \sum (\% \text{ market covered by each newspaper})^2$.
11. Available at <http://www.fundar.org.mx/mexico/pdf/POCostodelegitimidad.pdf>.
12. The percentage of critical headlines fluctuates between 15 and 5.9 percent if the number of HROs is set to its median (14) and between 16.5 and 5.9 percent if the mean is considered (18).
13. Marginal probabilities were computed, but they are not included here due to their lack of significance.
14. Marginal probabilities were computed due to their significance (maximum p value = .01).
15. The percentage of critical headlines fluctuates between 16.9 and 5 percent if the number of local newspapers is set to its median (6.2) and between 17.2 and 5.1 percent when the mean is considered (6.7).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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