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In search of protection, justice and the truth: journalists' responses to impunity in Mexico and Honduras

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About the author

Tamsin Mitchell has 15 years' experience of working in the international human rights and development sector. From 2007-2016, she managed PEN International's programme of research and advocacy in Latin America and Africa, providing support to writers and journalists at risk. She is a former trustee of Peace Brigades International UK (2016-2018). Tamsin holds Masters degrees from the universities of Oxford and London and completed a PhD in Politics in conjunction with the University of York's Centre for Applied Human Rights in 2021. This working paper summarises the main findings and recommendations of her doctoral dissertation (Mitchell, 2021).

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Executive Summary

This paper summarises a recent study offering a qualitative, comparative, bottom-up exploration of journalists' responses to impunity for violence against journalists in two Latin American countries where this problem is particularly egregious, Mexico and Honduras. It provides a critique of international relations (IR) and politics debates on the value of international human rights (IHR) law and norms to local civil society groups and actors. Drawing on scholarship on civil society and coping strategies in violent and/ or repressive contexts, it asks what people do when state and international protection and the domestic civil society "enforcement mechanism" for IHR standards (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005) fail.

Via thematic analysis of 67 interviews with journalist-human rights defenders and protection actors, I show that journalists used several interlinked strategies to seek justice and protection: domestic and international (engaging with the state via intermediaries, or "protection approaches"), and activist and professional ("self-protection approaches"). Journalists rarely mobilised around IHR standards or legal rights, instead depending on intermediaries, largely domestic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs). While protection approaches were necessary and valued, they were usually insufficient to achieve security and justice: context-dependent and limited – particularly in terms of addressing impunity – and frequently risky for journalists.

Hence, journalists often supplemented or replaced protection with self-protection approaches. However, certain self-protection practices, including some grassroots forms of activism, self-censorship and co-optation, could undermine both journalists' security and journalism itself, as well as public perceptions of the profession. Consequently, some journalists were developing broader strategies to transform the profession and practice of journalism. Self-protection strategies go beyond immediate physical security, combining protection and professionalisation to improve journalists' work as well as continue it more safely, and building their credibility and public support. This indicates the significance of the norms of professional journalism over IHR norms in this case. Although they too had limitations and risks, and were no substitute for effective state protection, such self-protection strategies were an important complement: they represented a crucial form of resistance and source of hope for journalists and likely their best option for contributing to societal pressure for justice and state protection.

Implications for practice

- The findings of this study suggest the need for a recalibration of protection actors' understanding of the protection of journalists at risk towards one that is more local and bottom-up and less centred around states, (I)NGOs and IHR actors. It is important to acknowledge, on one hand, the very real limitations and risks of protection approaches in violent and repressive partial democracies and, on the other, the centrality of self-protection. Journalists at risk are not only victims and beneficiaries but individuals with agency, activists for their own cause and, above all, reporters, investigators, truth-seekers. For the journalists interviewed, facing violence and impunity often boosted their commitment to the social purpose of journalism. It would therefore be useful if protection actors placed more emphasis on supporting what journalists themselves do to seek justice and protect themselves, whether as professional journalists and/ or civil society activists, assisting them to develop and expand these initiatives, prioritising activities that empower journalists and encourage more collaboration and mobilisation, such as capacity building and the funding of journalist-led projects.

- Mexican and Honduran journalists' poor labour conditions and financial precarity pose a threat to their protection that predates and is equal to or even greater than that posed by violence and impunity. It is imperative to find ways of empowering journalists in relation to the media outlets they work for, as well as the state, for example via labour rights training, and to back the reform of government advertising to minimise its influence over editorial line and content and the media more broadly.

- Corrupt and unethical practices, including the co-optation of journalists by the government or organised crime groups (OCGs), are serious obstacles not only to journalists' independence and ability to do their job but also to their security. It might be useful for protection actors to support local journalists and NGOs to acknowledge and expose corruption and government influence over journalism and civil society more generally, despite the sensitivity of these issues, and find ways to tackle them and their causes. For example, revising university journalism courses to include a greater emphasis on professional ethics in codes and in practice and offering opportunities for ongoing training and professional development.

- It is essential that protection actors acknowledge the tendency for more resources, whether for protection, professionalisation or other activities, to flow to journalists who are more urban, "professional" and well connected, and that this practice potentially discriminates against those with fewer opportunities to build their capacity due to their location and educational and socioeconomic background. In particular, it is important that protection actors be proactive in seeking ways to build the capacity of journalists in areas where journalism is seen as "weaker" and less independent, such as Honduras and some Mexican states. Strategies might include supporting local journalists and media outlets not only to professionalise but also to network and collaborate with international journalists, media outlets and donors, for both journalistic and protective purposes.

- It is important that protection actors provide more opportunities for tailored, context-specific wellbeing support for journalists at risk, in recognition that psychological resilience is a vital but often overlooked tool in the "war of attrition" that is the fight against violence and impunity.

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Introduction

In October 2021, journalists Maria Ressa from Philippines and Dmitry Muratov from Russia were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their defence of freedom of expression, considered by the Nobel Committee to be "a precondition for democracy and lasting peace". It was only the third time in 120 years that the prize had been given to journalists[1], the aim being to highlight how they, their media outlets and many others worldwide are increasingly repressed and attacked for their free, independent and fact-based reporting (The Nobel Prize, 2021). The award is the latest sign of international recognition of anti-press violence and the importance of journalists[2] to society and therefore of protecting them, issues which have received significant attention at UN and regional level since the late 1990s and in particular since the 2012 UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (UN, 2012b) (Mitchell, 2019).

Yet in many countries the significance of journalists, and their social role and security, are frequently disregarded and even contested, while violence against journalists[3] continues to grow, largely unchecked. At least 1,167 journalists were killed in 63 states worldwide between 2006 and 2019 (UNESCO, 2020: 12-13, 18); non-fatal attacks tend to receive less attention but are far more frequent. Violence against journalists increasingly occurs in countries officially at peace rather than those at war, with perpetrators including both state and non-state actors (Carlsson and Pöyhtäri, 2017, Chocarro, 2017, Asal et al., 2016). In many countries – including Mexico and Honduras, the focus of this study – violence does not affect all journalists equally but mainly targets independent and investigative reporters covering sensitive topics such as human rights violations, corruption and organised crime groups (OCGs) (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; CONADEH, 2017; Waisbord, 2002). Such journalists may also be considered human rights defenders (HRDs), or people who promote human rights, even if they do not see themselves as such (Mitchell, 2019). The vast majority of attacks against these journalists are poorly investigated, if at all, and go unpunished (AI, 2014, Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013, IACHR, 2013, UN, 2013, UN, 2012b, IACHR, 2008, Waisbord, 2002). For example, as of late 2020, 87 percent of journalist killings worldwide between 2006 and 2019 remained unresolved (UNESCO, 2020: 19).[4]

In such contexts, how do journalists keep themselves safe and seek justice[5] for attacks as they struggle to continue their work? This paper outlines a qualitative, comparative, bottom-up study of how journalists respond to impunity for violence against journalists in two Latin American countries where this problem – like impunity for human rights violations in general – is particularly widespread, Mexico and Honduras. Based on in-depth interviews with journalists and protection actors[6] in these countries, I show how the former use a range of interlinked strategies to seek justice and protection: domestic and international strategies (engaging with the state via intermediaries, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs) – "protection approaches"), and activist and

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1   The last time being German journalist, pacifist and Nazi critic Carl von Ossietzky in 1933 (NYT, 2021).

2   A journalist is anyone "who is regularly or professionally engaged in the collection and dissemination of information to the public via any means of mass communication" (Heyns and Srinivasan, 2013: 307, citing Council of Europe and UN sources). This can include media and community media workers, freelancers, photographers, "citizen journalists" (IACHR, 2013; UN, 2012a) and even "social media producers who generate a significant amount of public-interest journalism" (UNESCO, 2016: 5).

3   Violence against journalists defined here as physical or psychological attacks, threats or harassment (possibly) related to journalists' work, and impunity as an absence of legal consequences for the perpetrators.

4   The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO) considers a killing to be "resolved" when, according to information from the relevant state, the suspected perpetrators have been brought to justice and convicted by a court of law, unless deceased or the judicial process has established that the death was not related to the victim's journalism (UNESCO, 2020: Annex A, p. 1).

5   Justice is defined here as fair treatment of victims of violence, including legal redress, i.e. the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators by the authorities.

6   Protection actors are state and non-state actors that act to protect HRDs, including journalists, at risk (Nah, 2020: 2).

professional strategies (mobilising for self-protection[7] – "self-protection approaches"). I argue that while protection approaches facilitated by (I)NGOs on the basis of IHR law and norms[8] are important and valued, they are not enough: their usefulness in terms of bringing about compliance is context-dependent and limited, particularly in terms of addressing impunity, and they are frequently risky for journalists. Hence, self-protection is central to journalists' responses.

Via this case study, I offer a critique of international relations (IR) and politics debates on the "translation" of IHR law and norms to local contexts and the value of such standards to domestic civil society groups and actors. In this study, I employ a broad definition of civil society[9] that specifically encompasses the media, journalism and journalists (Amanpour, 2020; Cottle et al., 2016; Brysk, 2000; Cohen and Arato, 1994; Diamond, 1994; Stepan, 1988: 3–4).

Both Mexico and Honduras are formally democracies that have voluntarily subscribed to international standards on the protection and promotion of human rights and the importance of preventing and countering impunity, including in relation to journalists. Yet these commitments have generally failed to translate into reductions in either violence or impunity, despite related civil society activism and government responses. Hence, the study is about what people in partial democracies with high levels of violence and/ or repression do when protection from the state and international community and the domestic civil society "enforcement mechanism" fail – which arguably is much of the time. While protection approaches have some benefits and are necessary for accountability purposes, they are only part of the story of how victims seek protection and justice. The other part, often neglected, is self-protection, as indicated in disparate scholarly texts on the coping strategies of civilians, journalists and HRDs in conflict situations and otherwise violent or repressive circumstances. The study shows that the multiple limitations and risks of a state-oriented approach to seeking justice and protection facilitated by (I)NGOs, whether pursued at domestic or international level, is a key factor in journalists in Mexico and Honduras turning to activist and professional forms of self-protection. Self-protection is widespread and central to journalists' security and, despite its own risks, needs to be taken more into account by scholars, protection actors and policymakers.

The relevance of the study is not limited to journalists in partial democracies with high levels of violence or repression. Recent research has found that journalists are more likely to be killed and attacked in democracies than non-democracies, although journalist killings decrease with democratic consolidation (Solis, 2020; Asal et al., 2016). However, even in some of the established democracies, such as the USA and in Europe, journalists are increasingly being murdered[10] and otherwise attacked. Distrust in the media is on the rise, often encouraged by the rhetoric of elected leaders. As the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize highlights, the issue of violence against journalists and impunity has broader significance since it impacts not only the journalists directly affected but also the profession's ability to report, analyse and investigate and society's right to be informed (IACHR, 2013; UN, 2012b). Moreover, according to Gohdes and Carey (2017), journalist killings are often a precursor of wider repression.

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7   Self-protection is defined here as practices on which individuals or groups at risk rely to defend themselves from violence and the effects of impunity.

8   Following Risse and Sikkink (1999: 7) and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891-2), I define "IHR norms" as shared standards or expectations regarding appropriate behaviour for a given actor, usually the state; I use the term "IHR law" to refer to IHR norms that have been codified in international law, and "IHR standards" to refer to IHR law and norms collectively.

9   Civil society is "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, [...] autonomous from the state [...and] involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable [...] [and that] stand[s] between the private sphere and the state" (Diamond, 1994: 5). It is non-state, non-commercial, non-[party]political (Brysk 2000; Cohen and Arato, 1994) and non-elite (Simmons, 2009: 138).

10 For example, Daphne Caruana Galizia, Malta (2017); Ján Kuciak, Slovakia (2018); Jamal Khashoggi, US resident killed in Turkey (2018).

The paper proceeds as follows. I outline the conceptual framework for the study before briefly introducing the case and the methodology. I then describe my findings in terms of protection and self-protection approaches employed by journalists in Mexico and Honduras. I conclude by drawing out the overall divergences between the countries and briefly reflecting on the study's contribution.

Civil society responses to impunity, from international human rights law and norms to self-protection

Impunity for human rights violations is widespread, including in Latin America (Engle et al., 2016, Skaar et al., 2016, Sikkink, 2011). Human rights approaches and advocacy tend to invoke IHR laws and norms (Engstrom, 2018a, Risse et al., 2013, Engstrom, 2010, Simmons, 2009). But to what extent do journalists exposed to violence and impunity in Latin America employ IHR standards and related mechanisms[11] and actors[12] to seek justice and protection and how effective is this? Or do they prioritise other tactics and strategies?

Whether and how IHR law and norms "translate" to domestic contexts has been the subject of considerable debate among scholars of IR and politics. This has become a highly contested area of research where there is little agreement other than that the effects of IHR standards are typically very much conditional on context, and that they translate imperfectly and unevenly in domestic settings, due to weak built-in and external enforcement (e.g. Engstrom, 2018b, Simmons, 2010, Hathaway, 2007, Hathaway, 2002), as well as a perceived lack of appropriateness in some regions.

However, Simmons (2009) along with numerous other scholars since the late 1990s have converged on identifying a strong and active civil society as a key – if not the key – element of domestic politics with the potential to translate IHR standards (make them meaningful) in local contexts (e.g. Risse and Sikkink, 2013; Hafner-Burton, 2012; Smith-Cannoy 2012; Simmons, 2009; Hathaway, 2007; Neumayer, 2005; Ropp and Sikkink, 1999; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). There now seems to be broad agreement that domestic civil society has the potential, among other roles, to act as a de facto "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005: 1385-6[13]), pressuring governments to comply with their commitments. Domestic civil society groups and activists are sometimes theorised as "entrepreneurs" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998) or "translators" of international norms in local contexts (Merry, 2006) and often act as "intermediaries" between citizens and state institutions (Brysk, 2000). For example, they use IHR standards to lobby for legislative change, take legal action and mobilise people to demand their rights (Simmons, 2009); they also "accompany" victims in their rights claims, facilitating access to protection, support and solidarity at domestic and international level.

Yet a review of relevant IR and politics scholarship suggests several limitations with regards to the concept of domestic civil society as "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms. The literature tends to take a rather reductive view of civil society, focusing on (I)NGOs over other civil society actors

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11 I define IHR mechanisms as specific, formal, international or regional-level human rights protection mechanisms, for example mechanisms that are legally binding on states under international law, such as protective or "precautionary" measures issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human rights (IACHR) (IACHR, 2006) and rulings by bodies with judicial or quasi-judicial status such as, respectively, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (OAS, 1979) and the UN Human Rights Committee (the UN Committee) (UN, 2008); as well as non-binding mechanisms, like UN or IACHR Special Rapporteurs or the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Heyns and Srinivisan, 2013).

12 IHR actors are defined as international or regional organisations and states, or their representatives, that play a formal role in promoting human rights in Mexico and Honduras. These include INGOs, human rights bodies of the UN such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissionr for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNESCO, the IACHR, the European Union (EU), and foreign embassies.

13 Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005, 1385-6) use the term "enforcement mechanism" to denote how "global civil society", particularly INGOs, pressures vulnerable governments into complying with IHR law. However, here I employ it in a more bottom-up way as a shorthand for pressure for compliance exerted by domestic civil society, including via interactions with INGOs and other IHR actors.

(e.g. Bakke et al., 2019: 1; Risse and Sikkink, 2013: 276-7; Smith-Cannoy, 2012; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005: 1385-6; Landman 2005: 8; Neumayer, 2005; Risse and Sikkink, 1999; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 899-900). It is generally relatively silent on the role of journalists and the media and how their monitoring, investigations, exposés and criticisms of a state's human rights record can make them part of the civil society "enforcement mechanism" or "translators" (exceptions including Bakke et al., 2019: 4; Engstrom, 2019: 371; Simmons, 2009: 237; Hathaway, 2002: 2019). Moreover, scholars tend to emphasise IHR law and legal rights (e.g. Cole, 2015; Clark, 2013; Dai, 2013; Sikkink, 2013; Hafner-Burton, 2012; Smith-Cannoy 2012; Simmons, 2009; Hathaway, 2007, 2002; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Landman, 2005; Neumayer, 2005) over human rights norms as values that inspire, as an "ideology of justice" (Merry et al., 2010) and to take civil society actors' legal literacy[14] for granted (exceptions include Hafner-Burton, 2012: 282-3; Merry et al., 2010: 101-2, 108).

Moreover, I argue that this literature includes a set of explicit and implicit assumptions regarding the conditions that provide domestic civil society with the best chances of successfully acting as "enforcement mechanism" for IHR standards, which appear to be premised on Western liberal notions of the state, civil society and the media. That is, the literature tends explicitly to assume a state where there is democracy, the rule of law, peace, some degree of state capacity and judicial independence/capacity, and strong domestic institutions, including courts; and, implicitly, consolidated democracy of the kind found in relatively few, mainly Western, countries (Snyder, 2017; Cole, 2015; Börzel and Risse, 2013; Jetschke and Liese, 2013; Risse and Ropp, 2013; Hafner-Burton, 2012; Risse and Sikkink, 2013, 1999; Hafner-Burton, 2012; Englehart, 2009; Hathaway, 2007, 2002; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005; Landman, 2005; Neumayer, 2005). Similarly, civil society is overtly assumed to be "strong" (i.e. able to pressurise the government towards compliance despite challenges faced) (e.g. Risse and Sikkink, 2013: 295; Hafner-Burton, 2012: 271, 282; Merry et al., 2010; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005: 1398; Neumayer, 2005: 926), unified (Merry et al., 2010: 108) and (usually) to enjoy international support in order to succeed in its demands (e.g. Risse et al, 2013; Sikkink, 2005; Risse and Sikkink, 1999; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Implicitly, the literature also assumes civil society to be uniformly pro-democracy and pro-human rights and independent from the state.

I contend that these assumptions have limited applicability in many countries where human rights violations and impunity are particularly egregious, drawing on disparate scholarly literature on democratisation, civil society in authoritarian regimes and "illiberal democracies", high-risk activism, and theories of mobilisation. Many states, including in Latin America, are partial and sometimes backsliding democracies with limited separation of powers and judicial independence; they are more violent, repressive, corrupt and vulnerable to infiltration by OCGs (EIU, 2020; Bellal, 2019, 2018; Puddington, 2018; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2015; Briscoe et al., 2014; Smith and Ziegler, 2008: 51) – and less open, pluralist, persuadable and shame-able. They tend to lack political will as well as state capacity to comply (Anaya-Muñoz, 2019). Their governments often use the dual strategies of "corporativism" (co-optation) and "exclusion" (repression) to restrict and divide domestic civil society – including the media – precisely to limit its autonomy and its ability to mobilise and influence public opinion and government policy (Bakke et al., 2019; Ekiert and Kubik, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Spires, 2011; Heurlin, 2010; Brysk, 2000). Public distrust in the state and its institutions is widespread. Hence violent and repressive regimes shape civil society and its relations with the state, meaning it can be difficult or impossible for it to act as "enforcement mechanism" for IHR standards. Moreover, the reality is that civil society is, everywhere, heterogenous and not necessarily pro-democracy, liberal values or human rights, including in Latin America (Bloomfield, 2016; Ekiert and Kubik, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Spires, 2011; Brysk, 2000; see also Harrison, 2019).

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14 Legal literacy can be defined as "critical awareness about rights and the law, the ability to assert rights, and the capacity to mobilize for change" (Schuler and Kadirgamar-Rajasingham, 1992: 5).

In such contexts, therefore, appeals to state institutions and IHR standards, mechanisms and actors are likely to be just part of the story of how civil society, including journalists, respond to violence and impunity. A non-exhaustive review of disparate literatures on how people respond to conflict, violence and repression suggests that journalists and HRDs, like civilians in armed conflict, often rely on themselves and each other for survival and protection. They use similar categories of *self-protection measures* to avoid, present themselves as neutral in relation to, and accommodate (potentially) violent state- and non-state actors, often under duress ("avoidance", "remaining neutral" and "accommodation"), albeit these measures take different forms depending on context and identity. Self-protection measures are necessary and important and can boost safety in the short-term, but they can also bring risks (Berents and ten Have, 2018; Nah et al., 2017; Jones, 2015; Jose and Medie, 2015; Burnyeat, 2013; Baines and Paddon, 2012; South et al., 2010; Bonwick, 2006). In the case of journalists, since such measures tend to be bound up with the continued practice of their profession (e.g. self-censorship[15], anonymous reporting, reporting only the official version of events, co-optation by government or OCGs) and they can have a significant negative impact on their journalism and the public perception of journalism as well as on their physical safety (Gonzalez, 2020; Harrison and Pukallus, 2018; IACHR-UN, 2018; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; González de Bustamante and Relly, 2016; Repnikova, 2014; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2013; Barrios and Arroyave, 2007; Tong, 2007).

However, I argue that some journalists and HRDs have also evolved complementary *self-protection strategies* which extend beyond the framework of self-protection measures and fall into three categories. Firstly, journalists and HRDs aim to build support and solidarity among themselves via mutual support networks and collective protective measures such as, in the case of journalists, collaborative reporting and publication (Gready, 2019; IACHR-UN, 2018; Hughes et al., 2017; González de Bustamante and Relly, 2016; Sambrook, 2016; González de Bustamante and Relly, 2014; Repnikova, 2014; Amir, 2013; EHAHRDP, 2013; IM-Defensoras, 2013; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2013; Tong, 2011; Barrios, 2007). Secondly, they boost their support networks externally, among local civil society, international allies and the public; for journalists, support from foreign journalists and media outlets as well as international donors is key (Janetsky, 2019; Eriksson, 2018; Nah et al., 2018; Nah et al., 2017; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2017, *2013*; Bennett et al., 2015; Repnikova, 2014; Burnyeat, 2013; EHAHRDP, 2013; Hankey and O Clunaigh, 2013; Nah et al., 2013; Mahony and Eguren, 1997; Wiseberg, 1991). Finally, they build their capacity via professionalisation[16] and, particularly in the case of HRDs, via "holistic security" training, encompassing psychological, digital and legal security as well as physical safety (Janetsky, 2019; Harrison and Pukallus, 2018; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; Hughes et al., 2017; Nah et al., 2017; González de Bustamante and Relly, 2016; O'Flaherty and Ulrich, 2016; Repnikova, 2014).

Such self-protection strategies go beyond immediate physical security to address other aspects of journalists' safety in the longer term, allowing them not only to survive and to continue their work but also to improve it. There has been relatively little scholarly discussion of these strategies' potential advantages and drawbacks. However, professionalisation is potentially more contentious for HRDs than for journalists, who already form part of a widely recognised profession: some scholars believe it can lead to discrimination against more local or grassroots HRDs in terms of their access to support,

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15 Self-censorship is defined as avoiding investigating or publishing on certain issues due to fear of physical or other reprisals (paraphrasing Fadnes et al., 2020).

16 The meaning of "professionalisation" can vary. For example, O'Flaherty and Ulrich (2016: 7-8) use a general definition in their discussion of the professionalisation of human rights field officers: "an informal process begun by practitioners who perceive there to be exacting standards required of their activities which make it necessary to exclude amateurs" (quoting O. Lewis, 'To what Extent was Diplomacy Professionalised in the French System?' International Relations e-Journal p. 428 (Aug 2008). In this study, I define "professionalism" in relation to journalists as their ideas about what constitutes "good journalism", including observing standards such as autonomy, accuracy, fairness, confidentiality of sources, ethics, public interest and, in some cases, objectivity (Harrison, 2019; Revers, 2014; Örnebring, 2009; Anderson, 2008). By "professionalisation" I mean the process by which journalists achieve "professionalism".

protection mechanisms and resources (Malkova, 2018; Ichim, 2017; Jones 2015; Nah et al., 2013; O'Flaherty and Ulrich, 2016).

In sum, recent IR/politics scholarship may have overstated the influence of domestic civil society in partial democracies with high levels of violence and/ or repression, while neglecting the role of state willingness to bring about compliance. The limitations of the concept of domestic civil society as "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms would suggest that international standards may be less useful where the need for change is greatest. Hence, appeals to IHR standards, mechanisms and actors at domestic and international level are likely to form only a small, albeit potentially powerful, part of what civil society and journalists do to seek protection and justice. What they do to defend themselves must also be taken into account.

The overarching research questions for this study are as follows.

How do journalists exposed to impunity for violence against journalists perceive and respond to this problem?

What strategies do they adopt?

What effects do they perceive these strategies to have?

The specific research questions are introduced below.

Violence against journalists and impunity in Mexico and Honduras

Mexico and Honduras differ in many respects: Mexico is 13 times more populous, four times wealthier and is considered more geopolitically significant, and the countries' political systems are distinct (federal vs unitary states). However, they also have important similarities. Both countries are considered partial democracies, albeit Mexico a "flawed democracy" and Honduras a "hybrid regime" (EIU, 2020: 19, 53). Both are parties to the major UN and regional human rights treaties and many relevant rights are embedded in domestic legislation. Yet both have a history of widespread human rights violations, high levels of societal violence, increasing militarisation, weak rule of law, growing presence of OCGs which have infiltrated politics and state institutions, rampant corruption, and almost complete impunity. Both experienced a critical juncture in the 2000s after which human rights violations, including against journalists, escalated: for Mexico, the government's militarised "war" on drug cartels from 2006; for Honduras, the coup d'état in 2009 (AI, 2019; IACHR, 2019; Palifka, 2019; UN, 2019; Berg and Carranza, 2018; Frank, 2018; IACHR-UN 2018; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Violence against journalists in Mexico and Honduras has been documented since at least the 1970s and 1980s respectively (Waisbord, 2002: 56, 93), but it has intensified this century. In Mexico, 127 journalists were killed and 26 others were forcibly disappeared between 2000 and 2018 (Article 19, 2019: 17; FEADLE, 2019: 6, 9; FEADLE, 2017: 2, 5, 24). In Honduras, at least 82 journalists and media workers have been killed since 2001, most since the 2009 coup (CONADEH, 2018: 50-52), and seven in 2019 alone (C-Libre, 2020: 112-5, 117-8). Nonfatal attacks are even more frequent in both countries, including threats, assaults, torture and arbitrary detention (Article 19, 2018: 37, C-Libre, 2016: 23-24).

Impunity for such attacks is almost total: in Mexico over 99 percent remain unpunished (Article 19, 2019: 166), while in Honduras the impunity rate is around 90 percent (IACHR, 2019: para. 110). This makes it difficult to prove who is responsible – and easy for governments to blame generalised violence and OCGs (Article 19, 2018: 37-8). However, official figures and NGO research suggest that state agents are key, if not the main, perpetrators, responsible for up to 50 percent of all attacks or more (SEGOB, 2019: 10; Article 19, 2018: 32, 78; C-Libre, 2020: 38-42, 114; C-Libre, 2016: 26); collusion between state actors and OCGs is also common (Article 19, 2018: 78; IACHR, 2019: para. 52). Hence the state is directly

responsible for a substantial proportion of the violence as well as for impunity, raising questions about its willingness to implement its IHR commitments.

In both countries, violence and impunity have persisted and increased despite legal reforms and the creation of dedicated state institutions in the last 10-15 years, following international and domestic civil society pressure. In Mexico, the main such institutions at the time of interviews were the federal-level Special Prosecutor for Crimes Against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE[17]) and the Protection Mechanism for Journalists and Human Rights Defenders[18], both based in Mexico City; there were also local-level prosecutors and protection mechanisms in Mexico City and Veracruz state. In Honduras, the key operational institutions at the time were the national Public Prosecutor's Office (MP[19]), Prosecutor for Crimes Against Life (FEDCV[20]) and Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Law Enforcement Officials.[21] Such institutions typically lacked adequate resources, autonomy and political backing and journalists often distrusted them in both Mexico (Anaya Muñoz, 2019; Article 19, 2018; IACHR-UN, 2018; Relly and González Bustamente, 2017) and Honduras (C-Libre, 2020; IACHR, 2019; UN, 2019).

Methodology

The findings of this study are primarily based on 67 in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists and protection actors conducted in Honduras and Mexico in March and September 2018 respectively (36 interviews carried out in Mexico: 24 journalists and 12 protection actors; 31 interviews in Honduras: 21 journalists and 10 protection actors). Given the importance of studying violence against journalists and impunity at subnational level (e.g. Hughes, 2017: 167), I conducted interviews in two locales per country: in Honduras, the capital Tegucigalpa and the northern towns of San Pedro Sula and El Progreso; in Mexico, Mexico City and Veracruz state.[22] These were chosen because of their persistently high rates of violence and impunity (Article 19, 2018: 74-75, 83; CONADEH, 2017) as well as their accessibility and relative security for a sole researcher.

The primary interviewees were journalists who reported on human rights or other sensitive/ controversial issues such as corruption and OCGs and/or were involved in activism around violence against journalists and impunity. Such journalists have been identified as a sub-group of HRDs most at risk globally (UN, 2011). The secondary interviewees were protection actors including representatives of government protection schemes, civil society organisations (CSOs), (I)NGOs and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). I selected interviewees on the basis on my knowledge and contacts from my previous employment for an INGO[23] and via snowball/chain-referral sampling. Relevant academic and grey literature and media reports were used for triangulation but also as a data source in themselves.

In practice, there was overlap between the two groups of interviewees since a significant minority of journalists interviewed in both countries had worked for (I)NGOs as well as media outlets. The

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17 *Fiscal Especial para la Atención a Delitos cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión*

18 *Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas*

19 *Ministerio Público*

20 *Fiscalía de Delitos Contra la Vida*

21 *Mecanismo de Protección de las y los defensores de derechos humanos, periodistas, comunicadores sociales y operadores de justicia*

22 In Honduras, I interviewed 12 journalists in Tegucigalpa, six in San Pedro Sula/ El Progreso and three in locations not specified for reasons of anonymity and/ or security; and representatives of six protection actors Tegucigalpa, three in San Pedro Sula/ El Progreso and one not specified. In Mexico, I interviewed 12 journalists in Mexico City, including three journalists displaced from other states, nine in Veracruz State and three not specified; and 11 protection actors in Mexico City and one in Veracruz State.

23 PEN International (2007-2016)

journalists' profile varied between countries: in Mexico most journalists worked for mainstream media outlets (14/24), often on a freelance basis, or a combination of mainstream and alternative outlets[24] (5/24), whereas in Honduras most journalists (15/21) were part of the alternative media, with one-third of these (5/15) working for outlets established/run by NGOs. This variation is likely due to selection bias inherent to snowballing as well as a reflection of the countries' differing media sectors and the mainstream media's openness to coverage of human rights/sensitive issues. The sample of journalists was not intended to be representative of the general media landscape in the two countries: it targeted a specific subset of journalists who are HRDs. In both countries the journalists can be seen as "critical change agents" as much as "detached watchdogs" of business and political elites; that is, they "emphasise[d] the importance of advocating for social change, influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda" (Hanitzsch, 2011). They were not pursuing an idealised Western version of journalism or starting from a position of power in their search for protection and justice.

Prior ethics approval was obtained from the University of York. Given the vulnerability of the journalist-interviewees and the "high risk" nature of Mexico and Honduras, I followed a strict ethical and security protocol, including using secure/encrypted communications and safe meeting places, and ensuring anonymity where desired.[25] Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, lasted 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded. I transcribed the interviews and conducted a thematic analysis, triangulating the data with primary and secondary written sources.

Domestic strategies: demanding justice and protection from state institutions

The research question for this section is: *To what extent do journalists engage with state institutions to demand their right to justice and protection?* Considering that state agents are a major perpetrator of violence against journalists in both Mexico and Honduras, the journalists interviewed engaged relatively frequently with state institutions to request investigations into and protection from attacks. For example, 50 percent of the journalists interviewed in Mexico (12/24) and 38 percent in Honduras (8/21) were beneficiaries of dedicated government Protection Mechanisms[26]; in Mexico, 54 percent of the journalists (13/24) said they had reported threats or attacks to prosecutors, while in Honduras 67 percent (14/21) had done so.[27]

In many cases, journalists engaged with the state via intermediaries, mainly NGOs – and in the case of Mexico, also INGOs – which "accompanied", or supported, them in these rights demands, advising them, acting as their representatives and attending meetings with the authorities. Such (I)NGOs also provided journalists with legal assistance (defending or bringing lawsuits, strategic litigation) and lobbied the government for improvements to state institutions, policies and laws, such as those relating to journalist protection, impunity or reform of the justice system or media.

In this way, (I)NGOs effectively strove to act as an "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms on behalf of journalists at risk, and were a crucial source of expertise, resources and solidarity, encouraging and enabling such journalists to interact with the state in a way they were often otherwise reluctant to do, due to lack of trust. Engaging with the state via (I)NGOs was an important strategy because it could

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24 Harcup (2014) defines mainstream media as "[a] broad term covering any form of media produced or distributed commercially, as part of a profit-seeking industrial enterprise, or as a publicly and/or state-funded operation" and alternative media as "media projects […] that reject and/or challenge the conventions and structures of mainstream commercial or state-funded media."

25 Most journalists wanted to be named, hence quotes are attributed.

26 In Mexico, all of these journalists had opted to join the federal Protection Mechanism based in Mexico City.

27 In Mexico, most of these journalists had reported attacks to FEADLE rather than to the Veracruz state or Mexico City prosecutors.

improve the security situation of individual journalists, in some cases saving lives, set legal precedents, and help establish laws and formal protections. Above all, it encouraged journalists to make demands of the state so that it was held accountable in as systematic way as possible, de facto increasing their chances of justice and protection, rather than allowing violence and impunity to go unchallenged. In so doing, (I)NGOs prima facie increased journalists' chances of securing justice and state protection. I argue that journalists relied on (I)NGOs in this way because, in addition to distrusting the state, they generally lacked the necessary legal literacy and the support of employers and professional associations to allow them to act alone or mobilise around rights claims as journalists (discussed below).

However, despite the support and best efforts of journalists and their (I)NGO allies, engaging with state institutions for protection and justice in this way had significant limitations. Firstly, the usefulness of this strategy was context-dependent: it had more positive impact in Mexico, especially the capital, where journalists had easier access to intermediaries and (I)NGOs appeared more able to collaborate with one another and engage directly with, pressure and influence the government via lobbying, than in Honduras. NGOs in Honduras were less able to act as a de facto "enforcement mechanism" for journalists at risk: they had less access to resources and were less well connected with IHR actors both inside and outside the country (see below) and civil society appeared less cohesive but, above all, it and its opportunities to engage with and influence decision-makers were more blatantly restricted by the Honduran government (co-optation/ exclusion).

Secondly, in both countries engaging with state institutions was often frustratingly ineffective. Although it could improve outcomes for journalists at risk, this was mainly in terms of physical and police protection measures (both countries) and legal or formal changes (mainly in Mexico) rather than justice. Journalists' chances of securing successful investigations and convictions were extremely small, even if they were supported by an (I)NGO and consistently followed up on their complaints with the authorities.

Thirdly, engaging with the state was risky for journalists: as well as being time- and resource-consuming, emotionally draining and a distraction from journalism, it was also far more likely to lead to "revictimization", harassment and reprisals than justice, in both countries but particularly in Mexico.[28] Hence journalists' lived experiences of engaging with the state could actually worsen rather than improve their security situation and deepen their distrust of the state.

Journalists and (I)NGOs attributed the uneven, unsatisfactory and risky nature of engaging with state institutions more to a lack of state willingness than of state capacity. They acknowledged that prosecutors and protection mechanisms in Mexico and Honduras face significant resource challenges including inadequate funding, staffing and training. However, 25 percent of interviewees in Mexico (9/36) and 30 percent in Honduras (9/31) believed that underfunding was due to government decisions about resource allocation rather than lack of resources and was often used as a pretext for lack of implementation. Moreover, in both countries several interviewees believed that prosecutorial resources were used selectively and for political ends: to protect those with power and money rather than the rights of citizens, to prosecute journalists and government critics rather than those who attack them. State willingness to comply with IHR commitments existed only in pockets, at the level of individual officials or institutions, rather than being systematic, and there was a lack of high-level support for ending violence against journalists and impunity.

I suggest that the danger of continuing to engage with the state in such circumstances – although to be clear there is no obvious alternative to doing so – is that (I)NGOs, and by extension their journalist

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28 Journalists in Mexico cited numerous examples of how state institutions responsible for ensuring their right to justice and protection not only failed to do so but also further violated their rights, particularly federal institutions. The worst offender by far was FEADLE, which 38 percent of journalists interviewed (9/24) alleged had mistreated them, including "revictimization", including facing excessive bureaucracy and insensitive treatment, victim-blaming, obstruction and threats. Those most affected by ill-treatment by FEADLE and the federal Protection Mechanism were from Veracruz or displaced from other states.

beneficiaries, become trapped into engaging with institutions whose creation they have called for but which in practice is unpredictable, ineffective and risky. There is a real danger that such engagement becomes a means for the state to set the human rights agenda, to manage or control civil society, or to bring about "reverse-rhetorical entrapment" (Katzenstein, 2013) of (I)NGOs. This could lead to disillusionment and strategic engagement or disengagement on the part of journalists, endangering accountability efforts.

International strategies: using international human rights standards, mechanisms and actors to seek justice and protection

The research question for this section is: *How do journalists make use of IHR protection standards, mechanisms and actors?* When it came to such international strategies, journalists were generally even more dependent on (I)NGO intermediaries than when engaging with state institutions. Their reliance on (I)NGOs was due largely to their limited legal literacy: despite the fact that most could be considered HRDs, they appeared to be poorly informed about their rights under domestic and, in particular, international law. This was attributed to limited dissemination and training by (I)NGOs, university journalism courses and media outlet employers. However, it was sometimes also linked to resistance on journalists' part. For example, some were reluctant to refer to the law or IHR standards in their reporting, especially in Mexico, on various grounds: that such "legal language" did not resonate with the public, the belief that their governments' IHR commitments were insincere and used to mask the reality on the ground, or fears of being marked as an "activist", which could impede their access to official sources.

Hence, with a few important exceptions (discussed under 'Activist strategies' below), most journalists did not invoke IHR standards in their journalism or for their protection nor did they mobilise around them, in the ways that Simmons (2009) suggests citizens sometimes do. Instead, they left such actions to an (I)NGO and lawyer élite who used IHR standards, mechanisms and actors to enhance and support their domestic-level litigation, "accompaniment" and lobbying on behalf of journalists at risk, as well as to carry out similar activities at global level via the international protection regimes for journalists and HRDs[29] and related transnational advocacy.

Journalists and their (I)NGO allies in Mexico and Honduras clearly valued such international strategies as providing access to vital and sometimes life-saving practical support, additional avenues for generating pressure on the state and an important source of solidarity and hope. Yet, as with domestic strategies, the usefulness of international strategies was dependent on context, their impact was limited, especially in terms of countering impunity – despite IHR actors' frequent and public recognition of the need to address it – and they were not without risks for the journalists concerned.

I outline four key challenges in (I)NGOs' and other protection actors' "translation" of IHR standards in both countries.

Firstly, journalists' access to (I)NGOs and other protection actors, and therefore to the international protection regimes and associated transnational advocacy, was uneven, and dependent on their location, professional profile and personal connections/ networks. This created a hierarchy of access and unequal "translation" of IHR standards which favoured Mexico over Honduras and capital cities over other areas. Protection actors were usually based in the capitals with limited presence in or

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29 Loose, organically evolved systems, underpinned by IHR standards and international humanitarian law, that bring together multiple formal IHR mechanisms and actors at international, regional and domestic level to provide protection and support for at-risk journalists and HRDs (see Mitchell, 2019).

outreach to other areas, limiting access; this was a particular issue in Mexico due to its greater size and federal system. There were more IHR actors (INGOs, international human rights institutes or IHRIs, embassies) present in Mexico City than Tegucigalpa, they had generally been there for longer, and the UN, European Union (EU) Delegation and embassies in Mexico City tended to have a greater focus on freedom of expression and journalist safety and a different, apparently more supportive and equal relationship with local civil society. Journalists in Honduras had enjoyed less direct contact with or support from IHR actors, including INGOs. In both countries, but particularly in Mexico, journalists who were well connected and/ or well known, especially at international level, appeared to enjoy privileged access to the IHR protection regime.

Secondly, there was generally a focus on emergency or short-term protection over more strategic activities including empowerment of journalists. Despite their foundation in IHR law and norms, (I) NGOs in both countries provided only limited access to legal representation and legal literacy training, due in part to limited funding. Much more in evidence was short-term support for relatively small numbers of individual journalists, for example emergency grants and relocation; and, in Mexico, security training with an emphasis on physical security, a focus which some interviewees felt was largely donor-led. This limited journalists' ability to defend themselves independently of (I)NGOs.

Thirdly, implementation of IHR law and norms is dependent on political pressure, not legal enforcement. Whether or not domestic civil society, with international support, could generate sufficient pressure to compel the government to implement even supposedly legally binding international decisions was dependent on country context, with advocates in Mexico again in a stronger position than in Honduras. Interviewees in Mexico emphasised that many of the country's advances in terms of freedom of expression and human rights, including the creation of FEADLE and the federal Protection Mechanism, could be traced to UN and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) recommendations based on requests from local civil society which were then taken up by IHRIs and international organisations in political dialogue with the Mexican state. In contrast, Honduran interviewees frequently stressed the enormous efforts they had to make to get the government even to pay attention to their concerns let alone act on them, even after they had secured legally binding international judgements from the Inter-American Human Rights System, with eventual implementation still dependent on transnational advocacy and sometimes even the use of personal connections. Pro-rights civil society in Honduras was far less able to act as a "compliance mechanism", due not only to its limited influence over a repressive state (discussed above) but also its apparently less supportive and less equal relationship with IHR actors both inside and outside the country such as the Office of the United Nations High commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), EU and Organization of American States (OAS). This is disturbing because it seems to suggest that in precisely those places where IHR mechanisms and legally binding commitments are needed most, i.e. where civil society is repressed and lacking in influence, their rulings are less likely to be implemented, due to lack of internal and external pressure for compliance.

Finally, according to interviewees in both Mexico and Honduras, although international pressure was essential, it was also discretionary, unpredictable and had clear limits. Above all, there was a danger that it led to governments merely "simulating" compliance with IHR standards on protection and justice for journalists for the benefit of the international community. For example, governments pass laws and create institutions such as specialised prosecutors and protection mechanisms but ensure they cannot work properly by starving them of resources, power and political support. International pressure cannot generate political will, but it can sometimes result in enforced and unwilling manifestations of compliance. However, about 20 percent of interviewees in both countries, mainly journalists, also emphasised what they saw as a lack of political will on the part of the international community: international organisations' and other states' reluctance to use their "teeth" to back up their human rights discourse by making use of human rights conditions and sanctions on trade and aid. For example,

they flagged the EU's refusal to suspend parts of its trade agreement and other cooperation with Mexico on human rights grounds, and its continued funding of Eurojusticia, a large programme to reform the Honduran justice system, despite its limited results. Interviewees attributed this reluctance to fears of economic, political and geopolitical ramifications.

Hence, interviewees saw international strategies employed and facilitated by (I)NGOs on journalists' behalf as an important and even essential but ultimately limited tool in the fight for justice and protection. IHR standards, mechanisms and actors could only ever be one set of tools among others and did not appear to be one that journalists mobilised around.

The multiple limitations and risks of a state-oriented approach to seeking justice and protection facilitated by (I)NGOs, whether pursued at domestic or international level, was a key factor in journalists turning to complementary or alternative strategies.

Activist strategies: mobilising as activists

This and the following section explore the research question: *What alternative strategies do journalists adopt if domestic and international avenues fail?* I distinguish between two self-protection approaches employed by journalists: activist strategies (described here) and professional strategies (next section). It is important to note that self-protection was not necessarily a last resort for journalists; they often used it before or as well as turning to the state or allies like (I)NGOs. Both activist and professional strategies involved journalists prioritising self-reliance and playing a more protagonist role in their own protection rather than (only) relying on intermediaries – although (I)NGOs often still had a role to play. Crucially since they involved collaboration, these strategies offered journalists the potential to address their lack of mutual trust, solidarity and organisation, important underlying causes of their vulnerability to violence and impunity.

In both Mexico and Honduras journalists face considerable obstacles to organising and mobilising within their profession. Interviewees confirmed that, as in other areas of Latin America, the state exerts control over the mainstream media and influences editorial line via corporative tools such as government advertising contracts and other financial incentives, both official and unofficial. Combined with many media owners' proximity to economic and political elites, this means that such media outlets tend to be aligned with the interests of the government rather than citizens – including their own journalists (Gutiérrez and Ocampo, 2019, IACHR-UN, 2018, EU EOM, 2017, Boas, 2013, Meza and Bähr, 2002, Waisbord, 2000, CENCOS-RSF). I further argue that mainstream media owners often collude in the state's "exclusion" (repression) of journalists and therefore in the problem of violence and impunity. In both countries, interviewees indicated that media outlets were often negligent, exploitative and repressive employers, imposing poor pay and other working conditions which left their journalists vulnerable to attack and bribery. Media outlets and owners were known to penalise journalists who were threatened or attacked or who attempted to organise for their own protection, rather than offering them help. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that in both countries existing journalists' associations are widely discredited as corrupt and representing the interests of media owners and the authorities rather than journalists.

However, despite these obstacles and even though the journalists interviewed often relied on (I)NGOs as intermediaries when seeking justice and protection from the state as victims, many had also striven to engage directly with the state by mobilising as activists. Around 75 percent of journalists in Mexico (18/24) and 48 percent in Honduras (10/21) had taken part in some form of related activism; in both countries, activism was overall slightly more common in the capital city, likely linked to its concentration of government and protection actors. In this way, journalists went beyond being victims and beneficiaries to play a more active part in the civil society "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms, although these direct demands were not generally expressed in legal terms.

Journalists took part in activism in three main ways. Firstly, in both countries, a few journalists with first-hand experience of suffering attacks and threats and the challenges of securing justice and protection from state institutions had set up their own NGOs or (in Mexico) journalists' collectives to help colleagues. These organisations, like others working with journalists at risk, encouraged and supported such journalists to engage with state institutions, particularly for protection, undertook lobbying on their behalf and facilitated access to other forms of support at domestic and international level. Such journalists were effectively HRDs in a fuller sense, in that they not only promoted freedom of expression and human rights through their journalism but also assisted other journalists in need and defended their rights; indeed, they were more likely than other journalists interviewed in the study to self-identify as HRDs. They were also more likely to make use of domestic and international law and mechanisms than other journalists.

Secondly, journalists organised and attended protests and vigils against violence against journalists and impunity and related freedom of expression issues. In Mexico, around 40 percent (10/24) said they had taken part in protests (particularly in Veracruz state), compared to 30 percent in Honduras (6/21) (mainly in the capital). Although such protests had various objectives, including awareness raising, showing solidarity and providing an outlet for journalists' emotions, a key aim was to exert pressure on the government to end violence and impunity by generating public and media attention.

Thirdly, journalists had also made significant efforts to organise as a profession, despite the obstacles outlined above: two-thirds of journalists in Mexico (16/24) and one third in Honduras (7/21) had been involved in such initiatives both in the capital and outside it (in roughly equal proportions in either country). This had proved particularly challenging in Honduras, where journalists recounted numerous thwarted past attempts, for example to set up unions or independent/ alternative journalists' associations or to reform the existing official associations from the inside. In Mexico, recent attempts at organising seemed more promising – in particular, the Journalists' Agenda[30], intended as a national-level journalist-led response to violence and impunity in the wake of the murder of renowned reporter Javier Valdez in 2017 – although they still faced significant challenges.

Activist strategies offered journalists the potential to strengthen their representation and voice within civil society and bring their perspective, commitment and creativity to the struggle. Via the organisations they set up, journalists provided important material, legal and other support to colleagues at risk. Activism also provided opportunities for journalists to collaborate and develop solidarity and mutual support within the profession, the lack of which had made them particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation, as well as to attract wider attention and support for their cause. It was also a vital outlet for emotions such as fear and anger, with the potential to harness these for the collective good.

But precisely because they involved journalists becoming more integrated in civil society initiatives, activist strategies entailed similar challenges to domestic and international strategies and were similarly context-dependent, limited and risky. Activist strategies were generally more prevalent, multifaceted, and separate from journalistic activity in Mexico than in Honduras, due to differing opportunities and levels of repression. In both countries activist strategies tended to be relatively small-scale and to have limited focus on countering impunity. Although activist strategies were common among the journalists interviewed, the indications were that they were not widely adopted among the general population of journalists.

Activist strategies could be dangerous, perhaps even more so than domestic strategies, particularly protests. In Honduras, repression of protests, by journalists and in general, was common. In Veracruz state, Mexico, almost half the journalists (4/9) believed that the local authorities used demonstrations against violence against journalists and impunity to identify and target participants; several journalists

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involved in activism in the state had been killed. Such reprisals deterred other journalists from protesting. Moreover, because activist strategies made journalists the protagonists, rather than (I) NGOs, they also raised some profession-specific challenges. Being seen as "activists", even for their own security, could undermine journalists' perceived independence and professional credibility and therefore their ability to continue working. Activism also sometimes threw into sharp relief internal divisions within the profession and a lack of support for journalists and their plight – from the mainstream media, public and journalists themselves – which blocked or limited successful mobilisation.

Professional strategies: responding as journalists

Many journalists in Mexico and Honduras believed that it was not enough to respond to violence and impunity as victims backed by (I)NGOs and IHR actors or as activists. They needed to respond as journalists. Hence, they had re-focused on their professional identity and turned to themselves and, sometimes, like-minded colleagues to seek alternatives. These strategies do not target the state directly but rather journalists' natural spheres of influence, the public and the profession, incorporating profession-specific and journalistic measures into their work as alternative means of seeking protection and justice – or at least the truth. It is in this sense that I use the term "professional" to describe these strategies that relate to the profession of journalism.[31]

Interviews showed that out of necessity journalists in Mexico and Honduras commonly employed three types of self-protection measures. Firstly, self-censorship: in both countries a third of journalists said they had self-censored[32]; in Mexico, this was mainly outside the capital. Seventy-eight percent of the journalists in Veracruz state (7/9) and two reporters in Honduras avoided investigating or covering OCGs, in particular alleged links with the authorities. Secondly, "accommodation". This encompassed strategic engagement with institutions and using professional contacts to circumvent official protection channels, but above all co-optation via threats and bribery from government actors and OCGs. Fifty-eight percent of journalists in Mexico (14/24) and 62 percent of journalists in Honduras (13/21), as well as some protection actors in both countries, believed corruption was widespread in the profession, particularly in Honduras, with government actors typically seen as the main corrupters.

Thirdly, reporting (an addition to the conceptual framework): many journalists had covered threats and attacks against colleagues and themselves and related official investigations via the media and social media, particularly in Honduras (67 percent or 14/21 journalists interviewed versus 46 percent or 11/24 in Mexico). The main motivation was to raise public awareness – and presumably attract support. However, a small minority of journalists (11 percent or 5/45) felt that such coverage had very limited influence over either the public or the government, due in part to its lack of depth. This superficial coverage was attributed to the expense and increasing difficulty of journalistic investigations, perceptions – including among journalists themselves – that threatened reporters were unnewsworthy and corrupt, and above all the dangerous nature of such investigations, including into anti-press violence.

The data confirmed that while self-protection measures could be useful, mainly in terms of survival, physical security and sometimes solidarity, their benefits were short-term and limited and they brought considerable risks. Some, like self-censorship and co-optation, undermined journalism as a profession and its usefulness to society. As with activism, self-protection measures revealed the urgent need for journalists to acknowledge and address perceived and actual corruption in journalism which led to a lack of mutual and public trust and solidarity.

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31 However, I acknowledge that "professional" strategies might seem a misnomer in the case of self-censorship and co-optation, which are contrary to the norms of professional journalism.

32 Mexico: 8/24; Honduras: 7/21

Hence, many journalists, particularly those with experience of activism or working with NGOs, were attempting to develop broader self-protection strategies that combined protection and professionalisation, with the overall aim of transforming the profession and practice of journalism. They aimed to build journalists' internal, public and international support and ultimately their legitimacy.

Journalists built internal support via mutual support and collaboration. Some journalists, especially in Mexico, simultaneously published sensitive stories in more than one outlet at domestic and/ or international level, to overcome censorship, spread risk of reprisals and increase impact. Forty-two percent of journalists interviewed in Mexico (10/24) were also working as part of collectives and networks in the capital or at subnational level, often with the aim of promoting self-protection and professionalisation. Such groups often provided training, both professional (e.g. digital journalism and investigative journalism, how to cover sensitive issues like the environment, elections and security) and security-related (physical and digital security and emotional self-care); some carried out risk analyses and documentation of attacks. Some groups also employed mutual protection practices such as collective monitoring of members covering sensitive stories, sharing/ corroborating information or alerting each other to security threats. Relatedly, in Mexico, journalists were increasingly focusing on collaborative journalism[33], whereby several media outlets cooperate in order to spread risk as well as maximise resources and impact.

Some journalists, particularly in Mexico, believed that their best option for addressing violence and impunity – as well as corruption in journalism – was simply to focus on doing better journalism. They employed various interrelated, overlapping sub-strategies to professionalise: seeking journalistic autonomy by setting up their own media outlets or working freelance or for independent outlets; practising socially engaged journalism, with more focus on human rights, corruption and other sensitive issues; raising standards via training in journalistic techniques, ethics, law, etc; and developing investigative journalism as a crucial tool to probe social problems, including violence and impunity. Professionalisation in such contexts of violence and impunity can be considered a self-protection strategy in that it constituted a clear attempt by the journalists concerned to reject self-censorship, "accommodation"/ corruption and the security and reputational risks of such self-protection measures, and (re-)claim "neutrality" vis-à-vis the government and OCGs. Moreover, professionalisation was seen as a means of generating credibility and public support and pressure to address violence and impunity, albeit in the longer term.

In both Mexico and Honduras, international donors and funding were vital to this project of transforming journalism: for independent journalistic projects, organisations, collectives/ networks and (I)NGOs working with journalists. In both countries, some interviewees, especially in the capital cities, emphasised that the international media had the potential to amplify sensitive stories or issues, expose the government to global scrutiny and exert pressure via a media "boomerang effect" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Recent years have seen the emergence of collaborative investigations into unsolved journalist murders by local and international journalists which are published worldwide (Lakhani et al., 2020, Colectivo 23 de Marzo, 2019).

Although self-protection strategies seemed overwhelmingly positive for journalists and society alike, they too had limitations. All strategies were more prevalent and impactful in Mexico than in Honduras. I suggest that key reasons for this included Mexico's stronger history of independent and investigative journalism, Mexican journalists' capacity to work collaboratively, and their greater access to international media and donors, as well as supportive (I)NGOs and IHR actors, especially in Mexico City. However, even in Mexico, mutual support and collaboration initiatives were nascent, and doing

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33 Collaborative journalism can be defined as "a cooperative arrangement (formal or informal) between two or more news and information organizations, which aims to supplement each organization's resources and maximize the impact of the content produced" (Stonbely, 2017: 14)

better, more independent and socially engaged journalism was still risky. The success of such strategies was dependent on access to funding and other resources, which were more accessible to journalists in Mexico City, compared not only Honduras but also to other parts of Mexico.

The growth and very existence of professional strategies generally clearly stem from the failure of the state and the IHR protection system. Self-protection strategies can make important contributions to justice but cannot bring it about. They cannot be a substitute for effective state protection and compliance with IHR standards, but instead are an additional, complementary way of securing these, targeting journalists' spheres of influence, the profession and the public, rather than the state directly. Professional strategies did not represent a rejection by journalists of (I)NGOs and their state-oriented approach, rather a recognition by both that other approaches are also required, where journalists are the protagonists and prioritise their role as journalists.

Despite their limitations and risks, I believe that self-protection strategies are vital in the fight against impunity for violence against journalists for several reasons. In an otherwise fairly bleak panorama, where impunity for violence against journalists appeared intractable and engaging with the state as victims or activists was context-dependent, limited and often risky in nature, such strategies were evidence that journalists were not giving in to despair or resigned to the role of "journalist victims" or "threatened reporters". They were using their work and professional skills and contacts in ways that allowed them to regain agency and hope and did not involve them having to engage with the state directly; this allowed journalists to sidestep "activism" per se, which many found uncomfortable and risky.

The collaboration required to successfully develop and implement self-protection strategies helped journalists to develop the mutual trust, solidarity and organisation they need in order to overcome impunity for violence against the profession and other related problems they faced, such as poor labour conditions and precarity. Moreover, by doing higher quality and more useful journalism and forming public opinion around the root causes of human rights violations, impunity and corruption, journalists could potentially inspire citizens to join civil society pressure to end human rights violations and impunity and for political and social change. In the process, journalists may also generate public trust and potentially societal support for their own plight and demands.

Lastly, the focus on transforming journalism is, hopefully, building the foundations for a truly free press, considered a key part of a fully functioning democracy. This may be journalists' best hope for justice and sustainable protection until broader change occurs in their governments and state institutions, as well as their best option for contributing to that change.

Conclusion

I have shown that the journalists interviewed in Mexico and Honduras responded to impunity for violence by adopting a range of interlinked strategies which I have characterised as domestic and international (protection approaches) and activist and professional (self-protection approaches). Comparison reveals both similarities and differences in journalists' responses in the two countries, as discussed, but it also suggests three overarching divergences, as follows.

Firstly, although protection approaches are broadly comparable in both countries, they are generally more diverse and have better outcomes in Mexico, at least formally. Domestic civil society in Mexico is more able to act as an "enforcement mechanism" for IHR law and norms than in Honduras. However, this is true more of Mexico City than Mexico as a whole. Moreover, although this "enforcement mechanism" works better in Mexico, it is still not very effective in terms of generating improved access to protection and, particularly, justice for journalists at risk. Protection approaches are also risky for journalists.

However, secondly, the most marked differences between the countries can be seen with self-protection approaches: both activist and professional strategies were generally more widespread, developed and successful in Mexico than in Honduras. Reasons for this include less pronounced government control of Mexican civil society including the media, and Mexican journalists' greater ability to collaborate and access protection and IHR actors. Also important, I believe, is Mexican journalists' longer experience both of violence against journalists and impunity and of state responses being ineffective and retaliatory, leading to lower expectations of the government and state protection, and therefore more impetus to find alternative solutions. In this sense, self-protection approaches are creative responses to despair. Professional self-protection strategies around transforming journalism were also far more feasible and successful in Mexico. This was likely due to the country's stronger tradition of independent and investigative journalism, as well as Mexican journalists' greater access to international media and donors and to supportive (I)NGOs and other IHR actors, and capacity to work collaboratively.

Hence, thirdly, journalists in Mexico, but especially in Mexico City, have more and more varied options for both protection and self-protection than in Honduras. However, this did not necessarily lead to more or better access to protection and justice in the immediate. All these strategies had potential benefits but also drawbacks, and none alone, or even in combination, resulted in adequate protection for journalists, let alone justice. Whichever strategy or strategies journalists employed, seeking justice and protection was difficult and dangerous and its usefulness depended to a degree on where they lived and who they were. This suggests that there is no one sure-fire strategy or single solution to journalists' predicament: it is necessary to try a variety of approaches according to the circumstances despite the risks and success not being guaranteed. The only real way forward was for journalists to be aware of the relative pros and cons of each strategy and to keep going, trying different ones at different times or all of them simultaneously in a perpetual "calculus of risk" (Cottle, 2016). After all, there is little alternative bar resignation, silence and despair.

However, it was clear that self-protection approaches were central for journalists in both countries and need to be taken more seriously by scholars and protection actors. Professional strategies had particular appeal, especially self-protection strategies in Mexico, which also had significant potential. These did not provide a straightforward solution to violence and impunity and were not a substitute for state protection, or, therefore, domestic and international strategies. However, they were an important complement, with the potential to radically alter journalists' relationship with the state, each other, and above all the public.

Overall, the study makes three key contributions to knowledge. Firstly, and most importantly, in highlighting the centrality of self-protection, it shows the need for IR and politics scholars to take a more bottom-up and inclusive approach to civil society, and the importance of alternative, non-legal norms in (self-)protection and truth and justice-seeking. In this case, journalists, particularly in Mexico, valued the norms of professional journalism over IHR norms in their self-protection strategies. That is, autonomy, neutrality and (sometimes) objectivity, an emphasis on social engagement or the public interest, developing investigative and collaborative journalism, and observing ethical standards, including addressing corruption and malpractice.

The study shows that in Mexico and Honduras journalists' efforts to address impunity directly, via the legal system, with the help of (I)NGO allies, are typically thwarted by an unresponsive and sometimes retaliatory state. However, it also suggests that such journalists can potentially have more success in addressing some of the *socio-political effects of impunity*, by transforming the profession and practice of journalism: building solidarity and collaboration, countering corruption, fear and distrust, seeking to uncover the truth, and holding the state accountable. In a landscape that can otherwise seem fairly bleak, this provides grounds for some optimism in terms of journalistic agency, free and independent journalism, and the search for protection, justice and the truth in Mexico – and possibly Honduras – in

the future. As things stand, however, this progress and optimism is to a large degree contingent on the continued support of foreign donors as well as international journalists and media outlets, which tend to prioritise journalists and journalism already deemed to be "professional".

Secondly, the study demonstrates that the performativity of states' apparent adherence to IHR standards conceals the lived reality of journalists and others at risk and the dangers of "reverse-rhetorical entrapment", and that there is a need for a greater plurality of human rights approaches. Lastly, it suggests the potential of free and independent journalism to promote public trust in and support for human rights values and journalists at risk. This resonates with two sets of scholarly debates: the need to engage wider publics in support of human rights, including via "(re)framing"; and the possible links between "media and information literacy" and the safety of journalists.

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