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## 'Everything is dimming out, little by little:' examining self-censorship among Venezuelan journalists

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### ABSTRACT

Using the conceptual frameworks of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy, our in-depth interviews with 25 journalists from Venezuela show that years of anti-press violence have ensured an atmosphere where journalists self-censor as the norm and where, through different forms, self-censorship has become a part of news routines. Journalists, especially those with over ten years of experience, clearly distinguished between self-censorship and other forms of suppression, but self-censorship has become so prevalent and infused in daily news routines, and so deeply internalised and reinforced that younger journalists and recent entrants into the profession consider self-censorship an integral part of their professional identity.

### KEYWORDS

Collective professional autonomy; journalists; Venezuela; news media; professionalism; reflexivity; censorship; violence

## Introduction

The media in Latin America, driven by ownership interests and their domestic and foreign allies, and characterised by high levels of market clustering, (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009; Fox & Waisbord, 2002) saw in Venezuela a growth and development defined by the importance given by Chavismo (Hugo Chavez and his ideology) to media representations. Since Chavez became president of Venezuela in 1998, winning with an unprecedented majority, his inception as a political leader outlined three mechanisms regarding his relationship with news media which play a crucial role in Venezuelan media even today (Smilde & Hellinger, 2011). First, the presidency sought to contest mainstream media narratives by imposing divergent representations that overtly defied the factual representation of events, thus enabling the erosion of journalistic practice in the country by emphasising that mainstream media reports were absolute fabrications (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Knight & Tribin, 2019). Second, the proliferation of multiple pro-Chavista (pro-Hugo Chávez and his policies) media outlets drowned, in different ways, privately owned and independent news media, preventing alternative and opposing perspectives to viewpoints circulated by the pro-Chavista and Chavista-controlled state media (Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011; Waisbord, 2014). This involved the annulment of broadcast licences for radio and television stations or the denial of foreign currency to purchase newspaper as ways to eliminate critical voices (Knight & Tribin, 2019; Nelson, 2009). The third mechanism entailed the terrorisation of anti-

Chavista journalists who were threatened into compliance. Reporters Without Borders (2003) documents how Chavez accused private media channels of ‘inciting rebellion and disrespect for legitimate institutions and authorities’, ‘broadcasting false, misleading, or biased news reports’, ‘harming the reputation and good name of persons or institutions’ and promoting ‘subversion of public and social order’ (Knight & Tribin, 2019). This materialised through a legal framework that has made it possible to criminalise uncomfortable journalistic coverage under the guise of protecting pro-Chavismo personalities against libel, or that of protecting the general population from media-induced anguish (Amnesty International, 2020; Dinneen, 2012; Nelson, 2009).

Similar to the ‘Politics of Impunity’, as explicated by Harrison and Pukallus (2018) where governments and state-sponsored actors use impunity as a tool to ensure that journalists self-censor, President Maduro’s time in office has extended the persecution and repression of media using state apparatus. For example, freelance journalist Darvinson Rojas was arrested and violently interrogated for his reporting on the COVID 19 spread in Venezuela (Amnesty International, 2020). It is the effects and impact on journalists of this third and last mechanism that inform the crux of this study.

As scholars seek to revisit the concept of press repression and censorship beyond state and commerce-related practices (Burt, 1994; Yesil, 2014), they put forward a new understanding of censorship which does not solely focus on censorship as a mere act of ‘exclusion’, but also considers the concept as one that is ‘dispersed across a wide range of sites and agencies,’ (Burt, 1994, p. 31). This new conceptualisation is inclusive of ‘internally self-imposed forms of censorship’ like self-censorship (Burt, 1994, p. 21). Venezuela’s regulatory infrastructure and oppressive legal provisions give the state an enormous amount of power over media organisations, and while censorship mechanisms are overt, the practice of self-censorship among journalists is intricate and remains quite unexamined. In Venezuela, the nongovernmental media watchdog Press and Society Institute (IPYS) registered 74 incidents of prior or self-censorship in 2014, with cases of prior censorship alone increasing fivefold from 2012 (Vásquez, 2014).

Venezuela’s Constitution protects the freedom of the press and expression, but within the last decade governments in power, including the presidency of Maduro, have endeavoured, using a mix of various contrivances, to effectively eradicate this. There was a time when Venezuela was among the leading exporters of oil in the world, but there is little doubt that the South American nation is now facing one of the largest ongoing humanitarian crises that has seen more than three million flee the country (UNHCR, 2018). Venezuela faces severe shortages of basic necessities like food and healthcare, as well as issues of hyperinflation and a lack of economic growth (UNHCR, 2018). Today, Venezuela leads Latin America with the largest number of imprisoned journalists and extreme government-led media censorship (CPJ, 2019). Media censorship and its impact on journalists in Latin America have received excellent scholarly attention but the situation of journalists in Venezuela remains extremely underexamined, especially with regard to issues of self-censorship.

Studies on censorship generally focus on newsrooms as a whole, but this analysis takes a more granular approach and examines how journalists respond to its travails and demands, especially in their daily work. How do years of experience and involvement with new and traditional media influence praxis? Using theories of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy, our in-depth interviews with 25 journalists

from different cities and regions of Venezuela show that self-censorship is pervasive and finds different expressions in news production and evidence (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016). In line with Van Dijk (2013), who regarded the analysis of the unsaid as being more revealing than the said, this analysis offers an in-depth analysis of the multi-faceted impact of self-censorship that arises from extreme anti-press violence, the different ways journalists internalise and define its effects on professional identities, and the contradictions raised by focusing on how journalists in Venezuela define and perceive self-censorship, the extent to which they exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity when dealing with self-censorship, and how journalists' perceptions about professionalism signal the presence of collective professional autonomy when dealing with self-censorship.

## Literature review and theoretical approach

### *Journalists and self-censorship*

Self-censorship can be defined as 'a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to a choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organisations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure' (Lee, 2007). This can best be understood as being caused by a multiplicity of phenomena, ranging from the fear of suffering physical retaliation to deviating from social norms and expectations (Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017). Censorship and self-censorship have almost become a part of normal media practices, especially in conflict and post-conflict societies marked by limited parliamentary representation of citizens (Arsan, 2013; Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017). This is of special relevance to Venezuela, which saw different political coups during 1992 as well as 2002 and where, today, the state apparatus plays a prominent role in media suppression to the extent that the Reporters without Borders have stated that 'press freedom is in great danger in Venezuela. The Maduro administration must stop censoring and systematically obstructing journalists' work and must instead guarantee their safety' (RWB, 2019).

At one end of the continuum of self-censorship lie the formal and informal restrictions enacted in authoritarian or proto-authoritarian countries (Mortensen, 2018). For example, in Venezuela, a pro-Chavez Supreme Court defined the criteria for 'timely, truthful and impartial information' (2003) in response to an activist petition against him. Pressures can include the real or perceived strains exerted by politicians, advertisers, or even groups of reference as forms of 'soft censorship' (Almeida, 2014; Kenny & Gross, 2008) that 'have tangible effects on journalism even in democratic countries with strong cultural, legal, and institutional safeguards for press autonomy' (Hiltunen, 2017, p. 66). Among such subtle pressures, some authors have noted the animosity of politicians (Hiltunen, 2017; Tapsell, 2012), the refusal of service by printers or distribution outlets (Whelan, 2009), the fear for the potential loss of advertising revenue (Trabold, 2017) or the exercise of editorial prerogatives by senior staff (Hiltunen, 2017). Included within these mechanisms are the 'friendly reminders' of editors and supervisors, who ask journalists to exercise some form of self-restraint under the guise of concern for possible negative outcomes. Examples of these subtle pressures can be found in the directives given to some journalists. For example, in Hong Kong protests, journalists were called on

‘to be smart [...] to be cautious’ (Lee & Chan, 2008, p. 124). These directions can also come from the courts of the land, which, for example, in Venezuela, ruled that journalists were free to express opinions, but such opinions could not contain offensive or unnecessary information (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

The precarious financial status of some media outlets forces journalists to be exceedingly careful with their coverage. In countries and areas in which governments play a dominant role as advertisers, their influence on news media greatly determines what is said and what is not (Waisbord, 2014). Venezuelan media is extremely controlled by the government and its compulsory announcements, called *cadena*s (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). A different, yet equally effective, form of financial pressure comes from the need to avoid the ever-existent possibility of unpayable fines levied against critical journalistic enterprises (Kenny & Gross, 2008), as exemplified by the 500,000 USD fine imposed on news website *La Patilla* for ‘moral damage’ by a Venezuelan court for republishing a 2015 story from a Spanish newspaper alleging that a top Venezuelan official had ties to drug trafficking (CPJ, 2017).

At the farthest end of the self-censorship continuum, proponents of the New Censorship Theory have advanced a conceptualisation of self-censorship where the external censor is absent, and inexplicit and structural forms of censorship have an even greater impact on the freedom of the press than those of overt government repression (Bunn, 2015). For example, in France, beyond the legal mandates of privacy laws, self-censorship is articulated around the upholding of social taboos against the violation of personal privacy (Lewis, 1996). Self-censorship as both part of the profession and as part of the journalist’s oeuvre raises interesting questions for researchers. Self-censorship due to political polarisation prevents, for example, an activist or a journalist from critiquing issues that they feel might damage the political side they are on (Pozzebon, 2020). As Lee and Chan (2008) ask in their study of newsroom structures and internal dynamics ask, what are some of the changes within news production that occur when orders are not explicit, and how do journalists adjust their sense of professional autonomy when ordered to self-censor? We add to this international understanding of self-censorship and professional autonomy from the Venezuelan perspective by examining the effects of self-censorship through the frameworks of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy.

### ***Professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy***

As Libby (2006) has shown, journalism, like the concept of ‘professional’, is a developing notion and can manifest as discourse, ideology, and an unwritten social and moral contract (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). Reflecting on studies of journalists in 31 countries and territories, Weaver and Willnat (2012, p. 544) concluded that ‘the patterns of similarities and differences are not neatly classifiable along some of the more common political or cultural dimensions.’ But Shoemaker and Reese (1996) say that journalists in democracies have similar behavioural tenets and work with shared values that shape ideology and the concept of professionalism. Scholars define core values of professional journalism as autonomy, public service, objectivity, immediacy, and the democratic justification of journalism (Ahva, 2012; Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2006). As Carey (2007, p. 13) has emphasised, without democracy or spirit of democratic freedom, journalists

are reduced to entertainers or propagandists. The ability of journalists to reflect on and 'recognise influences and changes in their environment, alter the course of their actions, and renegotiate their professional self-images as a result' (Ahva, 2012, p. 791) is referred to as professional reflexivity.

At its core, as a profession, journalism is forged by various influences, both internal and external, and economic, sociocultural, technological, and political trends (Ahva, 2012; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016) that fashion the profession, often assembling or challenging its normative ideals. Given the insidious and obvious way the government in Venezuela works, to counter basic press freedoms, the theoretical framework of professional reflexivity proffers a chance for journalists to deliberate on the different influences and impacts on their occupation, in this case, the impact of self-censorship and professional identities in an authoritarian state.

Just as Tuchman defined objectivity as a strategic protective news ritual for journalists, in some countries, self-censorship functions as a protective mechanism. For example, in Hong Kong, journalists often cover up criticism on their coverage of sensitive stories by reporting what has already been published in international media (Lee, 2007). Lee and Chan (2009) contend that in some situations self-censorship is rarely explicit and that journalists consciously self-censor, especially because of their dependence on and proximity to government sources. This is seen in Argentina and Bosnia Herzegovina, where reporters often align themselves with politicians to guarantee protection from persecution (Cvijanovic, 2001; Pinto, 2008). In spite of such findings, in some countries like Hong Kong, journalists show a largely intact sense of professionalism (Lee & Chan, 2009). In China, it is argued that self-censorship protects newsrooms and increases the chances of publishing sensitive topics, especially political ones, and that self-censorship is a potential tool that therefore increases media freedom, acting, as Gramsci describes, as a war of position for Chinese journalism (Tong, 2009).

Journalists adapt to censorship and self-censorship in ways beneficial to their safety and professional autonomy, since autonomy is 'a fluid concept that is continually adjusted to manage the daily task of reporting the news' (Sjovaag, 2013, p. 1). The concept varies across different stages of news production and in different arenas of coverage (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012), and is a complex historical creation that is also context-dependent (Hughes, Garcés, Márquez-Ramírez, & Arroyave, 2017). For example, journalists in Mexico often have to wait for a 'greenlight' from mafioso members before publishing certain stories (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016), and they come together, as both online and offline collectives to decrease such professional insecurity (González de Bustamante & Relly 2016). Such collective acts to protect professional autonomy are representative of Hughes (2006) and Hanitzsch et al.'s (2011) idea of conceptual autonomy that considers journalists to be critical change agents, 'especially in areas where they are responsible for making the profession more transparent and civic oriented.'

### ***Self-censorship and socialisation***

Self-censorship is linked to the intricate and complex process of socialisation where knowledge about media values and norms is transmitted through socialisation, and

newsrooms are often the centres where self-censorship is imbibed through the pervasive environment rather than as an industry-endorsed norm (Tapsell, 2012). As a process, self-censorship is subtle and hard to document. Perceptions among professionals vary and most journalists perceive themselves but not their colleagues to be brave (Lee & Chan, 2009). Often, being a part of professional structures and enmeshed in daily professional behaviours means that journalists themselves may not be aware that they may be self-censoring. Those who are aware may hide their behaviour (Lee, 1998). Attempting to examine questions of perceptions about professional cultures and how journalists perceive the issue of self-censorship can be complicated and, thus, a focus on the conceptual framework of professional reflexivity helps journalists reflect on their ability 'for self-awareness' and 'recognise influences and changes in their environment' that can 'alter the course of their actions, and renegotiate their professional self-images as a result' (Ahva 2013, 792). Self-reflexivity is important in Venezuela because the atmosphere for journalism – which has been tense since the times of Chavez – has greatly intensified during the present incumbent Maduro's presidency, which often refers to 'media warfare' and arrests journalists under 2010 sanctions (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). For example, in March 2019, well-known radio journalist, Luis Carlos Díaz, who has always been critical of the government, was arrested and tortured. Although he was quickly released conditionally, he was accused of inciting crime (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

It is in this light that this study examines:

RQ 1: How do journalists in Venezuela define and perceive self-censorship?

RQ 2: To what extent do journalists in Venezuela exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity when dealing with self-censorship?

RQ3: Do journalists' perceptions about professionalism signal the presence of collective professional autonomy when dealing with self-censorship?

## Method

A qualitative method was deemed the most suitable approach since our purpose was to explore 'social reality in subjects' perceptions of their environment' (Bryman, 1988, p. 70). One of the authors of the paper is a native Venezuelan and media practitioner with many years of media experience in the country. This experience was invaluable in helping get access to journalists and media organisations to request interviews. Using a snowball sample (Browne, 2005) that allowed access to participants without organisational intervention or influence on responses, this study draws on 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Venezuelan journalists, from online as well as traditional media, based in the cities of Caracas, Maracaibo, Valencia, Mérida, San Cristóbal, Maturín, and Cumaná. Our participants' media experience ranged from five to 50 years in various news organisations, ranging from television and radio to print and web portals.

Five interviewees had exclusively online media experience. Our sample of 12 women and 13 men (total 25) had an age range of 25 to 78 years. Over 100 journalists from different organisations were contacted but only about 35 responded and agreed to recorded interviews. At the time of analysis, 25 interviews were completed and transcribed. The low response rate can be attributed many factors, primary among them

being the fear of government and organisational reprisal. Our participants, as the interviews show, were, very honest about this. The initial transcription and analysis of our interviews showed that our sample was characterised by the 'information power' which, as postulated by Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016), emphasises that the more relevant information interviewees hold, the lower the number of participants needed to understand phenomenon. The concept of saturation is also an important one but how the concept can be applied in situations that do not use a grounded theory situation is not clear, so we choose to use the notion of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Since the study had very specific aims and the sample had the specific experiences that we wanted more insight into, our interviews were extremely rich and thus our sample had information power to inform our research (Malterud et al., 2016).

Our primary motives were to examine and shed more light on how journalists in Venezuela view self-censorship, the characteristics of professional reflexivity journalists exhibit when dealing with issues of self-censorship and if journalistic perceptions about professionalism signal the presence of collective professional autonomy when dealing with issues of self-censorship. Our interview guide was adapted from studies and surveys on censorship done by scholars Hughes et al. (2017), González de Bustamante and Relly (2016), Lee and Chan (2009), and Jungblut and Hoxha (2017), as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights surveys on censorship in Latin America (2016). A series of open-ended questions were asked about their typical routines, different pressures and the different kinds of censorship they face, as well as how repression shapes their perception of their professional identity.

McCracken's (1988, p. 85) long interview technique, which allows researchers to 'step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves,' was used and journalists were asked to explain and describe the situations they referred to for our understanding. Participants granted permission to audio-record interviews and all identifying information has been removed as per IRB requirements. Interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish, over phone and Skype, from October 2018 to March 2019 with lengths of the interviews varying from 45 to 120 minutes. Each interview, considered a unit of analysis, was translated and transcribed by the authors. Our theoretical framework and research questions guided the classification of the data which were coded into categories by grouping together and comparing interrelated ideas (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), and reviewed multiple times, by the two authors, for critical understanding and to find latent and manifest meaning.

Manifest and latent content depends on the interpretation of data but vary in terms of the level of abstraction (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). As Berg (2004) has explained, 'Manifest content is comparable to the surface structure present in a message' (Berg, 2004, p. 176). RQ1 that examines how journalists in Venezuela define and perceive self-censorship provided interview responses that are an example of manifest content whose elements are physically present with visible, obvious components (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). RQ2 and RQ3 deal with content found by interpreting the underlying meaning contained in the text. Responses to RQ1 that showed that journalists defined and perceived self-censorship in similar ways, considering self-censorship as an impediment to free and impartial reporting but they were also very conscious of the routine harassment that they had to face in their profession, which also forced them to self-censor. Their responses to this research question were grouped under 'Perception



and definition of self-censorship'. RQ2 and RQ3, which examined characteristics of professional reflexivity and presence of collective professional autonomy when dealing with self-censorship, saw that most of our participants believe in the normative professional tenets of journalism and work hard to circumvent censorship of rather than is any kind, even self-censorship, and display great introspection on how this can influence their practice of the profession. Quotes, representative of most of the responses, have been used below to facilitate a critical understanding of the categories and data interpretation.

## Findings

### *Perceiving and defining self-censorship*

This section refers to the analysis for RQ1 that examines how journalists in Venezuela perceive and define self-censorship. Our participants were keenly aware of the impact of censorship on the profession and defined censorship as 'the absence of information that is vital for decision-making in society' (2018). As our participants made clear, self-censorship is a constant among Venezuelan journalists, particularly among outlets which depend on the use of the radioelectric spectrum. This happens – in part – because many of these outlets have expired licences, therefore risking their entire operation if they are sanctioned by CONATEL (the government agency overseeing telecommunications in Venezuela). Self-censorship was predominant in the way they chose news topics and negotiated relationships with sources, and became a way to retain jobs. Respondents were extremely aware that they self-censored and that this impacted their professional practice.

Our participants, especially those with over 10 years of media experience, considered self-censorship as part of their organisational milieu as much of the demands for censorship came from their own supervisors. As one participant said, their direct supervisor told them – 'they should have never allowed that piece to come together in their reporter's mind, because you know what you can and what you can't publish here (2019)'.

Most participants agreed that they had self-censored at some point in their careers as well as observed colleagues and peers doing so. Self-censoring helped them keep their jobs and soon had become a part of their professional work ethos. As one participant said, 'I am no longer careful to check if I am self-censoring' (2018), thus denoting the degree of naturalisation of the practices of self-censorship which journalists in Venezuela are exposed to.

Journalists worked extremely hard to ensure that not even the slightest bit of speculation crept into stories. They tried to corroborate every fact, every element that they were publishing. The Venezuelan government has ensured this by making outlets responsible for the information and opinions that they air (regardless of whether it is their personnel who expresses them). As such, both the outlet and the individual journalist are held (legally) accountable for all information and opinions. This is also ironic: as the respondents said, their organisations and supervisors were also very careful that no news that could make the government uncomfortable would 'see the light of day' (2019).

As one participant said:

Here in Venezuela, there's an entire State apparatus of surveillance and censorship that has been put in place precisely for that ... None of this is coincidental, it's not like we had a particular keyword on a particular day and, so, we were on their radar ... (2019)

Journalists are routinely intimidated and, as, one participant, said, one colleague was thrown in prison for three years for tweeting unfavourably about the government and then harassed online after being released. Our respondents were extremely open in their acknowledgment of the fear of government reprisal. They stated that: 'I have ... I do self-censor ... I'll have information of things that are going on and I won't dare publish them ... I haven't dared because I'm not that brave' (2019).

Self-censorship prevented them from publishing articles that would draw attention to their work, thus staying under the radar and keeping alive a minimum amount of access to scarce official sources.

For our participants, the concept of self-censorship was deeply associated with the lack of access to sources and the periodic bursts in which censorship operated. As our participants said, 'Censorship in Venezuela seems to come in waves, at times increasing, only to ease out at later times' (2019). Government censorship in the country restricts access to sources and journalists depend largely on 'second, third accounts of events'. Even government press releases are created in a way that discourages questions. This has a negative impact on their work but, as our respondents say, they self-censor in order to preserve the few points of access they might still have with those in power. Self-censorship has become a mechanism that helps them to be journalists. But this clearly has limitations. One participant said, 'We've become so used to self-censorship that sometimes, there are things that you could actually say but we refrain from saying it (2019)'.

Censorship in Venezuela during Chavismo has gone on for so long, said most of our respondents, that they have become conditioned by it. As referenced by one of our interviewees, managers and editors nudge journalists to steer away from difficult or complex topics, under the guise of providing them with formative feedback. As our participants reiterated, this enables a process of internalisation of limits, until – eventually – journalists start asking to have work 'checked by all the higher-ups at the network' (2019). This has created new ways in which censorship and self-censorship are perceived.

Younger journalists entering the field self-censor as a matter of norm. They assume that such checks are a normal practice because they know no other reality. They are, as our respondents pointed out, socialised into self-censoring. This was clearly evidenced in the difference of perceptions about self-censoring held by respondents with five or less years of media experience in contrast to our older respondents, especially those with more than 20 years of media experience. The former was not as critical about the topics they were asked to report on nor were they used to interviewing the same sources. Especially for journalists with more than 15 years of media experience, self-censorship and an inability to publish stories they deemed important were the main motivator to publish on social media. Our participants in the age group of 40 to 55 overwhelmingly agreed that on social media they did not have to be nearly as vigilant, despite being aware that government censorship also takes place in those spaces. As they reflected on their

self-censorship, one participant said that they were worried that journalists were so ‘educated’ in a specific way that, like ‘a stray dog that’s been beat so much that when you want to pet him, he’ll back away . . . I’m unsure if the journalistic practice will go back to being normal after a change of government” (2019).

### ***Professional reflexivity and self-censorship***

This section deals with the data related to RQ2 that looks at the extent to which journalists in Venezuela exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity when dealing with self-censorship. Journalism in Venezuela, according to our interviewees, still holds most of its basic tenets: information gathering and corroboration and contrasting sources even if self-censorship has changed the way the practice has obviously been influenced. Our participants emphasised that, despite their self-censorship, journalists would – necessarily – always be contrarian to those in power. But as one participant said, ‘The most important thing, is for journalism to hold itself to truth itself’ (2019). The tension between responsibility and fear and self-censorship seems to be a constant in their work, even for those working in relatively more independent outlets. In order to deal with this fear, one interviewee mentioned that they choose their fights, ‘if not to win them, at least to survive them’. Our participants agreed that ‘there’s a fine line there between fear and self-censorship on the one hand and responsibility on the other . . . it would be irresponsible for an editor not to ask themselves whether what they are doing endangers the outlet itself’ (2019). It is along this fine line that journalists and editors in Venezuela are constantly forced to negotiate their professional engagements.

Responses to censorship and self-censorship have created certain divisions within newsrooms, especially between journalists with long years of experience and recent graduates. New entrants to the profession have internalised self-censorship as a professional norm and in the process as one respondent explained, ‘ . . . newsrooms have become quite diminished’. Newer generations, as our participants mentioned, might not have had the opportunity to have major journalists as role models, as many of them have been ousted in response to government pressure. The changes in the media have led – to a certain point – to ‘a substitution of good journalists for comfortable ones’, therefore leading to mediocrity in the mainstream Venezuelan news media. This old school/new school divide has greatly weakened what is being done in newspaper newsrooms, felt most of our respondents, and certainly reduced their overall impact.

### ***Collective professional autonomy***

This section pertains to RQ3 and analyses how journalists’ perceptions about professionalism signal the presence of collective professional autonomy when dealing with self-censorship. While reflecting on professional autonomy and the demands of their profession, our respondents were clear that their fear transcends the merely personal, spreading onto their work as editors and reporters, warning other journalists to be careful with how they said things, for their outlets may not be in financial positions to withstand onerous lawsuits or other crackdowns.

Journalist cannot cover all topics and self-censorship often prevents them from selecting and writing on certain topics or at least contextualising them in a way they see fit. This has led journalists to use social media to create independent news outlets and use the work of citizen journalists. They firmly believed in covering topics that are useful to inform the public. They were especially clear that they advocated for topics and the coverage of areas that lacked journalistic attention; however, they drew the line at becoming activists.

Our respondents found activism and journalism to be antithetical. As one respondent explained:

... being an activist implies being convinced of whatever it is you believe in, while being a journalist implies you are to question everything you believe in every single day, no matter what your beliefs are. (2019)

A strong urge to cover issues related to the citizens of the country, especially from areas where there are few journalists to bring news, drew them to the idea of citizen journalism but they were very divided on the idea of citizens producing news. As one participant said it is more of a romantic idea than anything else. Another reiterated:

... well, I'm unsure if citizen journalism actually works, because you can't simply take a housewife from El Cafetal (a middle class neighborhood in Caracas whose 'housewives' have become a paradigm for the irreflexive opposition to Chavismo characterized for being illogical, misinformed, and radical) and have her practice citizen journalism ... (2019)

Independent news organisations or web portals were more their media of choice. Our interviewees mentioned that they have certainly been let down by mainstream media, although they find comfort in knowing digital media have taken up the baton and are currently leading the way in terms of journalism, not only in Venezuela, but throughout Latin America. But they were also very aware that these portals had some severe limitations. As many of our participants reiterated, these new outlets did not reach most Venezuelans who lack access to Internet or smartphones. Radio was considered a more viable option. Radio journalists often collaborate with mainstream newspaper journalists to incorporate the reading of news headlines to amplify the reach of newspapers; but as our participants pointed out, at present, most papers are not being published daily, therefore reducing this effect. As one journalist said, 'Everything is dimming out, little by little (2019)'.

Censorship may have changed their relationship with sources but in a bid to build, sustain, and protect some sort of professional autonomy, journalists have taken to sharing information, and wording it in ways that would help them work beyond their self-censorship. This, as our respondents explained, has created a 'cartelization of information' where journalists are eager to share limited information and access to sources. This is clearly problematic, particularly among younger generations who have recently entered the profession and have no sources of their own. This practice, coupled with state censorship, prevented them from cultivating their own sources, only being left with, as one participant put in, 'the front stage presentation put together by those in positions of power'.

One of the problems with cartelising, as our respondents pointed out, was a homogeneity in media coverage where '... new generations (of journalists) will all

go and do their coverage together, and interview the same spokesperson, ... so that plurality of information is lost' (2019).

Solidarity amongst journalists – both inside Venezuela and overseas – has played a key role in ensuring that journalists do not feel alone when fighting against powerful interests. Journalists often send information that they cannot publish in the country to counterparts outside who publish it as international news. In a bid to ensure publication, antigovernment journalists have started collaborating in a bid to get information published rather than being the first to do so. As one respondent explained:

... when journalists are told they are not allowed to publish something, they simply turn to a colleague and provide them with the information, such that it finds its way into the public sphere. (2019).

In other cases, Venezuelan journalists have opted for publishing in foreign outlets, many times using pennames, to avoid potential repercussions. Faced with the spectre of self-censorship, others use social media to guide or direct readers towards news that they themselves could not or would not publish.

Professional associations like the National College of Journalists (Colegio Nacional de Periodistas), the National Union of Journalists (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa) and the IPYS (Press and Society Institute), an NGO formed mainly by journalists, seem to fall somewhat short in their defence of journalists and because of this, solidarity among journalists is at an all-time high. As one respondent said, 'If something were to happen to me', they say, 'I know there'd be a bunch of solidarity and pressure from NGOs and colleagues that know me within other media' (2019).

## Discussion and conclusion

Over the past two decades, Venezuela has undergone a period of marked change, rupture, and extreme displacement that has deeply interfered with the democratic values of the press. Scholarly attention has been deeply focused on politics and development in the country rather than on the media and the impact of authoritarian regimes on journalistic practices. Thus, this study focused on the experience of conflict and polarisation as exemplified by journalists, exploring the impact of extreme government censorship on how journalists self-censor, through conceptual frameworks of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy and, in the process, reflected on journalistic practices in situations of conflict through the realities and perils of being a professional journalist in Venezuela.

Studies on censorships generally focus on newsroom practices but this shifts the onus on how journalists perceive and work with the impact of self-censorship and how years and type of media experience influence perception and praxis. This analysis extends the application of the conceptual frameworks of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy to fulfil key lacunae in our understanding of censorship, self-censorship, and journalistic autonomy in a very understudied international context. As Lee and Chan (2009) have documented, the process of self-censorship is difficult to record, for the concept is taboo: journalists rarely want to discuss it and often perceive their colleagues to self-censor but not themselves. Our examination of self-censorship proceeded through in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 Venezuelan journalists from

different cities and analysed how they perceived self-censorship, the professional reflexivity they applied when dealing with such complex issues and the collective professional autonomy they displayed when dealing with self-censorship.

Our examination showed that the interviewed journalists clearly admitted to self-censoring as a protective mechanism that enabled them to do their work as information purveyors and, in certain cases, avoid prison and calculated harassment from governmental authorities (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Journalist with over ten years of experience, clearly said that they self-censored and they were very aware of this selective suppression, but censorship and self-censorship had become such an integral part of their professional routines that younger journalists, recent entrants into the newsrooms, socialised into this and accepted self-censorship as part of their normalised work routines (Tapsell, 2012). Our participants were very aware of how government censorship and the ways they were forced to self-censor had diminished their work, but armed with awareness and a deep sense of their roles as journalists, they worked bravely and often at great personal risk to publish stories in outlets and via other mediums that could publish the stories that their own outlets had no space for. They explored concepts of citizen journalism to ensure that topics that they could not cover found some attention. Yet they were clear that their fight to make accessible news and information free from censorship to their audience did not make them activists. Their identities as journalists were strong and they were clear that their fight for clear objective information in no way diluted this. Working as journalists and striving to be independent and combat the effects of censorship as well as self-censorship often showed them the weakness of their positions and exposed to them the gaps in their work. But as they worked to get stories published and gather information in ways that would help them stay under government radars, their travails only strengthened and rearticulated their identities as professional journalists.

As RQ1, which explored how journalists in Venezuela perceive self-censorship, shows, self-censorship was predominant in the way they choose news topics, negotiated relationships with sources and was an important way to retain jobs. Our respondents were extremely aware that they self-censored, but their reasons were very linked to state-sponsored impunity as explicated by the 'Politics of Impunity', as discussed by Harrison and Pukallus (2018) where governments and state-sponsored actors used impunity to force journalists into self-censorship. They spoke of colleagues thrown into prisons for years for simply tweeting against the government and those punished because of restrictions in an authoritarian state (Mortensen, 2018) that have tangible effects on the way journalists work (Almeida, 2014; Kenny & Gross, 2008). Cancelling media licences and imposing heavy fines have ensured that media censorship in Venezuela has gone beyond state and commerce-related practices (Burt, 1994; Yesil, 2014) and has put forward a new understanding of censorship that goes beyond the 'exclusion' of certain topics and is 'dispersed across a wide range of sites and agencies' (Burt, 1994, p. 31) that involves relationships to sources and the socialisation of young reporters into the profession. They were not afraid to emphasise the fear that came with that kind of government reprisals against unfavourable coverage.

But, unlike Hong Kong where journalists perceived themselves and not their colleagues to be brave (Lee & Chan, 2009), our participants showed extreme empathy towards their counterparts. They understood self-censorship as part of their organisational

climate for much of the demands for censorship also came from their supervisors. For most, self-censorship had become an ‘unconscious’ choice, as an entire ‘State apparatus of surveillance and censorship that has been put in place precisely for that’. They were also very aware of the limitations that this put in their way of being journalists, as they were so used to self-censoring that sometimes they refrained from being critical even when they could.

Government reprisals against unfavourable coverage have been going on for so long that they had been conditioned into self-censorship. Young reporters who came into newsrooms incorporated self-censorship as part of professional work styles. Unlike China, self-censorship here is a protective mechanism, but not one that has increased media freedom (Tong, 2009). Unlike Argentina and Bosnia Herzegovina, where reporters often align themselves with politicians to escape persecution (Cvijanovic, 2001; Pinto, 2008), some topics remain sensitive and journalists do not publish them to maintain contact with the few official sources they have access to (Lee & Chan, 2009).

### ***Professional reflexivity***

As RQ 2 shows, our participants showed enormous professional reflexivity when dealing with self-censorship. There were clear and constant tensions between the desire to be responsible journalists and the fear of reprisal that leads to self-censorship. The fight was one of survival, and the interviewed journalists were clear that self-censorship was a protective mechanism (Lee, 2007). Self-censorship may rise because of different developments, ranging from the fear of imprisonment to deviating from news norms and expectations for the more recent entrants (Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017), and may have become a part of normal media practices in the authoritarian state that Venezuela has become (Arsan, 2013), but journalists have also developed mechanisms to deal, to an extent, with pressures exerted by governments and other forms of ‘soft censorship’ (Almeida, 2014; Kenny & Gross, 2008) that can influence the profession even in countries that have strong traditions of ensuring press freedom (Hiltunen, 2017, p. 66).

### ***Collective professional autonomy***

As the data for RQ3, which examines collective professional autonomy when dealing with self-censorship among journalists, shows, our participants, deeply concerned about the diminishing of newsrooms and the lack of strong role models for those who come after them, have found ways to circumvent the paucity of access to sources, the inability to publish certain topics and the fear of vengeance by using various mechanisms. Venezuela may be authoritarian, and media may be forced to function in an undemocratic atmosphere, but journalists here refuse to become propaganda tools for the government (Carey, 2007). Autonomy is a ‘fluid concept’ adjusted to ensure the publication of news (Sjovaag, 2013, p. 1) and, like the journalists in Mexico who have come together to beat back the mafia (González de Bustamante & Relly, 2014), journalists in Venezuela have banded together around sources and information. They share sources and news topics they have access to, long forgetting the idea of getting news first. This provides a certain sense of professional independence but, as their reflections reveal, they also fear that these cartels are producing a homogeneity in news presentation that in the long run will

prevent objectivity and much needed scrutiny, especially among those who are just entering the profession. They publish on social media where there is less censorship and have created independent media outlets online.

Journalists in Hong Kong covered unfavourable news stories as those reported by international media (Lee, 2007), but journalists in Venezuela often send news out to colleagues outside the country to publish. They worry about how such long-standing persecution of the press may lead to inexplicit structures that will encourage censorship and self-censorship long after the disappearance of the explicit censor: here, an authoritarian government (Bunn, 2015). In a bid to ensure greater coverage of issues, especially in areas where there are few journalists, they also considered the benefits of citizen journalism. But most dismissed the idea of citizen journalism as a romantic notion. There was greater faith in online portals, but this also meant considering issues of access and reach among audiences who may lack access to smart phones and the internet. The motivation to ensure better informed audiences made them consider various ways to find and publish information but they were clear that at the end of the day this did not make them activists fighting for more independent media, but rather strongly emphasised their identities as journalists as it was the job of the media to remain 'contrarian' and the character of the profession to 'question' everything. There was deep reflection on the impact of censorship and self-censorship to recognise ways censorship could be negated or worked around, but there was no desire to renegotiate professional ideas of journalism or what it meant to be a journalist (Ahva, 2012, p. 791). The professional self was clearly intact (Lee & Chan, 2009). In Venezuela, journalists are forced to evaluate their professional identities as they battle various negative influences on their work but the notion of the journalist (Libby, 2006), at times seemingly fluid, actually manifests (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003) as the idea of journalists being objective professionals in public service who try to be as objective as possible in the fight to keep media in the country democratic (Ahva, 2012; Hanitzsch, 2006).

While this study certainly extends our understanding of self-censorship in Venezuela, its sample size clearly limits the generalisation of the findings. It also does not explore how political polarisation among journalists may inhibit them from selecting topics (Pozzebon, 2020). Self-censorship varies across different stages of news production and in different arenas of coverage (Márquez Ramírez, 2012) but this paper does not consider these distinctions. How do such differences influence notions of professional reflexivity and professional autonomy? We invite researchers to consider these questions in future studies.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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