

Social media in conflict coverage: journalists' perceptions of the risks, opportunities, and impact on professional routines

Las redes sociales en la cobertura de conflictos: las percepciones de los periodistas ante los riesgos, las oportunidades y el impacto en las rutinas profesionales



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Abstract:

The use of social media has inevitably influenced the routines and working conditions of journalists covering conflicts since its consolidation during the Arab Spring. The main objective of this study is to analyse the vision that the Spanish media have of the influence of digital technology on their profession and to consider journalists' perceptions of the risks such technology poses and its impact on both staff and freelance journalists. The analysis was carried out through in-depth interviews with both conflict journalists and international managers of Spanish media outlets (n=23). The chief results include the high degree of visibility and accessibility, the constant demand for updates along with the consequent increase in workload, the deterioration of news output resulting from worsening working conditions, and the challenges related to the lack of digital security tools among the Spanish media. Finally, the need for self-promotion on networks, especially in the case of freelance journalists, in addition to having an impact on their job opportunities, is seen as part of media brand positioning strategy.

Keywords:

Conflict journalism; social media; working conditions; security; digital technology.

Resumen:

El uso de las redes sociales ha influido inevitablemente en las rutinas y condiciones laborales de los periodistas que cubren conflictos desde su consolidación durante la Primavera Árabe. El objetivo principal de esta investigación es analizar la visión que los medios españoles tienen acerca de la influencia de las tecnologías digitales en el oficio e indagar en las percepciones que los periodistas muestran en cuanto a los riesgos que presentan y en su impacto tanto en periodistas de plantilla como freelance. El análisis se ha realizado mediante entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a tanto a periodistas de conflicto como a responsables de internacional de medios de comunicación españoles (n=23). Entre los resultados destacan la alta visibilización y accesibilidad, la demanda constante de actualización junto con el consecuente aumento de trabajo, el deterioro de la información fruto del empeoramiento de las condiciones laborales y los retos relativos a las herramientas de seguridad digital que carecen de su presencia en los medios españoles. Finalmente, la necesidad de promocionarse en redes, especialmente en el caso de los periodistas freelance, además de repercutir en sus oportunidades laborales, se presenta como parte de una estrategia para posicionar la marca del medio.

Palabras clave:

Periodismo de conflicto; redes sociales; condiciones laborales; seguridad; tecnologías digitales.

1. Introduction

Digital technology and social media have influenced journalists' work and therefore, the work of conflict journalists. Each conflict has been marked by technological change (Iturregui, et. al., 2017; 2014). One of the key points was the Iraq War, where digital technology and the Internet played a very important role for the profession (Dimitrova & Nenanski, 2006; Sánchez, 2019). Apart from influencing communication between journalists and the military (Iturregui et al, 2014), through the then innovative *Warblogs* (Meso, 2003), a new dynamic of transmitting information from the field was created, transforming the blueprint of traditional war correspondence (Wall, 2011).

Almost a decade later, the beginning of the Arab Spring also marked a before and after in international coverage, with social media playing a very important role (Gallardo & De la Quintana, 2012; Carlini, 2018; Martínez Canizales, 2020). These tools were used by both parties; both by citizens and by journalists on the ground. Therefore, on the one hand, the web and networks supposed a threat to the regimes due to the collective organisation of activists (Smidi & Shahin, 2017), so much so that in some cases, Egypt for example (El Hamdouni, 2013), States even cut off Internet connections. These tools were considered vehicles of information (Amaral, 2017; Magallón & Campos, 2021), representing an important change in the sources and channels of

the media paradigm (Rodríguez & García, 2013), thus becoming an issue that “favoured an event that was unheard of until that time: a citizen anywhere in the world, armed only with a mobile phone, could tell a story with a photograph and 140 characters” (Sánchez, 2019, p. 61).

On the other hand, the consolidation of social media has caused a qualitative shift in journalists’ work in the field, “continuously changing the practice and performance of conflict journalists and their coverage of war” (Harris & Williams, 2018, p. 75). This context directly translates into the increase in journalists’ need to acquire new skills, fostered by the demands of the media (Unda, Iturregui & Cantalapiedra, 2022). Nevertheless, the concept of the “multimedia journalist”, “multimedia correspondent” or journalist who works for several platforms in different formats, is hardly new: it is an issue that came up with coverage of the Iraq War (Iturregui, 2011). and became established over the following years, especially among freelancers (Bauluz, 2016). The consolidation of the multimedia profile of journalists who cover conflicts has generated, among other transformations, a demand for various devices offering permanent connection with the media outlet and has reduced their capacity to create news (Harris & Williams, 2018). Thus, “the combination of technological advances and professional competence has led most of the main English-speaking media to exert increasing pressure on their correspondents in the field” (Palmer, 2018, p. 13), demanding constant updates from them.

Furthermore, those technological changes that have marked the development of each conflict (Navarro, 2009) and professionals’ journalistic routines, together with the crisis in the media (Massey & Elmore, 2018), have triggered a considerable increase in the number of independent or freelance journalists on the ground, these becoming key figures in the news market (Marín & Valero, 2023). This has led to several studies analysing the conditions of, on one hand, freelance journalists, and on the other, journalists who are part of the staff of a media outlet. Ryan (2009) analyses the job satisfaction of staff and freelance journalists who work for American television networks through a survey conducted in 2007. Gollmitzer (2019) compares the working conditions of staff and freelance journalists and investigates “the emerging ways of organising and financing journalists’ work.” Van Leuven, Vanhaelewyn & Raeymaeckers (2021) study cost-reduction strategies in newsrooms, among other issues, in terms of differences between permanent staff and freelancers through surveys carried out with journalists (2013-2018). Istek’s analysis (2017), focusing specifically on journalists covering conflicts, is centred on the perception of media support for both types of conflict photojournalists by carrying out in-depth interviews.

In comparison with studies that focus on analysing and/or comparing the working conditions or perceptions of staff and freelance journalists, the presence of works that only analyse the working or professional conditions of the latter collective is of particular interest. These include studies that employ surveys to analyse the job satisfaction of these professionals (Massey & Elmore, 2011), that look into the effects that the working conditions of these professionals have on the construction of news (Hayes & Silke, 2018), and on their identity as journalists (Josephi & O’Donell, 2022), and studies that analyse the effect of the greater numbers of freelance journalists in the media and its repercussions on professionals’ routines (D’Arcy, 2015). These studies have been carried out through both surveys and in-depth interviews.

For their part, Christensen & Khalil (2023) analyse the performance of journalists who covered conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq with the emergence of new digital tools such as social media. They place particular emphasis on the verification

processes that professionals had to carry out, through in-depth interviews of journalists who worked for various international media.

Even so, although the influence of digital technology on the profession of journalism has brought about numerous contributions (McNair, 2003; Micó, Masip & García Avilés, 2009; Weaver & Willnat, 2016; Salaverría, 2019 and 2022; Sánchez & Canhaviilas, 2022), the same has not occurred in the field of conflict reporting. On the international scene, since Matheson & Allan (2009 and 2013) investigated the challenges and changes that the format of digital journalism entailed in the practice of war journalism, there have been few studies that analyse the role of digitalisation in war coverage (Bennett, 2013; Mortensen, 2014; Kaempf, 2013) where books that offer a more global vision of the situation predominate (Hoskins & O'loughlin, 2010; Carruthers, 2011; Harris & Williams, 2018).

There have also been few studies on the subject in Spain. The trajectory of the war correspondent's profession has been influenced by technology and the media crisis (Sánchez, 2019) and specifically, by analysis of the coverage of the Arab Spring by digital media (Arias, 2012), the role that social media had in those events (Soengas, 2013; Elena & Tulloch, 2017; De Aguilera & Casero, 2018), or the fact of taking them as sources of information (De Ramón, 2014), are topics that have been considered. Among these, although there are some qualitative studies, a predominance of quantitative analysis can be observed. Finally, Lavín de las Heras (2015) used in-depth interviews in his doctoral thesis to analyse the influence that digital technology has had on the job of the war correspondent (Lavín de las Heras & Rommer Pieretti, 2015) interviewing a total of 15 journalists.

This paper aims, on the one hand, to outline the Spanish media's vision of the influence of digital technology on their profession and, at the same time, to look more deeply into the perceptions of the journalists who work for said media in terms of the risks presented and the impact the technology may have on both staff and freelance journalists. In-depth interviews have been carried out with those responsible for the international sections of the main Spanish media outlets and with journalists who work for those media outlets to glean a more complete and up-to-date view of the topic (Unda, Iturregui & Cantalapiedra, 2022). The specific objectives of the research are the following:

1. Learn the perception that conflict journalists and those responsible for international sections have of the impact of social media on professional routines.
2. Identify the risks and opportunities that come with the consolidation of the use of social media in the coverage of conflicts.
3. Analyse the differences in the impact of such platforms for both freelance and staff journalists.

1.1. Digital technology and its impact on journalists' professional practices

In recent years, the profession of journalism has undergone considerable technological changes (Pavlik, 2000) as the Internet has become a key tool for reporting on political and social conflicts (Del Valle, Román, 2011), as well as for transforming news paradigms (Lavín de las Heras & Römer Pieretti, 2015; Carvajal et. al., 2022).

Many professions have had to change and adapt as a consequence of the arrival of digital technology, and journalism is no exception. The changes brought about by cybermedia and digitalisation (Cebrián, 2009; Salaverría et al, 2010, García-Orosa &

López -García, 2015) are mainly manifested in four broad areas: in digital technologies, logistical configurations, the profiles of new professionals and informative language (Masip et al., 2010). It is deemed necessary to face new media challenges with bold formulas, with the aim of fulfilling their function in the new social, political, and economic context of online society (Zelizer, 2017; García Orosa, López-García & Vázquez-Herrero, 2020).

This reality has made a mark on journalists' training: "In recent decades, journalism has reached higher levels of professionalisation with increasingly complex communication processes, with more direct effects, with large organisational structures that change the concept of news, and with new and unpredictable technologies" (Sánchez, 2021). Thus, although journalists' training has gone through different stages in line with each era's technological development (Sánchez & Tejedor, 2022), journalists themselves proclaim the need to include "multimedia" skills in university curricula for the practice of the profession today, as well as to open job opportunities; the media are currently looking for professionals who know how to produce a complete news item, in order to minimise on personnel (Marín & González, 2021).

It is not just a current phenomenon. Driven by the rise of technology and social media, the increase in journalists' workload, especially freelancers covering conflicts, has increased; just ten years ago, freelance journalists covering the Iraq War, apart from having agreements with different media, were feeding their own blogs (Iturregui, 2011; Moreno, 2010). All this, together with the constant pressure to send material to the media to get income from the coverage (García Prieto, 2022). In fact, new professionals entering journalism, especially freelancers, find it hard to get paid for their work, and many end up working for free (Hayes & Silke, 2018).

On the other hand, the media have historically been dependent on consumer-oriented electronic devices. Journalists, aiming to "meet *traffic quotas*," are tied to working a 24/7 timetable via smartphones, emails, and group chat programs, and face a constantly accelerating pace of work" (Cohen, 2019, p. 571). This routine, accelerated by a smaller number of staff and compounded by the requirement for constant digital news updates, leads to "the reality of not having a set deadline is that there is always a deadline" (Higgins-Dobney, 2021, p. 104).

The coverage of conflicts in particular sees the media demanding immediacy, and this, along with other factors, has inevitably influenced the routines of professional practices, "a fact that ends up making the media pay little interest to analysis of possible ways out of or the root causes of a conflict, and focus their attention, on the contrary, on those aspects that they consider more objective" (Requejo, 2018, pp. 1627-1628). Therefore, there is a need to closely monitor the impact of these advances on professional routines and, in turn, on working conditions:

The impact of these efforts on the work of newsrooms needs to be monitored. Rules governing work hours, time off, pay, and even editorial control can improve both day-to-day conditions and long-term outcomes for newsrooms and journalists (Higgins-Dobney, 2021, pp. 104 -105).

However, digital technology has not only played an important role in changes to media structures and working conditions in journalism but has also altered the process of news gathering and production (De Vuyst, 2020). Thus, the interaction between the media and digital technology has created new dynamics in terms of news in the coverage of conflicts. It has become an example of immediacy and has led to the need to speed up media verification processes of any news (Torres-Soriano, 2011), along with adjusting costs in newsrooms and, consequently, to an increase in journalists' workloads:

In the last two years, the laying off of workers and the downsizing of newsrooms has meant that the few remaining journalists have to deal with a greater number of tasks at the same time and it is an increasingly distant dream to carry out investigative journalism or even verify in depth the data provided by a source (Del Palacio et al., 2020, p. 4).

This comes together with the trend for using social media as sources of information, such platforms becoming a niche for fake news and misinformation around the world (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020), an issue that is causing concern among journalists, including those who cover conflicts (Schapals & Harb, 2021; Jamil, 2022).

1.2. The consolidation of social media in conflict coverage: the impact of the Arab Spring

Due to the increase in atypical and casual employment in all economic sectors and the downturn in media profits around the world, the conditions in which journalists work are changing and generally getting worse (Gollmitzer, 2019). Digital technology has had a direct impact on working conditions; the number of contracted journalists has decreased significantly (RSF et al., 2022; Tejedor, Cervi & Tusa, 2022) since the end of the 20th century (Gollmitzer, 2019). In the case of conflict correspondents, “changes in professional attitudes and organisational needs have affected the practice of war reporting: testimony and the information requirements of the 24-hour information culture are two factors behind this transformation” (Harris & Williams, 2018, p. 18).

In the context of the Arab Spring, specifically in the Syrian conflict of 2011; blogs, YouTube videos, and Twitter gained importance (Bennett, 2013). It was a revolution covered around the clock, which combined different news and broadcasting channels, such as traditional and social media (Hroub, 2015). The prominence or importance of traditional channels used by the media until that time was due to transmission problems, security issues, prohibitions imposed on journalists, and/or satellite incidents. But here, “the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa exemplified the near-ubiquity of global access to digital devices, the Internet, and social media, enabling unprecedented speed and reach” (Pearce & Rodgers, 2020, p. 1). Subsequently, digital sources and channels have become increasingly important (Lavín de las Heras, 2015) in media such as the BBC (Bennett, 2013) in coverage of stories from conflict zones.

Furthermore, one of the possibilities that new digital tools have brought to conflict situations was the growth of digital trust on the part of journalists and their sources, especially when direct personal contact was not an option (Christensen & Khalil, 2023). This, in turn, had other consequences:

As newsrooms continue with their cost-cutting measures, journalists may come increasingly to rely on social media and online sources. Not having journalists who primarily write stories in situ or visit the places they report on, and relying on social media platforms, potentially alters both the reliability of the story and the public's trust in the media (Christensen & Khalil, 2023).

1.3. Freelance journalists and the power of social media for promotion

Within the context of the precariousness of the journalist's profession, “freelancers have become the norm as cuts in travel budgets and the closure of foreign agencies have been carried out” (Matheson & Allan, 2009, p. 12; Díez Barriuso, 2017). The presence of freelance journalists in conflicts has “stabilised” and grown over time, especially during and after the Arab Spring: “The conflict in Syria has been referred to as a “freelance war” due to staff correspondents' refusal to risk their lives and the

unwillingness of editors to assign their best reporters. Over half of the Western journalists killed in Syria were freelancers” (Harris & Williams, 2018, p. 58). The War in Ukraine (2022) has confirmed this data 10 years later; 48.7% of the Spanish journalists who have covered the war are self-employed (RSF, et al., 2022), an issue that reveals “the abandonment by the Spanish media of the coverage of wars, increasingly delegated to the figure of the freelancer” (García Prieto, 2022, p. 19).

The incorporation of tools such as social media in daily practices encourages the creation of opportunities for one to become a centre of news and opinion, as well as to increase one’s market value (Brems et al., 2017) and obtain professional recognition from peers (Powers & Vera, 2018). Specifically, according to López & Casero (2017), social media offers journalists three major modes for promotion: professional, audience-related, and institutional. Moreover, such channels are considered to be extremely useful digital tools for consolidating their online identity and gaining independence from the media outlet (Yáñez et al., 2018). In the case of independent journalists, this trend can be exacerbated, since disconnecting from social media may lead to the loss of stories to other competitors. Thus, in this case, for freelance journalists, their product or merchandise is not only the finished work or content, but also the time they spend in the information industry as “eyes” and “ears” to get it (Hayes & Silke, 2018). Furthermore, “freelance journalists can take advantage of social media to become “entrepreneurs” with their own brand who can be or stay on the radar of potential clients, or generate their own audience” (Brems et al., 2016, p. 444).

With the increasing use of social media, combining work and leisure is a growing trend. In fact, young journalists consider it essential to stay active on social media, in addition to it being part of their work (Hayes & Silke, 2018), to the point that “their virtual presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram can offer unique information about their work habits, opinions and personal activities” (Brems, et al., 2017, p. 444). An example of this is that, in the American panorama, the dependence of journalism on commercial financing, “encourages individual journalists to direct the use of social media towards audiences as a way to advance their careers or demonstrate their effort to address the economic problems facing the media” (Powers & Vera, 2018, p. 2728). Thus, whatever the journalist’s professional status, it has been demonstrated that having a profile on social media and building a personal brand is valuable for everyone: “Staff journalists can strengthen the sustainability of their media outlet and freelance journalists can build an audience for themselves and develop and foster relationships with potential media clients” (Brems et al., 2017, p. 456), an issue that should be addressed in future studies (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017).

2. Method

This research presents the results obtained from a total of 23 in-depth interviews with both journalists who have covered conflicts over the last decade (n=19), from the Arab Spring to today, as well as those responsible for international sections (n=4) in the general media outlets with the highest audience ratings in Spain (AIMC, 2023): *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo* and *Spanish Public Radio & Television* (RTVE).

In-depth interviews have been chosen as the main technique for the study since they offer “a broad picture of a range of scenarios, situations or people” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1997, p. 195) which allows for an analysis of the development of the profession from the subjects themselves. Thus, this study utilises a qualitative technique, the in-depth interview, to learn the

perceptions of a variety of media professionals. Furthermore, that is the technique employed by several studies in the same field (Lavín de las Heras, 2015; Tejedor, Cervi & Tusa, 2022).

The tables below show the profiles of the journalists interviewed using assigned codes (P1-P19), as in the case of the international section managers interviewed (RI1-RI4). The objective of these tables is to preserve the anonymity of the subjects interviewed whilst facilitating attributions.

Table 1. Journalists interviewed

Code	Media outlet	Link with the medium	Conflict zones covered in the last 10 years
P1	<i>El País</i>	Freelance	Middle East since 2009: Egypt (2011), Libya (2012), etc.
P2	<i>El Mundo</i>	Staff	Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 (Syria, Libya, Yemen, etc.) and Ukraine War of 2022.
P3	<i>El Mundo</i>	Freelance	Middle East: Jordan (2012) and Syrian War (2012)
P4	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Freelance	Especially Middle Eastern countries: Syria (2012), Libya (2012) and recently in the 2022 Ukraine War.
P5	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Staff	Middle East and North Africa mainly: Syria (2012) Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, etc.
P6	<i>El País</i>	Staff	Middle East: Egypt (2011), Lebanon and Syria.
P7	<i>El País</i>	Freelance	Middle East and North Africa: Egypt (2011), Tunisia (2011-2022), etc.
P8	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Staff	Middle East: Egypt (2011).
P9	<i>RTVE</i>	Staff	Middle East: Syria (2012 and 2020), Libya (2012), Egypt (2011), etc. and Ukrainian War 2022.
P10	<i>RTVE</i>	Staff	Middle East: Tunisia (2011), Libyan border (2012), Yemen (2012), etc.
P11	<i>El País</i>	Staff	Middle East: Yemen (2012), Bahrain and Syria (2012).
P12	<i>El Mundo</i>	Staff	Middle East and Maghreb mainly since 2011.
P13	<i>RTVE</i>	Staff	Middle East Syria, Egypt, and Libya (2011-2012), Mali, Western Sahara (2012) and Ukraine War 2022.
P14	<i>El País</i>	Freelance	Middle East: Syria (2012).
P15	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Freelance	Middle East: Libya (2012) and Ukraine War of 2022.

P16	<i>RTVE</i>	Staff	Middle East mainly: Syria (2012), Libya (2012), Tunisia and Egypt (2011), etc.
P17	<i>El Mundo</i>	Freelance	Middle East: Syria and Lebanon (2012)
P18	<i>El País</i>	Freelance	Middle East: Egypt (2011), South Sudan and Africa.
P19	<i>RTVE</i>	Staff	Middle East: Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria (2011-2012), etc.

Source: created by the authors

Table 2. International section managers interviewed

Code	Media outlet	Career
RI1	<i>El País</i>	2 years as head of international desk
RI2	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	8 years as head of international desk
RI3	<i>El Mundo</i>	4 years as head of international desk
RI4	<i>RTVE</i>	6 years as head of international desk

Source: created by the authors

3. Results

3.1. Perceptions of journalists and media about the impact of digital technology on the profession: the two faces of immediacy

The majority of the journalists interviewed confirm that digital technology has brought benefits to international journalism, and some emphasise that this has improved their professional conditions.

“Digital technology provides greater and swifter access. You can do a live stream with your mobile phone if you can’t use a satellite, it’s clear that makes things easier. You can also send reports online” (P10, personal communication).

“I had kit that weighed more than 10 kilos on my first assignments, the satellite, etc. Then satellite phones began to appear, but only Time magazine or the New York Times had them. The rest of us went with very heavy but really expensive equipment. Covering those stories was expensive” (P6, personal communication).

P5 says that technology has made transmissions easier, as previously information could only be transmitted by telephone: "There were computers called "*Tandy*" that connected to the telephone. It was really precarious, because the signal was constantly cutting out when the signal wasn't good" (P5, personal communication). Therefore, according to P5, the only alternative was to dictate the report orally from a telephone booth.

"Digital technology allows you to access a very broad spectrum of information/documentation, especially when it comes to background, since one of the most important things about conflicts is that, knowing the background of what has led to the conflict" (P2, personal communication).

The Covid-19 pandemic, on the other hand, "proved that we can reach anyone through technology, even if they are not present," says P12 (P12, personal communication). The phone was around before, but P12 says that seeing it "face to face" makes it more authentic, although he believes that this will have its consequences:

"It is an advantage when covering events. However, the consequences of that may be that journalists travel to the scene less" (P12, personal communication).

Both the use of these tools and their influence on the profession have their positive and negative sides, according to P9. On the one hand, he considers that it is much easier to send reports from the field, but, on the other hand, the "immediacy" that social media demand increases the journalist's workload.

The increase in workload and the need to constantly update information are aspects mentioned by almost all those interviewed about digital technology. P8 says that they have brought "pressure to keep on producing continuously."

"Now when you go abroad, they make you constantly send stories to feed the web, because the web needs material, instead of spending our time doing in-depth stories as we used to. As time becomes shorter with this immediacy, it means we go into the story in less depth. They want a story now and then once posted, they ask you to enrich it" (P8, personal communication).

"We can't wait until seven in the evening to post something that happened at ten in the morning, we have to send it as soon as possible," says P7. That is why P10 mentions that conflict journalists today are "mortgaged" to the immediate situation.

"To make a good report you have to go to the place, record, collect testimonies and get out of there quickly, because if there's a war you have to leave as soon as possible, get wherever you are safe and send it. What's happening now? If you are constantly going live on the phone, etc., you don't have time to do that. I realize that many special correspondents are losing quality in their reports because they are so focused on the immediate and what is happening right now" (P10, personal communication).

The increase in journalists' workload is, therefore, a direct consequence of immediacy:

"Newsrooms are insatiable nowadays, they want everything. Not just a daily report, which is a lot in a war zone. What's more, they may ask for an audio, a live radio broadcast for the same media group and a video" (P5, personal communication).

Several journalists coincide in comments about the need to produce for different platforms, which is why the concept of the "multimedia journalist" has been driven by current news needs:

"Being a multimedia journalist is the result of circumstances. It is wonderful to be able to play every instrument, but you'll only really know how to play one well. I do television, radio, press, in English, in Spanish, etc. I used to work with a cameraman or photographer because they covered his expenses, now I have to do everything myself. I can do it and I think I can do it with dignity,

but there's no doubt that if I could have someone working with me, I could focus much more on the interview I am doing instead of paying attention to things like sound, etc." (P1, personal communication).

P1 suggests that this distracts your attention from what you are doing at that moment. Even so, P3 insists that the media demand this type of multimedia, highlighting the effort that this implies for independent journalists:

"Now media outlets insist that you be a multimedia journalist. If you want to survive in the Middle East, you have to know how to make a video, which is why it's so bad for me. That means investing a lot of money in good equipment" (P3, personal communication).

The reality that journalists are facing at the moment calls for easy access to and dissemination of news, along with a demand for immediacy in news processes, a greater workload, and the need to adapt to different platforms and formats in the field. That situation clearly affects both professional routines and working conditions.

3.2. Risks derived from the consolidation of social media in the coverage of conflicts: greater workload, constant updating, and the danger of misinformation

All the international desk managers interviewed agree that social networks have facilitated the work of journalists in the field:

"They have greatly speeded up the work and allow you to have material that was impossible before. When we travelled in the 90s, we had to pay for excess luggage on flights. Now you can do with a computer what used to need 80 kilos of kit" (RI4, personal communication).

However, social media have brought to light various misinformation-related issues, such as immediacy, along with poor data verification, visibility of work, and for the Spanish media, personal safety.

"Social media give the impression that you are finding out what is happening, but in reality, they are like flashes, the news is sometimes easy to manipulate. This has helped manipulation, because you can often see an image and notice that it's old, it doesn't fit the story, etc." (RI2, personal communication).

In addition to misinformation, according to RI3, the speed of news that the networks ask for does not correspond with the field work that conflict journalists have historically carried out on the ground. But, during the Arab Spring, social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, consolidated their function as news channels among journalists and, in turn, among activists: "I remember going to Tunisia a little after the Arab Springs, I recall seeing a huge poster that said: *Merci Facebook*" (RI1, personal communication).

This boom, according to RI1 and RI3, contributed to the visibility of the work that journalists were doing in the field and in turn to that of the media outlet: "The fact of reporting through social media makes your item more visible and more widely spread" (RI3, personal communication). Furthermore, although social media had not reached the magnitude they have today, they were fundamental in organisation and in getting news out. "The regime did not know what to do then, it couldn't close down social media" (RI4, personal communication).

The dissemination of information through networks is a firmly established routine in the media landscape nowadays, so much so that RI1 and RI3 highlight its commercial effectiveness as well: “Today, a part of the subscriber traffic of the distribution of our material comes through social media” (RI1, personal communication).

Therefore, apart from social media contributing to the dissemination of the work of journalists in zones of conflict, they also bring up concerns about the risk of disinformation, such as the ease with which images can be manipulated. Even so, they are thought to be extremely useful tools not only as channels for dissemination, but also as a means for generating a greater number of hits on the media websites, or for attracting subscribers.

3.3. *Freelance and staff journalists: the promotional dimension in news flows through social media*

Social media played a very important role in the Arab Spring, known in the media as “*The Facebook Revolutions*” and “*Twitter Uprisings*” (Pontone, 2022), both in political mobilisation (Magallón & Campos, 2021) and in news coverage. More than ten years later, all the Spanish journalists agree that social media were very important in the revolts, especially Twitter (P17, personal communication). According to P14, at that time the majority of people already made frequent use of Facebook and YouTube.

“The platforms gave activists a chance to record their own videos and upload them so that they’d have a reach that they wouldn’t otherwise have had. The media took this news from YouTube for free. If I’m getting it free, why am I going to pay you? That’s what has ended up ruining the profession” (P14, personal communication).

P15 mentions that due to the speed with which information is received from the platforms, “exclusive” no longer means anything. When it comes to social media, the journalists interviewed have different opinions about them. One of the most important things about “spending time” on the platforms is that they do not create their own content for the media:

“I retweet my own articles, but the truth is it takes time. The more time you spend on stuff like that, the less time you have to do real journalism” (P2, personal communication).

“If I’m writing a tweet and making sure people see that I was the first to post it, I’m not engaged in the reporting that I’m supposed to be doing, I’m being immediate and I’ll be the first up, but perhaps the news I’m offering is almost worthless. The function of journalism is to give keys, to try to show the key aspects of a complex reality, to simplify it so that someone who is not an expert can understand it better” (P10, personal communication).

The constant need to update social media is another of the most frequently mentioned topics among the journalists. P16 says that there is a kind of “whirlwind” that makes you update Twitter and Instagram with a specific frequency, since, if there is not a constant presence on these platforms, it is as if one does not exist. In this sense, according to P16, women’s situation is even worse:

“Women are even less visible in this profession, there has always been an air of “khaki-trousered macho”, it is the way that social media have of saying that we are here. There’re more and more of us, but the problem is that we aren’t seen. I see Twitter and Instagram as tools to make our work visible, and us as well” (P16, personal communication).

On the other hand, P3 mentions that this issue has a “B side” in the case of self-employed or freelance journalists, affecting journalists who are in the field, in the sense of a call for presence on the social media:

“The more active you are on social media now, the more attention you get from people. It’s true that I sometimes feel that social media force you to talk when you have nothing to say. When a journalist is in the field, there is a lot of preparation time, doing interviews, organising trips, etc. If you’re off the screen for a week or two on the social media, it seems like you no longer exist” (P3, personal communication).

Along the same lines, P1 says that social media, particularly Twitter, offer the opportunity to create a personal brand, although this trend is not something new:

“Tools like Twitter allow you to create your own personal brand. The historical figures of conflict journalism also had their own personal brand, with one difference: their personal brand was created through television, books, etc.” (P1, personal communication).

“We all become a brand, and it seems like you’re a nobody if you don’t have a follower on Twitter,” says P8. In fact, he mentions that if his goal was to find a job, it could be a cause for concern, since it is something that the media values increasingly. For this reason, he mentions that freelancers use Twitter more to make their work known.

“If you don’t have a fixed salary and no job security, you have to earn a living and promote yourself” (P6, personal communication). P7 holds the same opinion because as far as being a freelance journalist is concerned, the fact of being known can have a great impact on job searches:

“If you are freelance, as they can then give you jobs, call you to give talks, sometimes university classes, sell books, etc. It depends on whether you’re high-profile or well-known. And how do you become well-known? Well, one of the ways is by being active on social media. So, for me, if you’re freelance and want to make a living, you have no other option. If you have a contract, then it is a matter of ego, because your salary isn’t based on that” (P7, personal communication).

For example, P18 points out that in the middle of the Arab Spring he decided to start his own Facebook page:

“There was a time when I created an open page on Facebook, as a journalist, a “brand page”. I don’t know if it was a coincidence, but media like *Radio France International*, *Deutsche Welle*, etc. called me. I had a high profile. People responded, it was something that could build my brand, but it required a lot of work, a lot of time, it wasn’t my cup of tea and I ended up dropping it” (P18, personal communication).

Although networks are a tool for self-promotion, P6, a staff journalist, says that this is “quite an unfortunate” issue because, in this situation, the journalist should be focused on doing his or her own work, something which has an impact on journalists’ working conditions.

In conclusion, social media is a double-edged sword; they are free broadcasting channels which have had a direct impact on journalists’ working conditions in general, and particularly on conflict reporters. Moreover, they can be seen as tools that require journalists’ “presence” on the network so that their work, and their profiles, can be publicly recognised and valued. Freelance journalists face an even harsher reality, as their social media presence may determine the number of contracts and / or assignments they can try for.

4. Conclusions and discussion

The impact of digital technology on the profession of journalism, and specifically on conflict journalism, is unquestionable. Quite apart from being a facilitating element in work routines, social media have played, since their consolidation in the Arab Spring (Marta & Idiakez, 2014), a crucial role for journalists covering conflicts. This study offers the first diagnosis of the impact of this consolidation from the point of view of journalists and heads of international sections.

The interviews carried out have confirmed that the consolidation of social media in professional practice has led to a notable increase in workload due to a demand for constant updating of news, both from the audience and from the media outlets themselves, since these types of platforms are seen by the media as “beneficial”, as effective channels for keeping the audience informed (Martín et al., 2022).

Faced with this reality, journalists mention the deterioration of news quality as a result of worsening working conditions, as well as limited opportunities to “look in depth”, which has had a direct impact on the quality of news available, and also supposes a risk for verification processes.

Media outlets, for their part, admit the power of these tools in terms of making work visible, something positive for both the media and journalists themselves. In the case of the media, the benefits are evident, since, as they themselves recognise, a “double effect” occurs; hits on social media favour an increase in traffic of the outlet’s news output, which in turn leads to a better position in audience rankings and a better chance of gaining subscribers.

The media are aware of both the opportunities and the risks that social media and digital technology can pose for their journalists and for the news they provide, but they are still far from offering personal tools to manage the security of their professionals, an issue that falls to the individual responsibility of every journalist who covers conflicts. An issue that will doubtless call for further research in the future.

Finally, in the case of freelance journalists, the impact of social media goes even further. They acknowledge the need to promote themselves on the platforms, to be known and to have greater access to possible future employment. Staff journalists also accept the importance of having a complete profile, especially on Twitter (now X), but it is the freelancers whose activity and impact on the platforms may determine their professional futures. It could be said that the pressure that media outlets begin to exert on journalists, both freelance and staff, to develop and feed their personal accounts is part of a strategy to position the medium’s brand through the work posted by the journalist on their personal networks. That is to say, a journalist’s professional relationship with a media outlet is also conditioned by promotional criteria, which are part of the logic of corporate communication, and not so much of journalistic criteria. An issue that forces us to pay attention to new elements that may be influencing the work of conflict reporters.

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Data collection and analysis	Annette Unda Endemaño
Discussion and conclusions	Leire Iturregui Mardaras and Annette Unda Endemaño
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7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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