

Flexible journalist's association as a self-regulating tool: The Latin American case

Colegiación periodística flexible como herramienta de autoregulación: el caso latinoamericano

Carme Ferré-Pavia*

Autora de correspondencia

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona | C. de les Vinyes s/n 08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona) | España

 0000-0002-7258-6376/ | Carme.Ferre@uab.cat

Jerónimo Biderman Núñez

Universidad San Isidro | Av. Libertador 17.175 CP 1642 Buenos Aires | Argentina

 0000-0002-2574-9574/ | biderman@usi.edu.ar

Recepción 10/02/2025 · Aceptación 14/12/2025 · Publicación 15/04/2026

Abstract

This research is motivated by the dearth of journalist associations (*colegios de periodistas*) in the majority of Latin American countries, resulting in an absence of training requirements for journalists in the region. The primary objective of this study is to ascertain the status of journalism associations within the region and thereby establish a comparative perspective on the various types of professional associations present. The article also puts forward the notion of flexible association as a self-regulating device. The method employed is founded upon a documentary analysis and a comparative process, culminating in a qualitative scope. The findings indicate that in 11 out of the 19 countries examined within the region, there is an absence of registered membership, while in 8 countries, flexible membership is in place. In order to become a member, it is necessary to hold a university degree. It is evident that the merits of affiliation with these associations are more closely aligned with the principles of a union association than with those of a professional body. From this standpoint, the existing barriers to entry into the field of journalism should be dismantled, and the regulatory framework should be transformed into a flexible and self-regulating apparatus aimed at elevating the technical and ethical standards of the profession. This could engender higher quality journalism and public confidence in the profession, with the concomitant benefits that this brings to a democratic society.

Keywords: flexible association, Latin America, media mistrust, professionalism, deontology.

Resumen

Esta investigación está motivada por la escasez de colegios de periodistas en la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos, lo que se traduce en una ausencia de requisitos de formación para los periodistas de la región. El objetivo principal de este estudio es determinar la situación de las asociaciones de periodistas en América Latina y, de ese modo, establecer una perspectiva comparativa sobre los distintos tipos de asociaciones profesionales existentes. El artículo propone la noción de asociación flexible como mecanismo de autorregulación. El método empleado se basa en un análisis

Cómo citar: Ferré-Pavia, C. y Biderman Núñez, J. (2026). Flexible journalist's association as a self-regulating tool: The Latin American case. *Ámbitos. Revista Internacional de Comunicación*, (69), 84-102. <https://doi.org/10.12795/Ambitos.2026.i69.11>

documental y un proceso comparativo, con un alcance cualitativo. Los resultados indican que en 11 de los 19 países examinados de la región no existe la afiliación registrada, mientras que en 8 países existe la afiliación flexible. Para ser miembro es necesario poseer un título universitario. Es evidente que las ventajas de afiliarse a estas asociaciones se ajustan más a los principios de una asociación sindical que a los de un colegio profesional.

Desde este punto de vista, deberían eliminarse las barreras existentes para acceder al campo del periodismo y el marco regulatorio debería transformarse en un aparato flexible y autorregulado destinado a elevar los estándares técnicos y éticos de la profesión. Esto podría generar un periodismo unas mayores calidad y confianza del público en la profesión, con los beneficios que ello conlleva para una sociedad democrática.

Palabras clave: asociación flexible, América Latina, desconfianza en los medios, profesionalismo, deontología.

1. Introduction

In Latin America, journalism as a profession is immersed in a crisis sprung from three current concerns: a low level of credibility, a growing job insecurity and a decreased level of association. This context affects not only professional journalists, but all the actors in democratic societies, who are witnesses of the collapse of one of the most decisive institutions when it comes to guaranteeing the quality and intensity of democracy. Today, while disinformation is growing exponentially due to the development of non-journalistic communication formats, journalism professionals are fighting for survival in a sea of public mistrust. And they are battling almost in solitude.

In this context, re-addressing the debate on the need to develop a higher level of professionalization is at risk but essential. The association between journalists in Latin America bases the very sustainability of the profession. The discussion on the role of professional associations, which has been widely dealt with throughout the last century in the continent, is open once again.

The decrease in public confidence in Latin American journalism can be related, partly, to the lack of technical knowledge of media professionals, but to a much greater extent, to an ethical deficit. Additionally, given the absence of journalist associations in most of the countries of the region and, consequently, the actual non-existence of training requirements, a significant number of Latin American journalists work in a context of deontological orphanhood. Except for the regulations designed by some media companies to frame the activity of their employees, or for some journalist organizations or forums which provide voluntary association and limited scope, Latin American media professionals are not guided by any type of ethical standard deriving from professional associations.

Over the last century, the journalism profession in Latin America has developed in a framework of political instability. In most countries in the region, institutional disruptions have naturally added complexity to the journalistic profession. In the last hundred years, there have been 102 *coups d'état* in Latin America, and most of them involved some degree of persecution of professional journalists. However, given the cultural, national, economic and political diversity that prevails among the different nations of the region, it is particularly challenging to establish a common framework that would enable us to draw overarching conclusions applicable to all countries (Mellado Ruiz, 2009).

Although the regional political landscape appears to have stabilized in the 21st century, frequent risks of institutional crises are faced by countries such as Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador or Honduras, while Venezuela, Nicaragua or Cuba live under regimes at odds with the consensus of liberal democracy. In these last three countries, the journalistic profession has been a risky activity. According to the Press Freedom Index of the association Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024), 14 Latin American countries are ranked below the 100th position among 180 countries, the most dangerous countries for practicing journalism being Cuba (position 168), Nicaragua (163), Venezuela (156), Honduras (146), Guatemala (138), El Salvador (133), Peru (125), Bolivia (124), Mexico (121), Colombia (119), Paraguay (115) and Ecuador (110). Only Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Panama are the nations of the subcontinent where press freedom is most respected.

Within this framework, this study aims to analyze the status of journalist associations in Latin America with a detailed documentary study of the status of this professional requirement in 19 countries in the region. Moreover, it wants to contribute to the field of studies on the journalistic profession by developing the concept of *flexible association* as a self-regulating device. It will diagnose if the low levels of professional association in Latin American journalism are connected with fundamental problems that the profession entails. In particular, if they are linked with the absence of deontological frameworks, which could lead, in turn, to a comprehensive crisis of public trust in journalism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Professional association in Latin America

The idea of professional association is traditionally connected with membership. But is the traditional association —to be called from now on *rigid association*— not appears to be the only form of professional bonding that journalists may engage in.

Professional associations, from a classical perspective, are organizations that “arise from the associative will of their members”, but that also have functions of general interest “delegated” by the Administration [the State], for which reason they are constituted as Public Law Corporations” (Chacón Fuertes, 2009, p. 111). That is to say: the State delegates mainly to professional associations the integral control over a profession, including that of granting qualifying licensing and that of applying sanctions to professionals who have infringed ethical conduct or the praxis of the activity. In a rigid membership scheme, then, professional associations bear the following characteristics:

1. They are created through state legislation.
2. They are public law corporations, to which the State delegates the power to fully control the exercise of a profession.
3. They require mandatory affiliation.
4. They bear the exclusive representation of the professionals of an activity.
5. They organize and grant qualifying licensing, based on the control of the academic background required for the exercise of the profession.
6. They develop a deontological framework for the exercise of a profession.
7. They establish internal mechanisms for disciplinary control and application of sanctions.
8. They exercise the integral defense of professionals of an activity in the public and private spheres.

9. They carry out mechanisms to prevent and denounce the exercise of the profession by those who are not registered as members.

When a profession is organized through a rigid association, the exercise of the activity is prohibited for those who:

1. Do not have the academic background required by the professional association.
2. Are not bearers of professional licensing.
3. Their licensing was suspended by the professional association for disciplinary reasons or for other causes provided for in the regulations of the organization.

Consequently, rigid professional membership is a restrictive form of association. Therefore, in this paper is understood that the traditional type would be a disadvantage for the profession, considering that the journalistic profession is an essential activity for democracy (Real-Rodríguez, 2006). Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are enshrined in the constitutions of most democratic nations in the region. In addition, a type of association of these characteristics has already been rejected in the continent, through a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CIDH in Spanish). In 1985, before a query from the State of Costa Rica, the CIDH rejected rigid membership as a form of organization and regulation of journalistic activity, according to the Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (1985). It argued it prevents the access of any person to the full use of social communication media as a vehicle to express themselves or to transmit information.

The Costa Rica case refocused the debate on professional association in Latin America. As will be seen, in most of the countries of the region journalism is not regulated by a professional association. And in the countries where it is, the association has no practical implementation. The core of the CIDH ruling points to the fact that the exercise of journalism —the use of social communication media as a vehicle to express ideas and transmit information— is a human right, and, therefore, cannot be regulated through a professional organization that is restrictive.

In some contexts, rigid professional association is not a possibility —neither legal nor convenient in risky situations. Some authors also argue that the profession is not naturally articulated. As Real-Rodríguez (2020a, p. 237) points out: “The journalistic union has not been precisely characterized by its unity. What has distinguished it has been the marked individualism of its journalists, who frequently are reluctant to be part of professional organizations”. Different research confirms this assertion in other countries (Gajardo & Mellado, 2025; Jastramskis et al., 2025).

In this context, it is necessary to bear in mind that the professional association cannot be substituted by the trade union organization. The latter is aimed at defending the labor conditions and rights of workers, while professional associations encompass the integral ecosystem in which professionals develop. For this reason, a professional association scheme, which, from here on, will be called *flexible association*, is suitable for the journalistic profession in Latin America since, as it will be later confirmed, it can foster higher standards of the activity.

A flexible association is defined as an organization with the following attributes:

1. It is to be led by a group of professionals.

2. It is voluntary.
3. It grants a professional license to those who meet the previously established membership requirements (for example, university degree, association statement, commitment to comply with deontological standards). It is not a registration but a professional license, which, for the member, implies access to certain benefits generated by the institution.
4. It safeguards the interests of the professionals of an activity.
5. It develops a deontological framework and other self-regulating devices.
6. It generates continuing training and fosters debate on the development of the profession.
7. It drafts proposals for curriculum updates to study programs related to the profession.
8. It officially represents professional members before public authorities, private organizations, and civil society.
9. It does not prevent non-members from exercising the profession, although it aims at ensuring access to job opportunities for members.

To further clarify the concepts discussed in this paper, it is helpful to present a comparative Table 1 outlines the ideas of professional association, flexible professional organization, and rigid professional organization. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they are not synonymous.

Table 1

Professional, rigid and flexible association categories

	Professional association	Rigid professional organization	Flexible professional organization
Type of legal organization	Private Law Association	Public Law Corporation	Private Law Association
Nature	Non-regulatory	Regulatory	Self-regulatory
Creation	By the free agreement of a group of professionals or workers	By legislative means	By consensus of professionals and employers
Type of membership	Free and voluntary for professionals or workers	Mandatory for practicing a profession	Not mandatory for practicing the profession but required to access professional benefits
Registration	Not mandatory	Mandatory	Not mandatory
Requirement for university degree	No	Yes, in all cases	Yes, with exceptions
Adherence to a Code of Ethics or Normative Standards	NO	YES	YES
Authority to Impose Sanctions or Suspend/ Prohibit Professional Practice	NO	YES	NO

Source. The Authors (2026).

As shown in the table, professional associations represent a type of organization aimed at bringing together a group of professionals or workers in a specific field to represent their interests before the State, private entities, or the community. In the case of professional organizations, there is an underlying intent to regulate professional activity.

For rigid professional organizations, the regulation comes from an external authority to the members of the organization and has legal power to impose sanctions and manage the registration system. In other words, the organization has the authority to enforce mandatory sanctions on professionals, which can even include suspending or revoking their license to practice. Flexible professional organizations, on the other hand, are based on the concept of self-regulation. In this case, membership and registration are not mandatory for practicing the profession. However, as will see later, membership in the organization offers a range of benefits. These benefits, while raising the profession's standards through requirements such as education, ethics, and access to ongoing training, also significantly enhance the overall practice of the profession.

2.2. Redefining professional association

Addressing the issue of professional association leads us to initially redefine the concept. In the traditional view, professional associations represent a type of regulation of mandatory nature for those who, having completed a university training course, seek to work in a certain professional field, for which a registration or license is required. Membership, then, is structured through professional associations, which are public law institutions. That is, they exercise public-private functions and articulate professionals of an activity, the state administration and society (CGTS, 2016).

Therefore, the traditional association involves, in the first place, the requirement of a qualifying university degree to achieve enrollment by a professional association. Consequently, professions (and not trades) can be organized in associations. However, journalism in Latin America has been traditionally considered a trade and not a profession. In its beginnings, in times of the independence processes of the nations in the region, the early media were led by lawyers, philosophers, priests or other citizens who became known as journalists while carrying out their other activities. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, with the impulse of the so-called 'popular journalism of large circulation', most of those who practiced journalism were already doing so as a way of life, but without being part of a professional association that would regulate their activities. It was enough to master the task and/or get by in the art of writing and telling stories to practice journalism. Unlike what was happening, already at that time, with professions such as medicine or law, journalism was granted a social status as a trade but not as a profession.

With the rise of the radio in the 1920s and television in the 1950s, this situation did not change. On the contrary, the media continued to be populated by various professionals from other disciplines —lawyers, writers, actors, broadcasters— working alongside journalists who were trained in newsrooms or in one of the journalism schools or colleges that emerged in the first decades of the 20th century. In their classrooms, technical training on the art of writing or speaking was provided, but lacked a universal, deontological, sociological and comprehensive view of the profession. Thus, journalism continued to be considered a trade that could be performed by any citizen —with or without training— though not a profession.

For a more complete understanding of the issue, the differences between a trade and a profession are to be addressed. On the nature of trades, Díaz Piña states “trade focuses on the permanence within the same activity [...], on the greater share of physical effort and on the amount of mental strain required [...], as well as on the method to acquire such skills or abilities”. (Díaz Piña, 2013, p. 238)

Alternatively, he considers that a profession is a form within the social structure recognized by the State and subject to legal norms that regulate and determine its exercise; an area of knowledge transmitted through education; an activity characterized by the predominance of rational effort, and a product of research and the interaction of professionals with the demands for development generated by their social, economic and political environment (Díaz Piña, 2013).

Other authors focused on this question (Fernández Pérez, 2001; Oller & Chavero, 2014; Soto, 2012), and some have even articulated it with the practice of journalism (Aznar, 1999, 2003; García Benítez & Cerón Martínez, 2005; Lamuedra, 2012; Ruiz, 2016). In all cases, authors agree that for an activity to obtain the status of a profession, the following three requirements must be met:

1. Academic training
2. Professional association
3. Ethical framework as a self-regulating device

The exercise of journalism in Latin America, nevertheless, is not subject to any of the three conditions stated above. It is, therefore, socially and institutionally considered a trade and not a profession. In the United States, on the other hand, the situation is different, since “journalism has enjoyed a rich and relatively stable history of professionalization” (Deuze & Witschge, 2018, p. 165). In the Latin American case, the changes originated in the digital transformation and its challenges have worsened this situation. In this sense, Zelizer (2018) affirms that new challenges complicate the notion of journalism as a profession: full-time employment, affiliation with a news organization, and identification with specialized practices.

Part of the changes that affect the activity are also connected with the transition towards a journalism more oriented to the market than to the public service, which also affects the ethical standard of the profession, self-regulating instruments such as codes of ethics, and the thorough idea of professionalization. As stated by Iggers (2018, p. 8), “[...] changes include the corporate restructuring of newsrooms in ways that reduce the autonomy of journalists and undermine the premise of professionalism on which the codes of ethics are based”.

This discussion —trade or profession— is not merely conceptual since there is also the underlying appreciation and recognition that society grants to an essential activity such as journalism. Hanitzsch and Örnebring (2019, p. 105) connect this debate with the identity of the profession and with the ability of journalism and journalists to obtain social legitimacy: “Research into professionalism, professional identity, and the roles of journalists is key to our understanding of journalism’s role and legitimacy in society.”

2.3. The collapse of credibility of Latin American professional journalism

As it has already been mentioned, there is a credibility issue in journalism in Latin America. From the perspective of this article, the reasons behind this could be related also to the lack of solid self-regulating and deontological frameworks, and a very low level of professional associations.

Credibility of journalism in the region barely reached 40% in 2020 (latest data available) collapsing from 51.4% in 1995 (Latinobarómetro, 1995–2020). The Argentine case as an example, less than 3 out of 10 people, when hearing or reading information published by a journalist, tend to believe it is true (Auditorio de Opinión Pública USI, 2022). Regarding the rest of the countries in the region, and apart from the Dominican Republic (59.7%) and Panama (50.9%), all Latin American nations bear levels of public trust in journalism below 50%, being the regional average 40.4% (Latinobarómetro, 2020).

When analyzing the last three decades, is observed that trust in journalism as a social actor shows a downward trend, hitting a 40-point low in the latest regional measurement. This trend is on par with the weakened democratic systems of a significant number of countries in the subcontinent (Latinobarómetro, 2020). In other words, professional journalism fails to avoid the credibility crisis and remains involved in the heat of mistrust. Data from Latinobarómetro (1995–2020), Auditorio de Opinión Pública USI (2021–2022), Statista (2022) and Gallup USA (2022) show a negative confidence trend in Latin America if compared to the European Union. On the other hand, trust in the media and journalists is even lower in the United States.

Having said that, the credibility crisis towards journalists is not a problem that affects only professionals in the activity or media companies: it impacts on a weakened democratic society (Monje et al., 2021). In this context, the participation of professional journalism that recovers public trust and plays a social role is essential, since rescuing democracy will require that journalists reconceive their role in society (Ward, 2018). Cruz follows the same line of analysis when he connects the lack of credibility towards journalism with the processes of disinformation and the impact of these problems on a democratic society: “The media must take into account the impact of misinformation on society, invest in verification training for their newsrooms, and adopt transparent and honest rectification policies.” (Cruz, 2019, p. 13)

In addition, journalism with lower records of credibility and public trust is a weaker journalism, more vulnerable to exogenous and endogenous pressures, more dependent and, consequently, more precarious. And precariousness, understood as the economic and social insecurity experienced by workers because of unstable working conditions (Brophy & De Peuter, 2007; Ross, 2009), deepens the problems of journalistic practice and damages the relationship between the press and society.

Thus, one way to recover credibility is to raise the technical and, fundamentally, ethical standards of professional practice (Sadri and Roberts, 2023). This can be achieved through more in-depth professional self-regulation that fosters flexible association. Based on the consensus of journalists, credible and sustainable deontological frameworks for professionals can be implemented. In addition, developing training programs would substantially raise the technical level of workers.

In this context, flexible membership as a self-regulating practice can reshape journalism towards an ethical exercise of the profession, which aims at recovering trust from society. As Otto and Köhler (2018, p. 2) point out, the relationship between credibility and ethics in the journalistic field is significantly profound: "Recently, media credibility has been the focus of debates on journalistic misconduct [...] A disregard for ethics and norms was cited as a reason for the loss of trust in the media."

In a society that suffers the impact of misinformation flows, the need to professionalize journalism through comprehensive training, professional association and continuous updating, becomes a pressing issue. It is professional journalists who can build a wall against misinformation:

Misinformation, identified as a threat to democracy, can be an opportunity to empower communication professionals by making society aware of the fact that the information flow must be led by trained experts, capable of coping with orchestrated campaigns and the hidden intentions of false information. (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019, p. 7)

In the region, there are no studies linking association models with the credibility of journalism, only some institutional sources. The annual Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford is a useful resource. It is the most widely used empirical source on general trust in news and the credibility of the media and journalism, both globally and regionally. Overall, the region shows relatively low levels of trust in journalism (RISJ, 2025). The present study aims to address this gap in academic literature.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Objectives

- RO 1. To identify the status of journalism association in Latin America.
- RO 2. To establish a comparative view of the different types of professional associations.
- RO 3. To contribute to the field of studies on the journalistic profession with the concept of *flexible association* as a self-regulating device.

3.2. Tools

1. A documentary-analytical review of the ideas of *trade* and *profession* has been carried out. The focus is on the characteristics that distinguish each form of organization. Thus, the research will define the concepts of *professional associativity*, *membership* and *registration*, of which will be specified their nature and singularity, focusing on professional associations and their characteristics.

This analysis allows to present a framework that reflects the state of professional association and/or registration of journalism in Latin America, as shown in Table 2 (Professionalization of journalists in Latin America).

2. The comparative tool amidst the various types of associativity that have been configured will allow us to distinguish between:

1. Type of membership
2. Requirements for practicing the profession
3. Registration requirement
4. Presence or absence of deontological frameworks
5. Administrative nature of the type of organization
6. Requirement or not of certification
7. Objectives of the type of association

Later on, a comparative table on the situation of membership in all the countries of Latin America will be presented, which will be the result of a tool that allows to distinguish for each country:

1. Presence of rigid membership
 2. Presence of flexible membership
 3. Real requirement of registration to practice the profession
 4. Requirement of a degree
3. Finally, and after analyzing the different singularities of the countries in the region, a scheme for the implementation of flexible association for the Latin American case has been developed, focusing on:
1. Benefits of flexible association for journalists and for the media system
 2. Benefits of flexible association for the public and for democratic societies
 3. Requirements to access flexible association
 4. Articulation between flexible association and self-regulation as a way to rebuild credibility in the journalistic profession in the region

3.3. Documental sources

In order to finally advance in the development of the concept of *flexible association* as a tool for self-regulation, different phases of analysis have been carried out. When reconstructing the context that surrounds and structures the practice of journalism in the region, a specific limitation appears that, to some extent, is closely linked to the origins of this work: the low levels of professional association and/or registration in Latin America.

Therefore, to access the data presented here, a detailed, country-by-country study has been carried out:

- Preexisting surveys of professional journalists
- Consultations with press workers' associations and/or unions
- Collection of regulations and legislation from each country regarding journalism practice

In this regard, the work of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, 2024) and the Knight Center (2025a, 2025b) in Latin America and the Caribbean is particularly noteworthy. Both institutions regularly conduct surveys on professional journalistic practices in the region. Furthermore, various unions, press organizations and civil society groups in Latin America also carry out similar studies (Sipreba, 2024; UNESCO, 2017).

In terms of legislation and regulations, we have consulted the Latin American Observatory of Regulation, Media and Convergence’s (Observacom, 2023) various works, which provide a comparative overview of regional regulations and discuss their scope.

4. Results

4.1. Professional association in Latin America: current situation

Table 2 shows what is the current and general situation in 19 countries in Latin America regarding the journalists’ professional association. It displays if there are associations of journalists, if its subscription is or not mandatory, in what countries journalist associations are registered, and if there is a university degree required to become a member.

Table 2
Professionalization of journalists in Latin America

COUNTRY	Rigid association/ Real mandatory registration to practice the profession	Flexible association	University degree requirement
Argentina	NO	NO	—
Bolivia	NO	NO	—
Brazil	NO	NO	NO
Chile	NO	YES	YES
Colombia	NO	NO	NO
Costa Rica	NO	YES	YES
Cuba	NO	NO	NO
Ecuador	NO	YES	NO
El Salvador	NO	NO	NO
Guatemala	NO	NO	NO
Honduras	YES	YES	YES
Mexico	NO	NO	NO
Nicaragua	NO	NO	NO
Paraguay	NO	NO	NO
Panama	NO	YES	YES
Peru	NO	YES	YES
Dominican Republic	NO	YES	YES
Uruguay	NO	NO	NO
Venezuela	NO	YES	YES

Source. The Authors (2026).

In 11 countries out of the 19 in the region, there is no registered membership, while in 8 there is what in this article is called *flexible membership*. There is not a compulsory association for the exercise of the profession and the access to journalistic activity to those who are not members is not limited. To these 8 nations, it must add the case of Honduras, where there is a type of rigid and mandatory membership to practice journalism, although compliance is irregular. Out of the 9 countries with registration, in 8 of them a university degree is required to become a member, Ecuador being the only country where it is possible to become a member without having a university degree. In Honduras, advanced journalism students can become members.

When analyzing the benefits of belonging declared by most of these associations, the results show that they have more to do with a type of union association than with a professional one. In the case of the Association of Journalists of Costa Rica, which can be accessed by submitting a university degree in Advertising, Journalism, Graphic Design, Digital Animation, Advertising Design, Public Relations, Audiovisual or Multimedia Production, the following are mentioned as benefits of the association:

- Belonging to the strongest and most solid communicators union organization in Central America and the Caribbean.
- Attending permanent training professional activities.
- Being granted scholarships for study.
- Participating in the annual professional awards: Journalism Jorge Vargas Gené/Oscar Cordero Rojas, Advertising Mirta de la Cuesta, Production René Picado Esquivel and Public Relations Norma Loaiza Gutiérrez.
- Having access to corporate medicine at no charge for members and their families.
- Enjoying mutual aid: retirement and death funds, subsidy for children's birth, for disability, for the funeral of parents, spouse or partner, and descendants up to first degree, agreements with clinics and universities, voluntary collective life insurance policy, among others.
- Celebrating inter-institutional agreements.
- Using Recreation and Training Center facilities.
- Attending the Week of Communication Professionals. (CPCR, 2023)

As it can be seen, these benefits are mostly linked to union activity. In the case of the Association of Journalists of Peru —it is accessed with a degree in Journalism or Communication Science—, the declared benefits of joining the association, with the exception that it is linked to ongoing training, are part of an abstract universe much larger than specific assets journalists could be given if they decide to join it:

- Belong to a deontological institution that promotes the ethical exercise of the journalistic profession, protecting citizens from the improper practice of freedom of expression.
- Participate in training programs for communication science and journalism professionals.
- Be part of an institution strengthened by its members, which guarantees the defense of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression. (CPP, 2023)

In Chile, the Journalists Association, founded in 1956, describes itself as a “union that brings together journalists from all over the country” (CPCH, 2023) and grants a press license card to whoever enrolls. The Chilean case is perhaps one of the most developed in the region in terms of professional associations. One particular detail is that, as an entry requirement, a university degree

in Journalism is mandatory, rejecting studies related to social communication. It is a case totally opposed to that of Costa Rica, which, as seen, even accepts qualifications that are not specifically related to the journalistic practice.

In Ecuador, the National Federation of Journalists of Ecuador (2023) acts as a confederation of different institutions in the country. At a basic level, there are some typical characteristics of union organizations (defense of the labor rights of press workers), although they also carry out actions related to the defense of freedom of expression.

In Honduras, although the legislation imposes compulsory membership for the practice of journalism, it is not enforced. A university degree in Journalism or alike is required to be eligible, but advanced students can equally become members. However, there are two issues that arise in the Honduran case: sports journalists do not require —by law— to be registered as members, and, to access management or editing positions in the media, it is required to have been born in Honduras (CPH, 2023).

In the Dominican Republic, the Dominican Association of Journalists (CDP, 2023) is defined as an entity “that brings together journalism professionals from the Dominican Republic as a public law corporation and official authority, whose purpose is to raise the professional levels, promote the ethical exercise of journalism and defend public liberties”. In order to register, a degree in Social Communication is required, although, as in Panama, in practice journalism is exercised by professionals who do not have a degree and/or are not registered. In both Central American countries, the role of associations articulates union activity with training programs for press workers.

Lastly, in the case of Venezuela, the Decree 966 of 1975 (CNPV, 2023) imposes compulsory registration with the requirement of a university degree to practice journalism. But, in the current context, where there are numerous national and international callouts related to attacks on press freedom in the country, the practical exercise of journalism in Venezuela is not connected to this requirement.

4.2. Flexible professional association as a self-regulating tool

The benefits linked to journalistic flexible association could be sufficient and engaging for professionals.

1. Having a national journalist card
2. Accessing press rooms, official, private and civil society institutions (government houses, parliaments, courts of justice, other official bodies, business chambers, unions, third sector organizations, sports clubs, etc.).
3. Obtaining direct access to public information through an automatic and direct path, shorter and less cumbersome than those provided by laws on access to information for civil society.
4. Accessing accreditation in national and international events (political, economic, sports, artistic, cultural, social, etc.).
5. Being allowed a special retirement fund, like those which, in various countries in the region, professions linked to work in education, the field of law, banking, security forces have access to, etc.

6. Accessing continuous university training networks by agreement with the professional association (postgraduate and other updating training courses).
7. Obtaining preferential access to jobs in the media—connected with the media system and journalists— from public entities and civil organizations linked to the public world (official sports associations, unions, business chambers).
8. Participating in discussion forums to update and generate new self-regulating instruments, such as deontological codes, fact-checking professional groups, public defenders, etc.
9. Obtaining, from the association, professional advice for the development of new journalistic projects, focused on monetization.
10. Accessing comprehensive professional representation by the institution, in order to reduce the precarious situation that currently affects professional journalists in the region.
11. Having a body of representation before state, national and international authorities, and other power groups.

Those mentioned here are some of the benefits that a flexible association could bring to journalism professionals. But it would also be positive for public and democratic society:

1. Having a comprehensive reference of the journalistic profession, which allows society to distinguish between the professionals of the activity and those who work in the discipline outside the ethical and educational standards of the school.
2. Accessing the deontological standards of professional journalists, thus being able to develop an ethical requirement that results in higher quality journalism.
3. Accessing an institutional space to make proposals, and even complaints, before the presumption of malpractice by journalism professionals.
4. Resorting to, in short, a professional associative structure that will tend to improve the quality of journalism, a fundamental and decisive actor in guaranteeing the exercise of freedom of expression and, above all, of the citizen's right to information.

From this research point of view, the individuals eligible to become members of the association are:

1. Those who hold a university degree in journalism, social communication or similar disciplines, taking into account the singularities of each country and/or region (audiovisual communication, information sciences, etc.). The university degree which is among those that allow access to the membership of its graduates must be previously validated by the association.
2. Those who, from the creation of the association and even without holding a university degree, can prove ten years in the exercise of the journalistic profession.
3. Those who, without holding a university degree and who cannot prove ten years of practice, and as long as they express their willingness to join, may access a provisional card (with all the benefits), having ten years' time to access a degree that gives access to the association. After that period, if they have not obtained the degree, they will lose the right to be a member of the association until they graduate. The exceptionalities presented here respond to the fact that, as already stated, in the Latin American tradition, journalistic activity has been outside the scope of professions.
4. Those who, fulfilling any of the above conditions, commit to respecting the deontological standards established by the association.

5. Conclusions and discussion

This work has exposed the situation of crisis of trust and credibility in Latin American professional journalism. Then, a conceptual discussion about the nature of membership as a self-regulating tool is presented, crafting the concept of “flexible association” as a way to develop associativity in journalism in the region. Later on, there is a revision of the situation of the existing membership, today, in the countries of Latin America. As a cross-cutting element, the article demonstrated the link between a higher quality journalism (both from a technical and deontological point of view) and public confidence in the profession, with the benefits that this brings to a democratic society. Finally, the study presented the benefits of a flexible membership, both for journalists and for all citizens and social actors. In addition, a proposal for conditions of access flexible membership is developed, considering its particularities and the Latin American journalistic tradition.

It must be taken into account that this type of collegiality is not a reality in all countries. This implies a limitation when comparing Latin America and Spain with other areas of the world. Even in Spain, being part of an association of journalists and being a member of a college have a different nature, but sometimes the same interests and objectives (Mellado Ruiz, 2009; Real-Rodríguez, 2020b). Media trust in Latin America and other parts of the world has been related with misinformation, spectacularization (Ferré-Pavia, 2013) and the importance of the public policies to control the media performance (Markov & Min, 2020; Rodríguez-Pérez & Canel, 2023).

One of the implications of the research is that journalism performed in a framework of associative orphanhood leads to a weaker discipline, dependent on powers and pressures —internal and external— subject to more precarious conditions and, fundamentally, with lower levels of technical and ethical standards. From this perspective, a type of flexible association like the one described is, on the one hand, perfectly compatible with the views expressed by the CIDH in the Costa Rica ruling. On the other, it would give journalists most of the benefits that come with professional associations.

A flexible membership scheme worthy of the appreciation of journalistic professionals and which, at the same time, is recognized by both public and private organizations and institutions, will set journalism on track to rebuilding public trust. Simultaneously, flexible association will aim at empowering professionals, providing them with options for refresher training programs; with access to coverage and public information; with social and retirement funds; with a deontological paradigm in permanent debate, in order to incorporate new challenges to the ethical praxis of the profession; a limit to the growing intrusion suffered by journalism in Latin America; with a containment barrier against both external and internal pressures that journalists suffer when they carry out their work; with a way to reduce job insecurity.

As mentioned before, journalism with low levels of credibility and without professional recognition represents a problem that exceeds the borders of the press, a problem that weakens the democratic system (Biderman, 2021; Primig, 2022). Recovering the technical and deontological quality of journalism in Latin America, then, constitutes a fundamental challenge both for journalists and for the media systems of each country, as well as for the democratic society (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). Flexible association goes down that road.

In this context, the professionalization and development of the journalist associations in Latin America have the potential to operate as powerful self-regulatory instruments, which tend to improve the technical and ethical standards of professionals, in order to recover public trust and the credibility in journalism.

But what kind of association is this study alluding to? Is it referring to a rigid and compulsory membership, with its consequent registration, which would prevent those who are not registered from practicing journalism? No. Taking into account some limitations previously addressed — related to freedom of expression and the organization of the journalistic profession, this proposal aimed towards a type of flexible membership, which is based much more on the benefits of being part of the professional association than to the barriers to access it.

Further research could focus on the historical cases of rigid or free association and their political and professional implications, obviously different in polarized or autocratic regimes. In addition to the documentary analysis, interviews with those responsible for the different entities would make it possible to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each type of association and to explore the characteristics of each from a professional point of view.

6. Acknowledgment and funding

The Authors thank Florencia Nicoll for her linguistic support. This research has been not funded.

7. Statement on the specific contribution of each author, according to the CrediT taxonomy

- Conceptualization: Author 1 & 2.
- Data curation: Author 2.
- Formal analysis: Author 2.
- Funding acquisition: Not applicable.
- Investigation: Author 2.
- Methodology: Author 1.
- Project administration: Author 1.
- Resources: Not applicable.
- Software: Not applicable.
- Supervision: Author 1.
- Visualization: Author 1 & 2.
- Writing – original draft: Author 1 & 2.
- Writing – review & editing: Author 1 & 2.

8. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence.

For this study and article, AI processes have not been used.

Semblanza de los autores

Carme Ferré-Pavía. PhD in Communication Sciences. Full Professor in the Department of Media, Communication and Culture. Director of the same department at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Director of the Comress research group on communication and social responsibility. Author of over a dozen monographs and around 80 articles in leading journals. Her main research focuses on media ethics, social media content, and narratives around social issues.

Jerónimo Biderman Núñez. PhD in Media, Communication and Culture from the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Catalonia, Spain. Master's degree in Political Science and Sociology from FLACSO, Argentina. Bachelor's degree in Social Communication from Universidad Austral, Argentina. He is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of San Isidro (USI, Argentina). Professor of Journalism Ethics at USI. Principal researcher at the USI, directing the 'Journalistic ethics in light of media coverage of vulnerable groups' project.

References

- Auditorio de Opinión Pública USI (2022). *Credibilidad Periodística. Actitudes de los argentinos hacia los medios de comunicación y el periodismo*. <https://surl.li/rrjrpg>
- Aznar, H. (1999). *Comunicación responsable. Deontología y autorregulación de los medios*. Ariel.
- Aznar, H. (2003). El periodismo como profesión: la contribución de la ética y los códigos deontológicos. In C. Barrera, M. García, and F. Martínez (eds.). *La comunicación: industria, conocimiento, profesión* (p41–59). Edipo.
- Biderman Núñez, J. (2021). *Periodismo y crisis de credibilidad*. Poliedro Editorial.
- Brophy, E., & De Peuter, G. (2007). Immaterial labor, precarity and recomposition. In A. C. McKercher (ed). *Knowledge workers in the information society* (p177–192). Lexington Books.
- CGTS/Social Work General Council, Spain (2016). ¿Qué son los colegios profesionales y para qué sirven? *Revista Servicios Sociales y Política Social*. <https://surl.li/gqpmny>
- Chacón Fuertes, F. (2009). La formación en los colegios profesionales, el aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida, la acreditación profesional y la calidad de servicios a los usuarios. *Arbor: Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura*, (185), 111–124. <https://surl.lu/fihmge>
- CIDH/Human Rights Interamerican Court (1985). *La colegiación obligatoria de periodistas*.
- Colegio de Periodistas de Chile (2023). <https://surl.li/inuntx>
- Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras (2023). <https://surl.li/sqzglp>
- Colegio de Periodistas del Perú (2023). *Colegiatura, Beneficios de ser colegiado*. <https://surl.li/pccgnl>
- Colegio de Periodistas y Profesionales en Ciencias de la Comunicación Colectiva de Costa Rica (2023). <https://surl.li/mgctpq>
- Colegio Dominicano de Periodistas (2023). <https://surl.lu/tobayx>
- Colegio Nacional de Periodistas de Venezuela (2023). Reglamento de la ley de ejercicio del Periodismo. <https://surl.li/ccprry>

- Cruz, C. J. (2019). En la era de la desinformación, periodismo para que no te la cuelen. *Cuadernos de periodistas: revista de la Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid*, (38), 13–20. <https://surl.li/jpkcvu>
- Deuze, M., & Witschge, T. (2018). Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism. *Journalism*, 19(2), 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688550>
- Díaz Piña, A. (2013). El concepto de profesión, su presencia en los textos legales en México y una propuesta de definición. *Alegatos*, (83), 237–254.
- Federación Nacional de Periodistas de Ecuador (2023). <https://surl.li/xcfzog>
- Fernández Pérez, J. (2001). Elementos que consolidan al concepto de profesión. Notas para su reflexión. *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 3(1), 23–39. <https://surl.li/xstfgv>
- Ferré-Pavia, C. (2013). *Infoentretenimiento. El formato imparable de la era del espectáculo*. Editorial UOC.
- Gajardo, C., & Mellado, C. (2025). “journalists are just employees”: Examining Journalistic Autonomy from an Audience Perspective. *Journalism Studies*, 26(2), 200–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2416062>
- Gallup/Brenan, M. (2022). *Media Confidence Ratings at Record Lows*. <https://surl.li/gqdola>
- García Benítez, C., & Cerón Martínez, A. U. (2005). Entre la ética y deontología profesionales. Reflexión sobre el campo periodístico. Reencuentro. *Análisis de Problemas Universitarios*, (43), 13p. <https://surl.lu/pxtndnp>
- Hanitzsch, T., & Örnebring, H. (2019) (eds). *The handbook of journalism studies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315167497>
- Iggers, J. (2018). *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and The Public Interest*. Routledge.
- Jastramskis, D., Plepytė-Davidavičienė, G., & Kupetytė, R. (2025). The role of organisational factors and working conditions for the autonomy of journalists in an unstable economy. *Journalism studies*, 26(2), 258–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2420204>
- International Federation of Journalists (2024). *Situación de las trabajadoras de Prensa en América-Latina y el Caribe*. <https://surl.li/mmdwnc>
- Knight Center (2025a). Ser periodista en América Latina es cada vez más riesgoso e inestable, según nueva encuesta. *Latam Journalism Review*. <https://surl.li/xpbrco>
- Knight Center (2025b). Se estima que más de 900 periodistas de América Latina están rehaciendo sus vidas y empleos en el exilio. *Latam Journalism Review*. <https://surl.li/kourdq>
- Lamuedra, M. (2012). Percepción de la realidad mediática y deontología periodística: hacia un periodismo participativo acorde con una Democracia Deliberativa. *Observatorio Journal*, 6(1), 183–209.
- Latinobarómetro (2020). Opinión Pública Latinoamericana. <https://surl.li/kvjojo>
- Markov, C., & Min, Y. (2020). The origins of media trust in a young democracy. *Communication & Society*, 33(3), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.33.3.67-84>
- Mellado Ruiz, C. (2009). Los colegios de periodistas en Latinoamérica. *Cuadernos Venezolanos de Comunicación*, (148), 5–9.
- Molyneux, L., & Coddington, M. (2020). Aggregation, Clickbait and Their Effect on Perceptions of Journalistic Credibility and Quality. *Journalism Practice*, 14(4), 429–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1628658>
- Monje, D. I., Rivero, E. A., & Zanotti, J. M. (2020). Crisis del periodismo y políticas de retracción de los Estados en Argentina, Brasil y Chile. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, (17), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2020.7622>

- Observacom (2023). Entorno regulatorio y políticas públicas para la sostenibilidad de los medios comunitarios en América Latina. <https://surl.li/bhvlkp>
- Oller, M., & Chavero, (2014). La profesionalización del periodismo y el profesionalismo de los periodistas de Ecuador. *Prisma*, (25), 23–49. <https://surl.li/pcezji>
- Otto, K., & Köhler, A. (eds.) (2018). *Trust in media and journalism: Empirical perspectives on ethics, norms, impacts and populism in Europe*. Springer.
- Primig, F. (2022). The Influence of Media Trust and Normative Role Expectations on the Credibility of Fact Checkers. *Journalism Practice*, 18(5), 1137–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2080102>
- Real-Rodríguez, E. (2006). Periodistas sin identidad profesional: puntualizaciones al proyecto para un futuro Estatuto. *Ámbitos Revista Internacional de Comunicación*, (15), 333–371. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/Ambitos.2006.i15.19>
- Real-Rodríguez, E. (2020a). Autorregulación profesional y comunicativa frente a regulación en el periodismo español: sentido, justificación, efectividad y complementariedad. In J. C. Suarez Villegas, and S. Marín Conejo. *Ética, comunicación y género: debates actuales* (pp. 266–284). Dykinson.
- Real-Rodríguez, E. (2020b). Las debilidades de la colegiación profesional de periodistas en España. *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 26(1), 237–247. <https://doi.org/10.5209/hics.75711>
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2025). *Digital News Report 2025*. <https://surl.li/ksmzia>
- Rodríguez-Fernández, L. (2019). Desinformación: retos profesionales para el sector de la comunicación. *El profesional de la información*, 28(3), 1699–2407. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.may.06>
- Rodríguez-Pérez, C., and Canel, M. J. (2023). Exploring European Citizens' Resilience to Misinformation: Media Legitimacy and Media Trust as Predictive Variable. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 30–41. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6317>
- Ross, A. (2009). *Nice work if you can get it: life and labour in precarious times*. New York University Press.
- RSF (2024). Reporteros sin Fronteras: Clasificación Mundial de la Libertad de Prensa. <https://surl.li/vswwbm>
- Ruiz, F. (2016). Frenos externos e internos en las redacciones argentinas. In A. Amado Suárez, M. Bongiovanni, R. Christofoletti, D. Dessein, F. Ruiz, M. Dragonetti, L. Luchessi, M. Oller, and C. Schwarz. *Periodismos argentinos: modelos y tensiones del siglo XXI* (p63–78). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- Sadri, S. R., & Roberts, C. D. (2025). A Misinformation Insurrection: Examining the Influence of Political Affiliation on Media Hostility and News Credibility. *Journalism Practice*, 19(7), 1460–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2279339>
- Sindicato de Prensa de Buenos Aires (2024). Encuesta 2024: en medio de los ataques al periodismo, el 76% de quienes trabajan en prensa en el AMBA cobra por debajo de la línea de pobreza. <https://surl.li/tpcwjl>
- Soto, M. (2012). Educación, ¿profesión u oficio? *Series Iberoamericanas de Museología*, 2, 261–269. <https://surl.li/chlsjr>
- Statista (2022). Credibilidad de los medios de comunicación en la Unión Europea en 2022, por nivel de confianza y tipo de medio. <https://surl.li/qomvur>
- UNESCO (2017). Concentración de medios y libertad de expresión: normas globales y consecuencias para las Américas. *Cuadernos de discusión de comunicación e información*, 7(51), 1–36. <https://surl.li/eyxols>
- Ward, S. J. (2018). *Ethical journalism in a populist age: the democratically engaged journalist*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Zelizer, B. (2017). Epilogue: Timing the study of news temporality. *Journalism*, 19(1), 111–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688964>