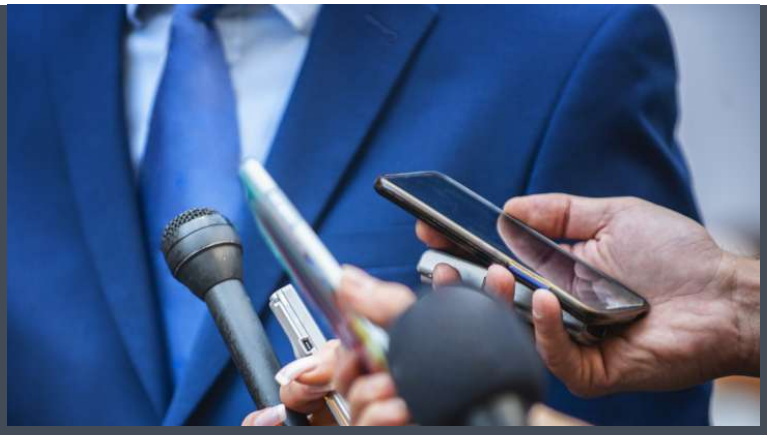
Divulga UAB
Revista de difusió de la recerca de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

29/10/2026

Digital authoritarian practices could undermine press freedom in Latin America



A study conducted by the Department of Journalism and Communication Studies and by the Department of Public Law and Legal History Studies warns that digital authoritarian practices are undermining press freedom and weakening journalism's capacity to hold power to account in Latin America.

Istock/Microgen

In the study, we examined Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and El Salvador in order to understand how governments, political elites, and other actors use digital tools to erode journalistic autonomy. Our research combines a hermeneutic analysis of 36 reports produced by human rights organizations, NGOs, and journalists' associations with 11 in-depth interviews with media professionals.

The findings show that repression no longer operates only through conventional forms such as direct censorship or physical violence, but also through more sophisticated digital strategies: disinformation campaigns, online harassment, surveillance, bot-driven attacks, and reputational damage targeting journalists and media outlets. These practices generate a chilling effect that encourages self-censorship, weakens journalism's watchdog role, and harms democratic quality.

In the article we make an important contribution to international debates on democratic backsliding, polarization, and human rights by framing these dynamics as forms of accountability sabotage. In doing so, our study shows that democratic erosion is driven not only by visible institutional change, but also by digital and discursive practices that gradually undermine the conditions under which journalism can operate freely.

Our publication strengthens UAB's international profile in the fields of journalism studies, digital communication, and democracy research. The article appears in *Digital Journalism*, a leading journal published by *Taylor & Francis* and indexed in *Journal Citation Reports*, *Scopus*, and the *Social Sciences Citation Index* (SSCI); the journal is also placed in the top quartile (Q1) according to its *2024 CiteScore*.

In this study we highlight the urgency of protecting independent journalism from emerging forms of digital coercion and of reinforcing democratic safeguards in contexts marked by polarization and institutional fragility.

Luiz Peres-Neto and Santiago Giraldo Luque
Departament of Journalism and Communication Studies
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Luiz.Peres@uab.cat
Santiago.Giraldo@uab.cat

Juan Pablo Soriano Gatica
Department of Public Law and Legal History Studies
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Santiago.Giraldo@uab.cat

References

Peres-Neto, L., Giraldo Luque, S., & Soriano Gatica, J. P. (2026). **Accountability Sabotage and Journalism: Digital Authoritarian Practices and Chilling Effect in Latin America.** *Digital Journalism*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2026.2638928

View low-bandwidth version