

The Emerging Practices of Watchdog Science Journalists in Ibero-America

Michele Catanzaro  and Luiz Peres-Neto 

Department of Journalism and Communication Science, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Correspondence: Luiz Peres-Neto (luiz.peres@uab.cat)

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Abstract

Watchdog science journalism (WSJ)—investigative journalism whose objects are scientists and scientific institutions—is an important way of complying with the public service commitment of journalism. It is also one of the instruments to uphold the integrity and independence of scientific research in the face of misconduct, corporate and political interference, ideological manipulation, and scientific misinformation. But science journalists often find themselves in a “too close for comfort” relationship with scientists, which can compromise their critical stance. This problem is even harder in Ibero-America, a cultural region encompassing Spain, Portugal, and Latin American countries. Here, investigative journalism has historically been less prevalent, and science journalism consolidated later. But recent outstanding journalistic work suggests the emergence of a vibrant investigative science journalism scene in the region. In this study, we explore this development by interviewing 15 journalists from Ibero-America who have carried out outstanding WSJ on science, health, and technology. Based on their answers, we identify practices, values, impacts, barriers, and facilitators of WSJ in the region. We also identify what they perceive as constraints specific to Ibero-America, including political interference, lack of transparency, disabling newsroom culture, precarious funding, problematic relations with scientists, misuse of results, and job and psychological instability. For each of these challenges, we also identify enabling actions that are fostering or could foster WSJ in the region. Our work signals a departure from historical trends and ingrained practices, calling for a reconsideration of the contribution of Ibero-America to global science journalism.

Keywords

Ibero-America; investigative journalism; journalism practices; science journalism; watchdog science journalism

1. Introduction

In this article, we define watchdog science journalism (WSJ) as the investigative journalism whose object is the social process of science, the behavior of scientists, and the functioning of scientific institutions. According to Fleerackers et al. (2026), it encompasses a large variety of topics, including retractions, questionable scientific practices, plagiarism, falsification, image manipulation, fabrication, fraud, misconduct, corporate manipulation, political manipulation, conflicts of interest, abuse (sexual or of other nature), and misinformation spreading by scientists. WSJ can be classified as a subset of investigative science journalism: While the latter investigates any subject related to science (Gross, 2018), the former scrutinizes specifically the social processes involved in it.

We focus on Ibero-America, a cultural region encompassing Spain, Portugal, and Latin American countries (akin to similar cultural regions, like the Francophonie). Although Ibero-America has many differences, such as diverse media systems and political specificities, Castillo (2013) maintains that it is also an area with shared interests and common themes. Precisely, Kunsch (2013) argues that scholars and practitioners recognize the commonalities of this zone, bringing together the challenges and realities they face. Science journalists in particular have historically self-organized more in Ibero-American associations than in national ones (Massarani & Magalhães, 2024). Hence, comparison can illuminate some paths of specialized science journalism in a non-Anglophone zone and in a complex cultural region that identifies itself as such.

In this region, science journalism consolidated later than in other areas, such as the Anglophone area (Massarani et al., 2025), and investigative journalism faced historical challenges (Michener et al., 2025). However, recent cases, such as a high-profile investigation into widespread misconduct among highly cited researchers (Ansele, 2023), among others, suggest the emergence in Ibero-America of an investigative science journalism scene, focused specifically on scrutinizing the behaviour of scientists and the functioning of scientific institutions—that is, WSJ in terms of Fleerackers et al. (2026).

To investigate this emerging sector, we have conducted a qualitative, exploratory study focusing on practitioners who have carried out WSJ in the region. Our research questions are: What are the practices, values, impacts, barriers, and facilitators of WSJ in Ibero-America? What aspects of it do practitioners identify as specific to the region and its countries?

To fulfill our objectives, we carried out qualitative interviews with 15 practitioners from nine countries in the region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Spain, and Venezuela), covering health, science, and technology in a variety of different outlets. While this sampling does not cover all the region's diversity, it contributes to minimizing gaps in mapping the practices of WSJ outside the Anglophone world.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Watchdogging as an Investigative Journalism Practice

Several scholars and journalism theories sustain that investigative journalism focuses on scrutinizing and exposing corruption, malfeasance, fraud, and abuses of power by government and other institutional elites (Carroll, 2024; Frías Vázquez et al., 2024; Knobel, 2018). It acts as a “custodian of conscience” by making

visible the hidden actions of those in power (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Mellado, 2020). The extended literature calls for independent scrutiny by journalists, with a skeptical examination of power entities (Knobel, 2018; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Independence is crucial for documenting, questioning, and investigating institutions or elites to provide clear information on issues of public interest (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). As sustained by Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020, p. 103), “journalists must always act as critical watchdogs of established powers.” In this sense, as Coronel (2010) argues, investigative journalism has been interchangeably associated with the watchdog role.

Unlike hard or breaking news, this watchdog function requires deep and sustained research. Therefore, a significant investment of time, resources, and effort is needed to “ferret out” hidden facts (Coronel, 2010; Knobel, 2018).

As such, investigative journalism requires the production of evidence over the hidden facts, which involves procedures such as interviewing, analyzing different documents, actively contrasting sources, making field observations, and not working solely with secondary data, leaks, or official statements (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Knobel, 2018; Mellado, 2020).

Coronel (2010) maintains that the best investigative journalism goes far beyond exposing wrongdoing by corrupt or bad actors, but also examines the systemic flaws that enabled it. In this sense, it investigates not only the laws and regulations violated, but also how institutions actually work compared with how they should, and details who is responsible for the institutional failures and their consequences. In this context, although investigative journalism has been interchangeably associated with watchdog, Coronel (2010, p. 138) sustains that “watchdogging is the exposure of wrongdoing in the public interest.”

In the context of growing global disinformation (Bechmann, 2020; Bennett & Livingston, 2018) and declining trust in news (Goyanes et al., 2023), Ferracioli et al. (2022) identified that public attitudes toward the press watchdog role can be positively associated with trust in news, but paradoxically also with higher levels of news avoidance (Newman et al., 2025). Investigative journalism, and watchdogging as a practice of it (Coronel, 2010), can therefore be key elements in recovering the public sphere from informational disorder.

De Burgh (2021) explains that although investigative journalism may be a global practice, it is not universal when cultural differences and regional contexts are considered. Hence, we should consider the particularities of Ibero-America as a cultural region with common political trends: a long shadow of authoritarian regimes, which remains; a considerable number of young democratic constitutions preceded by military regimes in the 20th century; populism; and several threats to freedom of expression (Michener et al., 2025). Consequently, journalism and the media system have had their own historical trajectory, shaping the development of journalistic practices, such as investigative reporting.

In fact, Guerrero (2014) proposed that many Latin American countries have media systems built on an apparently liberal model, in which private and commercial media prevail. Nevertheless, the press is “captured” by political and economic elites, constraining effective regulation and undermining watchdog capacity. Spain and Portugal, in turn, although their media systems were also shaped by late democratization, have a “polarized pluralist model” in which political parties and state power are intertwined with the media (Hallin & Mancini, 2012).

Cultural specificities make it difficult to generalize about the state of watchdog practices in Ibero-America. However, some key points can be drawn from Mellado's (2020) comparative approach for forecasting cultural investigative journalism practices in the region. In Spain and Portugal, the press performs at a very high level of watchdog journalism, with practitioners conducting original reporting and raising their voices against abuses of political and economic power, corruption, and wrongdoing. In many Latin American countries, due to the captured liberal media system, however, watchdog roles very often focus solely on political corruption while largely ignoring private and corporate wrongdoing.

2.2. WSJ

Investigative science journalism may be defined with the same criteria as investigative journalism in general (independence, critical scrutiny, deep work) but with a focus on the realms of science, health, environment, and technology (Gross, 2018). Several different practices are compatible with this broad definition: from investigating stories related to health, environment, forensics, or other issues by using scientific evidence (Eban, 2022), to "science-based investigative journalism" (Fahn, 2022), a practice that employs tools of scientific inquiry, like technical databases or satellite imagery.

Another branch of investigative science journalism is WSJ (Fleerackers et al., 2026). In this case, the object of investigation is science itself, as a social process. The investigative nature of this type of journalism consists of holding scientific communities and institutions accountable to the public. In this sense, WSJ encompasses the application of Coronel's (2010) idea of watchdogging.

Based on fieldwork in Canada and the UK with science journalists, Fleerackers et al. (2026) have identified issues considered as watchdog reporting claims, such as retractions, fraud, problematic uses of data or sampling, paper mills, predatory journals, plagiarism, GenAI use, among other science integrity issues; alongside others linked to problematic human behavior, including breaches of equity and diversity and harassment; or even funding-related problems, conflicts of interest, inappropriate public expenditure, and science misinformation. More than a thematic catalog, what they have in common is the watchdogging practice of exposing wrongdoing in the public interest.

WSJ can be seen as a response to a "too close for comfort" relationship between science journalists and scientists, which compromises journalists' critical stance (Rensberger, 2009). Instead of acting as "watchdogs," science journalists often serve as "cheerleaders," merely promoting scientific innovations to the public ("Cheerleader or watchdog?," 2009). Science is highly effective in shaping the media agenda (de Semir et al., 1998). Science journalists often seem to be sentenced to limit their reporting efforts to celebrate and applaud scientists and their achievements (Walsh-Childers & McKinnon, 2024). On the contrary, WSJ casts a critical eye over the scientific sphere.

WSJ can also be seen as a response to increasing concerns about scientific integrity (ALLEA, 2023). For example, 2,9% of researchers admit having committed falsification, manipulation, or plagiarism, and 12,5% admitted to other forms of questionable scientific practices (Xie et al., 2021). Beyond breaches of research integrity, WSJ also puts other aspects of science that raise public-interest concerns in the spotlight, such as hype (Sumner et al., 2014), corporate interference (Oreskes, 2025), ideological bias (Saini, 2019), and pseudoscience (Deer, 2011).

While WSJ can play an essential role in tackling these issues, it also risks providing ammunition to stakeholders who promote political or corporate interests contrary to scientific evidence. The tobacco industry used criticism of “junk science” to advance a supposedly “sound science” agenda that discredited evidence linking secondhand smoke to disease (Ong & Glantz, 2001). Similarly, the movement to improve research is now being weaponized to promote a so-called “gold standard science” that contradicts scientific evidence (O’Grady, 2025).

In Ibero-America, investigative journalism has been historically more challenged than in other parts of the world (Michener et al., 2025). Science journalism has deep historical roots in the region (Gascoigne et al., 2020), but the starting point of its professionalization and legitimization is often associated with the creation of the Ibero-American Association of Science Journalism in 1969 (Massarani & Magalhães, 2024). Contrary to what happened in other parts of the world, science journalists first self-organized as Ibero-American, and only later formed national associations. By the mid-seventies, the membership of these organizations was still one or two orders of magnitude lower than those in the English-speaking world (Massarani et al., 2025). Therefore, the consolidation of science journalism in the region is often dated to the ‘80s—later than in other parts of the World. Moreover, almost no country in the region was among the world pioneers in creating science journalism associations, awards, radio programs, or TV shows, and most of them took these actions in the middle or late phases in the history of global science communication (Gascoigne et al., 2020).

The “uncomfortable closeness” between science and science journalism is more intense in Ibero-America than elsewhere. As Massarani et al. (2025) argue, in the region, science journalism achieved professionalization in a political context of authoritarian modernization, which was reflected in a coverage that framed science as politically neutral and economically beneficial. The associative movement that contributed to its legitimization was not led solely by journalists (as in other parts of the world), but also by scientists. Science journalists in Ibero-America have often presented themselves as advocates for science and spokespersons of the scientists (Rosen & Cruz-Mena, 2015). At the same time, they have shown a tendency to avoid controversial issues (Massarani & Buys, 2007). Less than one in ten science journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean mention being a public watchdog among their main roles, well below other functions such as informing, explaining science, and promoting it (Massarani et al., 2022). The confusion between science journalism and science popularization is also reflected in the academic literature on science journalism in the region (Angulo-Giraldo & Felipa-Anchante, 2024).

At a time in which journalism is challenged, and its democratic function is put in jeopardy (Newman et al., 2025), research can shine a light on the conditions that hamper and facilitate that function and point to actions to uphold it. Our work aims at contributing to the exploration of those conditions in the specific case of WSJ, a branch of journalism that plays a crucial function in the accountability of science—a role that is especially relevant at a time of a deepening integrity crisis (Xie et al., 2021).

WSJ is a little-studied subject, and research has focused mainly on English-speaking, Global North countries (Fleerackers et al., 2026). Our work aims to start to fill this gap by exploring its practices in Ibero-America, a region where languages other than English are prevalent and that encompasses many Global South countries. The literature discussed above has highlighted the special challenges of both investigative and science journalism in the region. Our work tries to give an insight into how journalists in the region are dealing with those challenges.

3. Methodology

This study examines WSJ in Ibero-America through interviews with 15 high-profile journalists who have produced outstanding investigative reporting in science, health, environment, or technology. Candidates were identified through two sources: (a) the authors' contextual knowledge (professional experience and the PerCientEx project (Percientex, n.d.), an Ibero-American initiative to identify and promote quality and best practices in science journalism); and (b) expert consultations, as described below.

At the early stages of our field research, we consulted 26 experts by email: senior journalists, editors, leaders of science communication associations, members of journalism organizations, science sleuths, and science communication scholars (see Supplementary File Appendix A). Experts typically provided a journalist's name and examples of relevant work. When experts suggested only a media outlet, or named a journalist without specifying a piece, we located pertinent WSJ by that author, by web searching the outlet's or journalist's name combined with scientific wrongdoing-related keywords ("retraction," "misconduct," "manipulation," "conflict of interest," "plagiarism," "falsification," "fabrication," "fraud," and "abuse") in Spanish or Portuguese.

This process yielded a list of 54 journalists. From this pool, we selected 15 interviewees for qualitative analysis. Eight were identified through contextual knowledge and 11 through expert suggestions (one overlapped across both sources). Selection was based on review of candidates' work and sampling constraints, using the criteria summarized in the Supplementary File Appendix B. Appendix C provides a detailed description of the sample and a summarized profile of the 15 interviewed journalists. Extended profiles are contained in Appendix D. The journalists in the sample work in Spain (four), Argentina (two), Peru (two), Portugal (two), and Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela (one each). They are predominantly female, with journalism-oriented education, mid-career or experienced, and hold a staff position in a media outlet. Most watchdog work dates from 2018 to 2025 and was published in newspapers (six), native digital outlets (four), magazines (four), television (one), and a book publishing house (one). The most common watchdog topics concern questionable research practices and misconduct, followed by corporate manipulation and conflicts of interest (notably involving pharmaceutical and tobacco companies), sexual harassment, and misinformation. By including a number of corporate manipulation cases, our work expands the range of WSJ explored in previous literature (Fleerackers et al., 2026).

Qualitative interviews have been consistently used in the social sciences field as a strategy to capture how social actors interpret and explain their universe, process, or practices (Knott et al., 2022). As Arfuch (1995) sustained, it is an interactive method in which the interviewer is also a coproducer of the discursive output. Therefore, it must be considered a negotiation of meanings and identities among the dialogical parts. Although this must be noted as a limitation of our study, it allows us to capture in-depth views on our research questions, namely on the practices, values, barriers, and facilitators of WSJ in Ibero-America, and on specificities of the region based on practitioners' views. Appendix E contains the detailed description of how the interviews were conducted and analyzed, the ethical protocol, and the script of the questions posed to journalists.

4. Results

4.1. Practices

Regarding sources, the interviewees identified science insiders as the main source of WSJ stories, including institutional whistleblowers and informed outsiders. This relationship follows a self-reinforcing feedback loop: Journalists said that publishing WSJ stories increases the likelihood of receiving similar tips. Another source is the news agenda: public announcements, press releases, other media, and social networks. Yet interviewees stressed the importance of detecting gaps in that agenda rather than merely replicating it. For example, journalists investigated sexual abuse in Mexican and Argentinian academia after noticing that similar cases had emerged elsewhere while remaining unexplored nationally. Other occasional sources include official documents, such as laws, regulations, and bulletins; academic and specialized events; Retraction Watch; and readers' tips.

As for selection, the decision to pursue or drop a lead reveals interviewees' views on the journalistic value of science watchdog stories. A key reason to pursue a story is the classic investigative commitment to uncover wrongdoing hidden by the powerful. However, most interviewees noted that this condition is not sufficient for WSJ. The technical nature of science sets a higher bar: "The public doesn't always recognize the general interest served by investigative journalism focused on scientific activity. It's difficult to make people understand why it's important and why it matters to society" (AB). Thus, assessing public interest becomes crucial. Interviewees used proxies such as relevance to audiences' real lives, the number of people affected, and the topic's presence on social media. For example, misconduct related to cancer or Covid-19 is more likely to trigger a story than misconduct on more abstract topics. Another key selection criterion is the profile of the scholars and institutions involved; national scientists or high-profile researchers often increase a story's appeal. In Latin America, the political edge of WSJ stories was sometimes decisive, particularly in legacy media. One journalist noted that politicians' involvement in Peruvian universities enabled a story on paid authorship, while another politically charged story concerned a Colombian minister's curriculum vitae.

Regarding methods, journalists reported using a wide range of them, some case-specific and others recurrent. Extensive online searches in open or paywalled sources are the most commonly mentioned method. Search engines and keyword-based web alerts often lead to relevant documents (including spreadsheets and presentations) and help detect conflicts of interest. Journalists also consult specialized archives such as international trade databases, health registries, company registries, public procurement records, legal repositories, and databases assembled by investigative journalism organizations. Scientific databases are central: publication databases (Google Scholar, Scopus), scientist rankings, predatory-journal lists, and Retraction Watch. Several journalists reported analyzing research papers not only for scientific claims but also for metadata (affiliations, funding, declared conflicts of interest). When information was unavailable, several interviewees used access-to-public-information requests.

Interviewees conducted on- and off-the-record interviews with numerous sources, often dozens. Two types were especially valuable: researchers familiar with the institution under investigation but not tied to it, such as former employees or scientists abroad; and "allied scientists" who help interpret technical issues without necessarily being cited: "I always try to find a source that isn't one I'm going to cite, but rather one that I need to explain things I don't understand so I can write them better" (PM). Additional sources included people affected

by wrongdoing and organizations, such as networks of women scientists. In some cases, interview testimony can substitute for documentary proof when multiple independent sources corroborate the facts. However, journalists also stressed the need to assess sources' conflicts of interest to avoid being instrumentalized by groups with hidden agendas, such as campaigns to discredit colleagues, and one emphasized offering a right of reply to those accused.

Trust-building was presented both as a practical route to further disclosures—"You gain the trust....Then they start [to open up]" (MA)—and as an ethical obligation, given risks of retaliation—"We have learned to protect sources....Part of our work is to coach them" (RPO). Beyond voluntary interviews, some journalists mentioned more intrusive tactics: infiltration (posing as a scientist to investigate authorship-for-sale networks) and hidden recording (suggested to a source to obtain proof of abuse).

Lastly, regarding time and frequency, WSJ work requires a time investment above the usual news cycle turnaround. Reported times to prepare a story range from two days to over a year. These are not equivalent to full-time commitments, since journalists often do this work alongside routine reporting. In general, journalists say they need to strike a balance between everyday reporting and in-depth work, which makes WSJ infrequent. Several journalists report they carried out the bulk of their investigations outside working hours or between urgent assignments: "Time is the main barrier, because my job is not uncovering corruption cases in science. It's doing science journalism in general" (MA).

4.2. Motivations and Impact

When asked about their motivations, many appeal explicitly to the investigative journalism ethos:

My role is not to say whether something is right or wrong. My role is to raise issues, to open up debate, and to ensure the public is informed....When things are public knowledge, society is freer and can decide for itself, instead of having decisions made for it. (BP)

These statements are often accompanied by emotional expressions, underscoring the importance of psychological incentives: "Every time I have a story, I feel butterflies in my stomach" (LG); "it's sort-of an addictive thing....I get indignant when I discover things that people ignore" (PM); "there are incredible human stories, and this is what motivates me to continue" (BP); "journalists have an immense love for their profession and their mission...improving other people's lives is what motivates me" (VN).

Some journalists explicitly pit investigative journalism values against the usual practice of science journalism:

In science journalism, there's an easy path: simply publishing studies that appear in journals like *Cell*, *Nature*, and *Science*. And in the end, we all publish the same things....Well, I don't like that. I prefer to do the research; I find it much more relevant and engaging to seek out original and relevant topics. To try to break news first. (MA)

In one of the interviews I did...to ask about this case, they said to me, "But why do you have to do this?" And at that moment, I really thought, "Wow, this can't be happening." I mean...it's our job as journalists to ensure transparency, not to allow these cases to be covered up. (CS)

Interviewees display a vision of science as a socially constructed activity: “This journalism shows society a different notion of science. Not the lonely genius in his lab. Science is also social processes: groups, resources, money, debates, etcetera” (PC); “it’s not journalism that distrusts science, but rather one that scrutinizes the power dynamics that permeate science” (FT). However, several interviewees imply a clear boundary between what is socially constructed and what is not: “We don’t put the scientific method in question....We separate bad practices from science as a knowledge-producing system” (FT).

Interviewees occasionally report that their work has been questioned for damaging trust in science: “There were people saying that this [work] conveys the image that all scientists are dishonest” (MA). Other interviewed journalists reply that, on the contrary, their work improves trust in science: “That a person does irregularities or mistreats his team does no favor to the [scientific] system....One must remove those that are poisoning the system. They make you lose trust in it” (CS); “normalizing the fact that [those] who work in science are flesh-and-blood people...helps to consolidate rights, and encourages more people to want to dedicate themselves to science” (AB).

At the same time, journalists are aware of the weaponization of the criticism of science carried out by authoritarian governments and disinformation mongers: “Today, the government itself wants to dismantle the scientific system in Argentina. It’s difficult to do investigations that challenge Argentinian science because of what’s happening” (FB). FT mentions the risk of vaccine denialist movements using critical reporting on the handling of vaccines to foment skepticism about vaccines themselves.

Journalists also shared strategies they deploy to shield their reporting from that kind of manipulation. Some of them insisted on the importance of drawing a clear line between scholars involved in wrongdoing and those who aren’t, for example by involving respected scholars to comment on their story. Another strategy is balancing WSJ with more positive science reporting. A third strategy consists of focusing on the process of science, not only on its results, as a way to make uncertainty explicit.

Regarding the impact of WSJ, the general perception among interviewees is that their work contributes to triggering changes. A large majority of interviewees reported practical impacts of their work, although some said these impacts were not sustained over the long term. Others said their work did not trigger any change. Reported impacts on individuals include resignations, scholars partially admitting wrongdoing, and victims expressing gratitude. More systemic reported impacts include new regulations or laws, new protocols, lawsuits, and contributing to sparking protests. The journalists who reported no impacts of their work point to the scientific community, administration, or politicians ignoring their work, protecting the reputations of questioned scholars, or going back to their old ways after a resignation.

4.3. Barriers and Facilitators

In this subsection, we discuss what factors hamper or foster WSJ in Ibero-America, according to how the main stakeholders report being impacted by—or influencing—them.

In regard to journalists, a staff position facilitates WSJ, according to several interviewees, because it provides job security, covers reporting costs, and offers legal protection. Freelancers reported structural constraints: WSJ is typically paid at the same rate as less time-consuming assignments, and legal support is

not automatic. Only one freelancer—working for an international science-specialist outlet—was paid by the hour and had legal protection specified in his contract. Specialization is another enabler: training or long experience in science journalism supports technical understanding, familiarity with scientific institutions, and access to scientific source networks that can suggest stories and provide expert commentary. A third facilitator is managing mental-health strain. A majority of journalists described WSJ as producing fatigue, obsessive work patterns, stress, anxiety, exhaustion, exposure-related distress, fear of errors or retaliation, backlash from online harassment, frustration at limited impact, and regret about insufficient time for investigative work: “The weeks before publishing I had nightmares...I dreamt that somebody recognized me in the street and attacked me...also because, coming from science journalism, this is not the type of stories you expect to do” (RPO). They cited coping strategies such as editorial and peer support, regular breaks, and alternating with less controversial stories.

As for collaborators, many journalists published WSJ as co-authors, often pairing science/health reporters with law, data, or investigative journalists to add expertise in freedom-of-information requests and legal frameworks. One journalist involved a woman co-author in a sexual-harassment investigation to allow victims to choose to speak with another woman. Even when bylines were individual, journalists emphasized the value of being embedded in a newsroom to discuss findings and share workload, while a freelancer regretted lacking a larger team. Two interviewees collaborated transnationally on tobacco-industry manipulation of evidence and highlighted the importance of investigative networks: “One of the advantages of [Ibero-America] is the networks that are being built. A large part of my expertise comes from these networks” (LI).

Concerning editors, several journalists described “breaking-news” newsroom cultures—organized around speed and volume—as a structural barrier: “Most media engage in double-talk. They call for journalistic quality, but every single structural decision they take goes against quality” (PC). Some indicated their outlets were genuinely committed to investigative reporting; this was common to all those that work for native-digital or specialized outlets. Meanwhile, others attributed it to the financial independence of their outlet from economic and political power. It is among native-digital outlets, specifically those that fiercely promote their financial independence from corporations, that we found a lot of WSJ involving private sector stakeholders, especially pharmaceutical or tobacco companies. Yet journalists also highlighted that these kinds of outlets face challenges because of their precarious funding (subscriptions, donations, grants). Strategies that foster WSJ include dedicated investigative teams and routines that protect time for in-depth work, and interviewees stressed that editor commitment is decisive: supportive editors approve high-risk pitches and help make stories legally defensible—“The biggest issue right now in legacy media newsrooms is having leaders that actually care about this kind of thing and are not worried about publishing [just] the next...news” (RB).

As for journalism funders, most of the interviewees’ stories were funded through routine newsroom resources, but some journalists reported foundation grants supporting some WSJ investigations; others had received grants for other projects, and several outlets cited grants as part of their revenue mix.

Regarding scientists, “allied scientists” are often mentioned as sources, explainers, commentators, or co-investigators: “Watchdog science journalism is not only journalism. It’s a joint investigation [with experts]” (LI). The majority of journalists reported receiving public or private recognition from scholars after

publication. However, nearly all interviewees confronted strong secrecy—off-the-record conditions and anonymity were widespread: “Heavyweight scientists remained all off the record. No one wanted to speak out. I found it sad and frustrating” (CS); “when someone is seen acting improperly, what usually happens in an institution is that almost no one says anything. Scientific communities are afraid to confront them” (PC). Several described a “code of silence” rooted in loyalty (“in a plagiarism story, there was a lot of resistance from scientists. They said it was an isolated case,” FB), complicity (“who would dare to report [a papermill case]?...There was a complicit silence among them all. Everyone was getting something out of it,” JMH), or fear (“there are many vertical structures that promote this kind of “Messi of science” who is allowed to do anything. Everyone knows, and everyone turns a blind eye,” CS). Self-censorship can also extend to journalists, depending on the degree of dependence they have on scientific institutions. Some interviewees highlighted that having a position outside science allows journalists to be more critical. But others pointed out that science journalists are not real outsiders: “I was telling things that bothered the medical community, but the medical community is my source of information....I said [to myself], is it in your best interest to be at odds with the people you have to work with?” (BP). On the other hand, some journalists reported open hostility from scholars, including questioning journalists’ integrity, tipping off investigated actors, and aggressive communications.

Some journalists pointed to low scientific literacy in their audiences as an obstacle for WSJ, yet many more reported above-average performance of WSJ stories in virality, metrics, comments, follow-up coverage, and private praise: “[These stories] contain all elements of journalistic interest: famous characters that fall because they do bad things; respected institutions that are perverse inside” (PC). However, popularity sometimes generated online hate: Five journalists reported online harassment from supporters of questioned scholars and from misogynistic actors.

Relating to administration, several interviewees emphasized that access to data and accountable administrations are extremely important for WSJ, while authoritarian practices proactively obstruct information (as described by one journalist in the case of Covid-19 casualties in Venezuela). Still, difficulties were reported across regime types: freedom-of-information laws are perceived to be weakly implemented (resulting in long delays to access public information), and press offices can function as barriers rather than facilitators.

Regarding the legal system, some journalists in our sample have been sued for WSJ stories; one pre-selected journalist declined to participate due to an ongoing lawsuit; and two received lawsuit threats. In one case, the fear of being sued led to a substantial editorial change (withholding the name of an allegedly abusive scholar). Mitigation strategies included extreme evidentiary rigor and pre-publication legal review.

Lastly, concerning the political system, watchdog science journalists operating under authoritarian practices feel threatened. A journalist from Venezuela reported fearing for her family and being worried about communication surveillance or movements around her house. Journalists from Peru and Argentina noted that “autocratizing” trends could restrict independent outlets. But political interference was also reported in democratic settings. For example, a Spanish journalist reported political pressure to give up her investigation.

5. Discussion

Our work highlights a set of constraints and opportunities for WSJ in Ibero-America. In this section, we interpret them in the light of existing literature.

With respect to political constraints, our findings are consistent with Guerrero's (2014) proposal on the capture of the press by political and economic elites in Latin America. In that region of Ibero-America, some WSJ stories could make their way in legacy media precisely thanks to their political edge.

Another of our findings is consistent with the focus of Latin American investigative journalism on political corruption at the expense of coverage of corporate wrongdoing, as observed by Waisbord (2010). We found this type of coverage (focusing especially on tobacco and pharmaceutical companies) mostly in native digital outlets that don't depend on corporate funding. "Political grip" and "influences of non-science vested interests" are two of the main problems facing science journalism in the Global South, highlighted by Nguyen and Tran (2019). Of the Latin American science journalists who answered a 2022 survey, 56% said political or corporate spin was one of the main problems they faced, while 24% mentioned a lack of editorial freedom, and 20% outright censorship (Massarani et al., 2022).

The degree of political interference with journalism in our sample varies widely across the region. Our interviewees mention limitations on freedom of the press in Venezuela, policies that threaten it in Argentina, and unaccountable institutions in Peru. Throughout Ibero-America, there is an almost unanimous complaint about the deficient application of laws regulating access to public information.

Some of our observations may be interpreted in light of Mellado's (2020) remark that the Spanish press exhibits higher levels of watchdog journalism than in other Ibero-American countries. In particular, our methodology identified more WSJ examples in Spain than in any other country in the region, distributed across national, regional, and native digital media. However, this interpretation is tentative because our methodology does not generate a statistically representative sample. Moreover, the Spanish press is also affected by political interference, as observed by Hallin and Mancini (2012). For example, the most prominent attempt at political derailment of a WSJ story was found in a Spanish outlet.

At the level of outlets and editorial policies, the constraints on WSJ highlighted by our interviewees present a paradoxical picture. On the one hand, legacy outlets provide stability, legal protection, resources, and support from editors and colleagues. On the other hand, many of these outlets are taken over by a breaking news culture that sidelines in-depth work.

In the 2022 survey of science journalists in Latin America, 57% cited pressure to provide audience-attracting news as one of the main issues they face. Nguyen and Tran's (2019) assessment of the challenges of science journalism in the Global South also mentions the dominance of straight news over analytical coverage. Our findings show that these issues also partially affect science journalists in Spain and Portugal.

However, there are notable exceptions throughout the region: first, legacy outlets in which editors value and give time for investigative work; second, international outlets specialized in science, which are portrayed as spaces in which to conduct high-quality WSJ, offering good pay and legal protection, and sometimes

allowing the results to be presented in national outlets; and third, independent native digital outlets devoted to investigative work. This last group, however, experiences financial strain. Two journalists from these outlets noted feeling threatened by reduced support from journalism funders.

The main constraint on WSJ with respect to its relationship with the scientific community is its “too close for comfort” relation (Rensberger, 2009). Massarani et al. (2022) found that 63% of surveyed Latin American science journalists considered it acceptable to become friends with their sources. Science journalism is closer to popularization than to investigative work in Latin America in particular (Rosen & Cruz-Mena, 2015) and in Ibero-America in general (Angulo-Giraldo & Felipa-Anchante, 2024). Several interviewees feel challenged by the fact that scholars are both sources and objects of scrutiny. The issue is especially critical for journalists in small countries, where elites are more interconnected. However, the responses of our sources (see Section 4.3) suggest that this constraint may be less severe for journalists who act more as outsiders than insiders to science, and whose range of sources is broad enough to be able to risk losing access to some of them by reporting on their potential wrongdoings.

With respect to this point, it is remarkable that many more journalists in our sample have a journalistic education than a scientific one. While the latter is framed as a way to gain an insider view of science, it may also cement loyalty to the scientific community, making it harder to develop a critical stance.

The reported impact of WSJ on science (resignations, regulations, and victims’ empowerment) shows it may play a crucial role in addressing the mounting integrity crisis (Xie et al., 2021). And journalists are also aware of the potential misuse of their work for doubt-mongering on sound science (O’Grady, 2025)—especially by promoting health pseudoscience in Latin America—and have developed a range of strategies to minimize this risk (see Section 4.2).

The constraints on WSJ at the level of individual journalists paint this activity as a fragile endeavor. Staff journalists face overtime and psychological strain, while freelancers face insufficient pay and legal vulnerability. Low salaries, in particular, were identified as the main issue faced by Latin American science journalists by 77% of respondents in Massarani et al.’s (2022) survey. Two of the members of our sample had left journalism at the time of our interview, and a third had become freelance to break out of an exhausting newsroom routine. A Venezuelan, a Colombian, and a Mexican journalist also expressed fears of physical attacks. On the other hand, many journalists in our sample mentioned the crucial support given by networks of like-minded professionals. This was especially evident in smaller countries with fewer specialized journalists.

6. Conclusions

Our work suggests that many WSJ practices in Ibero-America resemble those found elsewhere (Fleerackers et al., 2026), generating shared challenges—from dwindling resources and newsroom culture to legal threats.

However, our analysis addresses a less discussed aspect: WSJ as a practice through which science journalism negotiates its autonomy from science. Interviewees see science as socially constructed and deserving critical scrutiny. They contrast their work with science journalism that is subordinated to the scientific agenda and seek a more mature relationship with scientists as joint investigators on an equal footing. This translates into strategies to regulate their “closeness” to scientists and prevent anti-science uses of their critical stance.

Interviewees report effects on audience mobilization—contrary to the assumption that it is an esoteric subject—and on science governance, including regulations and resignations. This suggests that WSJ can contribute to systemic efforts to promote integrity and discourage bad scientific practices.

The variety of WSJ experiences documented across Ibero-America may signal a departure from the historically ingrained confusion between science journalism and science popularization in the region. It also suggests a degree of excellence rarely reported in the literature and calls for a reconsideration of Ibero-America's contribution to global science journalism.

We identify previously unreported challenges: political interference, even in democratic settings; physical and online threats and harassment; and practitioners' mental health strain. We also identify less discussed opportunities: multidisciplinary journalistic teams, regional collaboration networks, and the role of international specialized media and independent digital outlets as havens for WSJ, alongside some committed legacy media.

Some findings are likely specific to Ibero-America. However, they may offer useful ideas and strategies to researchers and professionals elsewhere, including in the Global North.

As a first-of-its-kind analysis of WSJ in Ibero-America, this study has clear limitations. Our sample of journalists is not statistically representative, nor does it cover all the countries of the region. The recurrence of topics in the interviews signals that we may have reached saturation, but we are certainly unable to grasp all the differences between countries in detail. The bulk of our analysis relies on the information's emitters. Future research may focus on a much more detailed study of WSJ products and on the perceptions of other stakeholders, such as scientists and audiences.

Our work yields some key recommendations for stakeholders to promote WSJ:

- For journalists: Applying strategies to manage their dependence on scientists (see Section 4.3) and to prevent anti-science use of WSJ (see Section 4.2), and seeking specialized training. The scarcity of educational opportunities in Latin America has been highlighted as a significant obstacle to science journalism (Massarani et al., 2022; Nguyen & Tran, 2019), and our interviewees have emphasized its importance. Key training subjects for WSJ are technical databases, data analysis, and requests for public information access.
- For journalism funders and donors: increasing support for independent outlets and networks of investigative science journalists, especially in Latin America. Nguyen and Tran (2019) already pointed out the scarcity of philanthropic funders in the Global South as a relevant hurdle, and our work confirms that this support is crucial for a part of WSJ. Funding targets may include training, legal and psychological support for journalists, and grants for WSJ projects (such as Retraction Watch, n.d.).
- For editors and media outlets: aligning practices to investigative journalism values and setting up routines that make time for it. Improving working conditions through more stable positions and better payment. Providing psychological support and legal protection by default to both staffers and freelancers.
- For the scientific community: increasing accountability and transparency practices. Recognizing the important role of WSJ in upholding integrity. Nguyen and Tran (2019) identified insufficient support and cooperation from the scientific community as a key problem for science journalism in the Global

South. Our work hints at a widely spread “code of silence” within the scientific community. Scientists should engage with journalists not only for self-promotion but as key sources for WSJ stories.

- For the administration and governments: making data more accessible by complying strictly with laws regulating access to public information.

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Conflict of Interests

Michele Catanzaro has carried out work as a freelance journalist for *El Periódico de Catalunya* and *Science*, outlets for which two of the interviewees work.

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No LLMs were used for this article.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors



Michele Catanzaro is a lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Communication Science and a researcher at the Institute for the History of Science (iHC-UAB) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Spain. He holds a PhD in physics and has worked as a freelance science journalist since 2003.



Luiz Peres-Neto is a Serra Húnter lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Communication Science and an associate researcher at the Institute of Communication (InCom) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Spain. He holds a PhD in communication and conducts research on political communication, ethics, and human rights.