Article

Southern European Journalists' Perceptions of Discursive Menaces in the Age of (Online) Delegitimization

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Abstract

In a new communication context, factors such as the rise of hate speech, disinformation, or a precarious financial and employment situation in the media have made discursive menaces gain increasing significance. Threats of this kind challenge the legitimacy of institutional news media and professional journalists. This article contributes to the existing literature on the legitimization of journalism and boundary work through a study that seeks to understand the perceptions of Southern European journalists of the threats that they encounter in their work and the factors that help explain them. To this end, a survey of 398 journalists in Spain, Italy, and Greece was conducted to learn what personal or professional factors influenced their views and experiences of discursive and non-discursive menaces. Results show that discursive threats, such as hateful or demeaning speech and public discrediting of one's work, are the most frequent to the safety of journalists, while expressions of physical violence are less common. Younger and more educated journalists tended to perceive themselves as having been victims of discursive menaces more often, although not many significant differences were observed between different groups of journalists. Even though it could show a worrying trend, this finding can also indicate a growing awareness about menaces of this kind.

Keywords

discursive menace; Greece; hate speech; Italy; journalists; legitimacy of journalism; Southern Europe; Spain

1. Introduction

Spain, Italy, and Greece are three of the most important and influential countries of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean area. They share multiple sociocultural similarities and were some of the most affected countries by the 2008 financial and economic crisis, suffering particularly from high unemployment rates—especially among young people—as well as severe debt problems. In demographic terms, this crisis led to the emigration of large numbers of mostly young highly-educated people, leading to a general trend of older populations and negative net growth rates. However, these countries are also the three main gateways for immigration into the South of Europe, having similar migration patterns—what some have called the "Southern European migratory regime" (Arango, 2012; King, 2000). Furthermore, they share very complex political scenarios. Not only do they face economic and migratory challenges, but are strongly polarized in political terms, and populist and extremist parties have gained a significant presence in the government and parliamentary powers in recent years. Overall, Southern European countries share socio-demographic, cultural, political, and economic features that differentiate them from other European countries (Hall, 2007; Reher, 1998; Rhodes, 2015).

The connections between these three countries are obvious, but they also have many similarities in the

journalistic field. According to the theoretical model developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), they belong to the Mediterranean media system. This model is defined by weaker professionalization, strong state intervention in the media, and high political parallelism between parties and news outlets. Even though this model has limitations and many changes have taken place since its academic formalization, the main patterns persist. In fact, the similarities are not only in journalistic production—on which this model focuses—but also in consumption, as stated in the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022). In this sense, the three countries are similar in what concerns the growing importance of online news outlets and sharply decreasing print media consumption, whereas social media are frequent sources of news (71% of Greeks, 56% of Spaniards, and 47% of Italians claim to access news on social media). Trust in the news is rather low (35% in Italy, 32% in Spain, and 27% in Greece), following a clearly decreasing trend in recent years, and with significantly lower levels of trust in the news posted on social media. Moreover, the process of hybridization (Chadwick, 2013) and technological saturation (Harambam et al., 2018) are raising similar challenges for news media that often entail homogeneous efforts of adaptation within media systems that already have many features in common. All this makes it advisable, or even necessary, to go beyond a national approach and treat these three Southern European countries as a single entity.

Our research sought to understand the challenges and threats faced by journalists in Southern Europe because the current communication environment has given rise to a continuous discursive challenge to the legitimacy of institutional news media and professional journalists (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Koliska et al., 2020). Many actors within, or on the borders of, the journalistic and political communication fields derive authority by delegitimizing news media (Van Dalen, 2021). This study makes an unprecedented effort to understand what perceptions journalists have about those discursive and non-discursive menaces to their work and what factors might explain those perceptions. Mediterranean journalism is particularly interesting because of its traditionally low level of professionalization and high level of political parallelism, but also because the serious economic crisis—not only the one in 2008, whose effects are not completely over, but also the ones that have followed, including the ones produced by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine—is especially affecting journalism in Southern Europe. The analysis that follows therefore aims to understand what factors make journalists feel that they are not legitimated and protected in their independent production of information.

1.1. Professional Journalism in Southern Europe

In recent years, journalism has undergone a profound transformation caused by new technologies, in particular, the irruption of social media (Carlson, 2018; Hermida, 2013) and the overall process of digitalization (Steensen & Westlund, 2021). This new paradigm has had a strong impact also at a professional level, generating new professional roles and backgrounds (Salaverría, 2016; Splendore, 2017; Splendore & Iannelli, 2022).

This new context has raised new challenges, and precariousness, for instance, is one of the most important ones. The financial weakness and the sales decrease of big media companies have led to redundancies, making the jobs of professionals more insecure (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2020; Figueras et al., 2012; Spyridou et al., 2013). This insecurity increases due to the lack of willingness to pay for journalism in the previously mentioned countries—around 12% are willing to pay for journalism, according to the *Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022)—which makes the financial situation of many news outlets more difficult because they have to compete with free (sometimes partisan or low-quality) sources of information. These economic and labor aspects are also among the causes cited in some studies (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Blanco-Herrero & Arcila-Calderón, 2019) for the onset of another of the main challenges that journalism currently faces, namely disinformation, given that less time to compare sources or verify information often leads to a careless journalistic praxis. Additionally, a precarious employment situation also relates to a lack of formation or specialization, the need to cover multiple topics, or the need for immediacy, which are factors that affect the coverage of news by journalists (Solves-Almela & Arcos-Urrutia, 2021).

Disinformation is affecting the credibility of media as a whole, while also becoming a problem for democracies and societies in general (McNair, 2017). Closely connected with disinformation (Grambo, 2019) and the current situation, hate speech has also become a growing concern in the new communication scenario. Following the Council of Europe (1997) or the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (2016), we can define hate speech as any message whose objective is to spread discrimination, rejection, exclusion, humiliation, harassment, loss of prestige, and stigmatization of certain groups or people for belonging to a social group (identified by their national origin, ethnicity, color, religion, sexual orientation, etc.). The traditional targets are minorities and vulnerable groups, such as migrants (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2020). Journalists have also been targeted (Charitidis et al., 2020; Obermaier et al., 2018), not only when they belong to a specific stigmatized social group but also because of their exposure as public figures (Koliska et al., 2020; Van Dalen, 2021). Greek journalists identify hate speech as a recurrent problem in participatory spaces where they have to manage user-generated content (Saridou et al., 2019). At the same time, even if less commonly, hate speech has also been spread from within news outlets themselves (Sindoni, 2018), adding another dimension—though not a predominant one—to the phenomenon.

All these new challenges take place in a context in which the rise of social and digital media and, in general, online communication, have not necessarily created new problems but have increased the magnitude of existing ones. For example, anonymity or the use of pseudonyms (Anderson, 2007; Kim & Lowrey, 2015) offer users a sense of impunity and security when spreading content or performing actions that can be considered discursive menaces, given the difficulty of identifying and prosecuting them. Current threats like online harassment cannot be separated from the reality that is being depicted here (Relly, 2021).

Overall, the current scenario combines journalists made more vulnerable and insecure by precariousness with new tools and communication patterns that make discursive menaces more common. However, not only discursive menaces and threats arising from the new communication scenario are matters of concern. The worldwide score of the *World Press Freedom Index* (Reporters Without Borders, 2022), decreased in 2022, and the particular cases of the countries studied worsened as well. Spain dropped from position 29 to 32, Italy from 41 to 58, and Greece from 70 to 108.

Given all these factors, it is important to further explore the perceptions of Spanish, Italian, and Greek journalists, who represent the main Southern European countries, about the threats—both discursive and non-discursive—they face, and to analyze what factors help explain them. This is why we posed our first research question as such:

RQ1: What perceptions do Spanish, Italian, and Greek journalists have about the potential discursive and non-discursive menaces they face? What factors can help explain these perceptions?

Moreover, to furnish a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to go beyond discursive and non-discursive menaces and seek to understand each of the potential threats independently. This explains our second research question:

RQ2: What perceptions do Spanish, Italian, and Greek journalists have about the specific threats they potentially face? What factors can help explain these perceptions?

2. Method

2.1. Sample and Procedure

To answer these questions we surveyed journalists in the three countries. The survey was distributed by local researchers in each country using the Qualtrics software. The distribution started in June 2021 in Spain, in July 2021 in Greece, and in August 2021 in Italy. It was completed by September of the same year. The questionnaire was originally drafted in English and translated into each of the corresponding languages. The different amounts of time needed to complete the translation and ensure the quality of the survey explain why it was possible to start distribution earlier in Spain and Greece; in Italy, the delay is explained by the fact that our questionnaire was distributed together with a larger one as part of a broader project.

Different strategies were used to distribute the questionnaire. In Greece and Spain, the distribution was done through professional associations of journalists, trade unions, and similar organizations, and to media of all types to be shared in their networks. Moreover, individual journalists were contacted using a snowball strategy. E-mail was used for this purpose or, when not possible, social media. When no answer was received, the team sent up to two reminders with an interval of around one month between them. The response rate was very low in Greece and Spain—less than 10%, not including the journalists contacted by other journalists or organizations in a snowball procedure. It was equally low in Italy, where the distribution was made within the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) fieldwork, but the collection of data followed a more systematic and representative process specifically designed for this project. The difference between Greece and Spain, on the one hand, and Italy, on the other, is that, in the latter, a complete list of journalists exists, and the researchers were able to send each of them an e-mail.

The final sample comprised a total of 398 journalists. Using a confidence level of 95% and a 5% margin of error, and considering an estimated population of around 50,000 active and full-employed journalists in total in the three countries, the sample size should have been at least 381 people, which means that the sample had an acceptable sample size. However, even though the total sample size was adequate, the sample size in each country was not large enough. Given the difficulties of mapping a profession like journalism, a convenience sample was used in each country. Previous relevant studies had also used convenience samples of around 100 journalists per country (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Pellegata & Splendore, 2017). Furthermore, exploratory analyses were conducted to evaluate whether the distribution of the sample was normal and descriptive information on the demographic variables was observed to evaluate the demographic representativeness of the sample.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire used for the research was designed ad-hoc based on the one employed by the WJS project, modifying it to fit the goals of the project. WJS is the most significant international attempt to determine the state of journalism and journalists across the world. Among its many topics, safety issues and threats to the profession are of great importance. The questionnaire was validated by a group of experts in the field before being launched. Although it included a larger set of variables, the ones

used for the analysis reported in this article are shown in Table 1. Together with the dependent variables on the perceived threats, the variables studied focused on various factors: three sociodemographic, two educational, and five professional. These measures were taken into consideration because the different sociodemographic, educational, and employment conditions of journalists may influence their exposure to different threats, mostly due to their more or less precarious situation, but also to their different levels of awareness of different issues.

2.3. Analyses

After the construction and validation of the discursive menace and non-discursive menace indexes, various tests were conducted. First, we carried out, with an exploratory purpose, a descriptive analysis that also tested the normal distribution of the responses. Then, we first used the two scales specifically constructed for the analysis, studying how significant discursive menaces were perceived and their potential differences from other forms of threat to journalists, so that RQ1 could be answered. Afterward, tests were conducted in a more general way with all 10 potential threats to answer RQ2. For each of these cases, inferential statistics tests were conducted, trying to understand the factors that could help explain the potential differences: correlations for continuous variables (age, political ideology, and experience as a journalist), student's T-tests for two independent samples (gender, specialized education in the field,

Table 1. Variables used in the analysis.

Variable name	Description
Age	Continuous variable measured in years.
Gender	Although the option of "non-binary" was possible, all answers were either "male" or "female."
Political ideology	Continuous variable between 0 (*far left*) and 10 (*far right*).
Education level	Educational level reached by the journalist (without secondary education; secondary education; some unfinished university studies; undergraduate degree or equivalent; master's or equivalent; doctorate).
Specialized education in the field	Whether or not the journalist had completed studies in the field of journalism or communication.
Level of responsibility	Decision-making capacity of the journalist (no decision-making; operative decision-making; strategic decision-making).
Level of specialization	Whether the journalist worked on a specific newsbeat or as a generalist journalist.
Experience as a journalist	Continuous variable measured in years.
Funding of the news outlet	How the news outlet for which the journalist worked was financed (private company; public service/state-owned; different structures, such as community platforms, non-for-profit media, etc.).
Scope of the news outlet	Scope of the news outlet for which the journalist worked (local; regional; national; transnational).
Perceived experience of threats (dependent variable)	Using a Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*many times*), the respondents were asked whether, in the last five years, they had experienced different types of risky situations in the context of their work: demeaning or hateful speech; public discrediting of their work; stalking; other threats or intimidation; surveillance; hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites; arrests, detentions or imprisonment; legal actions against them because of their work; sexual assault or sexual harassment; and other physical attacks.
Perceived experience of discursive and non-discursive menaces (dependent variable)	To test the potential differences between discursive menaces and other types of threats, two scales were constructed, following an exploratory factorial analysis. Discursive menaces comprised four items (demeaning or hateful speech, public discrediting of the work, stalking, and other threats or intimidation; Cronbach's alpha = 0.829). Non-discursive menaces comprised six items (surveillance, hacking, or blocking of social media accounts or websites, arrest, detention or imprisonment, legal actions because of the work, sexual assault or sexual harassment, and other physical attacks; Cronbach's alpha = 0.638).

and specialization in a specific newsbeat), and one-way ANOVA tests for multiple independent samples (country, education level, level of responsibility, funding of the news outlet, and scope of the news outlet).

3. Results

Before proceeding with the presentation of the results, let us look at the composition of the sample. 51.8% of the surveyed journalists were male, 36.9% were female, and 11.3% did not state their gender. The mean age was 49.39 years (SD = 12.47) and the median was 49 years. The majority of the journalists worked in Italy (55.8%), followed by Spain (28.9%), and Greece (15.3%).

The above values show the adequacy of the sample. Journalism still tends to be a rather masculine profession, while the average age is not far from that observed in other studies, such as the Worlds of Journalism Study. Regarding the country of origin, there is a lack of balance, given that the Italian answers were collected together with a larger project, which made it easier to achieve a larger sample. The values for Spain and, especially, Greece, are lower. Another factor that justifies this particular result is that the population of journalists is the largest in Italy, followed by Spain and, finally, Greece.

The journalists surveyed tended to show a rather progressive ideology (M = 3.82; SD = 2.268), to have higher education qualifications (80% of them had a university degree), and 68.5% held specialized education in the field of communication or journalism. Regarding their careers, 40% had no management role, 37.1% had some operative decision capacity, and 22.9% had strategic decision capacity. Moreover, they had long experience in the field (M = 21.67; SD = 11.429) and they worked more frequently on general topics (60.7%) than on a specific newsbeat (39.3%). They mostly worked for private news outlets (68%) than for national (42.2%) or regional (21.7%) ones.

3.1. Journalists' Perceived Experience of Discursive and Non-Discursive Menaces

First, it is important to underline that we are focusing on the journalists' perceptions. We do not check—and methodologically there is no way to do so—if those threats were real. This is important because the same experience might be perceived differently by different journalists. However, the main effect of threats is their capacity to be perceived as such by the journalist, potentially affecting their conduct. In other words, if the journalist perceived that they had been a victim of any of the mentioned threats, their conduct might have been affected, no matter whether that threat can be officially considered as such (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

Using the two scales created for this study, it is possible to compare the perceived experience of discursive threats and other kinds of threats. First of all, we can see that discursive menaces were obviously perceived more

often (M = 1.95; SD = 0.878) than non-discursive ones (M = 1.33; SD = 0.449). Furthermore, 80.3% of all journalists claimed that they had experienced some form of discursive threat to some extent. This percentage fell to 58% regarding non-discursive threats.

No significant differences were perceived between male and female journalists. However, a significant and negative correlation was detected between age and having experienced discursive threats ($R(326)$ = −0.208, $p < 0.001$), which means that the younger the journalist, the greater the likelihood that they had experienced some form of discursive threat.

Regarding ideology, there was a significant correlation between having experienced non-discursive menaces and political ideology ($R(312) = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). Given that the higher values of the ideology scale corresponded to the right, this positive correlation means that more conservative journalists claimed that they had experienced such threats more often. No significant correlation was observed regarding the discursive menace.

The highest educational level obtained by the journalist seemed to be significant, both for the perception of having experienced discursive menaces ($F(5, 19.304) = 5.597$, $p < 0.01$) and for non-discursive menaces ($F(5, 18.502) = 3.298$, $p < 0.05$). The post-hoc tests showed that those journalists with some undergraduate studies were those experiencing the lowest perception of threats in both cases. These differences were only significant when the respondents with less educational level were compared with those who had completed undergraduate studies and those with master's degrees. No other relevant trend was observed.

The differences related to the completion of studies in the field of communication or journalism were also significant according to the student's T-tests conducted for the independent sample. Thus, the journalists with specialized studies (M = 2.07; SD = 0.899) had experienced more discursive menaces than those without (M = 1.72; SD = 0.830; $t(329) = −3.375$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.41$). The same was observed regarding non-discursive menaces ($t(303) = −2.703$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.34$), since those respondents with specialized studies (M = 1.38; SD = 0.433) perceived more threats of this kind than did those without specialized studies (M = 1.22; SD = 0.493).

The years of experience working as a journalist, the decision-making capacity, and the fact they worked on a specific newsbeat or as a generalist journalist, did not play a significant role in the perception of having experienced these two forms of threat. Neither the type of funding of the news outlet for which the journalist worked nor its scope, showed significant effects either.

3.2. Journalists' Perceived Experience of Risky Situations

Each of the 10 analyzed threats can be observed independently to furnish more detailed information. Being the victim of hate or demeaning speech was the most commonly experienced threat (M = 2.36; SD = 1.206), followed by

public discrediting of one's work (M = 2.30; SD = 1.211). More violent situations, such as arrest or imprisonment (M = 1.05; SD = 0.328), other physical attacks (M = 1.15; SD = 0.483), or sexual assault or harassment (M = 1.17; SD = 0.617), were very rare. Table 2 summarizes all the average values of the 10 situations studied.

Comparing the perceived experiences based on gender using student's T-tests shows that men (M = 1.46; SD = 0.867) experienced legal actions more often than women (M = 1.24; SD = 0.604; $t(328.948)$ = 2.655, p < 0.01, d = 0.29). However, women (M = 1.32; SD = 0.825) had experienced sexual assault or harassment significantly more often than men (M = 1.06; SD = 0.354; $t(168.169)$ = −3.480, p < 0.01, d = 0.41).

Considering the influence of age on these experiences, we see a significant and negative correlation with having experienced hate speech ($R(329)$ = −0.168, p < 0.01), public discrediting of the journalist's work ($R(329)$ = −0.206, p < 0.001), and other threats or intimidations ($R(330)$ = −0.164, p < 0.01). These negative correlations mean that younger journalists claimed to have experienced these threats more often than older ones.

Focusing now on ideology, there is a significant correlation of this variable with having experienced hacking or the blocking of social media accounts or websites ($R(313)$ = 0.146, p < 0.01), legal actions ($R(314)$ = 0.187, p < 0.01), or other threats or intimidations ($R(316)$ = 0.111, p < 0.05). These positive correlations mean that the more conservative a journalist is, the more they claim to have experienced these threats, and the opposite for more progressist journalists.

The educational level reached does not show significant differences or any trend that could be taken into account regarding the experience of risky situations. Only the three journalists without a secondary education seem to have experienced more of these situations, but the reduced size of the sample in this category prevents any statistically relevant comparison.

Respondents with specialized education in the field of journalism or communication claimed to have experienced more hate or demeaning speech (M = 2.47; SD = 1.228) than did those without education of this kind (M = 2.13; SD = 1.199; $t(332)$ = −2.325, p < 0.05, d = 0.28). There are also significant differences regarding the experience of public discrediting ($t(211.698)$ = −3.533, p < 0.01, d = 0.41), which was higher among journalists who had completed specialized studies in the field (M = 2.45; SD = 1.236) than among those who had not (M = 1.96; SD = 1.137). Journalists with specialized studies had experienced more surveillance (M = 1.98; SD = 1.202) than those without such studies (M = 1.56; SD = 1.118; $t(312)$ = −2.904, p < 0.01, d = 0.41). A similar pattern is apparent regarding the hacking and blocking of social media accounts and websites. Those with specialized education experienced more of this kind of threat (M = 1.49; SD = 0.939) than those without (M = 1.27; SD = 0.769; $t(236.975)$ = −2.217, p < 0.05, d = 0.26). Harassment was more frequently experienced among respondents with studies in the field (M = 1.55; SD = 0.947) than among those without (M = 1.27; SD = 0.766; $t(2422.837)$ = −2.873, p < 0.01, d = 0.33). Finally, the experience of other threats or intimidations was more frequent among those respondents who had completed studies in the field of journalism or communication (M = 1.80; SD = 0.992) than among those who had not (M = 1.50; SD = 0.921; $t(333)$ = −2.545, p < 0.05, d = 0.31).

No significant influence on the experience of risky situations was observed regarding years of experience as a journalist, the level of responsibility, and work on a specific newsbeat or general topics.

There were some differences based on the way the news outlet for which the journalist worked was funded. Experience of hateful or demeaning speech was significantly more common among journalists working for private news outlets (M = 2.50; SD = 1.185) than it was for those working in other types of media different from public or private ones (M = 2.02; SD = 1.094; $F(2, 343)$ = 3.553, p < 0.05). The same is apparent when we consider the experience of public discrediting, which

Table 2. Experience of different risky situations during the past five years by Spanish, Italian, and Greek journalists.

Situation	M	SD	Percentage of the journalists who had experienced the threat to some extent
Demeaning or hateful speech	2.36	1.206	66.8%
Public discrediting of work	2.30	1.211	65.0%
Stalking	1.46	0.891	76.9%
Other threats or intimidation	1.69	0.964	42.0%
Surveillance	1.89	1.189	43.6%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	1.42	0.873	24.8%
Arrest, detention, or imprisonment	1.05	0.328	02.9%
Legal actions against them because of their work	1.36	0.752	23.4%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	1.17	0.617	09.7%
Other physical attacks	1.15	0.483	11.3%

is more common among journalists working for private media ($M = 2.41$; $SD = 1.242$) than among those working for other types of media ($M = 2.00$; $SD = 1.071$); $F_{(2, 102.414)} = 3.412$, $p < 0.05$). These differences are also present regarding the experience of sexual assault or harassment, which was more frequent for journalists working in private media ($M = 1.18$; $SD = 0.651$) than in other types ($M = 1.05$; $SD = 0.282$; $F_{(2, 109.841)} = 4.283$, $p < 0.05$). The other risky situations did not show significant differences based on this variable.

The experience of public discrediting of the journalist's work exhibited significant differences according to the scope of the news outlet ($F_{(3, 352)} = 4.749$, $p < 0.01$), being higher among journalists working for regional ($M = 2.61$; $SD = 1.172$) or local ($M = 2.51$; $SD = 1.150$) media than among those working for transnational media ($M = 1.89$; $SD = 1.201$). There were also differences regarding the experience of the hacking or blocking of social media or websites ($F_{(3, 148.620)} = 3.641$, $p < 0.05$), which were more common for journalists working in regional media ($M = 1.64$; $SD = 0.916$) than for those working in national ones ($M = 1.28$; $SD = 0.774$). No other situation showed significant differences for this variable.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

After the murders of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 and the Slovakian journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, the concern about the safety of European journalists grew (Coelho & Alves Rodrigues, 2020). This article has shown that Spanish, Italian, and Greek journalists do not perceive to be affected so much by violent threats as by a discursive form of threat, that has gained ground due to multiple factors. Although violent crimes are those that capture the most attention among media, scholars, and public opinion, we maintain that discursive threats—on the authority and legitimization of both journalism and journalists—are equally dramatic. This kind of attack is a constant feature of the environment in which journalists have to work—an environment where their legitimacy is not adequately recognized. Such attacks—hateful or demeaning speech, public discrediting, and threats perpetrated by any social actor—have gained presence, becoming the most common threat to the Mediterranean journalists' safety. In recent years, many studies have analyzed the challenges to the authority of journalism (Carlson, 2017; Van Dalen, 2021). The data used here give consistency to those concerns in a context in which the effects of digitization and economic crisis are considered even more influential.

Among the various factors that we analyzed, perhaps the most important is the fact that younger journalists perceive these discursive threats to a greater extent. Concerns about the digitalization of journalism (Waisbord, 2020) appear to be even more challenging when the younger generation is the one perceiving itself as working in a context that does not consider safe and in which journalists feel that their work is delegitimized.

It is also interesting that it was precisely the respondents with higher education levels who more strongly perceived these discursive and non-discursive attempts to delegitimize their work, which is indicative of the fact that this influence is perceived by those who should know the importance of autonomy. Journalists who had completed specialized studies in the fields of journalism and communication claimed to have experienced more situations that posed a threat to their safety. This seems partly counter-intuitive because having specialized training should lead to higher and better-paid positions, and not make a journalist more vulnerable. However, it might make a journalist more aware of those risks, so they can better recognize them. This result significantly contributes to the boundary work literature (see Carlson & Lewis, 2015), because it makes it possible to identify a specific group that is struggling for its legitimacy not against the machine (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018) or the audience (Robinson, 2010), but to affirm its professional right and duty to tell the truth about current affairs.

The rest of the factors analyzed concerned only very specific types of threats and the patterns were not significant when talking about discursive and non-discursive threats. The goal of studying those threats more in detail was to observe these cases in particular. We now briefly review and interpret them further.

Gender differences were not particularly common. Though it might be considered surprising that female journalists were not significantly more commonly victims than male ones in situations such as hate speech, as previous studies have suggested (Antunovic, 2019; Sarikakis et al., 2021). The clearest threat experienced by women is sexual assault—significantly more female journalists suffer from it—which corresponds with the literature findings on the subject (Harris et al., 2016). More surprising is the rather low level of reported sexual assault. Even though our study does not seek to explain these differences, one possible explanation might be the comparison with other (mostly discursive) threats. In absolute terms, sexual assault may be a significant and worrying issue, but the number of occasions on which it happens may be smaller than those of other threats. Therefore, even if some studies have shown that sexual assaults are rather common, they are still reported less frequently than other threats faced by journalists.

Another factor that showed significant effects was the political ideology of the journalists. About this, it was found that more conservative journalists experienced more threats (mostly non-discursive ones) even though the effect sizes were rather small. This may also be considered surprising, given that much of the existing literature focuses on the threats posed by far-right movements (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). However, the risk might come from both sides, as previous work on affective polarization has shown (Iyengar et al., 2019). Polarization is not likely to be the only factor explaining possible differences in the perceptions of conservative

and progressive journalists. Another potential explanation is the fact that at the time of the survey, the Italian and Spanish governments were respectively center and left leaning politically, and this may have contributed to the conservative journalists' perceptions about the menaces against them. The ideological proximity model usually explains these dynamics (Curini, 2022). However, future research might need to further explore its connection with the topics studied in this article.

Regarding the funding and scope of the news outlets for which the journalists worked, the differences were not generalized, and the effect sizes were also rather small. But it seems that journalists working for private and regional media were the ones claiming to have experienced the most threats. It could be argued that public-funded and national or transnational platforms are more stable and secure, thus being able to support and protect their journalists, who perceive fewer threats, whereas those working for private and regional (and maybe even local) platforms may be less protected or may have more precarious situations. Other factors, such as public exposure (in theory, greater in platforms with larger scope) or perceived risk of the threat (in local outlets being closer to the threat may increase the perception of risk) could also play a role, but they seem less explanatory of these findings. In any case, more research needs to be conducted in this regard.

The years of experience as a journalist, the level of responsibility, and the fact that they work on a specific newsbeat or on general topics (all of them being individual professional factors) played no significant role. The first two could have been expected to show some differences, given that experience and level of responsibility tend to give journalists a higher status and a greater capacity to deal with potential threats. However, this does not seem to affect their perceptions of these threats. In regards to the third factor, no comparisons were made between beats. Future studies will be able to further explore the potential existence of differences here.

It is important to stress that this study does not measure the existence of threats, but rather the perceptions of the journalists about them. Consequently, these perceptions may differ according to the aforementioned factors, even though the experiences may be similar. In general terms, discursive threats exhibit greater variability among different groups. Thus, the experience of hateful speech, the public discrediting of one's work, or other threats and intimidations present significant variations depending on some of the factors studied. Other threats, like physical attacks, stalking, or sexual assault, present fewer or almost no significant differences. One potential and preliminary explanation might be that the perceptions about having been a victim of hateful speech or similar discursive menaces differ from one person to another, whilst having been a victim of legal actions or physical violence might be more homogeneously perceived.

Overall, the main finding is that younger and more educated journalists claim to have experienced more threats, especially discursive threats. Among other reasons, this could be explained by the fact that new generations have gained awareness of the risks posed by discursive threats and are more sensitive to discursive challenges. This is the first step for journalists to combat increasingly worrying threats—such as hate speech—and defend their legitimacy against intruders.

Finally, a limitation of this study is that the analysis reported did not seek representativity, for which a larger and more probabilistic sample would have been needed. The purpose of the analysis was exploratory with the goal to test the influence of some independent variables on the dependent ones, for which no representative samples were needed. Furthermore, a snowball distribution procedure was followed in Greece and Spain and for that reason, only those journalists with stronger opinions about the topic were likely the ones who participated in the survey. Even though this strategy might be adequate for exploratory studies like this one, future research with larger and representative samples, especially regarding Spanish and Greek journalists, will be able to furnish more consistent observations. Lastly, although no results seem to hint that way, it is not possible to completely remove the potential effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, given that the study was conducted during the third semester of 2021. Future replications will be able to test potential longitudinal changes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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