

Costa Rica

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INTRODUCTION

With just over 5.1 million inhabitants, Costa Rica is far from the largest country in the Americas, in terms of population or land mass. As one of the most stable and long-standing democracies in the region with the highest minimum wage in Latin America as of 2024 (\$687 USD/month), Costa Rica plays an influential role in Central America and Latin America. Press freedoms, freedom of expression and access to information are protected by the Costa Rican Constitution. Political and economic stability have led to Costa Rica being a place of refuge for journalists and intellectuals from other parts of Central and Latin America. For decades, and more recently with authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, journalists have moved to Costa Rica searching for a safe place where they can continue to practice their profession outside of their countries of origin.

For more than a decade, Costa Rica had ranked among the top 10 nations in the world with the most press freedoms. In 2022, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Costa Rica eighth out of 180 countries, while other nations in Central America, specifically El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, ranked 112, 124, and 160, respectively. According to Freedom House's 2024 Report, Costa Rica continues to have "one of the most open online environments" among all nations. In 2024, it became one of the last countries in Latin America to implement a national access to information law, which offers further freedoms beyond the protective jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court.

Despite the longstanding strength of press freedoms in the country, with the election of President Rodrigo Chaves Robles in May 2022, it became apparent that Costa Rica's journalists and press freedoms were entering a new and perhaps unprecedented phase. In 2023, with a new administration in place in Costa Rica, and attacks on the press increasing, the country's RSF ranking dropped from 8 to 23. President Chaves has intimidated some of the most powerful media outlets in the country, calling some journalists "rats" and filing lawsuits against news outlets. He also has called members of the professional press "sicarios políticos" (political hitmen). By 2024, Costa Rica had dropped to 26 out of 180 countries on the RSF Press Freedom Index. Beyond the political environment, despite new legislation regarding minimum wages, economic conditions for journalists worsened considerably during and after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. As in many other parts of Latin America, and the world, media outlets have also struggled to adapt to technological changes. Moreover, drug trafficking and violence have increased in the country, further complicating the environment in which reporters and news media workers perform their jobs.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

Our survey included 229 journalists with 32% identifying as women, 67% identifying as men, and less than one percent identifying as non-binary. The average age of journalists was 39.1 years (SD = 12.3; Median = 38). Ninety-two percent of the participants had formal education or training in journalism and an average of 15 years of professional journalism experience. Among those surveyed, 83.8% received training through journalism apprenticeships or cadetships and 80.2% did short-term courses.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most journalists interviewed (40.5%) worked for an employer with a background of print-based media. Twenty-one percent worked for a television news media organization, 18% worked at an online site, 5% worked for radio outlets, and 3% in magazine companies. According to our findings, the majority of Costa Rican journalists (61.6%) had full-time permanent contracts; 18.8% worked as freelancers or were self-employed, with 4.4% having part-time permanent contracts. Regarding specific areas of news coverage, the majority (63.8%) indicated that they did not work on a specific beat or subject area, while over a third (36.2%) of participants said they covered a specific beat (e.g. economy, politics, news events, sports, entertainment). On average, journalists worked for 15.0 years (SD = 11.0) in the profession, with the range of years the journalists worked being between two months and 48 years.

As far as how much time journalists devoted per week to the profession, full-time journalists worked on average 46.4 hours/week (SD = 13.0), with the median hours per week being 48. Journalism unions do not appear to be strong in Costa Rica with 43.2% of the journalists reporting that they were members of unions. With most journalists working more than 40 hours per week, it might not be surprising that slightly more than half (60.4%) indicated that they felt stressed out "very often" (35.6%) and "often" (24.8%) because of their work. Just under one-third (28.4%) experienced stress sometimes from work, with 6.8% "rarely" experiencing stress, and 4.5% "never" feeling stressed from work.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Demeaning or hateful speech directed at journalists, public discrediting of journalists’ work and questioning personal morality were reported as the most frequent threats experienced by Costa Rican journalists (Table 1). Other less frequent yet existing concerns included surveillance, hacking or blocking social media accounts, stalking, workplace bullying and other forms of threats or intimidation.

Nearly nine out of 10 journalists were concerned with the impunity of those who harm journalists without punishment (Table 2). More than two-thirds of journalists were concerned about their emotional and mental well-being. Job security, too, was a strong concern as was concern about physical well-being.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	229	5.7%	16.2%	25.3%	31.4%	21.4%
Public discrediting of your work	229	5.2%	16.2%	24.0%	26.6%	27.9%
Surveillance	229	1.3%	1.7%	7.0%	22.7%	67.2%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	229	0.9%	1.7%	10.9%	15.7%	70.7%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	229	0.0%	0.9%	0.4%	0.9%	97.8%
Legal actions against you because of your work	229	0.0%	0.4%	5.7%	8.3%	85.6%
Stalking	229	0.9%	0.9%	8.7%	21.0%	68.6%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	229	0.4%	2.2%	17.0%	27.5%	52.8%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	229	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	5.2%	91.3%
Other physical attacks	229	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	9.2%	87.3%
Coercion	229	0.0%	0.0%	5.2%	11.4%	83.4%
Questioning of your personal morality	229	1.7%	5.2%	21.8%	29.3%	41.9%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	229	0.4%	0.4%	5.7%	11.8%	81.7%
Others disseminating your personal information	229	0.0%	2.6%	10.0%	16.6%	70.7%
Workplace bullying	229	0.4%	0.9%	7.9%	10.0%	80.8%
Abductions	229	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	229	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	2.2%	96.9%
Intimidation that targets family	229	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	4.4%	95.2%

Question: “In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?”

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	229	42.1%	3.05	1.41
Concerned about physical well-being	229	29.6%	2.62	1.35
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	229	67.2%	3.67	1.28
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Costa Rica go unpunished	229	87.5%	4.28	1.04

Question: “Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.” (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Most Costa Rican journalists indicated that they perceived their role as traditional (Table 3). More interventionist roles, such as motivating people to participate in politics, setting the political agenda, supporting government policy, and creating a positive image of political leaders were not among the majority of journalists’ role perceptions. Moreover, those considering their role as providing entertainment and relaxation were not in the majority.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	229	81.2%	4.16	0.90
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	229	87.3%	4.33	0.81
Shine a light on society’s problems	229	95.2%	4.59	0.60
Motivate people to participate in politics	229	43.7%	3.21	1.19
Provide analysis of current affairs	229	87.4%	4.38	0.82
Let people express their views	229	91.2%	4.42	0.68
Provide information people need to form political opinion	229	88.3%	4.38	0.84
Advocate for social change	229	77.7%	4.12	0.89
Influence public opinion	229	57.7%	3.65	1.05
Set the political agenda	229	34.9%	2.99	1.17
Promote peace and tolerance	229	83.4%	4.34	0.87
Educate the audience	229	90.0%	4.44	0.87
Point toward possible solutions to society’s problems	229	82.1%	4.18	0.89
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	229	84.7%	4.28	0.91
Support national development	229	83.9%	4.28	0.80
Support government policy	229	39.3%	3.14	1.18
Convey a positive image of political leaders	229	41.0%	3.02	1.34
Provide entertainment and relaxation	229	38.4%	3.14	1.22
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	229	67.7%	3.84	0.99
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	229	62.9%	3.70	1.08
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	229	68.6%	3.93	1.03
Support efforts to protect public health	229	79.5%	4.13	1.01
Counteract disinformation	229	93.4%	4.66	0.71
Discuss future implications of current events	229	80.3%	4.11	0.85

Question: “Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work.” (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

A majority of Costa Rican journalists perceive that interpretation is necessary for audiences to make sense of facts, that it is possible to report objectively, that journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work and that they should alert the public when a source's claims are not true (Table 4). Nearly half believe it is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting with nearly the same percentage believing that things are either true or false, there is no in-between. Up to one-fifth strongly agree that journalists intuitively know what the final story will be and that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power. One in four believe journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what is true and that journalists should be a part of a community to accurately portray it.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	218	73.9%	3.91	0.93
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	218	15.6%	2.33	1.12
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	218	48.7%	3.31	1.13
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	218	42.7%	3.07	1.23
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	218	67.0%	3.72	1.03
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	218	25.7%	2.68	1.15
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	218	21.1%	2.56	1.11
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	218	67.9%	3.80	0.96
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	218	27.0%	2.75	1.11
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	218	58.7%	3.51	1.17
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	218	77.0%	3.97	1.01

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

More than eight in 10 Costa Rican journalists believe that what is ethical for journalists should always be determined by standards set up in the profession regardless of personal judgment or the situation (Table 5). Close to one in four journalists believe extraordinary situations may require journalists to disregard professional ethics standards and similarly nearly one in four believe ethics for journalists are situation dependent. Less than one in five journalists believe that ethics for journalists is largely personal judgment. Costa Rican journalists were nuanced about the justification of controversial reporting methods. Majority believed using hidden recording devices, confidential business or government documents without authorization, or using the personal materials of powerful people with permission was justified on occasion (Table 6). A third or fewer of the journalists in the study justified on occasion that claiming to be someone else for reporting was justified as was using personal materials of ordinary people without permission. Around money, less than one in five believed paying people for confidential information, accepting money from sources, producing promotional content that mimics stories and publishing unverified information was justified on occasion.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	229	86.5%	4.32	0.92
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	229	28.8%	2.64	1.32
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	229	22.7%	2.38	1.33
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	229	17.9%	2.23	1.24

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	229	0.4%	33.6%
Using hidden recording devices	229	1.7%	69.0%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	229	7.4%	59.4%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	229	4.8%	52.8%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	229	1.3%	24.0%
Paying people for confidential information	229	0.9%	20.5%
Accepting money from sources	229	0.4%	4.4%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	229	1.3%	40.2%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	229	0.0%	19.7%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	229	0.4%	4.8%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

More than eight in 10 journalists in the study perceived that they had a great deal or complete freedom to select news stories and freedom to decide aspects that would be emphasized. More than half believed they had a great deal or complete media freedom.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	222	83.3%	4.22	0.80
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	222	81.5%	4.16	0.81
Media freedom in Costa Rica	217	57.6%	3.67	0.83

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Two-thirds of Costa Rican journalists believed editorial supervisors and higher editors, along with access to information, were very or extremely influential. Close to half believed editorial policy, audience research and data, and relationships with news sources were very/extremely influential. The remainder of the editorial influences were perceived to have less impact.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	216	40.3%	3.10	1.17
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	216	65.9%	3.60	1.27
The business managers of the news organization	214	25.1%	2.53	1.32
The owners of the news organization	216	28.6%	2.53	1.41
Editorial policy	216	44.7%	3.17	1.30
Advertising considerations	217	20.9%	2.46	1.27
Profit expectations	217	19.7%	2.30	1.26
Audience research and data	219	47.9%	3.23	1.28
Availability of news-gathering resources	219	56.8%	3.51	1.15
Time limits	217	55.9%	3.48	1.22
Journalism ethics	219	84.4%	4.21	1.02
Self-censorship	215	18.7%	2.23	1.23
Personal values and beliefs	219	47.6%	3.28	1.24
Colleagues in other media	218	10.0%	2.19	1.04
Friends, acquaintances and family	218	11.4%	2.19	1.04
Feedback from the audience	219	44.4%	3.35	0.93
Competing news organizations	218	24.3%	2.75	1.13
Media laws and regulation	219	28.5%	2.79	1.16
Access to information	217	66.4%	3.78	1.05
Government censorship	218	21.3%	2.27	1.27
Government officials	218	20.3%	2.30	1.21
Politicians	218	17.4%	2.21	1.19
Business people	218	12.2%	2.11	1.13
Public relations	218	13.1%	2.25	1.07
Relationships with news sources	218	46.3%	3.12	1.26
Police	214	12.3%	1.86	1.12
Issue advocacy groups	215	11.5%	1.96	1.10
Scientists or health experts	216	29.1%	1.85	1.31
Religious groups and institutions	216	7.7%	1.28	1.02
Military	214	2.1%	1.20	0.71
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	214	1.1%	1.79	0.58
Organized crime and criminal groups	219	11.5%	1.29	1.16
Terrorist groups	216	3.6%	2.61	0.74

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)