

Countering Xenophobic Frames and Contextualizing Coverage Through North-South Cooperation: Collaborative Investigative Journalism Across the U.S.-Mexico Border

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This article focuses on collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North-South) border. The frame theoretical study examines how virtual and in-person cross-border collaboration counters xenophobic frames and contextualizes coverage of Central America and Mexico and forced migration from the region between 2016 and 2022. The study found that cross-border collaborative journalism effectively exposed wrongdoing by the Central American, Mexican, and U.S. governments while countering misinformation about Central American and Mexican migrants. The coverage also expanded humanitarian frames, providing nuanced descriptions of the suffering of Central American and Mexican citizens. However, a deep historical context concerning U.S. hegemony in Central America and its impact on the cycle of violence and forced migration was missing from the coverage produced in virtual collaboration. The most critical and contextual coverage was produced in in-person collaborations, where journalists from both sides of the North-South border worked side by side in Central America. The findings raise concerns about what kinds of context, dialogue, and awareness fail to emerge in North-South collaborations limited to virtual spaces.

Keywords: frame analysis, investigative journalism, collaborative journalism, migration

The function of investigative journalism is to make visible what is hidden (Waisbord, 2000). The existence of investigative journalism is fundamental to the functioning of democracy (Schudson, 2019). However, many challenges impede the production of in-depth investigative reporting. Investigative journalism is often characterized by a need to access concealed and complex data, which can be difficult and costly. Investigative journalism is a dangerous profession because it seeks to reveal abuses by powerful actors. Investigative journalists often need to invest substantial time and effort to gain trust and ensure the

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protection of their sources. However, resources are scarce because of overreliance on foundation support and modest progress in developing alternative sources of revenue (Birnbauer, 2019, p. 7).

Increasingly enabled by digital technologies, investigative collaboration across newsrooms and national and regional borders yields many benefits, such as the sharing of costs and information, increased story reach, and a strengthened ability to set the news agenda (Carson, 2021; Carson & Farhall, 2018). Collaborative journalism reflects a significant shift from an old model of a highly competitive single newsroom environment to a new model of multiple newsrooms and countries sharing information to expose wrongdoing. Collaborative investigative journalism is still under-researched (Carson, 2021, p. 362).

This article contributes to this gap through an empirical research project that examined collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico (Global North-South) border.² The collaborative coverage in focus exposed violence in Central America and Mexico and abuses against Central American and Mexican citizens fleeing from this violence. In the Central American context, the study focused on collaborative reporting by journalists from the so-called Northern Triangle, namely, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, notorious for extraordinary violence (Chávez & Avalos, 2014).

The U.S. military involvement in Central America during the Cold War set in motion a cycle of violence, which has been identified as the primary reason for forced migration today (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, pp. 8, 91–92, 120; Chomsky, 2021, p. 247). During President Trump's campaigns and administration, xenophobic discrimination against Central American and Mexican citizens became more pronounced. President Biden has continued many of the abusive immigration policies imposed by his predecessors, resorting to practices that reproduce inequality and corruption (e.g., Sawyer, 2022). At the same time, the U.S. journalistic media has failed to produce accurate and contextualized coverage of the impact of U.S. policies on the region and its migration (e.g., Andersen & Bergmann, 2020; MacLeod, 2018).

Mexico and the Northern Triangle are among the world's most dangerous regions for journalists. The threat is especially severe for independent journalists who investigate topics such as crime, corruption, and impunity, regardless of censorship and harassment. As independent journalism has advanced in the region in parallel with the expansion of Internet access since the mid-2000s, Central American and Mexican governments have declared independent journalism their public enemy (Ávila Reyes, 2021, p. 366; see also Kahn, 2023). In November 2022, the Network of Central American Journalists was founded to protect independent news media from state-sponsored attacks and spur regional collaboration (De Assis, 2022). Networks bring international attention to investigations, exerting pressure on authorities to protect journalists. Therefore, security is an important reason for journalistic collaboration (see Konow-Lund, Gearing, & Berglez, 2019).

² The first part of this project focused primarily on practical aspects of journalism, such as how the efficiency of newsrooms can be enhanced through cooperation (see Cheas, 2023). This article is rooted in the latter part of the project, which is more concerned with global power relations and theoretical questions (for field theoretical analysis, see Cheas, forthcoming).

Even as researchers have shown growing interest in investigative journalism in Latin America (e.g., Saldaña & Mourão, 2018) and investigative collaborations within Latin America (e.g., Palau-Sampio, 2020), research on collaborations between Central American, Mexican, and U.S. investigative journalists has remained limited. One existing study is Palau-Sampio's (2019) examination of five multimedia projects released by Central American media platforms between 2010 and 2017 and produced "in some cases in partnership with US media and foundations" (p. 93). Based on her analysis, Palau-Sampio (2019) addressed "the relevance of cross-border collaborations" to "delving into causes of the forced migration" (p. 105).

To assess the impact of cross-border collaboration on more recent journalistic content, this article examines a sample of six multimedia projects, all of which were produced in virtual and/or in-person collaboration between Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran, Mexican, and U.S. journalists between 2016 and 2022, investigating violence in Central America and Mexico and exposing abuses against citizens fleeing from violence. The analysis found that cross-border collaborative journalism effectively counters the xenophobic framing of Central America, Mexico, and the region's citizens as threats to the United States. The collaborative coverage also broadens and contextualizes humanitarian perspectives, providing diverse descriptions of suffering in the region.

However, unlike in-person collaborations, coverage produced in virtual collaborations falls short of providing a historical context concerning U.S. hegemony in Central America and its impact on the region's violence and forced migration. This finding raises critical questions mostly unaddressed by scholars and journalists celebrating the possibilities of new technologies for collaborative journalism—whether journalists of the Global South feel sufficiently comfortable in virtual spaces to address atrocities committed by the home country of their partners in the North. Several U.S. journalists and academics (e.g., Bonner, 2016; Bourgois, 1982; Chomsky, 2021; Forché, 2019; Frank, 2018) have noted that they did not understand the severity of circumstances in Central America until they witnessed the abuses firsthand. It was through this lived experience that they managed to communicate meaningfully about these circumstances to uninformed U.S. publics. Foreign bureaus, enabling correspondents to familiarize themselves with local circumstances, have mostly been deemed too costly for journalism and have been replaced with short-term visits (Hamilton, 2009) and reliance on local journalists to facilitate reporting (e.g., Blacksin & Mitra, 2024). The present article raises concerns about whether and how virtual collaborations with local journalists can replace in-person witnessing by Northern journalists.

Frame Analytical Approach

Framing is about selective perception (Benson, 2013, p. 5). Journalists convert strategic frames sponsored by elites and organizations into media frames, influencing one another's perspectives in this process (Entman, 1993). Past research has identified common frames that depict migrants as threats to the receiving country (e.g., Benson, 2013). Threat frames offer an "encapsulated narrative," which begins with "an invasion of a marching army of migrants" and is "solved" by those in power by "repelling" the migrants (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, p. 88; see also Amaya, 2013, pp. 96–97). Threat frames gained momentum when President Trump insisted that the United States was "under attack" by "terrorists and rapists" from Central America and Mexico (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020; Chavez, 2017).

A similar emphasis on threats has characterized U.S. framing of Central America and Mexico as a region. During the Cold War, media coverage was framed around a choice between supporting U.S. national security interests or letting the hemisphere fall into “communists” (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, pp. 25–26). Building on his study of U.S. coverage of Central America between 1979 and 1985, Hallin (1994) found that the human rights frame was also relevant—however, the U.S. administration retained the predominant power to shape the news frame, with the Cold War frame dominating coverage during the Reagan administration (p. 73).

Humanitarian frames have depicted migrants as suffering from inequality, xenophobia, and other hardships and/or as heroes, contributing to cultural diversity and working in jobs unwanted by others (see Benson, 2013, p. 6). However, like threat frames, humanitarian frames may offer only a glimpse of reality without connecting with the broader picture of forced migration (see Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, p. 13; MacLeod, 2018).

Framing and Contextual Reporting

Iyengar (1996) distinguished between thematic and episodic framing. The episodic frame depicts issues in terms of specific instances, such as a terrorist bombing, whereas the thematic frame places issues in historical or other relevant contexts. Episodic framing breeds media audiences’ individualistic attributions of responsibility, whereas thematic framing enables citizens to comprehend deeper-seated socioeconomic or political conditions and attribute responsibility to both government and society (p. 62; see also Benson, 2013, p. 59).

Excessive focus on threats to national security has caused the U.S. media to fall short of historical and social-causal contexts as to why Central America is so violent, forcing people to flee. This pattern has been attributed to journalists lacking subject-matter expertise (see Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, pp. 4, 23; Martínez, 2016; see also Iyengar, 1996, p. 62). Such expertise is not automatically included in reporting by Central American or Mexican journalists born and/or based in the United States. For example, Amaya (2013) found that reporting by a Mexican-American journalist on the Hutto Detention Center in Texas for the Associated Press resembled most U.S. reporting on the topic, as it “normalizes hegemonic discourses and practices,” “select[ing] from among the possible quotes available to her those that fit her views” (pp. 103, 108).

During the Cold War, U.S. journalists in the field were more critical of U.S. foreign policy than their peers reporting from Washington (Hallin, 1994, p. 70). The massacre of El Mozote in El Salvador in December 1981 by the U.S.-equipped Atlacatl battalion was exposed in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* by correspondents Raymond Bonner, Susan Meiselas, and Alma Guillermoprieto, who traveled to El Mozote and witnessed the corpses and devastation. Following an intense backlash, *The Times* withdrew Bonner from his position in El Salvador in August 1982. Massing (1993) emphasized that this had a profound negative effect on U.S. press coverage of Central America (p. 64; see also Chomsky, 2021, p. 141); few U.S. media organizations were willing to challenge Reagan’s framing (North, 2018). U.S. editors would prefer episodic stories from Central America, undermining the tradition of autonomous, professional correspondents (Hamilton, 2009, pp. 129, 436).

The demise of foreign bureaus accelerated during the economic crisis of journalism in connection with digitalization. Blacksia and Mitra (2024) use the term “local-foreign news work” to refer to the labor of “fixers”—locally based journalists, whose tasks can encompass anything from information-sourcing and cultural mediation to logistics, security assessment, translation, interviewing, and production of texts and images (p. 1273). However, using local Central American and Mexican journalists as helpers does not guarantee thematic framing in the U.S. media either: Latin American media is also characterized by a tendency of episodic framing, which creates “stories of no memory” (Saldaña & Mourão, 2018, p. 310). This is due to economic and political elites possessing most of the news media apparatus in the region. Hence, most Latin American journalists are both facilitators and victims of a repressive system that they should be challenging (Saldaña & Mourão, 2018, pp. 311, 318).

The greatest potential to counter xenophobic framing and contextualize coverage of Central America, Mexico, and migration from the region seems to be in cross-border collaboration between Central American and Mexican independent journalists, who readily challenge the perspectives of the political and economic elites on both sides of the border, and U.S. journalists, who can appreciate the expertise of their Southern partners. Palau-Sampio’s (2019) examination of coverage by “Central American multimedia productions involving explanatory, investigative, and narrative journalism” created “in some cases in partnership with US media and foundations” revealed that these projects “framed migration in a radically different way than traditional media”—the coverage was contextual, avoiding simplicity (pp. 93, 95, 100, 105).

To test these findings and further elaborate on the potential of cross-border collaboration, this article focuses on the following research questions:

RQ1: How and to what extent does collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico border counter misinformation and xenophobic frames depicting Central America and Mexico and migrants from the region as a threat to U.S. society?

RQ2: How and to what extent does collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico border extend humanitarian frames and contextualize coverage about Central America and Mexico and forced migration from the region?

Sample

This article examines a sample of six investigative projects conducted in virtual and/or in-person collaboration between U.S., Mexican, Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan journalistic outlets. The main criterion was that each project was explicitly defined as an investigative collaboration involving journalists from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The collaborative coverage in the sample investigates violence in the countries of the Northern Triangle and/or in Mexico, and/or how such violence is serving as a push factor of forced migration, and/or abuses against Central American and/or Mexican migrants fleeing from this violence. Each project is described briefly in Tables 1 and 2.

The sample was gathered with the help of digital archives of media affiliated with the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) and others. The time frame of the search was between June 2015

and December 2022, starting with the launch of Trump's presidential campaign and ending after President Biden's first two years in office.³ During this time, Mexican and Central American governments have gone to exceptional lengths to criminalize independent journalists. Salvadoran *El Faro*, which contributed to five of the six projects in the sample, is Latin America's first independent digital newspaper, founded in 1998. Since the start of the presidency of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador in 2019, *El Faro's* journalists have faced substantial harassment by the government, forcing them to move their headquarters to Costa Rica. The sample also includes coverage by three Guatemalan independent outlets—*elPeriódico*, *Prensa Comunitaria*, and *Plaza Pública*—which experienced remarkable repression during the presidency of Alejandro Giammattei, elected in 2020. This repression led to the close-down of *elPeriódico* in May 2023 (see Kahn, 2023). Honduran journalists were not involved in cross-border collaborations during the period examined. Topics related to Honduras were still investigated in many projects.

All six projects were coordinated and funded by media outlets or networks headquartered in the United States or Europe, reflecting the power of media and foundations in the Global North, respectively. Central American and Mexican independent outlets have local supporters, such as foundations, universities, and paying subscribers, but mostly struggle to support their critical work, naming international collaborations as among their main sources. For instance, 65–75% of *El Faro's* annual funding comes from international donors (Salamanca, 2024). While the relationship between funding, leadership, and journalistic content in collaborative projects is beyond the scope of this article, the sample enables the examination of the extent to which projects funded and coordinated by partners in the Global North enable the production of contextual and critical reporting about abuses caused in great part by the North.

Some projects in the sample involved partnerships with media in other Latin American countries—beyond Mexico and the Northern Triangle—and Europe. These contents were considered a secondary sample and examined in less detail, except for the contents produced by Forbidden Stories—headquartered in France—which coordinated the Mining Secrets collaboration. While defining themselves as global organizations, the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) are headquartered in the United States and are considered to represent the United States.

The projects consist of multiple stories in English and/or in Spanish in diverse formats, including text, images, audio, and video. "Books" refer to Central American narrative and investigative reporting; these are lengthy stories, each of which consists of multiple chapters (see Maslin, 2016).

³ This original sample was slightly expanded for the field analysis, which was conducted after the frame theoretical analysis had been concluded (see Cheas, forthcoming).

Table 1. Sample of Collaborative Projects Exposing Violence in Central America.

Project no, title, and duration	Description	<u>Main coordinator</u> Media partner Secondary sample	Virtual / in-person	Scope of coverage analyzed
1 Mining Secrets (e.g., Peruchòn, 2022). Six months, concluded in spring 2022.	Investigated internal data of the transnational mining giant Solway in Guatemala. Exposed damage and violence affecting indigenous communities and investigators.	<u>Forbidden Stories</u> <i>Prensa Comunitaria</i> <i>El Faro</i> <i>The Intercept</i> <i>Proceso</i> OCCRP <i>El Pais,</i> <i>The Guardian,</i> <i>Le Monde,</i> <i>Süddeutsche Zeitung,</i> <i>die Zeit, WDR,</i> <i>Folha de São Paulo, SVT,</i> <i>Eesti Express,</i> <i>RTS, IRPI</i>	Virtual and in-person collaboration: Analysis of data online; in-person collection of testimonies and evidence in Guatemala by the international consortium.	15 articles 110 images 3 videos 50 data excerpts
2 Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador (e.g., Martínez, Lemus, Martínez, & Sontag, 2016). Seven months, concluded in Nov. 2016	Investigated the finances, operations, and violence of gangs in El Salvador.	<u><i>The New York Times</i></u> <i>El Faro</i>	Virtual collaboration: <i>El Faro</i> reporters did the groundwork, <i>Times</i> reporters supervised; communication primarily through Skype and e-mail.	1 article 8 images 1 data excerpt
3 Massacre in El Salvador (e.g., Roane, 2021). Start date of collaboration unknown; coverage published in	Investigated the massacre in the village of El Mozote in December 1981 and exposed the impunity of the consecutive governments of the United States and El Salvador.	<u><i>PBS Frontline</i></u> <i>ProPublica</i> <i>Retro Report</i> <i>El Faro</i>	In-person collaboration: U.S. reporters traveled to El Salvador to visit the village and attend court hearings along with <i>El Faro</i> journalists.	3 articles 1 documentary

September and
October 2021.

Note. The main coordinator for each project has been marked with underlining. The secondary sample has been marked with bold font.

Table 2. Sample of Coverage Exposing Abuses Against Central American Migrants.

Project no., title, and duration	Description	<u>Coordinator</u> Media partner Secondary sample	In-person / virtual	Scope of coverage analyzed
4 Solitary Voices (e.g., García & Chávez, 2019). Five months, concluded in 2019	Investigated the misuse of solitary confinement of Central American and Mexican asylum- seekers in detention centers overseen by the DHS.	<u>ICIJ</u> <i>Plaza Pública</i> <i>Mex. Contra la Corrupción.</i> <i>NBC News</i> <i>The Intercept</i> <i>Univision</i> Grupo Sin	Virtual collaboration: Reporters communicated on a virtual bulletin board and stayed in frequent touch by phone and chat.	10 articles 52 images 3 videos 13 data excerpts
5 Zero Tolerance: Trump's Immigration Policy at the Border (e.g., Gallardo, 2018). June 2018 – no official conclusion date	Investigated abuses related to Trump's family separation policy in U.S. detention facilities.	<u>ProPublica</u> <i>Univision</i> <i>Animal Politico</i> <i>BuzzFeed News</i> <i>El Faro</i> <i>PBS Frontline</i> <i>The Intercept</i> <i>Plaza Pública</i> <i>Texas Tribune/</i> <i>El Periodico</i> <i>Prensa Libre</i>	Virtual collaboration: <i>ProPublica</i> created a map of 100 facilities holding immigrant children. Partners distributed the map to their virtual audiences, soliciting information from the public (crowdsourcing).	6 articles 8 images 1 video 2 interactive data links 32 social media posts
6 From Migrants to Refugees: The New Plight of Central Americans (e.g., Martínez, 2017). One-year investigation concluded in October 2017.	Investigated violence in the countries of the Northern Triangle and related forced migration to Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, and the United States.	<u>Univision</u> <i>El Faro</i>	Virtual: the newsrooms often discussed through Skype and co-edited each other's articles on Google Docs.	4 books 108 images 7 videos

Note. The main coordinator for each project has been marked with underlining. The secondary sample has been marked with bold font.

Methodology

This study formed part of a larger frame and field theoretical research project that analyzed content produced in collaborative investigative journalism across the U.S.-Mexico border. The first phase consisted of systematically collecting and organizing the multimedia sample. Specific codes were created to differentiate between each investigative project and each story within each project, with subcodes differentiating between different languages and co-published versions. Each project was also coded according to whether it was produced as an in-person or virtual investigative collaboration, or both.

This article builds on the frame analytical method applied to collaboratively produced content (for the field theoretical method, see Cheas, forthcoming). Frames can be identified deductively and inductively. The former approach examines the occurrence of predefined generic frames, whereas the latter focuses on unique issue frames in the research sample (van Gorp, 2010, p. 91). Given the heterogeneity of the sample, this analysis adopted a deductive approach—but rather than just identifying the presence or absence of generic threat and humanitarian frames, this study analyzed how these frames were countered and/or contextualized in investigative cross-border collaboration. A counter-frame promotes a contrary perspective to the dominant framing (Feagin, 2013, p. 163).

The study identified frames at their manifest level (Benson, 2013, p. 5) by particular words or phrases based on previous research and the sample. Codes were created to distinguish between (1) references to preexisting threat frames and counter-frames, (2) extensions of preexisting humanitarian frames, (3) possible new investigative frames, and (4) frameless data (graphs, maps, and other data lacking interpretation).

During the initial coding, it became clear that Iyengar's (1996) distinction between episodic and thematic frames was too simplistic for this study, given that most of the sample contained thematic framing. It seemed important to further differentiate between the levels of historical and other types of contexts offered. Hence, the study built on Rosen's (2011) typology of three different kinds of contexts relevant to journalism: background context, the story so far, and deep historical context (Table 3). The creation of all analytical codes was followed by systematic coding of the whole sample. The results were then qualitatively analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti software.

Table 3. Coding of the Different Types of Contexts.

Code and type of context	Description
A Episodic context	Depicts issues in terms of specific instances; does not require reporters to have subject-matter expertise (Iyengar, 1996).
B Thematic context	Depicts issues broadly by placing them in historical, geographical, or other relevant contexts; journalists' subject-matter expertise required (Iyengar, 1996).
B1 Background knowledge	Information needed to comprehend what is being reported. Analogous to the prerequisites of a college course: what a student needs to know before they can enter a specific-level course (Rosen, 2011).

B2 The story so far	Everything that has happened before the reader/spectator started paying attention to the story: Analogous to joining a college course in week 5: you need to know what happened in weeks 1–4 (Rosen, 2011).
B3 Deep historical context	The deeper context; the discussion of implications and consequences. Analogous to “further reading” in a college course (Rosen, 2011).

Findings

The cross-border collaborative coverage examined effectively countered the xenophobic framing of Central American and Mexican societies and citizens as a threat to U.S. society and culture. The coverage also manifested a diversity of socioeconomic, cultural, gender, and other backgrounds of Central American and Mexican citizens affected by violence, along with nuanced and individualized descriptions of their victimhood and suffering. These details were skillfully intertwined with background knowledge concerning violence, other societal circumstances, and push factors of forced migration. This way, the collaborative coverage reaches beyond a “glimpse” of humanitarian perspectives that fail to connect with the broader picture of violence and forced migration (see Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, p. 13). Most of the coverage contains thematic framing, providing different kinds of contexts that create a more complex perspective of Central America and Mexico in the U.S. media. This important context originates primarily in critical investigative reporting by Central American and Mexican journalists, building on their local knowledge and connections.

The collaborations certainly enabled the Central American and Mexican independent media to expose abuses by their countries’ governments. The collaborative coverage also exposed the current U.S. governments’ abuses against Central American and Mexican migrants. That said, a deep historical context related to U.S. foreign policy and its impact on the destabilization of Central American societies was missing from most of the collaborative coverage. This was hardly due to a lack of subject-matter expertise, given that the Central American journalists had included such context abundantly in their independent reporting related to similar topics before they collaborated with the U.S. media. The most critical and comprehensive context related to U.S. involvement was included in those two collaborative projects—Mining Secrets and Massacre in El Salvador—where journalists from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border worked in Central America side by side in person, in addition to virtual collaboration.

The finding raises concern about scholars celebrating cross-border collaborative journalism enabled by technological tools (e.g., Lewis, 2018) without sufficiently considering what kinds of critical context, dialogue, and awareness fail to emerge in the new virtual spaces. The finding also raises the critical question about the extent to which journalists in the Global North can comprehend the severity of the violence caused by Northern hegemony from the testimonies of their Southern partners and their sources alone, without having witnessed those circumstances for themselves.

In what follows, the article will provide examples from the analyzed projects to illustrate how the cross-border collaborative coverage countered threat frames and contextualized humanitarian frames, and how much critical context is included and missing in the different projects realized in virtual and/or in-person collaborations.

Countering Threat Frames, Missing Historical Context

One common “threat” frame is the “public order” frame, which depicts immigrants as lawbreakers and more likely than others to commit crimes and spread diseases (Benson, 2013, p. 8). The Zero Tolerance project (e.g., Gallardo, 2018) strongly counters this frame, showing how it was the Trump administration itself that was acting unlawfully and causing disorder by separating Central American families upon their arrival in the United States. That said, the Zero Tolerance collaborative coverage does not contain background knowledge or a deep historical context that would link the forced separation of Central American families by U.S. authorities with similar trauma from the past. Namely, during the armed conflicts in El Salvador (1979–1992) and Guatemala (1960–1996), the United States supported death squads that were responsible for numerous massacres and disappearances in the two countries. The death squads often separated children from their parents; many were killed and others placed on international adoption. Thousands of Central American families are still searching for these children (Chomsky, 2021, pp. 74–98; MacLeod, 2018, para. 13). Bourgois (2023) explicitly links this trauma with Trump’s Zero Tolerance family separation policy, concluding that “history is tragically repeating itself because the public has failed to learn from history and accountability” (p. 61). Bourgois’s understanding of the historical context stems from his lived experience in El Salvador in 1981, where he fled for his life from the death squads, along with hundreds of Salvadoran civilians, many of whom lost their children during the devastating journey (see Bourgois, 1982, p. 20).

The forced family separations and abuses against children during the U.S.-backed armed conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala had been reported by *El Faro* (e.g., Arauz, 2014) and *Plaza Pública* (e.g., Escalon, 2013) before their involvement in the Zero Tolerance collaboration. By inviting more contributions from Central American and Mexican partners and eyewitnesses from the North, the Zero Tolerance project could have delved deeper into the traumas caused by the U.S. administration and countered threat frames more effectively by showing how the United States has repeatedly caused public disorders in Central America.

Complex but Inadequate Reporting on the Cycle of Violence

The collaborative coverage contextualizes humanitarian victim frames by describing the personal tragedies of Central American and Mexican citizens and exploring violence as a macrolevel push factor driving forced migration from these regions. For instance, the From Migrants to Refugees project investigated how gang violence affects the lives of Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan people with different backgrounds. As part of the collaboration, *El Faro* journalist Óscar Martínez reported the stories of teenage Honduran girls whom he met at a migrant shelter: “They met three men who said they were immigrants and could help them cross to Mexico . . . The three men raped the girls” (Martínez, 2017, chapter 11, paras. 13–14). In other words, rather than selecting only those stories that neatly depict all Central American and Mexican migrants as innocent people, completely countering Trump’s framing of migrants as criminals and rapists, the collaborative reporting is brutally honest and factual. However, the coverage simultaneously shows that many people have had no choice but to commit crimes: “I ask him about the gang’s harassment. He says it was constant . . . ‘I had to belong, or I was going to be killed’” (Martínez, 2017, chapter 7, para. 33).

Background knowledge and deeper historical context are introduced in the *From Migrants to Refugees* project through a description of how thousands of Salvadorans fled from El Salvador to the United States during the armed conflict. Many of these Salvadorans who grew up amid violence became integrated into gangs in Los Angeles and were then deported back to El Salvador, a country still in ruin after the war. This caused the gangs to spread rapidly. However, the fact that the United States supported the Salvadoran death squads, provoking the original migration crisis and a cycle of violence (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020, p. 32) is not mentioned in the coverage.

The same historical context is lacking in *El Faro's* collaborative coverage with *The New York Times*, titled "Killers on a Shoestring," which likewise focused on gang violence (Martínez et al., 2016). Maslin (2016) describes how *El Faro's* reporters struggled to shorten scenes according to the expectations of *The Times* and find more straightforward ways to give readers context and background. However, even if substantially more compact (just one newspaper article) than *From Migrants to Refugees* (four books), the *Killers on a Shoestring* project contained a substantial amount of context. The only context missing from both collaborative projects was background knowledge and a deep historical context concerning the United States' support of the Salvadoran armed forces. Curiously, in *El Faro's* gang violence reporting, produced and published before these collaborations, this critical context had been abundant, mentioning "indescribable massacres perpetrated by elite army battalions, backed by US money, led by soldiers and generals who were trained at the US School of the Americas" (Martínez, 2014, p. 268) and how "everything that is happening to us is tangled up with the United States" (Martínez, 2016, p. 165).⁴

Relevant context related to the United States' more recent involvement in Central America is also missing from the *Solitary Voices* project. For instance, *Guatemalan Plaza Pública* tells the story of a Honduran named Silvio, who became politically active after the coup in the country in June 2009 (García & Chávez, 2019). The story explains that Silvio supported the ousted president Zelaya against the new president, Micheletti, and became a political prisoner in his country—as soon as he was released, he fled to the United States. However, the reasons for the Honduran coup, the U.S. role in it, and Silvio's support for Zelaya are not explained. Namely, Zelaya's government introduced free education, raised the medium wage by 80%, and subsidized small farmers. This was extraordinary in a country characterized by extreme inequality for centuries. The postcoup regime cast Honduras into repression, with the murder rate reaching the world's highest. While the United Nations and the European Union denounced the coup, the United States worked hard to legitimize it and eliminate Zelaya from the picture (Chomsky, 2021, pp. 159–161; Frank, 2018, pp. 9–10, 14, 31; MacLeod, 2018, para. 11). Adding this historical context would have helped the U.S. media audiences better understand the multiple layers of Silvio's victimhood and suffering—his motives for becoming an activist and seeking asylum in the United States, which had supported the destabilization of his country—only to become detained and placed in solitary confinement to punish him more without justified reason.

Previous reporting by *Plaza Pública* (Mejía Rivera & González Cerdeira, 2018) has argued that "the forced migration from Honduras cannot be understood without the continuity of the political crisis generated

⁴ Martínez's (2016) book is based on a series of articles he wrote for *elfaro.net*.

by the 2009 coup and the political support of the US to the post-coup regime" (para. 5). Yet, *Plaza Pública* refrained from including such a context in its collaborative coverage with the U.S. media.

In his critique concerning the lack of context in U.S. mainstream media's coverage of Central American migration, MacLeod (2018) observed:

The crucial and logical question of why there is so much violence . . . is not addressed, perhaps because doing so would necessitate looking at successive US governments' active roles in the region . . . Principled criticism of US foreign policy is off the table, it seems. (para. 16)

The question of why this context is also lacking from cross-border collaborative coverage should be associated with Global North-South power relations, especially considering that media in the North are in a coordinating, supervising, and funding role in all the collaborative projects. Such power dynamics should be examined in future research through ethnographic research and interviews with collaborators. One potential explanation that can be drawn from the present study alone is that in all the projects where the historical context about U.S. involvement in Central America was lacking, cross-border collaboration was mostly limited to virtual spaces. In these projects, Mexican and Central American journalists remain to the South of the Mexican border and U.S. journalists to the North, while the investigative collaboration takes place mostly online.

From their positions afar, U.S. journalists may not have been able to understand the heavy impact of their country's foreign policy on Central America and its forced migration. As noted by Chomsky (2021), "most US Americans, even those who decry the abusive treatment of immigrants, remain blissfully oblivious to the histories migrants carry" (p. 2). Several U.S. journalists and academics who have written and spoken about the U.S. impact on violence in Central America and Mexico have emphasized the importance of having witnessed these atrocities in Central America. For example, U.S. poet Carolyn Forché (2019) describes how political activist Leonel Gómez persuaded her to visit El Salvador in the late 1970s so that she could learn about the circumstances and then tell people in her country what was going on. Forché (2019) recognizes, "It was as if he stood me squarely before the world, removed the blindfold, and ordered me to open my eyes" (p. 384).

Central American and Mexican journalists are heavily dependent on the resources and protection of their U.S. partners. Therefore, Southern journalists may hesitate to dig deep into uncomfortable questions about Northern hegemony, fearing that they will lose necessary support in the future. There has been little research on how virtual collaborations may affect international work relations and how journalists can learn to trust one another when not working in the same physical space (see Konow-Lund et al., 2019). During the virtual collaborations, communication between the Northern and Southern journalists was mostly maintained via e-mail, chat, virtual bulletin boards, and Skype (Juarez, 2017; Maslin, 2016). These channels may be too limited to provide adequate space for critically addressing power inequalities between collaborators and their regions.

In the final part of the analysis, this article examines two collaborative projects in which U.S. and Central American journalists conducted investigations in Central America in person, in addition to sharing and analyzing data online.

In-Person Collaborations Exposing Crimes Against Humanity

Deep historical context concerning the United States' support of Salvadoran death squads is generously included in the collaborative project titled *Massacre in El Salvador*, consisting of two articles and a 27-minute documentary film. Throughout the reporting, the U.S. and Salvadoran journalists worked side by side in El Salvador. Alongside reporters of *El Faro*, the film involved two U.S. journalists, Susan Meiselas and Raymond Bonner, who had traveled to the remote village of El Mozote in early 1982 to investigate a government attack on civilians. Their story was published on the front page of *The New York Times* on January 27, 1982, depicting the massacre of hundreds of innocent civilians by U.S.-trained troops. In the collaborative film, Bonner recounts, "All their uniforms, all their M16 rifles, the helicopters that flew them into El Mozote, all supplied by the United States" (Roane, 2021, 00:06:44). The film describes how the U.S. Congress dismissed their reporting as communist propaganda, clearing the way for continued funding for the Salvadoran military: "The United States government was going to back the Salvadoran government come what may . . . so of course they were going to claim we were lying" (Roane, 2021, 00:11:41). The film revealed how the Salvadoran government is still denying the truth and preventing investigators from accessing crucial information.

Some background knowledge and deep historical context are missing from this project as well. The film displays President Reagan saying, "Very simply, guerrillas are attempting to impose a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship on the people of El Salvador" (Roane, 2021, 00:02:11). However, the coverage does not include any critical reflection as to whether this alleged threat of communism is real or why the armed conflict is occurring in El Salvador. It seems clear that this lack of context does not result from a lack of knowledge. In addition to *El Faro* journalists' expertise, Bonner's (2016) book about El Salvador manifests his understanding that the revolution was caused by the conditions and ideas originating in El Salvador rather than communist influences (chapter 2, para. 34).

This deep historical context is likely lacking in this collaborative coverage because of limited space or a different focus—it is unreasonable to expect journalists to cover every aspect of every story in an in-depth manner. Nevertheless, it needs to be addressed in this frame analytical study that this collaborative project does not counter the historical Cold War and Communism frames depicting El Salvador as a threat to the United States (Hallin, 1994). The misinformation and xenophobic narrative that constituted this historical frame by the U.S. government, CIA, and the Salvadoran military is not directly challenged in the coverage. What is explicitly contested is the United States' violent reaction to this alleged threat. Moreover, the coverage is dominated by a contextualized humanitarian frame describing how generations of Salvadorans are suffering from the trauma caused by the persisting lack of accountability by both the U.S. and Salvadoran governments.

Another project, "Mining Secrets," also features journalists from the Northern and Southern sides of the border working together in Central America (e.g., Peruchòn, 2022). The project, coordinated by

Forbidden Stories headquartered in France but also involving U.S. journalists, depicts the realities of Guatemalans in the village of El Estor. Their health and safety are threatened by multinational corporations based in different countries in the North. The citizens' protests and demands for accountability toward the company have resulted in violence, threats, and deaths. The project contains a strong global economy frame: a victim frame depicting unjust North-South relations (Benson, 2013, p. 8). The project also provides background knowledge and a deep historical context that is lacking in the Massacre in El Salvador project, labeling false accusations of communism as "dangerous implications in a country where the military committed crimes against humanity in the context of counterinsurgency" (Cuffe, 2022, para. 74).

In short, the analysis of these two projects suggests that in-person investigative collaboration supports the inclusion of critical background knowledge and deep historical context more readily than collaborations where interactions between the Northern and Southern collaborators are mostly or completely limited to virtual spaces. It should be emphasized that it is unlikely that very short in-person visits—parachute foreign reporting (Hamilton, 2009)—are enough for the formation of this kind of meaningful connection with local journalists. For instance, Bonner (2016) recalls reporting from El Salvador:

It has to approach the height of journalistic arrogance to pronounce upon elections on the basis of having been present on voting day and perhaps a few days before and after. But that is precisely what was done by the journalists as well as by the international observers; the US delegation was in the country for four days. (Bonner, 2016, chapter 15, para. 13)

Like the Massacre in the El Salvador project, the Mining Secrets project devotes substantial space to descriptions of the challenges and threats experienced by local Central American journalists investigating the issue. Witnessing these challenges firsthand while working together in the field may strengthen the bond between the journalists involved, enabling difficult discussions about sensitive topics and leading to more informed and contextualized coverage. U.S. journalists and scholars such as Ray Bonner, Don North, and Philippe Bourgois, who not only spent substantial time investigating Central America but also experienced censorship and dismissal in their own country, are most likely to gain the trust of the Central American and Mexican journalists who live under constant threat and dismissal from the authorities. This kind of deeper connection with journalists from the South would likely allow these Northern journalists to continue the collaborations virtually without falling short of critical context. In other words, the limitations of virtual spaces are most likely affecting new collaborations between partners who are unfamiliar with each other's contexts and challenges.

Conclusions

The collaborative investigative coverage across the U.S.-Mexico border analyzed in this article effectively countered the misinformative and xenophobic framing of Central America and Mexico and citizens from the region as a threat to the U.S. society. The collaborations also resulted in considerable contextualization of the humanitarian frames used in traditional U.S. media's reporting. It would be important for future research to accurately assess the longer-term impact of cross-border collaboration on the quality of reporting—whether journalists in the Global North continue to counter xenophobic and misinformative frames and use contextualized humanitarian frames after a collaborative project with

Southern partners comes to an end. For instance, *The New York Times* article “El Salvador Decimated its Ruthless Gangs” (Kitroeff, 2023) seems to make use of similar contextualizing frames as the newspaper’s 2016 collaborative coverage with *El Faro*. This *Times* article also refers to recent coverage by *El Faro* on the same topic, suggesting continued connections seven years past the original collaboration. However, a closer analysis of this post-collaboration coverage is beyond the scope of this article.

While all the examined projects contained rigorous reporting, background knowledge and a deep historical context concerning U.S. foreign policy and its impact on the cycle of violence and forced migration was lacking from most projects. This context had been elaborated in previous reporting by the Central American and Mexican media and journalists involved in the collaborations, suggesting that a lack of subject-matter expertise was not the reason for the absence of thematic framing. The two projects where U.S. journalists worked alongside their Central American and Mexican colleagues on the Southern side of the border, investigating violence in Central America, were the ones that best managed to capture the critical historical context concerning the involvement of the U.S. government and powerful corporations of the Global North in Central America.

Researchers have celebrated the “ever-advancing technologies” and their “enormous potential” for collaborative journalism, “tearing down walls” (e.g., Lewis, 2018, p. 5). However, little empirical research has investigated how virtual newsrooms affect international work relations—whether and how journalists can learn to trust one another when they do not work in the same physical space (Konow-Lund et al., 2019). This article has suggested that collaborations limited to virtual spaces limit vulnerable journalists from the South from addressing the impact of Northern hegemony on their countries, restricting their reporting capacity to avoid risking their future funding and international networking opportunities. Hence, before the technology-driven study of cross-border journalism “moves from ‘traditional’ understanding of foreign or international journalism as nation-centric or place-based practices to more innovative conceptualizations of global or transnational journalism marked by fluidity and flexible spaces-based approaches,” as has been called for (Hellmueller & Berglez, 2023, p. 10), it is important to recognize the persisting boundaries and hierarchies between nations, places, and regions, preventing the emergence of genuinely open global communication and investigative reporting. Moreover, concerns about the precarious conditions of “fixers” (e.g., Blacksin & Mitra, 2024, p. 1273) need to be extended to the study of collaborative investigative journalism—is virtual collaborative journalism ultimately different from foreign reporting that exploits local journalists rather than granting them recognition and freedom of expression?

Even if still problematic in many ways, cross-border collaborative journalism is fundamental for the future of global watchdog reporting. Without support from the Global North, Central American and Mexican independent media—like media elsewhere in the Global South—are at risk of becoming completely silenced, while repressive governments still avoid accountability and continue to exploit the most vulnerable citizens. At the same time, abuses against migrants and xenophobic misinformation continue to rise in the North. Cross-border collaboration between Northern investigative outlets and Southern independent journalists would seem like a win-win situation, with the North extending financial support and protection to their threatened Southern peers and correcting and contextualizing their reporting through the in-depth expertise provided by their Southern partners.

Important questions to be asked by future research, which should also build on interviews and ethnographic methods, include how freely the Southern partners perceive they can elaborate on questions related to Northern hegemony and abuses in situations where the partner based in the Global North is leading and/or funding the collaborations, and how these experiences differ in virtual and in-person environments. The dynamics in such collaborations should be systematically compared with collaborations coordinated by global networks and/or media based in the Global South. This way, journalists and researchers can identify the most sustainable and democratic forms of North-South collaborative investigative journalism.

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