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Journalism Under Restriction

How Five Venezuelan Independent Outlets Covered the January 2026 Release of Political Prisoners

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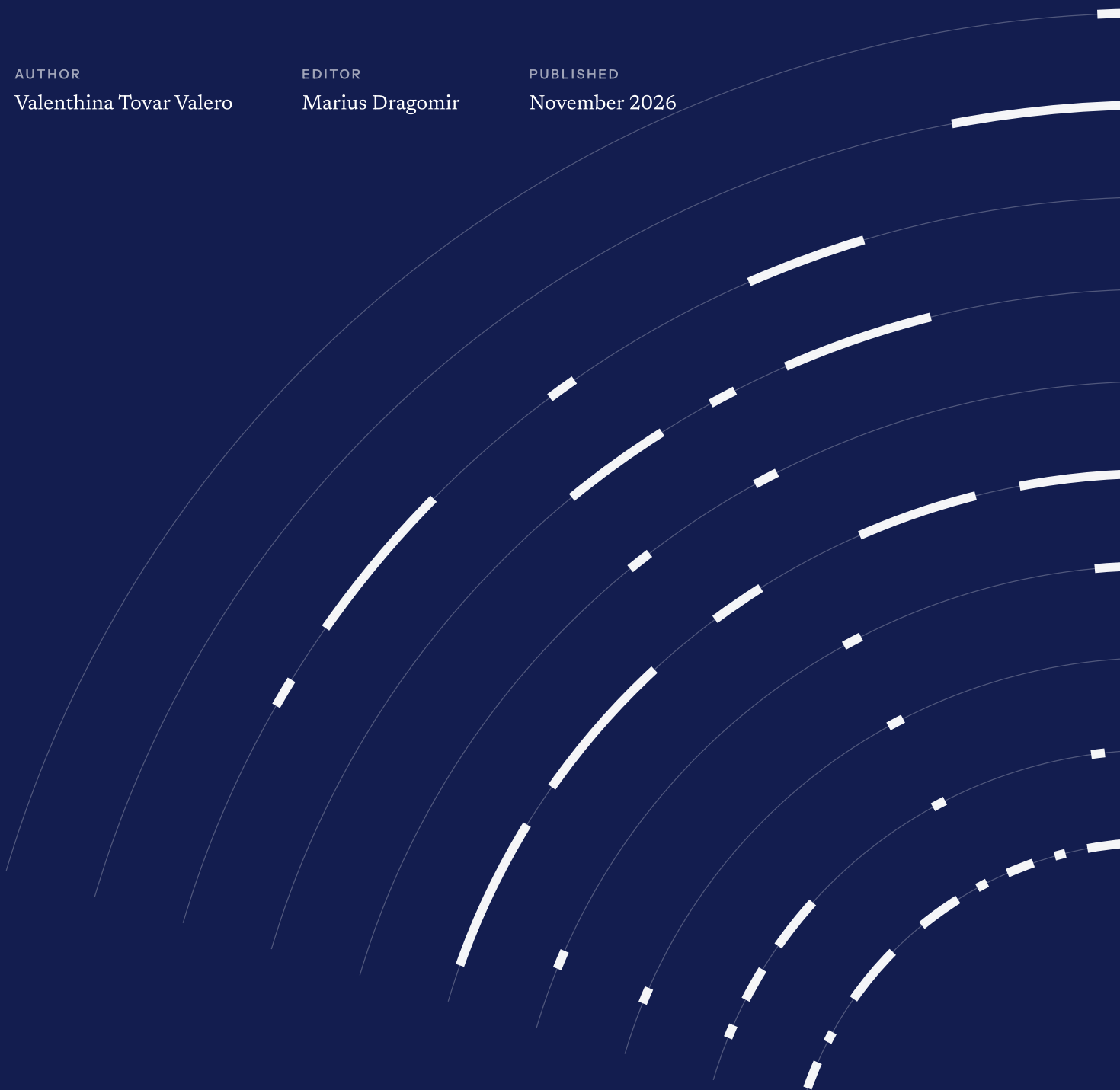

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Executive summary

This report examines how five Venezuelan independent digital outlets covered the release of political prisoners announced on January 8, 2026. It analyzes a purposive sample of 24 articles published between January 8 and 19 by Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, TalCual, Runrun.es and Crónica Uno. The analysis considers sourcing, framing and adaptation to risk, using publicly available interviews with journalists for context.

Across the corpus, NGO data, family accounts and independent documentation provided alternatives to official statements. Human rights framing, biographical profiles and testimony from relatives foregrounded the conditions of release and the experiences of prisoners and their families. Collective bylines, anonymization, legal-risk disclaimers and alternative distribution channels were among the practices documented in the material examined.

The report proposes a tentative four-layer typology of adaptation, covering source diversification, editorial and framing practices, protection of journalists and sources, and alternative distribution infrastructure. The content analysis does not establish editorial motives or measure whether these practices improved safety or maintained audience access. Its practical implications concern sourcing networks, support for reporting teams, alternative distribution and attention to gendered experiences. These implications are bounded by the small sample, short study window and reliance on a single coder.

5	24	204	3
independent digital outlets	articles analyzed	article entries in the initial screening pool	publicly available journalist interviews

Study window: January 8–19, 2026 · Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, TalCual, Runrun.es, Crónica Uno

01

Introduction

According to Reporters Without Borders, Venezuela ranks 159th out of 180 countries in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index [1]. Over the last 27 years, Venezuela has undergone a gradual restriction of its media environment through constant institutional and legal surveillance, administrative closures, license revocations, and public warnings. More than 400 media outlets have been closed over two decades [2], while social media platforms, including X, have been blocked by the state telecommunications regulator, the Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (CONATEL). These restrictions have been accompanied by the use of technology to pursue dissidents and critics [3], severe internet restrictions, and the direct persecution of media workers, with Espacio Público recording 44 arbitrary detentions in retaliation for critical expression in 2025 and 27 in the first three months of 2026. These figures include media workers and private citizens [4].

During the study period, this backdrop was underpinned by two enacted laws: the Ley contra el Odio (2017) and the Ley Constitucional Antibloqueo para el Desarrollo Nacional y la Garantía de los Derechos Humanos (2020), commonly known as the Ley Antibloqueo, and a draft law, the Ley contra el Fascismo, approved in first reading by the National Assembly in April 2024 but not enacted during the study period [5]. The Ley contra el Odio has been presented as a mechanism to combat hate speech and has been applied to restrict critical expression [4]. The Ley Antibloqueo was introduced to protect the national economy from international sanctions; its provisions on confidentiality and reserved information, including Articles 37–42, restrict access to certain public records and documents [6]. These restrictions contribute to an environment of censorship and legal uncertainty. Alongside this legal framework, the state has created institutions such as CONATEL, which regulates and supervises telecommunications and can order broadcast closures, block access to media websites, and revoke broadcast licenses. The Consejo Nacional de Ciberseguridad, established by presidential decree in 2024, is an advisory body that proposes cybersecurity measures and promotes a continuous monitoring network for telematic incidents. Espacio Público has warned that these powers could contribute to online surveillance and censorship [7]. This legal framework may have shaped the backdrop against which the media covered the political events of January 2026 and how independent journalists reported on the prisoner releases.

Following the U.S. military operation of January 3, 2026, which led to the capture of Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela experienced a series of rapid political events. During these days, the media environment was characterized by increasing restrictions and coercive measures [8]. On January 4, a team of journalists from the international media outlet Univisión Noticias was detained for about two hours by the Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (SEBIN), while their mobile phones and documents were checked [9]. Venezuela's national press workers' union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa (SNTP), documented the arbitrary detention of at least 14 journalists and media workers in Caracas on January 5, during the opening of the National Assembly's new session. One of those detained was deported [10]. On January 7, CONATEL ordered Impacto 105.3 FM in La Fría, Táchira, off the air [9]. Against this political backdrop, Jorge Rodríguez, in his capacity as the president of the National Assembly, announced the release of political prisoners on January 8, 2026. The legal framework established under the Maduro administration remained in force.

Given this context, the January 8 releases constituted a political event that had to be reported within a highly constrained media environment, in which outlets reported on the story under legal restrictions that had resulted in the imprisonment of some of their colleagues and the closure of other media outlets. This convergence between covering a significant political event and the restrictive conditions under which it had to be reported makes the January 2026 prisoner releases a particularly relevant case for examining how independent media operated under these conditions.

Within this restrictive environment, independent media outlets have become an important source of information for Venezuelans. These outlets and journalists have operated under legal and digital pressures while reporting on politically sensitive events in the country. As restrictions on traditional media have increased, independent outlets have continued their reporting practices by relying on alternative methods. This adaptation within a highly restrictive environment makes Venezuela an interesting case for examining how independent outlets have found new pathways to operate. On this basis, the article seeks to understand how selected Venezuelan independent digital outlets documented and framed the January 2026 release of political prisoners, and what reporting methods and strategies these outlets used to gather, diversify and communicate information. The study focuses on five prominent independent media outlets in Venezuela: Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, TalCual, Runrun.es, and Crónica Uno. It analyzes a corpus of 24 articles published between January 8 and 19, 2026.

The article is structured as follows. First, the methodology section outlines the research design, data collection, and analytical framework. Second, the findings section presents the results organized around three analytical dimensions — sourcing, framing, and adaptation-to-risk strategies — and contextualizes them with publicly available journalist interviews used as secondary material. After considering the limitations, the article discusses the main findings and their implications for understanding the importance of adaptation strategies within restrictive media environments, before presenting practical implications and conclusions.

02

Methodology

The article presents a desk-research case study of the January 2026 release of political prisoners in Venezuela. Five independent digital outlets were selected based on their recognition by international press freedom organizations: Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, TalCual, Runrun.es, and Crónica Uno. The selected study window runs from January 8, 2026, when the government announced the releases, to January 19, 2026, corresponding to the first days in which the releases were carried out and reported.

The articles were identified through a systematic keyword search of each outlet's archive between January 8 and 19, 2026. Google site-specific searches were conducted using the formula site:[outlet domain] "[keyword]" after:2026-01-08 before:2026-01-20 for the five outlets. The keywords used, alongside their variations, were: presos políticos, presos politicos, liberación, liberacion, centros de detención, centros de detencion, presos liberados, and excarcelados. For outlets where Google indexing was insufficient, searches were conducted directly through the websites' internal archives. Google searches were cross-checked against the outlets' internal search results.

The initial screening pool contained 204 article entries across the five outlets, after four rows containing notes or duplicate entries were removed from an earlier 208-row log. Based on a first reading of titles and dates, each article was classified as "Yes", "No", or "Maybe". Articles were marked "No" if they were outside the study window, were clearly about other events, or were duplicates across keyword searches. This process resulted in 106 articles marked "Yes" and 27 marked "Maybe", for a combined pool of 133 articles. The 27 "Maybe" articles were reviewed in a second round and those found to be relevant were incorporated into the "Yes" pool for final consideration. The final selection of 24 articles was

then made from the "Yes" pool, with four to five articles per outlet through a purposive maximum-variation approach. Four to five articles per outlet were considered sufficient to capture variation across the five reporting categories while keeping the corpus manageable for analysis by a single researcher. Five reporting categories guided the final selection: coverage of an official announcement, on-the-ground reporting outside a detention center, direct testimony from affected families, scrutiny or verification of disputed figures, and contextual or explanatory reporting. Each category was represented at least once per outlet where possible, so that the corpus could capture different reporting practices. This process resulted in a final corpus of 24 articles: five each from Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo, TalCual, and Crónica Uno, and four from Runrun.es. The 24 articles are not intended to statistically represent all Venezuelan independent media coverage of the releases, but rather to provide a structured purposive sample through which particular reporting practices can be examined.

Each article was analyzed by a single researcher using a structured coding sheet with three analytical dimensions: sourcing, framing, and adaptation to risk, alongside basic information such as outlet, date, and title. The sourcing dimension examined the range of source types cited, including government officials, NGOs, family members, legal representatives, and eyewitnesses. The framing dimension examined how each outlet characterized the releases: as a government gesture, a human rights issue, a transition plan, or evidence of continued repression, as well as how the articles contested official claims and referred to the constrained media environment. The adaptation-to-risk dimension examined visible practices potentially related to legal and digital constraints, including anonymous sourcing, cautious language, editorial and structural choices, alternative sourcing methods, and explicit acknowledgments of the reporting environment and related practices. These observations do not, by themselves, establish editorial motivations. A separate section of the coding sheet was used for open observations on the framing of the releases. The coding template is included in Appendix 1. Article IDs cited in the analytical text are illustrative examples, rather than an exhaustive inventory of each practice. Table 1 gives the article IDs recorded for each practice on the researcher's coding sheet. TalCual's January 18 article (TC-04) was part of the sample and is discussed in the text, but the sheet lists it under no practice. All five TalCual articles count toward the outlet's ratings. Appendix 2 lists all 24 articles. Article identifiers use EC for Efecto Cocuyo, EP for El Pitazo, TC for TalCual, RR for Runrun.es, and CU for Crónica Uno, followed by an article number.

The analysis was complemented by contextual document analysis of relevant press freedom reports and three publicly available interviews with Venezuelan journalists. The interviews were not conducted for this

study, but they are used as secondary contextual material to analyze patterns emerging from the article analysis. They do not directly establish the motives of the journalists who produced the selected articles.

03

Findings

Venezuelan independent outlets maintained their capacity to inform audiences while largely avoiding direct editorial confrontation with the government's narrative, instead constructing an indirect counter-narrative. Across the corpus, a recurrent theme was the interconnection of strategies through sourcing, framing, and adaptation practices observed within this restrictive environment.

Sourcing patterns

All five outlets drew on sources beyond the Venezuelan government. They treated official statements as claims to test and constructed their articles through a layered combination of NGO data, family testimonies, and independent documentation, which served both informational and counter-narrative functions.

One of the first patterns emerged in coverage of official announcements. On January 8, three days after Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as acting president, National Assembly president Jorge Rodríguez announced the releases. All five outlets reported Jorge Rodríguez's promise to release what he called "un número importante" ("a significant number") of people. He gave no figure (EC-01, EP-01, TC-01, RR-01, CU-01). The articles drew on different parts of the speech to describe the conditions of release. The January 8 announcement also provided a backdrop for stories in the other categories. The articles covering the announcement on January 8 did not provide sufficient evidence to confirm direct journalist presence at the press conference (EC-01, EP-01, TC-01, RR-01, CU-01).

Four of the five outlets drew on accounts from prisoners' relatives or people close to them, making families a central source in the coverage. These testimonies may have served to make the families' voices heard while also providing direct information about what was happening during the releases, including their conditions, irregularities, and the lack of institutional structure. In this sense, family testimonies provided information about how the release plan was being implemented, even when these details were not specified by official sources. Therefore, these testimonies served a dual function: they provided direct information about the releases while also foregrounding their human dimension to

capture the physical and emotional reality of the release process. Some articles explicitly noted interviewees' requests to remain anonymous (EC-02, TC-05, CU-04).

Within this source type, the outlets employed different sourcing strategies for family testimonies. For cases involving military personnel, Efecto Cocuyo drew on accounts from relatives in exile, including testimony shared on video (EC-05). The coded examples include interviews near detention centers (EC-02, TC-05), relatives quoted in other reporting contexts (EC-04, CU-02) and statements circulated on social media (EC-05, EP-03). Other articles illustrate the range of voices heard at vigils. In its account from El Helicoide, Crónica Uno quoted a mother and noted that some families there were waiting for relatives held on nonpolitical charges (CU-03). TalCual relayed a mother's testimony from a post on X (TC-04). El Pitazo quoted an unnamed source close to prisoners' families (EP-01) and attributed information to unnamed sources close to one prisoner's family (EP-02). Neither article said that anonymity had been requested. This variation may suggest that outlets adapted their sourcing strategies depending on the political sensitivity of the case and the resources available for on-the-ground reporting. However, the published articles do not establish why each sourcing channel was chosen.

All five outlets used statements, data, and reports from NGOs as a sourcing strategy (EC-01, EC-02, EC-04, EP-01, EP-03, EP-04, TC-02, TC-03, RR-01, RR-02, RR-04, CU-01, CU-04). These sources were used to frame the releases and to contrast government claims about the number of prisoners released and the conditions of the releases. This may suggest that outlets relied on independent, non-governmental sources to provide information about the situation and to address the lack of official and transparent data. Crónica Uno, for example, cited a statement posted on X by Foro Penal's director (CU-02). The sample's only regional article, on Bolívar, cited the outlet's own database of political detentions in the state alongside NGO data (CU-05). This may indicate a strategy for addressing the absence of official documentation, particularly in areas outside Caracas.

Among these sourcing patterns, some outlets used on-the-ground reporting near detention centers, with journalists present at the scene (Efecto Cocuyo, TalCual, and Crónica Uno) (EC-02, TC-05, CU-03, CU-04), while other outlets, such as El Pitazo and Runrun.es, relied more on social media aggregation (EP-03, EP-04, RR-02).

Framing patterns

Across the corpus, all five outlets constructed a counter-narrative to the government's framing of the releases as a gesture of reconciliation, though the degree of explicitness varied. They did so by emphasizing the human dimension of the releases through biographical documentation and the selection of external voices, as well as through one article specifically focused on detained journalists and one article with a gender-focused perspective.

The articles were primarily framed from a human rights perspective, highlighting the conditions of the releases through testimonies and emphasizing the broader human dimension of the prisoners' cases. This framing was particularly evident in biographical profiles, which presented the prisoners' careers and personal lives alongside the charges initially attributed to them by the government. Individual case stories — such as the one about Génesis Gabriela Pabón Paredes and Rocío del Mar Rodríguez (EP-05) or the accounts provided by family members (EC-02, EC-05, TC-05) — similarly incorporated biographical information and direct family testimony. This social dimension of imprisonment appears to be present throughout the articles, framing incarceration not simply as a process occurring in the background but as an experience affecting the lives of individuals.

This human framing was also achieved through coverage of vigils near detention centers, which highlighted the solidarity networks formed among family members and neighbors. Efecto Cocuyo and TalCual detailed the conditions under which family members and neighbors supported one another outside the detention centers (EC-02, TC-04, TC-05), adding another layer to the framing by showing that the effects of the releases extended beyond the prisoners themselves. In this way, the releases were presented as a multifaceted event affecting both prisoners and their surrounding communities. This framing may also have served as a mechanism for presenting the backdrop of heavy military presence around the detention centers and the tense environment (TC-04, TC-05, CU-03), providing context for the conditions in which these networks of mutual support emerged.

This human framing was positioned against the government's framing and the legal framing of imprisonment. Articles explicitly mentioned charges such as terrorism, often immediately following personal stories about the detainees. Outlets such as Efecto Cocuyo, El Pitazo and Runrun.es engaged with these accusations and followed them with biographical information (EC-05, EP-05, RR-03) or other editorial choices that provided an alternative framing.

Another framing strategy involved the use of direct quotations from external sources, such as family members and NGO reports, which provided accounts of how the releases were being carried out. The outlets' selection of specific terms used by these external sources — such as "selective," "discriminatory," "insufficient," and "incomplete," or descriptions of the releases as not constituting full freedom due to their conditional nature — appears to have contributed to this framing (EP-03, EP-04, RR-02, RR-04, TC-03, EC-04).

Beyond the written text, the outlets may have also relied on visual elements to frame the releases. Photographs showed the military or police presence outside detention centers while civilians were waiting outside (CU-03), as well as the vigils, tents and families waiting for news (TC-04, TC-05, CU-03, CU-04). This pattern was present in the articles even when the written text did not explicitly address these power dynamics. This finding may suggest that visual elements provided an additional means through which outlets could convey the unequal power dynamics surrounding the releases without explicitly articulating this critique in the written text. This does not establish why the photographs were selected.

Two articles in the corpus addressed specific dimensions of the releases not covered by the other articles. Within the corpus, Runrun.es devoted one article specifically to the situation of detained journalists (RR-03). Drawing on the SNTP's account, the outlet used cautious language to explain that the detentions did not stem from proven criminal acts. This framing was complemented by biographical profiles of the released and still-detained journalists, reflecting a recurrent strategy identified across the corpus while also introducing a distinct dimension: the restrictions faced by journalists as a professional group. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how an independent outlet frames repression affecting its own professional field, and how it used sourcing and biographical documentation to challenge the legal framing of those detentions.

Only one article in the corpus adopted a specific gendered focus. Crónica Uno's January 16 article documented how women formed a minority of the released prisoners — 17 of the 84 releases that the article attributed to Foro Penal's confirmed count as of January 16 — and framed their limited presence as an important dimension of the release process (CU-04). It also documented the burden carried by female family members throughout the process — mothers, wives, and sisters who had traveled from other regions, organized the vigils, and sustained the solidarity networks outside detention centers. This gendered dimension extended the human rights framing, explaining the social and familial burden of political imprisonment. These figures describe CU-04's dated account; the study

does not independently reconstruct Foro Penal's national totals. A comparison with the detained population would be needed to establish differences in release rates between women and men.

These framing strategies appeared to be interlinked with the adaptation practices that outlets used to operate within the restrictive environment. The constraints may have shaped both how the releases were framed and the ways in which outlets produced and communicated this framing. Published articles alone cannot establish the motivations behind these editorial choices.

Adaptation patterns

Adaptation to risk appeared as a multilayered set of strategies and practices at the individual level for journalists and family members, in article content, and in distribution infrastructure.

The risks to which outlets were exposed were also reflected in the experiences of journalists who had been persecuted and imprisoned. The possibility of retaliation may have shaped adaptation practices aimed at reducing the risk of journalist identification. The coding sheet records collective bylines at all five outlets: 21 articles in total. It records two individual bylines, both from TalCual (TC-01, TC-05). TC-04 is credited to TalCual in the published article, but has no byline entry on the sheet. Although the articles did not explicitly state the reasons for using individual bylines, the byline alone does not establish whether attribution reflected a case-by-case assessment of risk, a uniform editorial policy, or other considerations.

Concerns about identification were also reflected in the anonymization of people interviewed. Three articles explicitly noted that interviewees, including relatives and neighbors, wished to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation (EC-02, TC-05, CU-04). Both the use of anonymization and the explicit acknowledgment of these requests are consistent with the constraints under which the outlets operated. El Pitazo did not name some of its sources (EP-01, EP-02). Neither article reported a request for anonymity, and neither is counted as anonymous sourcing in Table 1.

This pattern was also observable in the content of the articles themselves. Articles may have used direct quotations to articulate critical arguments while maintaining distance from the outlet's own voice. Outlets also employed cautious and distancing language, using terms such as "supuestamente" ("allegedly") and "según fuentes" ("according to sources") when reporting government charges against released prisoners. While this was a consistent practice in the articles, it may also reflect a standard journalistic practice tied to the presumption of innocence and may not be exclusive to the restrictive environment.

The coding sheet records legal disclaimers in eight articles: four from TalCual (TC-01, TC-02, TC-03, TC-05) and all four from Runrun.es (RR-01, RR-02, RR-03, RR-04). A disclaimer also appears at the end of TC-04, which is not included in that count. These disclaimers referred to three legal instruments, described here using the names Ley contra el Odio, Ley Antibloqueo, and the draft Ley contra el Fascismo. The last of these had not been enacted during the study period. TalCual explicitly described the reporting environment as hostile and acknowledged that its content was produced while taking existing threats and limitations into consideration (TC-02). This practice suggests a distinct adaptation strategy: rather than silently adapting to legal constraints, these outlets made them visible to readers.

Among the five outlets, Crónica Uno appears to have employed two distinct adaptation techniques: a mirror site and a WhatsApp subscription channel as alternative distribution infrastructure (CU-01, CU-02, CU-03, CU-04, CU-05). These techniques may suggest that the outlet sought alternative means of maintaining access to its reporting in response to restrictions and blocking, while also establishing alternative channels in the event of government censorship.

A further pattern observed across the corpus was cross-referencing among journalists. TalCual cited Vladimir Villegas – a named Venezuelan journalist – as a source (TC-02), which may indicate information sharing between journalists operating under restriction. Crónica Uno described a video circulated by Villegas (CU-03). That reference and the post cited in CU-02 illustrate the use of individual social media sources; neither article is recorded as social media aggregation in Table 1. Runrun.es embedded a post crediting his footage (RR-01) and posts by Gabriel Bastidas and Enderson Sequera about the releases (RR-03). This may suggest a pattern of informal information sharing that may function as a sourcing strategy. Citations and embedded posts alone do not establish coordinated cross-outlet collaboration or a protective effect.

Together, these results provide important insights into the strategies that may have operated as an interconnected response through which Venezuelan independent outlets maintained their capacity to inform and report while managing legal restrictions and other constraints. The outlets found ways to operate under surveillance through independent sourcing, human rights framing, and editorial choices consistent with the risks of the reporting environment. Table 1 summarizes the reporting and adaptation practices recorded on the coding sheet for the five outlets.

TABLE 1

Reporting and adaptation practices across the five outlets

PRACTICE	EFECTO COCUYO EC	EL PITAZO EP	TALCUAL TC	RUNRUN.ES RR	CRÓNICA UNO CU
NGO sourcing	● Yes 01–02, 04	● Yes 01–04	● Yes 01–03, 05	● Yes 01–02, 04	● Yes 01–05
Family sourcing	● Yes 02, 04–05	● Yes 01–03	◐ Partial 05	○ No	◐ Partial 02
Anonymous sourcing	◐ Partial 02	○ No	◐ Partial 05	○ No	◐ Partial 04
On-the-ground reporting	◐ Partial 02	○ No	◐ Partial 05	○ No	◐ Partial 03–04
Collective bylines	● Yes 01–05	● Yes 01–05	◐ Partial 02–03	● Yes 01–04	● Yes 01–05
Named journalist byline	○ No	○ No	◐ Partial 01, 05	○ No	○ No
Legal disclaimers	○ No	○ No	● Yes 01–03, 05	● Yes 01–04	○ No
Social media aggregation	◐ Partial 05	● Yes 01–04	◐ Partial 02	● Yes 01–03	○ No
Alternative distribution channels	○ No	○ No	○ No	○ No	● Yes 01–05
Gender lens	○ No	○ No	○ No	○ No	◐ Partial 04

Note. "Yes" means the practice was recorded in more than half of an outlet's sample; "Partial" means it was recorded in at least one article but no more than half. "No" means the coding sheet lists no article for that practice and outlet. The numbers identify articles within each outlet (for example, 02 under El Pitazo is EP-02). For alternative distribution channels, "Yes" means a channel was documented for the outlet. The table describes only the sample.

04

Contextual triangulation: journalists' interviews

Online interviews with three Venezuelan journalists describe a constrained media environment before, during, and after January 2026. The interviews reflect both the conditions under which journalists report in Venezuela and accounts of adaptation strategies that help contextualize the article analysis.

Miguel Henrique Otero, president and editor of El Nacional in exile – an outlet whose premises were confiscated following a defamation case by Diosdado Cabello – speaking in an interview conducted by El Debate and republished by Arcadia Foundation on February 27, 2026, just weeks after the study window closed, identifies internet blocking as one of the main structural obstacles to press freedom in Venezuela, arguing that "no puede haber una transición en Venezuela sin que haya medios libres" [11]. This testimony directly connects press freedom to the political transition of the country, framing media independence as a precondition for democratic change.

Ana Carolina Arias, General Secretary of the Nueva Esparta branch of the National College of Journalists (CNP), speaking on January 15, 2026, described the imprisonment of journalists, noting that they had been detained "básicamente por cumplir su labor de informar" and deprived of liberty without due process following the publication of information, interviews, or analysis [12]. Arias provides both a national and regional perspective, documenting how the situation in Nueva Esparta reflected broader patterns of press restriction that predate January 2026: the disappearance of printed outlets due to denial of printing paper, repression, intimidation, and the systematic shrinking of independent media. Crucially, she highlights the innovation strategies through which Venezuelan journalists have navigated this constrained environment – framing their continued operation not as passive survival but as an active exercise of professional bravery. Her testimony helps contextualize the adaptation patterns identified in the article corpus while situating them within a longer historical trajectory of press restriction.

Esteninf Olivarez, speaking in May 2026, reflects on her experience of on-the-ground reporting throughout her career in Venezuela, describing how she experienced impartiality itself as a form of risk – noting that "no había manera de disfrazar la realidad" when reporting on the ground, and that sharp questioning and direct coverage resulted in immediate

backlash and lasting psychological effects [13]. In terms of adaptation strategies, Olivarez describes what she calls "hacer periodismo con inteligencia" – a deliberate approach that combines alternative social media use and collaborative information sharing among journalists within the country and with journalists abroad. In her account, this last strategy is particularly significant when dealing with sensitive information, such as testimony from family members of political prisoners, which she describes sharing with colleagues outside Venezuela to distribute the risk. She also describes collaborative on-the-ground reporting as a collective protection measure against detention.

These interviews align in documenting the effects of the constrained media environment both at the structural level and on the personal and professional lives of journalists.

05

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the researcher's positionality as an outside observer living abroad. This affects the way in which the context is analyzed. Not being present in Venezuela at the time the events occurred limits the interpretive claims that can be made. Furthermore, being from the country being studied provides contextual familiarity but may also influence the coding of the corpus and introduce bias into the analytical process.

The five outlets selected represent a small sample of the independent media landscape in Venezuela. The selection also excludes coverage published only on platforms such as Instagram and X, which have been used throughout the Venezuelan crisis to report in real time and may reflect distinct adaptation strategies not captured in this study. Posts embedded in the selected articles were included in the analysis.

Furthermore, the 24 articles in the corpus represent a purposive sample rather than an exhaustive one. They were chosen following the five categories to ensure maximum variation. Therefore, across the other articles from January 8–19 there may be reporting practices or patterns that the study does not capture. Frequencies in this sample cannot be generalized to the outlets' full coverage.

Much of the on-the-ground reporting concerned Caracas and nearby detention centers. Although the corpus includes an article focused on Bolívar (CU-05), it provides limited grounds for comparing practices across regions.

06

Discussion

In suffocating environments, laws, regulations, and institutions shape and constrain the ways in which information and ideas can be shared and communicated. Context shapes the environment, but it also shapes how people respond to it. If freedom of expression is under pressure globally, journalists operating under autocracies face an additional layer: a restrictive environment that limits the means of communication but does not extinguish creativity and resilience. Survival itself becomes a strategy when the task of informing people means not only delivering news, but keeping the public engaged and aware.

"This study suggests that under restriction, journalism does not disappear – it finds ways to strategically continue."

This study suggests that under restriction, journalism does not disappear – it finds ways to strategically continue. While protecting their practices, their sources, and themselves, journalists adapt. The Venezuelan case seems to indicate that journalists found ways to report on highly sensitive political topics through a multilayered strategy.

Such strategies can be identified in this study as a tentative typology emerging from the analytical dimensions used in the coding framework. The four layers – source diversification, editorial and framing practices, protection of journalists and sources, and resilient or alternative distribution infrastructure – may operate jointly, based on the patterns observed across the corpus. These layers may function in different configurations depending on the outlet, the story, and the level of risk involved. The article analysis does not establish whether one layer caused another.

Across the findings, this typology can be seen in how outlets combined multiple source types – NGOs and family testimonies – both to compensate for the absence of official information and to frame their coverage through independent voices. Protection is present throughout: anonymization was applied when requested, centering independent voices while protecting individual identities. The framing that emerged from these choices – critical and human rights-centered – in turn shaped how the information was communicated. As spaces for independent

journalism have continued to shrink and restrictions can be sudden, resilient distribution strategies become an additional layer – as illustrated by the mirror site and WhatsApp channel documented in the Crónica Uno material examined (CU-01, CU-02, CU-03, CU-04, CU-05). These layers are interconnected: when official information was incomplete, NGO data and testimony helped fill the gap; this sourcing helped shape the framing; and alternative distribution infrastructure provides channels through which coverage can reach audiences despite censorship. These observations do not establish when the channels were introduced or measure how effectively the practices maintained access to reporting.

Beyond the Venezuelan case, this typology could serve as a starting point for better understanding adaptation strategies across different restrictive contexts, and for identifying and sharing knowledge about the practices carried out by independent journalists in similar environments – for examining not only what is being reported but how and why information is communicated in a particular way, what is stated explicitly and what is conveyed implicitly in order to better understand the relationship between institutional restriction and journalistic practice.

Ultimately, the practices of journalists operating in restrictive environments matter beyond the academic study of media. If information becomes the window through which people connect with and respond to their reality, then understanding how that window remains open – however narrowly – is fundamental to understanding how societies resist and endure under authoritarianism.

07

Practical implications

Journalists

Across the corpus, the collective building of information through different types of sources and actors can be understood as an information-sharing practice with possible safety implications. Sharing information collectively and distributing it through civic actors – NGOs, family members, and civil society networks – constituted a form of collective infrastructure that may have allowed journalists to continue working despite restrictive conditions. When NGOs compiled lists of detainees, outlets produced and amplified the articles, extending the reach of that information to wider audiences. This network of interconnected information from different source types creates a channel

for information sharing, while also giving civic actors and affected family members a voice that might otherwise go unheard. The article analysis does not establish whether these networks built trust or reduced risk.

Journalists and news organizations operating in restrictive environments might consider creating or strengthening information-sharing networks with NGOs and civil society actors as both a sourcing strategy – expanding the range and credibility of available information – and, where supported by an assessment of the reporting context, a safety strategy to diffuse risk.

Safety trainers

Safety strategies should also aim to address the full reporting team. As Olivarez describes, this extends to frontline journalists, camera operators, editors and production staff, who can all be persecuted and affected [13]. Safety trainers and support organizations should consider developing measures and protocols that account for everyone on the reporting team, recognizing the specific risks associated with each role – whether that involves handling heavy equipment, working in high-risk zones, or sustained exposure through on-the-ground reporting.

Beyond physical risks, Olivarez describes significant and long-lasting psychological effects of working in this environment [13] – a dimension that safety training must take into consideration alongside more visible forms of persecution. Safety trainers and support organizations should take into consideration the psychological effects of on-the-ground reporting and handling sensitive topics – before, during, and after – as well as the cumulative impact of operating within a restrictive environment over time. Mental health support strategies should therefore be incorporated as a standard component of safety training.

Outlets

The mechanisms and strategies through which the five outlets covered the January 2026 release of political prisoners illustrate a range of adaptation practices. The documented use of databases, mirror sites, disclaimers and information-sharing networks suggests possible ways for outlets to respond when spaces for independent journalism shrink. Independent outlets operating in restrictive environments might consider assessing alternative channels of distribution that suit their audiences and reporting conditions. The study does not establish when this infrastructure was introduced or whether it maintained access during the releases.

The findings also suggest that outlets operating in restrictive environments should consider incorporating a gender lens into their coverage. When information is already limited and must be framed carefully, specific dimensions of a story risk being overlooked entirely. CU-04's reporting on detained women and on the mothers, wives and sisters waiting outside detention centers illustrates experiences that can be overlooked in broader accounts. News organizations might consider explicitly examining political imprisonment and releases through a gendered perspective, in order to identify and communicate dimensions that would otherwise remain invisible in the broader narrative.

Venezuela and press freedom

For Venezuela, as Otero highlights, press freedom must constitute a priority: journalists need a space that guarantees the free exercise of the right to communicate and to hold critical opinions, as a condition for building a transition that represents a genuine plurality of voices [11]. A reconsideration and reformulation of laws and institutional practices that restrict press freedom should be a priority, in order to create a safer and more enabling environment for journalists and outlets. Information and critical expression should be recognized as fundamental components of any democratic reconstruction.

The immediate release of all remaining political prisoners, as well as safety guarantees for them and their families after the releases, must constitute an urgent and fundamental action for the near future of the country.

08

Conclusions

After the coding and analysis of the 24 articles in the corpus, the main finding of this research is the way in which independent journalists operating under restriction may sustain their work through interconnected strategies that combine in different ways. The outlets studied used different combinations of strategies depending on the specific characteristics of what they were reporting, suggesting that rather than a fixed solution for risk mitigation, there is a layered, adaptive approach that may sustain independent journalism even in highly restrictive environments. Beyond individual strategies, the contextual interviews describe support and information-sharing networks through which journalists seek to share information and protect one another. Future research might look more closely at these dynamics – examining how the typology operates across different contexts, what early restrictive signs activate these strategies, how journalists build and maintain these networks, and how these practices might be strengthened over time. Comparative studies with other countries could contribute further by identifying shared patterns and differences in how journalists adapt to restriction.

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Appendix 1: Coding template

The template records the article information and coding categories used in the analysis. Blank fields are for article details; the listed categories are coding options rather than completed results.

FIELD	ENTRY OR CODING OPTIONS
Article identifier	Identifier used in the findings and coding records
Outlet	
Date	
Author(s)	
Article type	news report / political analysis / interview / editorial / live coverage
Main topic	
Main frame	government gesture / human rights issue / government plan for a transition / evidence of continued repression
Sources cited	government / NGO / international outlets / prisoner / legal representative / eyewitness / anonymous / family member / other
Did the outlet contrast official claims with other voices?	yes / no / mixed
References to the constrained environment or reporting limitations	
Adaptation strategies	anonymous sourcing / on-the-ground reporting / cautious language / collaborative reporting / alternative coverage strategies / none visible
Confirmation of the official release	
Notes on the framing of the releases	

Collaboration should be coded only when joint reporting or coordinated work is evidenced. Citing another journalist or embedding a public post records a cross-reference and does not, by itself, establish collaboration or a protective effect.

Appendix 2: Article corpus

This appendix lists the 24 articles selected for analysis, with their original IDs, outlets, recorded publication dates, titles and URLs. Titles and dates follow the corpus record. Online versions may have been updated after publication.

ID	OUTLET	DATE	HEADLINE AND URL
EC-01	Efecto Cocuyo	8 Jan 2026	Jorge Rodríguez anuncia excarcelación de "un número importante" de presos políticos https://efectococuyo.com/politica/jorge-rodriguez-anuncia-excarcelacion-numero-importante-presos-politicos/
EC-02		9 Jan 2026	Familiares se mantuvieron en El Helicoide con la esperanza de ver a sus seres queridos en libertad https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/familiares-se-mantuvieron-en-el-helicoide-con-la-esperanza-de-ver-a-sus-seres-queridos-en-libertad/
EC-03		12 Jan 2026	¿Cómo el Helicoide pasó de albergar damnificados e intelectuales a ser una cárcel para narcos, homicidas y presos políticos? https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/como-el-helicoide-paso-de-albergar-damnificados-e-intelectuales-a-ser-una-carcel-para-narcos-homicidas-y-presos-politicos/
EC-04		13 Jan 2026	7 claves sobre la situación de los presos políticos tras el balance del Clippve https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/7-claves-sobre-la-situacion-de-los-presos-politicos-tras-el-balance-del-clippve/
EC-05		17 Jan 2026	Hijos e hijas de militares presos en El Rodeo y Ramo Verde piden libertad para sus padres https://efectococuyo.com/la-humanidad/hijos-e-hijas-de-militares-presos-en-el-rodeo-y-ramo-verde-piden-libertad-para-sus-padres/
EP-01	El Pitazo	8 Jan 2026	Jorge Rodríguez anuncia la excarcelación de presos políticos: "Está ocurriendo en este momento" https://elpitazo.net/politica/jorge-rodriguez-anuncia-la-excarcelacion-de-presos-politicos-esta-ocurriendo-en-este-momento/
EP-02		8 Jan 2026	Juan Pablo Guanipa, Rocío San Miguel y Enrique Márquez entre los excarcelados este #8Ene: lista de nombres confirmados https://elpitazo.net/politica/juan-pablo-guanipa-y-enrique-marquez-entre-los-excarcelados-este-8ene-lista-de-nombres-confirmados/
EP-03		11 Jan 2026	No hubo excarcelación de presos políticos este domingo #11Ene: familiares tienen cuatro días esperando https://elpitazo.net/politica/no-hubo-excarcelacion-de-presos-politicos-este-domingo-11ene-familiares-tienen-cuatro-dias-esperando/
EP-04		12 Jan 2026	ONG denuncia que presos políticos recién excarcelados siguen bajo medidas cautelares y con juicios activos https://elpitazo.net/politica/ong-denuncia-que-presos-politicos-recien-excarcelados-siguen-bajo-medidas-cautelares-y-con-juicios-activos/

EP-05		16 Jan 2026	Excarceladas emprendedoras que estamparon camisetas con la caída de la estatua de Hugo Chávez https://elpitazo.net/politica/excarceladas-emprendedoras-que-estamparon-camisetas-con-la-caida-de-la-estatua-de-hugo-chavez/
TC-01	TalCual	8 Jan 2026	Jorge Rodríguez anuncia excarcelaciones de nacionales y extranjeros: Un número importante https://talcualdigital.com/noticias/jorge-rodriguez-anuncia-excarcelaciones-de-nacionales-y-extranjeros-un-numero-importante/
TC-02		8 Jan 2026	Fueron excarcelados Enrique Márquez y Biagio Pilieri: salieron en patrulla del Helicoide https://talcualdigital.com/noticias/fueron-excarcelados-enrique-marquez-y-biagio-pilieri-salieron-en-patrulla-del-helicoide/
TC-03		14 Jan 2026	Organizaciones de DDHH exigen publicar la lista oficial de presos políticos excarcelados https://talcualdigital.com/noticias/organizaciones-de-ddhh-exigen-publicar-la-lista-oficial-de-presos-politicos-excarcelados/
TC-04		18 Jan 2026	Familiares de presos políticos se mantienen en Zona 7 pese a intención de desalojo https://talcualdigital.com/noticias/familiares-de-presos-politicos-se-mantienen-en-zona-7-pese-a-intencion-de-desalojo/
TC-05		19 Jan 2026	Entre carpas, vigilias y amenazas, familias de presos políticos no abandonan la esperanza https://talcualdigital.com/a-fondo/entre-carpas-vigilias-y-amenazas-familias-de-presos-politicos-no-abandonan-la-esperanza/
RR-01	Runrun.es	8 Jan 2026	Biagio Pilieri, Enrique Márquez y cinco presos políticos españoles fueron excarcelados https://runrun.es/noticias/596652/se-confirma-excarcelacion-de-cinco-espanoles-tras-anuncio-de-jorge-rodriguez/
RR-02		12 Jan 2026	Gobierno dice que ha excarcelado a 116 presos políticos: cifras de las ONG revelan otra realidad https://runrun.es/noticias/597192/gobierno-dice-que-ha-excarcelado-a-116-presos-politicos-cifras-de-la-ong-revelan-otra-realidad/
RR-03		14 Jan 2026	19 de los 24 periodistas y trabajadores de la prensa detenidos fueron excarcelados https://runrun.es/noticias/597415/16-de-24-periodistas-y-trabajadores-de-la-prensa-fueron-liberados-este-14ene/
RR-04		14 Jan 2026	"No son números": Clippve exige al gobierno lista verificable de presos políticos y excarcelados https://runrun.es/noticias/597416/no-son-numeros-clippve-exige-al-gobierno-lista-verificable-de-presos-politicos-y-excarcelados/
CU-01	Crónica Uno	8 Jan 2026	Jorge Rodríguez anuncia excarcelaciones de "un número importante" de personas https://cronica.uno/jorge-rodriguez-anuncia-excarcelaciones-en-las-proximas-horas/
CU-02		8 Jan 2026	Familiares y defensores de DD. HH. a la espera de la excarcelación de los presos políticos https://cronica.uno/familiares-y-defensores-de-ddhh-a-la-espera-de-la-liberacion-de-todos-los-presos-politicos/

CU-03	9 Jan 2026	La espera no bastó para presenciar la excarcelación de Márquez y Pilieri en El Helicoide	https://cronica.uno/la-espera-no-basto-para-presenciar-la-excarcelacion-de-marquez-y-pillieri-en-el-helicoide/
CU-04	16 Jan 2026	Familias reclaman que las mujeres son minoría en excarcelaciones anunciadas por el Gobierno	https://cronica.uno/familias-reclaman-mujeres-minoria-excarcelaciones-anunciadas-estado/
CU-05	17 Jan 2026	Bolívar contabiliza apenas 10 excarcelaciones desde el 10 de enero	https://cronica.uno/bolivar-contabiliza-apenas-10-excarcelaciones-desde-el-10-de-enero/

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The researcher used Claude (Anthropic) for initial background research, grammar and language editing, flagging inaccurate references or citation errors, and cross-checking article IDs and corpus information against the researcher's own coding notes. All suggestions, edits and corrections were reviewed and verified by the researcher. The choice of references, data and information, all analytical decisions, and the findings, limitations and conclusions are the author's own.



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Cover: each ring stands for one of the ten practices in Table 1, and each position around it for one of the 24 articles analyzed. Solid segments mark the practices recorded for each article on the coding sheet.
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