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Invitada especial
Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar
Edición 51, 2026

Simón Bolívar Award Keynote — Bogotá, Nov 18, 2026

Good evening, and thank you for that kind introduction. Thank you to:

Señor Miguel Cortés Kotal, President of Grupo Bolívar, and to Grupo Bolívar for supporting this award for fifty-one years — and for keeping it fiercely independent. Thank you to:

Señor Fernando Cortés McAllister, Executive Director of Fundación Bolívar Davivienda;

Señora Silvia Martínez de Narváez, Director of the Simón Bolívar National Journalism Award;

And thank you to the Members of this year's incredible jury.

Margarita Martínez,
Jonathan Bock,
Juan Pablo Ferro,
Ximena Forero,
Catalina Gómez,
Ómar Rincón,
Ricardo Silva;

Congratulations to the Winners of the Simón Bolívar National Journalism Award, and particularly to the winner of tonight's Grand Prize for the Life and Work of a Journalist.

Ladies and gentlemen:

It is humbling to stand where so many brilliant writers have stood before. I am not a journalist. I am someone whose career has depended on journalists. My work on how democracies get better — how places like Colombia, India, and the United States can

reduce violence, fight corruption, and make positive social change — is built on what you have uncovered first.

Tonight is a celebration. A celebration for the award winners, for independent journalism, for the tens of thousands of stories each of you has fought to tell.

But I suspect many of you also came tonight with weight on your shoulders. Your work is getting harder. More dangerous. And the public you serve is becoming more distrustful.

So let me do three things tonight. First, honor the courage in this room. Second, explain why your work matters now more than ever. And third, talk honestly about how journalism must change — because the world it was built for is changing.

II.

Some years ago, while researching a book on how violent democracies become safer, I sat in a fourth-floor walk-up apartment here in Bogotá to interview an investigative journalist well known to this award committee, Ignacio Gomez, who goes by Nacho.

Nacho's reporting on the ties between politicians, cartels and paramilitaries had led to a series of assassination attempts against him. They came from nearly every armed group in the country — left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, cartels — and from parts of the government's own intelligence service and military. If everyone hates you, you are doing something right in reporting honestly – but it made for a tough life.

That day, Nacho's state-appointed bodyguard had not shown up. As I tried to interview him, he kept looking out the bank of dirty windows, chain smoking. His beautiful teenage daughter was in the kitchen. I was six months pregnant, sitting on his couch, paying extra attention to the array of padlocks on his door.

When I was asked to give this speech, I thought of Nacho. Not because his story was so unusual, but because in Colombia, his experiences are too common.

When I started that book, I worked with my colleague, Elena Barham to measure how capable governments were around the world, and plot that measurement against murders of journalists in each country. At the time, common wisdom was that murders were high where governments were too weak to fight violent criminals.

But it was not true. Reporters were most likely to die violently in states that were perfectly capable of keeping them safe. In Mexico, the reporters most often murdered are not the ones covering cartels. They are local journalists investigating government corruption.

Journalists are not being killed just because the state is absent. They are killed because someone powerful, sometimes inside the state, sometimes criminals given impunity by corrupt politicians — wants a story to die.

According to the Fundación para la Libertad de Presa that Nacho co-founded, 171 journalists in Colombia have been killed for their work since 1977. Most worked for small radio stations and regional papers. Last year alone, Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory documented 469 attacks against 305 journalists, including threats, forced displacement, exile. And increasingly, a new tactic: lawsuits filed not to win, but to exhaust. Impunity for these attacks runs close to 98 percent.

Despite all of this, you, the journalists of Colombia, keep going, with courage. You keep going because you know that only a public empowered with the truth can make democracy work.

III.

Why is democracy so important, and why is the press so important to democracy? When humans moved from small tribes to complex societies about 5,000 years ago, authoritarianism defined governments from the Middle East to Latin America. Small groups of leaders whom no one had chosen kept most of their countrymen poor and often enslaved. Those early societies gave way to monarchies, empires, and colonialism, all variations on a theme of authoritarian rule.

Democracy is a tiny blip in this historical pattern, a century or two of people choosing which leaders to keep and which to reject. And yet this blink of an eye has brought the greatest education, rights for women, children, minorities, the greatest wealth for societies and most opportunities for the poor of any system that has ever existed. Yes, there is still a long way to go. But these gains to all levels of society have come because democracy is the only system that allows citizens to hold their governments accountable and make them deliver for their people.

But citizens cannot do that if they do not know what is going on. In violent democracies, stories often portray two sides: the perpetrator, and the victim. That is what people who abuse power want their countrymen to feel – that the public are bystanders, helpless, disempowered.

But there are not two sides. There are always three. The rest of society is always part of the equation. Most real people are not heroes or villains. They want to go about their lives. And so they go along with whoever holds power – governments, illegal armed groups, agencies that play both sides.

In my book, I found that violent democracies get safer when the voters in that vast middle — people with enough voice to change the system — decide to act.

The fight for democracy is a fight over which way that great and powerful public leans.

And they can only lean toward the truth if they can see it.

That is your job. Courts and elections can check power. Security services can act against violence. But the core of democracy choosing which leaders deserve to govern depend on citizens who know what is actually happening. Journalism, at its best, helps a society see itself.

This is exactly why criminal groups, politicians, and other powerful forces who want to escape accountability go after journalists first.

Criminals in Colombia, freed from any ideology, are now more deadly.

Meanwhile, governments around the world have started to use quieter tools of repression. They call journalists enemies or liars. Bury them in lawsuits and tax investigations. Starve them of advertising. Let online mobs harass and silence its critics.

And sometimes they don't touch journalists at all, because they go after the owners of media companies. In Viktor Orban's Hungary, the government used taxes and regulatory pressure to push over 90 percent of the country's media companies into the hands of government-friendly oligarchs.

It is one reason an award like this one — funded by a private company that has protected its independence for fifty-one years — matters so much.

The playbook for destroying democracy has been used by governments of the left and the right and the criminal groups they allow to fester. From Venezuela to Türkiye, crackdowns on the media and civil society left citizens unable to check the abuses of leaders. In India, tax officials raided the BBC's offices weeks after it aired a documentary critical of the prime minister. And in the United States, media companies have felt similar pressure, and too many have capitulated to government demands.

Politicians have control over whether their governments target the press, and how seriously they address criminal threats to journalists. They also have power over how online mobs and angry community members act. Colombia's Foundation for Press Freedom has shown what researchers around the world have found: that one insult from a head of state can unleash a wave of online attacks against journalists. When leaders call the press an enemy, some people hear permission to attack.

The press also has power, and it, too, needs to take that power seriously. I've been threatened for my work, too – but the threats came from a white nationalist mob after I was misquoted by a reporter with sloppy notes.

I was angry at the reporter, and I was frustrated at how long the institution took to print a retraction. I want the press to be responsible, too.

But it is a pity that the President and Vice President could not be here tonight, because there is a a deeper truth that is necessary for all democratic politicians to hear, even those who are frustrated by their treatment in the media. A free press is not your opponent. It is how you learn what your own state is doing. It is how you learn what your people want, what they hope for, what their dreams are. Journalists and the state are not adversaries – they are steering wheel and the engine, and when the engine is willing to take some steering – your country avoids accidents and move in the direction your people want it to go. And when the engine accepts that steering – it's not the journalists who get the praise, it's the politicians, who go down in history as statesmen of their countries.

IV.

You thought that was the hard part of the speech – but the next part is harder. The threat to journalism does not come only from those who want to silence you. It also comes from people who have simply stopped listening.

This year, the Reuters Institute reported that only 25 percent of Colombians trust the news most of the time. That is the lowest level in Latin America Almost half of Colombians avoid news altogether. Trust in news is falling around the globe, but those numbers are well below global averages. Trust in the media is falling fastest in places where people are losing trust in government and in institutions. Their fates are mutually dependent.

In Colombia, more people seek news each week from social media than from print and television journalism combined. People are giving their trust to people who look like them, who speak to them from rooms, cars, and streets that look like their own. Legitimacy is granted not to those with facts and expertise, but to those who master emotional connection, authenticity, and immediacy.

Being a careful reporter and an amazing writer is not enough. Your story can't have impact if no one sees it.

But here is the hopeful part. People have not stopped trusting journalism. In the same report, Colombia's regional television newscasts earned a trust score of 59 percent. The journalism that is most dangerous to practice in this country — local, regional, close to

the ground — is also the most trusted. People do not trust "the media." But they trust someone they know who offers immediacy and connection.

V.
So how does journalism win back the public? I see three ways to start.

First: go where people are, without leaving your standards behind. Most people are not looking for news on social media – they are often trying to avoid it while scrolling for entertainment or community. Some great journalists have built communities on social media, achieving more reach through those conversations than they did in traditional media.

Others want to remain traditional reporters. Those journalists might consider partnering with creators who already have trust in communities you wish to reach, from farmers to football fans to Evangelical churchgoers. The roles of gathering facts and information, and presenting these in ways people want to hear, are separating, and partnerships are a way for traditional reporters to work with those who have reach to get their stories out.

Second: let people see the person, and the method. Influencers have one big advantage over institutions: intimacy. People feel they know them. Journalists also have an advantage: verification. You know how to find out what is true. The magic combination could be combining the two, by explaining how you know what you know, telling the story behind your story, and when needed, admitting openly why you got something wrong and why.

Third: earn trust across divided societies. Polarization is pulling the media into political fights which lead to political attacks, but also a loss of viewership, because in a polarized country, if some people think the media is aligned with the other side, they won't listen.

It's easy to blame the polarized public, but journalists also have to look within, When I researched polarization, I found that in my own country, the people with the least accurate picture of what the other side believes were those who were most politically engaged, particularly the highly engaged who leaned left. Because journalists spend their days among engaged people, they can start sharing the same biases, believing that the other side is singular, rather than plural.

This does not mean writing a false balance between truth and lies. It means letting people be complex, not flattening all identities into a single line from left to right, or assuming you know all of their beliefs because you know one of their viewpoints. Let people live in their complexity, present them as they see themselves, and you will gain their trust. Scrutinize every government with the same rigor. Cover what each side gets

right and what it gets wrong. Give voice to citizens who don't fit neatly into either camp. These are ways to get the attention of a distracted public.

VI.
I study how countries can pull themselves out of crisis. Colombia is one of the places that showed me it can be done.

At its worst, Medellín had a murder rate of 381 per 100,000 people. Twenty-five years later, it was a tourist destination. I know there are still serious problems. But that is also a lot of lives saved. That recovery was not magic. It took politicians who made hard choices. It took a public who believed change was possible. And it took journalists who kept telling the truth when it cost them dearly.

In 1986, as drug traffickers began converting their money into power, the director of El Espectador, Guillermo Cano, was shot outside the newspapers' headquarters for exposing Escobar's cartel. Seguimos Adelante, the next day's headline read. We keep going. In 1989, the Medellin Cartel placed a truck bomb outside the newspaper's offices. Clearing away broken glass, the staff huddled over a few functional computers to put out the next day's paper. The headline: Seguimos Adelante.

But they kept going not only because of the brave few in those offices, the brave few in this room. This work belongs to all of us. In those days, international newspapers took out ads to help El Espectador regain revenue. The work belongs to business leaders today whose advertising can fund independent local journalism. It belongs today to officials who answer a reporter's question instead of attacking the person who asked it. It belongs to every citizen who chooses to read, watch, and share the truth.

That is what you have done for fifty-one years. It is what Colombia needs from you now. Seguimos adelante. Thank you. Muchas gracias.