

REPORT FROM THE SEMINAR “CROSS-BORDER  
COVERAGE OF U.S.–MEXICO DRUG TRAFFICKING”

# JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF THREATS, CENSORSHIP AND VIOLENCE

Report from the Seminar “Cross-border Coverage of U.S.–Mexico Drug Trafficking,” conducted March 26–27, 2010 at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin, sponsored by the McCormick Foundation.

Report by  
Mónica Medel  
Introduction by  
Álvaro Sierra

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## A PAUSE FOR REFLECTION AND LEARNING

► By Rosental Calmon Alves <sup>1</sup>

For two days in March 2010, 26 journalists (12 from Mexico and 14 from the United States) who are directly involved in covering one of the most dangerous and complex topics in the entire world escaped from their routines in Mexico and on the border between the two countries. They participated in a workshop on the serene campus of the University of Texas at Austin, at the invitation of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. The opportunity to offer these journalists a pause to reflect and learn was created thanks to a grant awarded by the McCormick Foundation, based in Chicago. Since 1955, the foundation has supported journalism in the United States and worldwide, inspired by the legacy of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, who for many years was editor and publisher of the Chicago Tribune.

The workshop “Cross-border Coverage of U.S. –Mexico Drug Trafficking” was held as part of a series named the “Specialized Reporting Institute” or SRI, which the McCormick Foundation has financed for the last years. The objective of the SRI is to give journalists who cover specific topics an opportunity to reflect on their coverage, and at the same time, to learn more deeply from experts on the subjects. The idea is for them to return to work better prepared to carry out their journalistic duties, thus contributing to a public that is better informed and equipped to participate in a democracy.

We at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas have worked since 2002 to help journalists from Latin America and the Caribbean through training courses and other initiatives. We have had the privilege to work with thousands of journalists from practically all countries of the hemisphere, including hundreds from Mexico. But we were anxious to do something more for our Mexican colleagues and with them, considering the extreme seriousness of the situation that journalists confront in Mexico. For that reason, we are very grateful to the McCormick Foundation for making possible the workshop in Austin.

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1 Rosental Calmon Alves is a professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, where he holds the Knight Chair in International Journalism and the UNESCO Chair in Communication and is the director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas.

To our knowledge, never before has a group of such accomplished journalists from Mexico and the United States who work on the front lines of the drug wars in Mexico and in the border between the two countries converged for a meeting like this one. As can be seen in the list that follows this message, the group that united at the Austin seminar is representative of the press of the two countries, including the largest and most important media, and the regional and local press from the areas most affected by the violence of drug trafficking.

This report was prepared with the intention of sharing with all journalists, whether from Mexico, the United States, or elsewhere, the discussions, the concerns, the analysis, and the lessons that emerged from the Austin seminar. In charge of this report was Chilean journalist Mónica Medel, who has worked in Mexico and is now a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. The introduction to this book was written by Álvaro Sierra, a Colombian journalist of long experience who is currently a professor at the University for Peace, created in Costa Rica by mandate of the United Nations. Sierra served as the moderator and facilitator of the seminar in Austin and was in charge of inaugurating it with a presentation in which he referred to the complexities of the grave situation in Mexico with the authority of someone who has studied and lived a similar experience in his native Colombia.

Among the experts who participated in the seminar were Fred Burton, a security specialist for the Stratfor Global Intelligence firm and former special agent and deputy director of security for the U.S. State Department; Alberto Islas, Mexican specialist of Risk Evaluations LTD; Professor Howard B. Campbell of the University of Texas at El Paso and author of the book *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*; Frank Smyth, of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ); Donna De Cesare, of the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (and a professor at the University of Texas at Austin); and Emma Daly of Human Rights Watch.

This report presents a summary of the presentations made by the experts as well as an analysis of the situation facing journalism in Mexico. But perhaps the most impressive content is the testimony from Mexican journalists who confront every day a wave of violence that is unprecedented in Mexico's recent history and dedicate themselves to the task of informing the population in the best possible way. Among the themes discussed during the seminar were day-to-day dangers, violence that

has victimized close colleagues, the resignation to self-censorship as the only viable solution in extreme situations, and the constant effort to overcome limits imposed by self-censorship.

But what was most sought in the work of the seminar in Austin were solutions. How does one deal with a bloodbath? What steps can be taken by Mexican journalists, especially those in the regions most battered by violence, to protect themselves and keep informing the public in the best possible way? How to encourage greater collaboration and exchange of information among journalists to make the practice of journalism safer? And many other questions.

We didn't find magic solutions in Austin, because they don't exist. The problem is serious and complex. But the participants made a positive evaluation of the seminar as a useful meeting before they proceeded with their difficult and dangerous work. They left Austin with greater knowledge about the global dimensions of drug trafficking, the safety measures that journalists should adopt, and ways to take care of the trauma and stress of those who deal with diverse forms of violence on a daily basis and very closely. Hopefully this report will be useful to many more journalists from Mexico and other countries of Latin America that face similar problems.

Finally, in addition to thanking the McCormick Foundation, which provided the funding for this event, we also would like to express our deep gratitude to the John S. And James L. Knight Foundation for their constant support and for the funding provided to create and maintain the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas; and the College of Communication and School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, which always support the Knight Center's initiatives. We also wish to thank the entire staff of the Knight Center, who worked tirelessly in the organization of the event.

**Rosental Calmon Alves**  
**Austin, Texas, August 2010**

► **Journalists from Mexico:**

- **Ignacio Alvarado**, El Universal, Mexico City
- **Luis G. Andrade**, Frontera, Tijuana
- **Carlos Arredondo**, Vanguardia, Saltillo
- **Jorge Carrasco**, Proceso, Mexico City
- **Javier Garza**, El Siglo, Torreón
- **Maria Idalia Gomez**, Inter American Press Association, Mexico City
- **José Ponce**, El Imparcial, Hermosillo
- **Alfredo Quijano**, El Norte, Ciudad Juárez
- **Sandra Rodriguez**, El Diario de Juárez, Ciudad Juárez
- **Rafael Benavides**, El Mañana, Nuevo Laredo
- **Kowanin Silva**, Vanguardia, Saltillo
- **Marcela Turati**, Grupo “Periodistas de a Pie,” Mexico City

► **Journalists from the United States:**

- **Dudley Althaus**, Houston Chronicle
- **Randal Archibold**, New York Times
- **Cecilia Balli**, UT Austin/Texas Monthly
- **William Booth**, Washington Post
- **Lynn Brezosky**, San Antonio Express-News
- **John Burnett**, National Public Radio
- **Guillermo Contreras**, San Antonio Express-News
- **Alfredo Corchado**, Dallas Morning News
- **José de Cordoba**, Wall Street Journal
- **Sandra Dibble**, San Diego Union Tribune
- **Angela Kocherga**, Belo TV
- **Sam Quiñones**, Los Angeles Times
- **Jeremy Schwartz**, Austin American Statesman
- **Dane Schiller**, Houston Chronicle

► **Invited Speakers:**

- **Fred Burton**, Stratfor Global Intelligence
- **Howard B. Campbell**, University of Texas El Paso
- **Emma Daly**, Human Rights Watch
- **Donna De Cesare**, Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma/University of Texas at Austin
- **Alberto Islas**, Risk Evaluation LTD, Mexico
- **Álvaro Sierra**, Colombian journalist; professor at the University of Peace, created in Costa Rica by mandate of the United Nations (principal moderator/facilitator of the workshop)
- **Frank Smyth**, Committee to Protect Journalists

► **Invited Journalism Professors:**

- **Zita Arocha**, UT El Paso
- **Amy Schmitz Weiss**, San Diego State University

► **Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas:**

- **Rosental Calmon Alves**
- **Dean Graber**
- **Mónica Medel (rapporteur)**
- **Jennifer Potter-Miller**
- **James Ian Tennant**
- **Joseph Vavrus**



## DANGERS AND PARADOXES OF COVERING DRUG TRAFFICKING

► By Álvaro Sierra<sup>2</sup>

Mexican journalism is experiencing the most serious emergency in its history. This point was the main conclusion of the McCormick Foundation Specialized Training Institute “Cross-border Coverage of U.S.–Mexico Drug Trafficking,” which this publication summarizes.

The circumstances surrounding the meeting were telling enough. While 26 veteran reporters from Mexico and the United States attended the specialized event in Austin, Texas, on March 26-27, 2010, the emergency was dramatically illustrated some 450 miles (723 km.) to the south. In Reynosa, Mexico, journalists were silenced that month by a regime of totalitarian control imposed by one of the so-called drug “cartels,” which also sought to prevent the entry of the foreign press.

Only four months later, in August 2010, the publication you are reading has been finalized just days after the protest “We want them alive” (*Los queremos vivos*), in which hundreds of journalists throughout Mexico demonstrated against the kidnappings of four of their colleagues by another group of drug traffickers, in the La Laguna region of Durango and Coahuila states in northern Mexico.

Reynosa and La Laguna are only two names on the map of aggressions against Mexican media and reporters, who in only a few years have gone from receiving isolated threats to a crescendo of disappearances, beatings, assassinations, kidnappings, and bomb threats that occur by the dozen. They take place with utter impunity and in the absence of any truly energetic action by the government to end it. There is the added difficulty that until the march in August the journalistic profession, especially editors and owners, had been unable to overcome, except for isolated attempts, their traditional lack of solidarity, which makes everyone even more vulnerable and defenseless.

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2 Álvaro Sierra, a Colombian journalist and former deputy editor of the newspaper *El Tiempo* in Bogotá, is an associate professor at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, where he coordinates the Master’s program in Media and Peace and Conflict Studies. At the Knight Center’s invitation, he was facilitator for the seminar about cross-border drug trafficking between the United States and Mexico, held at the University of Texas at Austin, March 26–27, 2010.

To cover “narco-trafficking,” which is the news media’s popular designation for the topic of illegal drugs and their trafficking, is one of the most difficult tasks in journalism. It is even more difficult to cover these issues from both sides of the border, where all types of violence converge with all types of trafficking—drugs, arms, and people—and with multiple organized crime groups and complex phenomena that include *maquilas* (foreign assembly plants), poverty and emigration, in the south, and “Minutemen,” growing prejudice, and debates about the legalization of marijuana, in the north.

It is difficult, because it is—obviously—dangerous. Mexico is going through a phase of open warfare and shifting alliances among seven or eight large criminal groups (and many small ones) that each have the capacity for damage and corruption that Colombia’s Medellín and Cali cartels had during their time. Meanwhile, the federal government’s military campaign against several of the groups has produced “collateral damage” that is as disturbing as its lack of results. The danger for journalists is both the one involved in covering war, catastrophes, or corrupt politicians, and the danger of working under a dictatorship. The *narcos* impose totalitarian regimes on local communities under their control, and freedom of the press is their first victim. Mexico is home to dozens of “zones of silence”—and in some cases, entire regions—where, if news is published it is only if “spokespersons” designated by the *narcos* gather journalists, authorize what to say and what to censor, and dictate to editors by phone even how to frame photographs in their newspapers.

Local governments, be they complicit or frightened, do nothing. The militarization ordered by the federal government adds further risks, limitations and pressures to the journalistic work. Official sources range from utmost secrecy to the attitude “if you’re not with me, you’re with them.” Covering the drug trade under these conditions must be legitimately counted as one of the world’s most dangerous jobs. It is almost as perilous to dare to lift the thick veil of corruption that envelops Mexico and to expose official abuses and complicity.

The risks are not equal for all journalists and can be understood by different categories. First are the foreign correspondents and those U.S. reporters who are sent to cover specific stories in Mexico. They are the most protected, although as the seminar showed, the security that a blue U.S. passport once provided is

slowly eroding. These journalists can see the big picture, perhaps better than their Mexican colleagues, but they know fewer details and nuances. Next are the Mexican journalists from national media or large cities. They are relatively sheltered from direct violence, but they put themselves under fire when they are sent to cover certain zones. At the bottom are those journalists who work for local media in places controlled by traffickers. They have borne the brunt of the wave of violence, and they must grit their teeth and remain silent, muzzled by the terror regimes imposed by the traffickers in their regions. Another category of journalists identified at the seminar, the “foreign-local correspondent,” refers to those U.S. journalists who live in the border cities such as San Diego, Nuevo Laredo, and McAllen and cross the

border every day as part of their work. Their risks are greater than those of foreign correspondents, but less than those of Mexican colleagues.

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Danger is not the only difficulty that journalists from both sides of the border confront. For U.S. reporters, covering Mexico is a specialization that involves years of dedication and study. The same is true for Mexican colleagues who cover the United States, and for reporters from both countries who cross the border every day to cover their beat. Today, coverage of Mexico means covering drug trafficking in six or seven of every 10 stories. And drugs are another specialty that is equally or more complex than covering a country, a specialty dominated by curious paradoxes.

Drug trafficking is a global phenomenon, but it is covered almost always as a local issue. Drugs, their regulation and trafficking are international, not national. Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán is not just a Mexican personality; he is a protagonist in a drama that also features characters such as the price of cocaine in Moscow; the growth of consumption in Great Britain, Spain, the United States and Brazil; political-military riots in Guinea-Bissau; the changing division of labor among groups of Colombian and Mexican traffickers since the 1980s; and the century of history of the sale of prohibited drugs in Sinaloa, Guzmán’s home state, where opium and marijuana have been more important than cocaine.

Media on both sides of the borders mostly cover the Mexican narcos as Mexican phenomena, when, in fact, they are in reality, Mexican–U.S. phenomena at the minimum.

It is accepted that drug trafficking and violence in Mexico and consumption in the United States are a single phenomenon, but how much time and journalistic effort are invested in exposing the drug networks to the north of the border as a natural but largely unknown continuity of the “cartels” to the south? High-quality investigations are published, but how often does the coverage of drugs as a singular phenomenon involving both sides of the border appear prominently in the journalistic agenda and the public debate of the two countries? How relevant in the media and in the public perception are criminal groups in the United States, the flows of money from north to south, and the growing police corruption to the north of the Rio Grande/Bravo? How do drugs arrive and how are they distributed in the main consumer market? Despite the cuts in staff and budgets caused by the crisis in traditional media outlets, U.S. media still report a great deal from Mexico, but the reverse does not occur. How many Mexican journalists cross the border to “cover the north” as an essential complement of what happens in the south? These and other questions were intensely debated in the seminar.

Another paradox is the fact that drug trafficking is a complex political, social, economic and criminal phenomenon, but it is covered mainly as a police story. Explosions dominate; explanations don’t. Headlines contain body counts, seizures of drugs and cash, captures and killings of notable and less notable criminals, and the increasingly heinous list of their atrocities, which end up unrolled in the media like what Mexican journalist and writer Juan Villoro calls “the red carpet of *narco* terror.” How does one report on a person who has been dismembered, and the *narco-manta* (*narco*-banner) that accompanies the body (whose language, appearance, and intention can be more horrifying than the corpse itself) is a painfully difficult reporting and editorial decision. How does one report on the corpses and the assassins’ messages when the bodies are stacked up one after another in an endless routine before a terrified society that defends itself from horror by wrapping itself in the bubble of banalization? It is a society that, like the news media, adopts, as the killers do, the term “execution” to designate a homicide, or the word “pozole” (a popular food) to name serial killings? This is a question that is much more difficult—a question that the media in Mexico and the United States still struggle to solve.

How, as Villoro suggests, can journalists prevent the traffickers from striking once in real life when they commit their crime, and a second time in “the representation of reality,” when the media publish news of the crime?

These issues are covered in part, not in their totality. From the complex phenomenon of drugs, the media highlight the limited but “sexy” topic of trafficking. This is undoubtedly important, but it provides only one window into a complex matter. Dominating the news agenda is the official policy—the “war on drugs”—not other issues like harm reduction depenalization, or legalization—which are all part of a growing debate about drugs. Consumption is increasingly important in drug-supplying nations. (South America is the third major consumer of cocaine in the world and has some of the most dynamic markets for drugs.) These facts rarely make headlines and front pages. Clichés abound. Mexicans blame gringos for the problem; narcos are transformed into Robin Hoods; many people in the U.S. revel in the simplistic explanations of the “failed state” or “spillover”; deeply disturbing questions are avoided. Why Mexico? Why now? Why has U.S. society historically shown a remarkable and persistent fondness for drugs?

There is a great disconnection between journalistic work and the rich academic debates about drugs. The official versions, from governments and security agencies, carry disproportionate weight in the journalistic versions—with the effect, among others, of reducing the vast sociological phenomenon of illegal drugs to a police story of a war against ruthless drug traffickers. In the media drama the protagonists are the perpetrators, not the victims. The social impact of drug trafficking, the “sociology of the bandit,” its social base and its dynamics are far from being covered systematically.

Drug trafficking, especially in phases of acute violence like the one Mexico is experiencing, is one of the most frequently covered and prominently featured topics in the journalistic agenda. Paradoxically, the entire drug phenomenon is a topic that is little known and has little weight in public debate. The amount of coverage contrasts with its depth.

For all these reasons, the task facing the press on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States is enormous. It is enormously dangerous and enormously difficult. For the U.S. press, even though its members face

growing risks, the difficulty is essentially intellectual: to understand and explain a phenomenon that is immensely complex in all its richness and its contradictions. The Mexican press confronts the same challenge, as the paradoxes and pitfalls of the coverage of drug trafficking are very similar for all journalists on both sides of the border. However, the Mexican press faces the emergency of dealing with those difficulties of the coverage while it struggles to survive.

Colombian journalist organizations are often compared with those of Mexico. (Another popular cliché is the so-called “Colombianization” of Mexico.) But this comparison forgets that attacks by drug lords on Colombia’s press in the mid-1980s started with the top echelons of the media. Pablo Escobar kidnapped one of the owners of the nation’s leading newspaper and assassinated the editor and blew-up the building of the second most-read newspaper. This sparked an almost immediate reaction of solidarity among the media, but many killings took place over nearly a decade before journalistic organizations emerged to defend the profession. In Mexico, the reverse has happened. Almost no one remembers the names of the 60 reporters killed in recent years, and solidarity within the profession is as scarce as diamonds.

The emergency that Mexican journalism faces today cannot be confronted without solidarity; without a joint battle among all media to demand that the government fulfill its responsibilities; without large national media’s support of small local media; without mechanisms to ensure that information that is repressed or self-censored in a “plaza” (the word used by the gangsters to designate towns and villages that they are fighting to capture) can be published outside it; and without security and safety policies being discussed in newsrooms and supported with resources by owners and editors. To construct this solidarity takes time. And it has taken many deaths and horrors to begin to look critically at the coverage, review the usual parameters and address the paradoxes that dominate it. Mexican journalism is engaged in this dual task of trying to protect itself and to produce quality coverage. This occurs at unequal rhythms and with varying success, with anonymous heroes who try to report, dead colleagues who can no longer do so, and too many media, reporters and editors who are forced to wear the straitjacket of self-censorship. To build such solidarity is a daunting task, but it is an indispensable one.

Alvaro Sierra

San Jose, Costa Rica, August 2010

## JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF THREATS, CENSORSHIP, AND VIOLENCE

Report from the Seminar “Cross-border Coverage of U.S.–Mexico Drug Trafficking”

► By **Mónica Medel** <sup>3</sup>

Mexican media have been caught in the crossfire in recent years—particularly those that operate in states located in production zones or on smuggling routes for illegal drugs to the United States. From one side, the media receive pressure, threats, and direct attacks from criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking—the so-called drug “cartels.” From the other, they face restrictions and even violence from governmental institutions. Daily operations are difficult, and the media’s ability to make decisions and to publish is being restricted, while censorship (both official and self-imposed) increases. Being a reporter has become so hazardous that 60 journalists have been assassinated in Mexico since 2000, 12 of them in 2009 alone.<sup>4</sup> According to official figures, five more had been killed in 2010, as of April. Eight other reporters had “disappeared,” and seven media outlets suffered attacks by explosives, turning Mexico into one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist.

In the same way that this dangerous combination of factors has been lethal for the safety of journalists, it has also had a negative effect on the quality of coverage and news about drug trafficking at the local level, often plunging newsrooms into obligatory silence. National media outlets based in Mexico City and the foreign press have been able to break this information blackout and communicate what is occurring to the rest of the country and the world. Their stories focus not only on body counts, but also on the reality of daily life in areas affected by narco wars, through images and the words of the victims. In fact, the drug violence has focused its rage on local journalists and until recently has left national Mexican media outlets and foreign journalists untouched. The latter group in particular has enjoyed a high level of freedom to travel, report stories, and to interview people in areas most affected by the drug war—something their Mexican colleagues from media outlets in the capital have rarely been able to do, with few exceptions.

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3 Mónica Medel is a Chilean journalist, ex-correspondent in Chile and in Mexico for the wire services EFE and Reuters. She was also a stringer for The Washington Post. In Mexico, she covered the increasing drug trafficking violence between 2002 and 2007. Currently she is a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, working on a dual Master’s in Public Affairs and Latin American Studies.

4 Figures from the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH) of Mexico. Released Feb. 1, 2010.

Twenty-six journalists who cover drug trafficking and violence along the Mexico–U.S. border met in Austin, Texas, on March 26-27, 2010, to analyze the special circumstances and hardships they face in their work. Fourteen U.S. journalists and 12 Mexican colleagues participated in the seminar, almost all of them veterans with more than 20 years experience. They are true experts about the border region. The McCormick Foundation’s Specialized Reporting Institute, “Cross-border Coverage of U.S.–Mexico Drug Trafficking,” was organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin. This report covers the main topics discussed at the meeting.





Photo: Ramón Sotomayor/El Siglo de Torreón



Photo: newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez

Police mark bullet casings left after a shootout in front of a supermarket in Gómez Palacio, Durango, in 2009.

Three people were killed in a car bomb attack against federal agents in Ciudad Juárez, July 15, 2010.

One of the seminar's recurring themes was the problems and challenges involved in daily news coverage of violence and drug trafficking on the border between the United States and Mexico. The risks that reporters run and the lack of access to primary sources (like drug trafficking organizations, the government, and the military) were repeatedly raised in discussions that included a critical look at the type of journalism and the informational quality of stories published about drugs and violence on the border. Among the principal deficiencies discussed was language usage, specifically the use of excessively morbid terms and over-simplifications, which often reinforce stereotypes and conventional wisdom. In the best cases, the articles simply tell the official story, which is usually limited to body counts, but they lack socioeconomic and historical context. In the worst cases, however, an information blackout occurs after a journalist is killed, fueled by the fears of the victims' surviving colleagues.

#### **a. Risks Faced by Journalists Covering the Drug Trade**

All reporters who cover the *narco* phenomenon in Mexico are at risk of suffering pressures at best and violence at worst. But journalists face different levels of risk depending on whether they are members of the foreign press corps or Mexican reporters, said Colombian journalist Álvaro Sierra, a scholar at the U.N. University for Peace, and the seminar's moderator. The danger also varies depending on whether one works and lives in Mexico City or whether one is a local journalist who lives and works in the cities directly affected by the wave of drug trafficking violence—a wave that produced an unprecedented number of killings in the last three years. Those facing the greatest risks—including daily pressures, threats, and open violence—are local reporters who cover drug smuggling directly from the border. In these border communities, everyone knows which media the reporters work for, which beats they cover, and even the address of their homes.

The level of detail in local stories is also a factor that works against local reporters, who usually investigate cases of corruption by municipal and state authorities, or simply publish stories on micro-level drug trafficking and fights between rival drug gangs who are disputing certain city streets. Often, the small details in these stories are what lead to the deaths of journalists, said Mexico City-based Dudley Althaus of the *Houston Chronicle*. In stories by U.S. reporters, meanwhile, the tiny details are often edited out, and the coverage is geared more toward general trends for a

U.S. audience, which pays less attention to such detail. Sierra also emphasized that under any circumstances, the risk is far less for U.S. journalists, since a Mexican hit man “thinks twice before killing a gringo,” especially after the fallout from the killing of U.S. drug enforcement agent Enrique Camarena in 1985, who was assassinated by the Guadalajara Cartel. Camarena’s killers were arrested, and the leaders of the organization were jailed, leading to the fall of the cartel. But Alfredo Corchado, of the *Dallas Morning News*, argued that the situation is changing, and the battle has reached “a new level” in which living in Mexico City or being an American no longer means automatic protection. He cited an example from March: Three people were

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killed who were attached to the U.S. Consulate in Ciudad Juárez—Mexico’s epicenter of *narco violence*, located just across the border from El Paso, Texas. U.S. journalists working on the border made it clear that there is another category of journalist: those foreign and local colleagues who run specific risks by crossing the border every day to cover drug issues.

Jorge Carrasco, of *Proceso*, called attention to occasions when Mexican journalists based in the capital face the greatest risks. That occurs when local reporters simply decide not to cover certain stories, requiring journalists in Mexico City to step in and report the news. One example came at the end of last year, when Leonel Godoy, governor of Michoacán state, announced that the mayor, the public trustees, and the majority of the remaining top local government officials in the city of Tancítaro had suddenly resigned en masse after receiving threats from organized crime. Local reporters proved unwilling or simply unable to report what was really going on. “In (Mexico City), we do not have the problem, but when we have to go out (of the capital) and do these stories we are in danger,” Carrasco said.

Panelist Alberto Islas (Risk Evaluation LTD–Mexico) described a series of risks that journalists face when covering drug trafficking. Starting with the lack of information

about what they are covering and with whom they are getting involved, Islas stressed that reporters' conduct often causes security breaches that can increase their risk of suffering violent attacks. For example, do reporters have separate cell phones to deal with family matters and work matters? How much do they know about the people who work around them who may have access to their personal information? With whom are they sharing information about the stories they are investigating? Does their editor know everything they are up to? Does the reporter have the unconditional support of his/her news organization? What is their relationship with the authorities? What do the authorities know about how the press functions? What does the press know about the intelligence protocols that military and security officials follow? Still another important matter, Islas added, is to know and understand that drug trafficking is a business like any other, in which the bosses focus on profits, prices and costs. Because of this, he called for extreme caution in covering these stories. He also urged that everyone always keep in mind the consequences that reporters' actions will have. "You become a target when you get in the way of profits," he emphasized.

### **b. Violence by Criminal Groups and Government Institutions**

Journalists, especially those who work for local news outlets in cities that are most affected by drug violence, have become the preferred targets of criminal organizations. Pressures, beatings, kidnappings, torture, and killing are all tools that are frequently used to intimidate and silence independent investigations into drug trafficking in certain zones and its relationship with power. Among those who have been killed are journalists who were investigating ties between narcos and local authorities or businessmen, as well as those who gave details about the control over distribution routes in certain areas.

Most recently, institutional violence against journalists has been increasing, carried out by the government security apparatus, authorities and the military. "There is a phenomenon of permanently discrediting those journalists who publish news of human rights violations by the Army," said Idalia Gómez (IAPA). Without going into specific details, she said some reports have claimed that the majority of attacks on the press have come from the authorities. Although Gómez said she has reservations about the publications that reported those attacks, she acknowledged that in the last few years there has been an increase in violence by the state.



*Proceso* magazine experienced this last year. After breaking up a cell of the *La Familia* cartel in the western state of Michoacán, the authorities presented the suspects to the media along with several copies of the magazine and a video in which one of the leaders asked for copies of *Proceso* specifically. Carrasco (*Proceso*) said this put the magazine's reporters in a very risky situation because other cartels could have interpreted it as collaboration between *Proceso* and *La Familia*. Lawsuits and subpoenas are also employed to exert pressure on reporters who have revealed acts of corruption by authorities and possible ties to drug trafficking. Indeed, Sandra Rodríguez (*El Diario de Juárez*) said she was harassed by the Mexican military for asking "too many questions." Another type of violence used by the state, Gómez added, is acts of aggression in complicity with criminal gangs. "It is not state aggression, in and of itself, but in complicity with the criminal organizations."<sup>5</sup> The last type of aggression against freedom of expression and of the press, Gómez pointed out, is impunity for the perpetrators of violence, which makes everyone vulnerable. Impunity is linked to media silence and the ineffectiveness of the courts.

### c. Journalists' Sources

The sources journalists use to construct their stories were also a topic of debate for three reasons: the risks that sources can represent for reporters; their quality as gauged by their knowledge and their place in the hierarchy of an institution being investigated; and the overall lack of access to sources. On the other hand, too much access can be a bad thing as government sources often simply feed journalists outright propaganda. Also, the type of access to sources often depends on whether one is a local or foreign journalist. In Mexico, authorities tend to divide journalists into these two groups, and they make sure the two groups are not present together when information is released.

Meanwhile, the diffusion of data and analyses on drug trafficking is controlled by the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic (PGR) and the Secretaries of Defense (Sedena) and Public Security. The last two are practically inaccessible, only releasing

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5 This situation has not been uncommon in Mexico, where officials in positions as high as governors, Interpol chiefs and the Attorney General of the Republic's counter-narcotic special forces have been arrested and charged with protecting different cartels. The most well known of these cases was the 1997 capture of Mexico's then-drug czar, Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, for his ties to the Juárez Cartel.

data periodically and very rarely granting interviews or press conferences. The PGR used to be more flexible in providing information, especially during the government of Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) between 2000 and 2006. But the arrival of his successor and fellow PAN member Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) has again placed a tight lid on all official information related to drug trafficking.

Islas, of Risk Evaluation LTD–Mexico, said one of the frequent mistakes made when gathering information is that journalists come to believe that their sources “are the best.” But, he noted, no matter how valuable, secure and trustworthy a source seems, are they really what they appear to be? If access to official sources is heavily restricted and the other part of the story comes from *narco* informants, which story ends up getting told? What do the journalist and his or her readers really end up knowing about drug trafficking? Furthermore, what risks do reporters run by having *narco* informants? Carrasco (*Proceso*) emphasized treating information carefully and recognizing that there could be “interested sources” who deliberately give imprecise information on a detail that could later have dire consequences for third parties. José de Córdoba, of the Wall Street Journal, noted that the best sources of information are the local journalists themselves—those on the front lines of the action—who frequently act as guides for their foreign colleagues. Journalists often feel as though they are in a sea of unofficial, unconfirmed information without a compass, amid only rumors and scattered facts, some obtained through academic sources and others by on-the-ground work. “Often you feel like you’re chasing ghosts. How much of all of this is true?” asked William Booth, Mexico City correspondent for *The Washington Post*.

#### **d. Control of the News Agenda, and Information Blackouts**

Coverage of drug trafficking in Mexico has been based generally on an official view of the facts. Many stories are restricted to information from bare, official releases with minimal data. This is not an uncommon situation given the difficulty of access to sources mentioned previously. The government releases information at a trickle as part of its strategy to make its “war on drug trafficking” look more effective. This accounts for the endless tallies of drugs seized and criminals killed, arrests of people related to drug trafficking, but only sporadic information about attacks and clashes between hit men. Releasing information a bit at a time allows Mexico’s government to construct a public image of winning the war. On the other hand, reporting the

side of the story involving the drug cartels has proved extremely dangerous, with journalists beaten, kidnapped and killed. Javier Garza, of *El Siglo de Torreón*, said that publishing official information is a way of managing risk. "If there are shootouts, we get what the Public Ministry (prosecutor's office) tells us ... we don't like it, but we feel that it's the safest way to do our work." Also, the fact that drug-related crimes are considered federal offenses that must be investigated by federal police also helps dictate what journalists report. It does this by limiting the role of states and municipal authorities to common crimes and thus gives federal authorities an enormous amount of control over the management of information on drug trafficking.



A recent twist on this tight control of information by the authorities has been the emergence of organized crime groups trying—successfully—to dictate the news agenda and impose restrictions on the information that reaches the public. Drug trafficking groups are trying to impose their own terms on coverage by putting pressure on the media and directly intimidating journalists. These threats come in public statements, as well as via social networks, Internet chat rooms, e-mail, and their own news releases. During the seminar, several references were made to journalists who were successfully "bought" by the drug traffickers, the so-called "*narco-journalists*" who work in some newsrooms and try to influence what is published. This situation has led to distrust between journalists who now

don't dare to discuss certain topics in their newsrooms. How to protect reporters best is also unclear. "What do we do with these people? How do we be careful?" asked Marcela Turati, of *Periodistas de a Pié*, Mexico.

In some border regions, such pressures have led to complete media blackouts, in which local journalists are silent about clashes, attacks, and disputes between rival gangs of drug traffickers. An example of this situation came in the northern state of Tamaulipas, on the border with Texas. At the end of February and beginning of March, some citizens witnessed endless shootouts between rival drug groups, and

eight journalists were kidnapped (two of them were later freed) with no local media coverage of the situation. Groups of foreign journalists traveled to the area and revealed the situation to the world. However, while doing so, one reporter from the Dallas Morning News was warned by an unknown person that he was not authorized to report in the area, and it would be best if he left. For Corchado (*Dallas Morning News*), the situation offers a clear example of the power that drug cartels have gained in Mexico. For Turati (*Periodistas a Pié*, Mexico), it is an example of what can start to happen in other regions around the country if the “zone of [information] silence” grows. Rodríguez said that although Ciudad Juárez is the metropolis with the highest number of drug trafficking victims in the country (nearly 5,000 in the last three years, according to media accounts), the local press has “taken steps forward: here we are at a different level of not publishing anything. We aren’t investigating the business of the cartels but we do our own things with the data.” She added that the press in Juárez also keeps a methodical count of victims and shootouts. That situation is in stark contrast to what happens in other areas of the country, where different drug trafficking organizations employ different means of influencing the press. For example, in the state of Tamaulipas, on the border with Texas, and in another border state, Coahuila, the norm is to try to censor or control what is published. Whereas in Juárez, even when journalists live in a climate of threats, killings and repression, they manage to publish a substantial amount of information.

#### **e. Use of Social Networks**

Before the foreign press revealed what was happening in Tamaulipas, the media blackout was broken by residents of the affected towns. Armed with video cameras and cell phones, they filmed the drug smugglers’ roadside checkpoints, hundreds of bullet shells on the ground after shootouts, and shoes strewn in the streets, which raised the question of what had happened to their owners. The seminar’s moderator, Álvaro Sierra (University for Peace), also emphasized the use of the Internet by drug traffickers. The web has been used as much to recruit new drug hit men as it has to show images of violent killings, tortures and interrogations of members of rival gangs.

The opinion about the use of online social networks like Twitter and Facebook was a point of debate. Some seminar participants supported their use, and others did not. Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) disapproved, arguing that they spread rumors and



create “an illusion of participation” that is not real. For example, he said some people created pages on one of these networks to protest the violence and killings in La Laguna, an area that covers parts of Coahuila and Durango states. Some 25,000 people joined the movement online, making it a news item. The organizers then planned a march, but only 25 people attended.

Taking the opposite stance was Rosental Calmon Alves of the Knight Center. He said journalists can not afford the luxury of dispensing with social networks. “There is a mountain of lies there, but there is also gold. The role of journalists has always been to verify information,” he said. Angela Kocherga, of *Belo TV*, pointed out the role that social networks played during the media blackout in Tamaulipas, but she also emphasized the need to establish certain standards in their use by the press. In the end, seminar participants reached a consensus first raised by Alves: new media outlets are sources and should be treated as such, for all their advantages and problems.

#### **f. What is the News? Between the Body Count and Lack of Context**

Which topics should journalists cover? What is the main content of their reports? What is drug trafficking coverage commonly understood to entail? Who are the protagonists of the stories? How informative is the news? Can the reader understand what is happening? Do the stories published by the press offer a comprehensive account of the phenomenon? Do they include facts that go beyond a daily tally of violence and casualties?

In terms of both content and emphases, there are marked differences between stories published by national U.S. media outlets and those by newspapers on the border, just as there are differences between coverage by national Mexican press organizations and those in Mexican states, given the different information needs and the differences in physical and psychological proximity to the drug trafficking phenomenon. As previously mentioned, journalists covering drugs in Mexico, especially those living on the border, incur risks every day and are highly limited in what they can report, due to threats, lack of sources, and other efforts to control what is reported. They often seek protection by relying on official press releases, as mentioned previously, which leads to an emphasis on small criminal events and no discussion of the big picture.

Sierra (*University for Peace*) said Mexico's coverage has focused on the war against the drug cartels, but that represents only part of the situation. Mexico is only one part, albeit an important one, of a plot that is transnational and transcontinental, he said. That plot involves international policies directed not only at Mexico, but at other countries also affected by the production and smuggling of drugs. Sierra said stories are missing certain historical and socioeconomic ingredients needed to show the complexity of the phenomenon.

In the absence of comprehensive official data on killings linked to drug violence, several newspapers, both national and those in border cities, have chosen to keep their own tallies. Figures vary, depending on the criteria for classifying a killing as linked to the narco, but they are largely similar. The daily front-page stories on the deaths, however, have prompted many news reports to revolve around the death toll or "body count," as workshop participants referred to it. Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) and Cecilia Balli (*UT/Texas Monthly*) were in favor of this practice. Garza saw it as "the only way to get on the map," while Balli said it is a way to ensure the federal government does not forget the problem. Carrasco (*Proceso*) stressed that "the dead do count," and that the brutality of the violence has led to research into new stories, from different angles, depicting the phenomenon. Several participants acknowledged the need to keep reporting the number of deaths but stressed that numbers alone fail to convey the human element and individuality of the victims.

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Some homicides receive more attention than others. President Calderón recently decided to visit Ciudad Juárez after 15 young people were killed at a party in late January. Similarly, U.S. President Barack Obama only began to pay attention to violence on the Mexico border after the killings of three people connected to the U.S. consulate in Juárez. Juárez is indeed important now, thanks to the body count, said Alfredo Quijano of *El Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Rodríguez (*El Diario de Juárez*) said the counting of victims is an important responsibility for reporters and said it

has served to map out the killings in Juárez and establish patterns of occurrence. For example, homicides take place in the most marginalized areas of the city, and the victims are mostly young. Sierra (*University for Peace*) said journalists should not lose their journalistic sensibility or forget the public's opinion on the massacres. "It's almost inevitable that the repetition of these events will generate a routine and a certain social insensitivity to crime. The first time three people are killed together, it is a big story that lasts several days, but the tenth time, it will be on the inside pages, for a day. And the hundredth time, the decision may be that fewer than five murders do not qualify as news. How can we fight this, which does great harm to society?" he asked.

Similarly, Kocherga (BeloTV) called for journalists to move beyond the death toll quickly and focus on portraying its impacts on all aspects of daily life on the border, where it is not uncommon for 14-year olds to be gunned down. Kocherga and Corchado (*Dallas Morning News*) agreed that stories should be humanized to explain the phenomenon of drug trafficking and its impact on the lives of ordinary people. Another advantage of including the human factor in the news is that it achieves greater empathy with the reader and requires less work to sensitize public opinion on the subject.

Some participants engaged in self-criticism and emphasized the need to write stories with more social context and to give greater space to the victims, because most current stories emphasize the perpetrators. Sandra Dibble, of the San Diego Union Tribune, said participants collectively needed to include other voices and "not only the firing of AK-47 automatic rifles." Narco violence has resulted in the displacement of families to safer cities. "It's not just blood in the streets that affects some people, there are other dimensions of the phenomenon which should be incorporated as well," she said.

Turati (*Periodistas de a Pié*, Mexico) said one can escape the official rhetoric by telling stories through the eyes of individuals—such as children, women, rural doctors or teachers. They also serve as a gateway to dangerous areas where it is very difficult to gain access to someone on the inside. For example, she published a story about the way drug violence has affected the funeral industry on the border, examining an industry of "hunters" of victims who travel quickly to the scene of a killing and fight for the chance to provide services for the bereaved. She described

how an interview with an embalmer served to illustrate the sharp increase in the number of killings in his area, as well as their brutality. The mortician said the dead used to arrive with three bullet wounds, and now they come with 120; it used to take half an hour to do his work and now it takes five; he recently reported having too much work to handle, meaning he could have no vacation time.

#### **g. Language and Morbid Terminology**

Adherence to official information has had a high a cost for stories published by the press. The language is overly technical at times and full of linguistic crutches, including calling all kinds of drugs “narcotics” and calling all criminal organizations engaged in the production and traffic of drugs “cartels,” when in fact neither usage corresponds to their respective dictionary definitions, Sierra (*University for Peace*) said. Mexican journalism tends to repeat language used by criminals, referring to a killing as an “execution” instead of an “assassination,” for example. Gomez (IAPA) warned of the dangers of using the language from the “*narco* banners” through which traffickers leave messages to their rivals, usually accompanied by a killing. “It does a lot of harm, it makes common a language that should not be so and that is reproducing itself,” she said.

Another problem is caused by stories full of morbid details, including bloody images and even beheadings. “Society needs to know what is happening, but to what point is it necessary to show the severed heads?” asked Sierra (*University for Peace*). Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) agreed that journalists should do a better job of balancing what people want to know, and what they need to know about the story. Following Sierra’s example, the group agreed there are many gory details that do not add substance to the news and could be handled in more creative ways.

#### **h. Simplifications and Stereotypes in Telling Stories**

One topic discussed at length was the cliché of blaming the problem on the other country. In Mexico, this is done simply by blaming the U.S. for drug consumption and weapons trafficking, without taking into account the efforts of authorities on both fronts. In contrast, Washington accuses Mexicans of corruption and inefficiency, as if the elimination of those elements alone would stop drug trafficking. The Americans, said panelist Howard Campbell (University of Texas at El Paso), tend

to talk only about things that are going wrong, putting all the blame on the drug cartels. In fact, it is a simplification to see the coverage of drugs on the border portrayed as a “war between cartels.” De Córdoba (*Wall Street Journal*) stressed that the drug phenomenon in Mexico is much more complex than a struggle between cartels, calling that the “user-friendly narrative in journalism.” He recommended that journalists “dig deeper.”

Excessive simplicity in dealing with drug trafficking, not only in the media but also by authorities and citizens in both countries, leads to the creation of stereotypes about cities and even entire countries. An example is Ciudad Juárez, often portrayed as a crucible of violence where narco is king, without further reference to the profound social and economic problems that drag the city down: widespread poverty at one extreme and rich foreign assembly plants (maquiladoras) on the other. The *narcos* themselves are often stereotyped, portrayed almost exclusively as men wearing elegant cowboy hats and driving fancy, four-wheel-drive trucks with tinted windows. In reality many do not wear cowboy boots, and for many years now, women have occupied important positions in the chain of command, as demonstrated by the recent arrest of Sandra Ávila Beltrán, an accused cartel leader nicknamed “The Queen of the Pacific.”

### **i. Journalism is Dead**

With so many factors working against drug reporting in Mexico, some participants said journalism is “dead,” prompting a heated debate. “We have stopped doing journalism,” said Carlos Arredondo of the *Vanguardia de Saltillo*. The self-censorship that many media outlets have adopted to protect its journalists has meant turning a blind eye to corruption and possible links between authorities and drug trafficking. However, Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) said reporters have only stopped doing a certain type of journalism and now do a different kind. But for Gomez (SIP/IAPA) “journalism has not died in my country, it is only in resistance.” However, she said the press in states that have suffered most from drug violence needs the impetus of journalism in Mexico City and abroad—like an organized effort that shows the authorities’ inconsistency and total loss of control in part of the country—to trigger a reaction from the government.

>>>> **ANALYSIS**

Press coverage of the increasingly violent drug phenomenon in Mexico confronts many challenges that affect the type and quality of stories journalists produce. Reasons that have nothing to do with journalistic criteria form the bases for decisions on what is covered, how it is covered, how much space it is allocated, and what priority it receives (i.e. placement in news reports). Veiled pressures and direct threats by criminal groups and by the government itself are replacing the traditional criteria used by editors to decide what is newsworthy and how news will be covered. News agendas are now largely determined by what journalists are able to produce without much information or context: a lack of access to sources on the one hand, and self-imposed news restrictions to protect journalists and reduce risks on the other. Not knowing whom to trust amid allegations of collusion between the authorities and narco operatives (a phenomenon that has been growing since the origins of Mexican drug cartels in the 1920s) is another variable that adds to this restrictive environment.

After the start of the “war on drugs” launched by President Calderón at the end of 2006, just after beginning his six-year term as president, new pressures on journalists appeared. The so-called joint operations against drugs included the largest ever deployment of troops to the areas most affected by drug violence, with about 50,000 soldiers and commanders leading the operations. The result for the press was increasing restrictions on access to information and greater control on publications. Several journalists have been cut off from information or even put directly at risk for not accepting the official version of the facts or for wanting to investigate further. Some have been accused of collaborating with organized crime groups only for daring to contradict official data. Institutional harassment has included, among other tactics, the questioning of journalists in front of their colleagues, and formal complaints presented against reporters to the heads of their news organizations. More serious still, a report published in

September 2009 by the press freedom group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated that some authorities were linked to certain abuses that were “defended on the grounds of the need to combat drug trafficking and the high level of violent crime.”<sup>6</sup> It went on to say that the “multiplication of assassination cases and disappearances of journalists and targeted attacks on media in this region underscore two realities that are just as formidable as the threat of the cartels.... The first is the direct involvement of officials in human rights violations (...) the second is the fact that the legal and political mechanisms for combating organized crime...work extremely badly.”

But official harassment is not the only threat faced by journalists who cover the drug trade. In recent months, criminal gangs have taken control of news coverage as well. The media blackout in Tamaulipas state earlier this year, which affected the city of Reynosa and the village of Camargo, offers a clear example of the power that these gangs now exert. Until recently, threats and attacks focused almost exclusively on local journalists who live in areas affected by *narco* violence, but warnings are beginning to extend to the foreign press, which traditionally was thought to face fewer risks in this type of coverage. Starting with the response to the killing of Camarena in 1985, the nationality of U.S. journalists had acted as a kind of shield in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> However, the killing of three people linked to the U.S. consulate in Juárez in March has been judged by analysts and by the press itself as a warning that no one is safe anymore.

For several years, news coverage of the phenomenon in Mexico focused on drug seizures and isolated homicides and was relegated to the inside pages of newspapers. But the increase in killings to several thousand per year, with massacres and a level of brutality that includes torture, decapitations and dismemberment, has put the information on the front page. This began in the middle of the current decade, and those stories have remained

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6 Benoît Hervieu, Balbina Flores and Jean-François Julliard. “Mexico. Behind the scenes of impunity. Security offensive and bureaucratic red-tape ..” Reporters Without Borders (RSF), September 2009. P.1.

7 The exception was the murder of U.S. cameraman Brad Will, of the Indymedia news agency, who died after being shot while covering a protest in Oaxaca, in western Mexico, on Oct. 27, 2006.

there day after day, even as standards on coverage differ widely between U.S. and Mexican media. This situation has led to problems and challenges arising from the publishing of morbid language and images, and reproducing criminal language from the communication channels used by the cartels, the so-called “narco banners,” huge pieces of fabric with messages and threats to the government, rivals, or the public. It has also led the violence to become a commonplace news item, while leaving underlying motives unexplored or generating coverage that lacks a human face, as when the news focuses solely on the death toll without giving social or historical context.

Thus, over a few years, the degree of freedom and the scope of work of Mexican media, especially those based in the states with the most criminal groups, has been greatly reduced, constrained within the limits imposed by the government and the narco industry. No doubt this loss of decision-making power not only affects the security of journalists, but also the coverage and quality of the news on drug trafficking. For these reasons, journalism coming from Mexico City-based media and the foreign press has acquired fundamental importance, because it has become the voice of those who are mired in forced silence.





Photo: newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez

An armed commando in Ciudad Juárez killed Sacramento Pérez, the city's police operations director, and three other officers on Feb. 17, 2009.



Photo: Ramón Sotomayor/ El Siglo de Torreón

Soldiers turn over the car that carried gunmen after a chase and shootout in Torreón, Coahuila. After several minutes of shooting, the car crashed into a wall.

Drug trafficking is not entirely a new phenomenon in Mexico, and it has changed over the years. The so-called cartels that smuggle banned substances across the northern border have existed since the U.S. imposed alcohol prohibition in the 1920s. A historical analysis will reveal that journalists have been reporting on links between state and municipal authorities and drug groups for decades, as described by the academic Luis Astorga in his books *Drugs without Borders* (Grijalbo, 2003), and *The Century of Drugs: Drug Trafficking from the Porfiriato to the New Millennium* (Random House Mondadori, 2005).

However, the outbreak of violence that began in the mid-2000s is a new phenomenon. Violence used to be restricted to certain drug production and smuggling zones. But since President Calderón declared war on drugs, the level of violence has not only increased and turned more brutal, but it has also spread to parts of the country that were once peaceful. It was mentioned, as Astorga also noted, that part of the spike in violence was caused by the change from the one-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to a new PAN government after elections in 2000. The fact that drug gangs in Mexico developed under the protection of political power instead of having to fight such power, is a hallmark of the country's drug traffickers, which differentiates them from their counterparts in Colombia and other countries.

#### **a. A Tale of Two Countries (and How They Embarked on a War on Drugs)**

One of the issues that sparked the most debate at the seminar was the need to add more context—social, economic, and historical—to the news about drug trafficking to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon in all its complexity. Panelist Alberto Islas (Risk Evaluation LTD–Mexico) recalled there had been violence on the border and incursions by the U.S. military a century ago, when the government sent Gen. John Pershing to pursue Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa after Villa entered American territory illegally and attacked and burned the town of Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916. U.S. troops invaded Ciudad Juárez in 1919 under the pretext of preventing Villa from taking the city. The Americans eventually withdrew. Also, in 1909, the first meeting took place between the presidents of Mexico and the United States: Porfirio Díaz and William H. Taft. The topic: border issues. “Nothing has changed on the border for the last hundred years,” Islas said. Álvaro Sierra (*University for Peace*) said we must go beyond the simplifications of conventional

wisdom and delve deeper into the history and socio-economic context to find the elements that explain why Mexico has not historically been able to deal with violence and illegal businesses. In the case of the United States, he said, one would also have to look for explanations for why the country has such a penchant for drugs, a question that historian Richard Davenport-Hines has also asked. One must also keep in mind that the U.S. drug war involves not only Mexico but also other countries—especially Colombia—that are part of the chain of production and distribution of drugs that caters to the United States.

Drug trafficking routes into the United States, and the power held by those who



control them, have changed dramatically since the 1980s when the all-powerful Colombians used speedboats and small planes to smuggle cocaine into the U.S. through the Caribbean. Increased interdiction efforts by the Americans in that area moved the routes to Central America and Mexico, which by then had become the main suppliers of marijuana and heroin to their northern neighbor. Alves (Knight Center) said that it was after the capture and death of the Colombian coca czars (the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers and Pablo Escobar) that Mexican groups emerged. Panelist Frank Smyth, of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), said the forceful introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) further facilitated the movement of drugs onto American soil and that the decriminalization of the consumption of small

quantities of marijuana for medicinal use in some U.S. states provides another incentive for gangs involved in trafficking.

For Sam Quiñones, of the *Los Angeles Times*, the migration of Mexicans to the United States has played a key role in connecting production and distribution cartels in Mexico with U.S. customers. In fact, he said, drug trafficking groups operate in places where there are high concentrations of Mexicans in the population. "The (Mexican) cartels could not have the business they do without the contacts they have throughout the country," Quiñones said. But he said he is skeptical that the Mexican



cartels have made the full leap to the U.S. and are now controlling distribution in Atlanta, Phoenix and Chicago, as some media and police reports have led the public to believe. However, panelist Fred Burton, of Stratfor Global Intelligence, a former special agent with the U.S. State Department and current security adviser to Texas state government, said that new information has allowed criminal gangs in the U.S. to connect with Mexican cartels and that their dynamics have been assimilating. “The Mexican cartels took control of distribution networks in Atlanta,” he said. The logistical capabilities of the cartels are substantial, and they can buy what they please in the United States, from weapons to hired killers, Burton added. “Al Qaeda does not have that ability but *El Chapo* (Guzman) does,” he said.<sup>8</sup>

Burton said cooperation on border security between the U.S. and Mexico is dysfunctional, and there are more acts of corruption and *narco* crimes taking place on U.S. soil than most people believe. The difficulty with counting homicides is that local police conduct the investigations, but the information is not reported to the federal agencies responsible for investigating drug trafficking, thus creating gaps in intelligence, he said. Jose De Cordoba (*Wall Street Journal*) agreed we should inquire more about corruption on the U.S. side, which is a topic that has been consistently ignored by the U.S. media. “There must be many more cases of local corruption than what gets published,” he said. Sierra (*University for Peace*) and Jorge Carrasco (*Proceso*) agreed that the entry process of drugs into the United States is still not entirely clear within the supply chain: i.e. who sells drugs on American soil? Apart from several Mexican groups that have been reported trafficking in certain U.S. cities, which U.S. organizations are involved in this work? Certainly these are issues that deserve further investigation.

### **b. Evolution of the Mexican Cartels and Changes in Patterns of Violence**

In 2000, Mexico’s newly elected president, Vicente Fox, began an intense initiative to capture his country’s top drug kingpins, leading to the arrest of Benjamin Arellano Felix and Osiel Cardenas, chiefs of the Tijuana and *El Golfo* cartels in 2002 and 2003, respectively. This began a process of fragmentation and struggle for

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8 Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán is the reputed leader of the so-called Sinaloa cartel, one of the most powerful in Mexico. In 2009, Forbes magazine put him on its list of billionaires in the world, ranking 701, with more than one billion dollars.

leadership within the groups and among other smuggling gangs. According to Sierra (*University for Peace*), the collateral damage of this strategy was increased violence, even though it was not the only cause.

The reorganization of criminal groups after the capture of their leaders has also helped new groups to emerge like *La Familia de Michoacán* and other smaller groups of hired killers like *Gente Nueva*. These rearrangements are changing business patterns that have been in the hands of the same families for decades. Each of these families was well known, and even when they were allied they worked independently. Today, most gangs are not exclusively engaged in the drug business. They have also entered into piracy, kidnapping, alcohol bootlegging, extortion, human trafficking, prostitution, the arms trade, and other activities. “The criminal enterprise in Mexico is now not only drugs,” said Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*). The new groups have continued the tradition of violence imposed by the Zetas, a gang of killers co-opted directly from an elite unit of the Mexican Army in the late 1990s by *El Golfo* cartel, which Osiel Cardenas then controlled. The Zetas broke existing patterns, said Cecilia Balli (*UT/Texas Monthly*). They inaugurated an era of brutal violence against their enemies and spread the violence after later allying themselves with other cartels and distancing themselves from the *Gulf Cartel*. There was a resulting spike in overall violence—an imitation effect—which previously had been a simple byproduct of the business of transporting drugs but became a key strategy for these groups, she added.

While researching a story about suspected *narcos* who had been killed, Ignacio Alvarado, of the Mexico City newspaper *El Universal*, uncovered a reality that contradicted the long-accepted media axiom: that chaos and violence in Mexico are solely attributable to the ongoing struggle between cartels. Alvarado’s reporting showed the phenomenon to be far more complex. He discovered that there are people who are not parts of major cartels like *Sinaloa* or *Juárez* but who “work as organized crime ‘freelancers’ and offer their services as free agents.” The problem for them is that the narco phenomenon in Mexico has always been extremely territorial, with those involved exercising a form of control that, in some places, reaches levels similar to those of dictatorships or totalitarian systems, said Sierra (*University for Peace*). And they do not forgive disloyalty.

### c. Myths about the Drug War

Among the myths about the war on drugs, which have been long repeated as truths and become part of conventional wisdom, are: the United States does nothing to reduce drug use inside its borders or the flow of arms and cash to Mexico; Mexican drug violence has spilled over into U.S. cities at the border; and the only cause of violence is Calderón's anti-drug operation and its strikes against all his country's cartels. As previously mentioned, these myths are more complicated and involve many other dynamics.

John Burnett, of National Public Radio (NPR), said reducing demand for drugs in the United States is a very complicated issue whose solution requires solving a social problem. Consequently, there is no quick way to eliminate drug use. Attempts to curb trafficking in weapons and cash south of the Rio Grande, Burnett said, are hampered by the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which gives citizens the right to own firearms. Burton (Stratfor) said an Israeli weapon smuggling network was detected entering Guatemala and then Mexico. Burnett said the copious amounts of money floating around the border region had begun to corrupt police officers who are supposed to be finding and seizing it on border highways. Panelist Randal Archibold of The New York Times said violence in Mexico is a source of great concern on the U.S. side of the border and to the DEA, which has stated that Mexico's situation is comparable with Colombia in the 1980s. Some panelists argued that, despite the killings linked to drug trafficking, violence in the United States is not equal to that occurring in Mexico, where decapitations and dismemberment are common. Burnett also said certain acts of violent crime in U.S. cities are attributed specifically to the Mexican cartels, but the blame is debatable.

Another myth cited by Mexican reporters was whether a "drug war" is really occurring in Mexico. They pointed out that marijuana fields have expanded in recent years in the state of Sonora, and they wondered why Mexico's Army would allow them to exist if the planted fields already had been identified. Another myth panelists sought to dispel is that Calderón is winning the war against drug trafficking. De Cordoba (*Wall Street Journal*) said few believe that, and many openly question the government's strategy. For Carlos Arredondo (*Vanguardia de Saltillo*), the issue isn't whether or not Calderón wins the drug war because its winners and losers will be the state collectively—in other words, all Mexicans.

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Mexico is the main supplier of marijuana and heroin to the United States, although marijuana production is widely distributed throughout the world, and production in the U.S.'s southern neighbor is far below the levels of opium and heroin produced in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> While Mexico does not produce cocaine, U.S. authorities estimate that 90 percent of all cocaine consumed on American soil is smuggled in from Mexico.<sup>10</sup> This was not always the case. The Colombian drug czars controlled trafficking in the 1980s and part of the 1990s, and much of their product came through the Caribbean en route to the U.S. According to the FBI, cocaine and its elevated price generate the highest profits of the three major drugs previously mentioned, but it is marijuana that continues to generate the most revenue for Mexico's drug cartels. Smuggling routes shifted to Central America and Mexico when U.S. interdiction efforts began to show results in the Caribbean. After the fall of the Colombian drug lords in the mid-1990s, it was only a matter of time before Mexicans took control of the trafficking routes to become the all-powerful smuggling groups that the American authorities talk about today.

Meanwhile, parts of the NAFTA agreement that opened new routes for shipping goods across the border also facilitated the drug trade and created new vulnerabilities for border towns. The cartels, originally based mostly in western Mexican states, soon moved to or gained strength in cities all along the U.S. border, like Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Matamoros. The turn of the millennium coincided with the end of the single-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held power in Mexico for 71 years. New dynamics also emerged in the workings of these criminal groups. In his previously mentioned books, Astorga advances the thesis that the state protected the narco business during the PRI era. After the fall of the party, the state's relationship with drug dealers became more confrontational, and both Presidents Fox and Calderón launched anti-drug campaigns. These prompted increased bor-

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9 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) 2009. Vol I. Drug and Chemical Control. Chapter on Mexico. Available online at <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2009/vol1/116522.htm> International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) 2008. Vol I. Drug and Chemical Control. Chapter on Mexico. P. 176.

10 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) 2008. Vol I. Drug and Chemical Control. Chapter on Mexico. P. 176.

der violence, especially in the cartels' base cities and in Nuevo Laredo, where Fox first deployed soldiers to deal with the problem in 2005. Death squads that operate as the armed branches of the cartels at the behest of their kingpins appeared in the late 1990s and were first employed by the Gulf Cartel. The Calderón administration's massive deployment of troops in Mexico to fight the drug war and capture the leaders of the cartels, in fact, caused the groups to fragment and fueled disputes over leadership. This should be discussed as a contributing factor to the increase in number and brutality of violent acts. However, it is not the only explanation, the government says.

The battles in broad daylight between gangs of drug traffickers, along with the sharp increase in the number of victims, have also encouraged myths to emerge about Calderón's anti-drug campaign, including those alleging that Mexico's narco violence is crossing to the northern side of the border and that the Mexican state is "on the verge of collapse." Opinions differ on the subject, and news reports confirm some myths and debunk others. In late March, the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington issued a list of five myths about the drug war in Mexico: (1.) Mexico is falling into widespread, indiscriminate violence; (2.) the government lacks the resources to fight the cartels; (3.) endemic corruption allows cartels to flourish; (4.) drug violence is a problem of Mexico and not of the United States; and (5.) Mexican drug violence has spread into the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The Wilson Center's analysis rejected each of these myths, countering that violence is limited to certain trafficking routes, the fight against *narcos* is not a lost cause, and despite the violent clashes between trafficking organizations in Mexico, very little violence has spread beyond the border and into the United States. Even if the report's arguments can be disputed, the Wilson Center is correct in saying that the war against transnational organized crime is a responsibility shared by several countries, including the United States, and that Mexican authorities are making an effort to fight corruption and to improve their tools for combating criminal groups.

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11 Andrew Selee, David Shirk and Eric Olson. "Five Myths About the Drug War in Mexico." Mexico Institute at the International Center for Scholars Woodrow Wilson in Washington. The Washington Post, March 28, 2010.





Photo: newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez

The killing of an employee of the U.S. Consulate in Juárez, Lesley Enriquez, and her husband Arthur Redelfs, March 13, 2010



Photo: Ramón Sotomayor/El Siglo de Torreon

A bloody handprint on a wall where 17 innocent civilians were assassinated at a party July 18, 2010, by an armed group of alleged cartel hitmen who were let out of jail at night with permission of the authorities

The operation of Mexico's judicial system, the coordination between federal and state authorities, and the administration of justice were recurring themes during the seminar. This included debate on the efforts to reform the Mexican judicial system. The reforms have been ongoing since 2008, and the border states of Chihuahua and Nuevo León have pioneered their implementation. The reforms were designed in part to provide the state with more effective tools in the fight against drug trafficking, but the results have been mixed for journalists covering drugs in those states. A new system that presumes the accused are innocent until proven guilty has allowed suspects in some cases who are widely perceived to be criminals by the public to be released. Participants also pointed to the issue of military justice and said President Calderón's involvement of troops in the drug war has led to a substantial number of abuses and human rights violations at the hands of soldiers, illustrated by the numbers of complaints brought before Mexican military tribunals. In this regard, many seminar participants said the militarization of Mexico's war on drugs has added another factor to the growing list of risks faced by journalists covering drugs and the government's fight against them.

#### **a. Functioning of Justice**

José Ponce, of *El Imparcial de Hermosillo*, pointed to the lack of coordination between federal and state judicial systems in Mexico, saying it often delays and bureaucratizes investigations related to violence. It is often unclear where responsibility falls among the differing systems, he added. "The state says that it is a federal matter ... but PGR (the top federal prosecutor's office) doesn't address it either, and both coordinate their work very poorly," he said. Carrasco (*Proceso*) stressed that this is not just a Mexican issue, and the United States must also do its part. "There is a need in the United States to investigate the structure and inner-workings of the drug cartels. Something is going on there, and we do not know exactly what it is," he said.

Meanwhile, Islas (Risk Evaluation LTD–Mexico) said judicial reform is extremely important, as it gives more independence and transparency to the justice system in Mexico. However, Sandra Rodríguez (*El Diario de Juárez*) brought up the lag in the implementation of reforms in Chihuahua, saying that "prosecutors don't know, or they won't talk" about the changes. Rodríguez regarded the reform as a political miscalculation that was "designed for people not to go to jail, but to take alternative

measures.” She said that criminals are walking free, which generates bad feelings in communities torn by violence. The system has lost credibility as a result, she said.

Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) emphasized Mexico’s lack of uniform standards for criminal investigation and the lack of a national system for tracking crimes, including data at the local and national levels, both for federal and common law crimes. For Arredondo (*Vanguardia*, Saltillo), judicial reform is a new element that Mexicans have not learned to use yet. He believes the same has occurred with the Transparency and Access to Public Information Law of 2002. “We’re not using the

tool, and we journalists, those who use it the most, use it badly,” he said. Along the same lines, Gómez (IAPA) complained that police and prosecutors give little information about the investigative processes, and there is no access to preliminary inquiries in the archives.

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#### **b. Military Justice and Abuses**

The growing role of military justice in the context of the government’s anti-drug campaign was an important subject of discussion. Many participants stressed that the military deployment has brought more violence, and that soldiers are increasingly involved in human rights violations. This has created

new obstacles to journalistic work due to restrictions on content imposed by the military, as discussed previously. Carrasco (*Proceso*) said the Mexican Army’s role has been very controversial, because it is the only institution that investigates its own crimes. Panelist Emma Daly (Human Rights Watch) identified a number of problems in the way military courts conduct investigations. Among them, judges are not tenured, and the military judicial process is not subject to civilian oversight. Soldiers lack the proper training to be deployed to carry out police functions in an anti-drug war, she added. “The only way the Mexican state will be able to address the violence is by strengthening the rule of law,” fully respecting human rights, and restricting opportunities for corruption and abuse, Daly said.

### **c. Impunity**

A problem closely related to the ineffectiveness of the Mexican judicial system is the issue of widespread impunity. Gomez (IAPA) saw it as a form of aggression against freedom of expression that makes everyone vulnerable. Rodríguez (*El Diario de Juárez*) said impunity continues to fuel violence and that information about ongoing investigations is sometimes used for propaganda purposes. For example, she discussed an announcement by the state attorney general's office in Chihuahua state (where Ciudad Juárez is located), which stated it had solved thousands of homicides. When reporters checked the claim, they found there had been no charges filed in court.

For Quiñones (*Los Angeles Times*), the rise of drug cartels in Mexico is closely related to local governments' shortcomings and lack of institutional capacity, especially in terms of police and the courts. This, he said, is the only way to explain why gangs of peasants (the families who started the major drug cartels in Mexico, mostly from Sinaloa) have become such serious threats to national security. "They developed a lot of confidence because no one put a stop to them, it seems so obvious," Quiñones said. In contrast, local governments in the United States are well-financed, autonomous and powerful enough to confront many of their communities' most serious problems on their own, he said.



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The Mexican judicial system has been undergoing major reforms following legal and constitutional amendments approved by Congress in 2008. The previous criminal processing system was woefully outdated and had remained largely unchanged since the years following the 1917 Mexican Revolution. For example, the 1931 Federal Criminal Code and its legal crime-fighting tools had become obsolete, especially those meant to combat crimes like drug trafficking, a transnational phenomenon that is flexible, fluid, and rich in resources to operate in the modern world.

The new system incorporates public oral trials to replace the old trials that were done behind closed doors and without the presence of the accused, a practice long-considered to foment widespread corruption. The reforms also establish the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, unlike the previous system in which the accused was considered guilty until proven innocent. The new system also allows for wiretapping private telephones with judicial approval and the ability to arraign (or place in preventive custody) organized crime suspects for up to 80 days. After that time, formal charges must be filed, or the suspect must be released. The reform also created “control judges” who are responsible for expediting and resolving requests by authorities to conduct investigations and searches.

Since its introduction in June 2008, judicial reform is being implemented in all of Mexico’s 32 states over a transitional period of eight years. The newness of the system means that everyone involved must learn new skills. This includes the police, who must now provide oral testimony in court, and prosecutors, who must prosecute or defend the accused in person rather than by written letter. The new system has already shown some faults and weaknesses, which have been keenly observed by the public and the press. Some have already begun declaring parts of the new model a failure. Human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, applauded the reform, which attempts to show greater respect for the fundamental rights of the accused. However, rights groups have criticized a provision in the reform that allows for the detention of organized crime suspects for up to 80 days without charges being filed against them. For journalists, the

changes should mean greater access to judicial information, which used to be confidential and often leaked only to certain reporters for political reasons.

According to a report by the Secretary of Defense (Sedena), the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) of Mexico received 3,430 complaints against members of the Army for alleged human rights violation over the last three years—the first half of President Calderón’s administration.<sup>12</sup> Only 51 cases resulted in “recommendations” by the CNDH for the Army to investigate, and only six of those resulted in criminal proceedings against the accused soldiers. According to human rights groups, the allegations against the military are generally based on searches, illegal detention, violence and injuries. A total of 59 soldiers either have been convicted, are under investigation, or are being prosecuted for human rights violations, according to data from Sedena. In March, National Ombudsman Raúl Plascencia said militarization of the police needs to be temporary because the military is not trained for police positions, and it has led to new restrictions on journalistic work. Last September’s report from Reporters Without Borders was also especially telling, showing that political and legal mechanisms to combat organized crime, when they are hindered by the tension between state and federal power, do not work well.

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12 Data released by Sedena in a statement on March 3, 2010.



Photos: Christian Palma

Journalists march in the Federal District to demand "We want them alive!"





The conditions endured by journalists covering drugs on the U.S.-Mexico border are particularly difficult, and not due only to the daily threat of violence. During the seminar, issues of employment and financial security provoked several comments about the media as employers. The physical and psychological effects of violence on reporters and their being forced to cope with the climate of threats and attacks—including the killing of some of their colleagues—triggered calls for better organization and coordination among journalists to deal with all these challenges.

#### **a. Working Conditions**

Kowanin Silva, of *Vanguardia de Saltillo*, gave an overview of the working conditions of Mexican journalists who cover the police outside Mexico City. She said reporters and photographers earn salaries of less than U.S. \$500 a month, and most have no health insurance or benefits, even if they are staff writers and are not self-employed. Gómez (IAPA) said the media have a responsibility not only for choosing what is covered and how it is presented, but also for the wages and the treatment of their journalists. Balli (UT/*Texas Monthly*) decried the treatment of journalists in Mexican border cities by their U.S. colleagues, saying they are hired as assistants and guides, or “fixers,” but not as reporters in a relationship that would treat them as equals. Mexican reporters accept such contracts simply because they need the money, she added.

#### **b. Effects of Violence**

Journalists in Mexico face anxiety, unwillingness to return to work, fear of near-daily shootings, and the general climate of violence in some cities. Many of them are candidates for post-traumatic stress disorder, but there are no studies to confirm this. Research and steps to address the problem are urgently needed. How is it possible to overcome the daily sight of victims of killings and threats? Donna De Cesare, representing the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, and the University of Texas School of Journalism, made several recommendations. Among them, she suggested ways to cope with the trauma, such as rest, exercise, trying to maintain a normal routine, avoiding coffee, talking about feelings, and maintaining social relationships to avoid becoming isolated. To make the profession less dangerous, she said, it is necessary to choose a safe place to do interviews and to explain the rules first. This includes explicitly stating up front how the information will be used.

De Cesare also provided tips on how to recognize when one is affected by trauma, and how to take the necessary steps to feel better. She also stressed the importance of spreading education and awareness on the subject to all journalists. Turati (*Periodistas de a Pié*, Mexico) said many journalists, especially photographers who are the first to arrive at the crime scene and are always on the front lines, are “very psychologically damaged. They’re very scared, putting themselves at too much risk, with delusions of getting out of the area and winning grants,” she said.

### c. Killings of Journalists

Mexico has become one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists, ranking near the top of lists compiled by journalism associations and human rights groups since the mid-2000s. Panelist Frank Smyth (Committee to Protect Journalists) said Mexico ranks seventh among the countries where journalists have been slain with complete impunity, with 16 cases. Iraq tops that list. Smyth said the reasons behind the killings of journalists in Mexico are two-fold: to silence reporters who are touching sensitive nerves, and to intimidate their coworkers. As a form of protection, Smyth suggested journalists eliminate their real names from their bylines and that they use pseudonyms instead. He also recommended they create a freedom of press and expression organization that can pressure authorities and others to protect journalists. However, Alves (Knight Center) said such an association would be difficult to create in Mexico, as the country’s press is extremely fragmented. Several of the Mexican journalists also rejected the idea of not using their names, explaining that in small towns everyone knows which journalist covers which beat, and leaving a story with no byline or a fake name can put other professionals at an even greater risk. Alves called on those at the conference not to lose their indignation over the number of journalists being killed in Mexico. Islas (Risk Evaluation LTD-Mexico) urged them to stand firm and continue to keep count of the reporters killed, despite the dangers. Recording the data in a systematic way, he said, will continue to keep the topic in the news and on Mexico’s political agenda, making it harder for people to view the killing of journalists as normal.

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According to data from the Committee to Protect Journalists, 20 journalists have been killed in Mexico since President Calderón launched his anti-drug campaign in December 2006. All were Mexican journalists working at the state or local levels; none were based in Mexico City. Several others have been kidnapped. Some were released alive, but others remain unaccounted for. In 2009 alone, the CNDH recorded 79 attacks on journalists. Threats have been made in recent months against foreign correspondents, who are beginning to feel more intimidated when covering drug trafficking. In addition, three of every four journalists assassinated in Mexico were covering the police beat.

Mexico has a special prosecutor assigned to crimes against journalists (FEA-DP). The office was created in 2006 by then-President Vicente Fox, but the agency has been unable to curtail crimes against reporters, and its former director said only a minority of journalists had been killed because of their work. In February, the Attorney General's Office appointed Gustavo Salas as the new director of the special prosecutor's office, announced the expansion of the office's powers and ordered a review of each case. The change came after the national human rights monitor (CNDH) reported a month earlier that 60 journalists had been killed in Mexico since 2000, 12 of them last year, and five in the early months of 2010. The September report from Reporters Without Borders noted that eight other journalists had disappeared since 2000.

Mexico has several agencies dedicated to protecting journalists— many of which are run by the government—but they have been largely ineffective in ensuring the safety of reporters. As the September report by Reporters Without Borders stated: "No country has as many specialized administrations for the protection of journalists and the defense of press freedom as Mexico. However, the mutual neutralization of institutions largely explains the detriment of research and the perpetuation of impunity." The atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty is taking a great toll on quality of life and quality of the news, especially on local reporters and those who cover drug trafficking. Journalists work under conditions that are far from optimal, and they confront constant tension and aggression, but they still struggle to inform the public as well as they can.

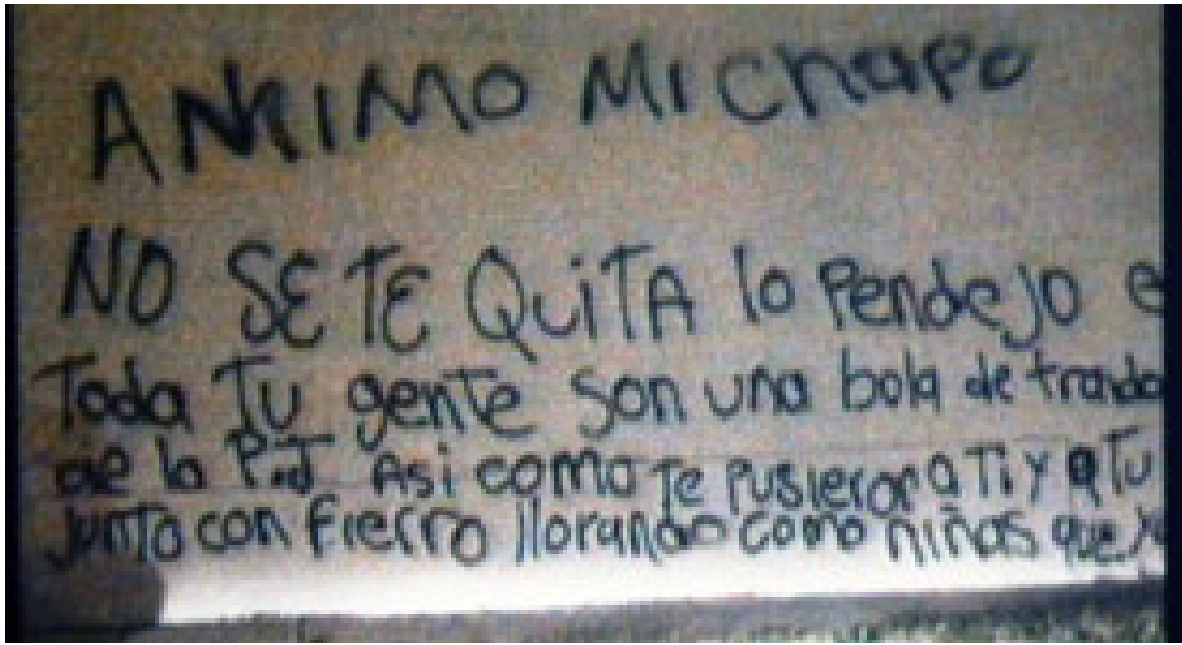


Photo: newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez

Drug traffickers leave a message in Ciudad Juárez against trafficker Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán



Photo: Miguel Sierra, Vanguardia

A Federal Police officer in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico.

Several journalists organizations exist in Mexico, but they are fragmented and do not usually work towards common goals. Similarly, despite Mexico's variety of national and state media, very few are affiliated with international organizations like the Inter American Press Association (IAPA). Seminar participants complained about the lack of journalistic solidarity and networks to support different media organizations in the challenges of drug coverage in Mexico. They also explored possibilities for breaking censorship, both self- and externally-imposed, with the use of new techniques that allow reporters to keep telling the story without exposing themselves to as much risk. In this sense, the Colombian experience serves as a guide: it took several years and thousands of deaths due to drug-related violence before organizations were formed to defend journalists. In fact, these new associations were created in the late 1990s, after the fall of the great *Medellín* and *Cali* cartels and after the death and capture of their leaders.

The journalists' discussions resulted in two proposals. First: continue encouraging more creative journalism that can better analyze the context and possible causes of drug trafficking and violence by portraying the lives of people affected by it. One example of journalists who have organized to improve coverage is *Periodistas de a Píe*. That organization focuses on social actors and social processes, monitors the interests of citizens and their rights, and seek explanations for contemporary phenomena. One of its greatest achievements has been simply to put reporters in contact with each other and show them that they are not isolated and don't have to confront their individual problems alone. The network was founded in 2007, and today it has more than 260 members. It also trains journalists through workshops, lectures and seminars to improve the quality of published work.

The second proposal was to seek new, safer platforms for publishing the wealth of information that is available to journalists, especially those working locally. Participants proposed using new media like blogs or websites. Those platforms can be used both as sources of information and new publishing platforms that are free and can be made safe, if the right security measures are taken to safeguard the authors' identities. This is something that is simply out of the traditional media's reach.

Proposals were also discussed for reducing the risks in covering the Mexican drug war, such as adopting protocols and protective measures, and increasing training for journalists functioning in hostile environments.



### a. Solidarity

The lack of organization and coordination among journalists on the U.S.–Mexico border was identified as a factor that creates vulnerability in their daily work. Gómez (IAPA) said there is a lack of awareness in Mexico City about what the regional media report about the war on drugs. She stressed that the stronger journalistic institutions and civil society are, the more difficult it is for organized crime and corruption to penetrate most facets of life. “Solidarity (among the press) is a strength, and the lack of it is a great weakness,” she said. Gómez also drew attention to what she described as “corrupt powers” in regions where the concentration of media in the hands of a few facilitates division and makes



accountability difficult. Alves (Knight Center) said news organizations in Mexico should be more active and more supportive of their members, while also working to create more solidarity. Turati (*Periodistas de a Pié*, Mexico) said Mexican news organizations are highly polarized and often fight among themselves, making it almost impossible to get the owners of newspapers together to discuss such critical matters. Gómez (IAPA) added that working in solidarity can help make it possible for Mexico to transcend national borders and build international support. This can lead to the changes that will begin to rebuild the country’s frayed social fabric.

In this regard, she stressed the need to work closely with media owners and publishers to generate a strong cohesive movement. Other panelists said IAPA can play a key role in helping to create this approach. However, Sierra (*University for Peace*) urged caution in creating expectations and setting unrealistic goals for cooperation. The histories of drug trafficking in Mexico and Colombia are similar, but they are not identical, he said. In the days of Colombia’s drug wars, he recalled, traffickers killed authorities and owners of newspapers, which triggered immediate solidarity. In Mexico, however, the killings have been almost entirely confined to local journalists, most of them unknown and in areas far from the capital. So, rather than expecting immediate solidarity in the Mexican case, Sierra suggested starting with

individual partnerships, then expanding the effort, if successful. “That is a realistic collaboration,” he said. There should also be an effort to create more organized and promising partnerships in this regard.

### **b. Creative Journalism**

In the regions and states most affected by the *narco* trade, the difficult daily living conditions journalists face in covering drugs, including violence, censorship and threats, have reduced and even silenced the flow of news about certain aspects of drug trafficking, especially those related to ties with authorities and investigations into members of the cartels. However, the same difficulties have led to a new way of doing journalism in those regions. Garza (*El Siglo de Torreón*) called it “creative journalism,” which he defines as reporting focused more on the social impact of drug trafficking than on disputes between criminal groups and body counts. For example, reconstructing the personal stories of innocent victims; communities living amid the violence; life in areas facing daily shootouts; and organized crime’s impact on increases in robberies, assaults, kidnappings and extortion.

The creative approach may be a legitimate and valid way to report news while escaping the restrictions on information imposed by drug trafficking and the cartels, but it does not replace the role of journalists in publishing and investigating essential information—which would be covered in a normal context—such as the extension of networks of corruption or authorities’ ties to *narcos*. Facts that are omitted continue to form an essential part of the picture, but for now they must remain unspoken, Garza said. In this way, it is possible to keep the subject alive without exposing journalists to unnecessary risks. Identifying the heads of criminal groups is not as important now as it was when the explosion of drug violence was a new phenomenon. But it is important to reveal changes that institutional structures and the social fabric have undergone, Gómez (IAPA) added. This evolution of the forms of violence in Mexico, brought about by the changes and increases in the cartels’ brutality, has created new stories, Balli (*UT/Texas Monthly*) said.

At the same time, the political and economic arenas also help better explain how the drug industry works as a whole. In communities where the economy is based on the drug trade, for example, the local economy simply collapses when authorities carry out actions against *narcos*, and people become unemployed, Carrasco



(*Proceso*) said. Illustrating that point is the case of a new group of nonviolent entrepreneurial narcos in the small town of Xalisco, in the Pacific coastal state of Nayarit. The community produces a certain type of heroin that is less refined and cheaper than regular heroin. It is sold in the United States under a different business model that was started by an army of small businessmen in Xalisco. Rather than rely on traditional small-funds transactions, the model takes advantage of door-to-door marketing techniques. The new initiative is changing the pattern of heroin use in many parts of the American Midwest, where there was no previous demand for the drug. This story was brought to light in February by one of the conference participants, reporter Sam Quiñones of the *Los Angeles Times*.

#### **c. New Platforms for Dissemination**

Despite new opportunities to further explore the social impact caused by drugs and coverage of the drug war, Silva (*Vanguardia de Saltillo*) said secure platforms are needed on which to publish hard and relevant information on the drug trafficking phenomenon. “There is a lot of rich information that we would like to have a forum to publish in,” she said. Zita Arocha (*Borderzine/UT El Paso*) proposed establishing an investigative team of reporters from both sides of the border. The group would be linked to a university and would investigate particularly complicated issues of drug trafficking, i.e. money laundering or the possible spread of violence to the U.S.

#### **d. Protection and Training Measures**

The constant threats and attacks faced by journalists who cover drug trafficking have led some newsrooms to adopt special measures to reduce risks and improve safety levels for journalists. Reporters who cover those stories every day often take steps to protect themselves, but after a time, many fall back into old routines and habits that make them more vulnerable, a pattern they recognize themselves.

Silva (*Vanguardia de Saltillo*) said that after the killing of a colleague at a competing newspaper in January, the newsroom was in panic and decided to install a technical council that established security measures to reduce risks. It opened a hotline at the newspaper to issue warnings if necessary. It also created a telephone database with five people who lived near the reporters and could account for them in case

of danger or the suspicion of kidnapping. In addition, it assigned three editors to monitor the publications of the day constantly, with attention to errors in coverage and language, whether committed by reporters or during the editing process. That step was necessary since errors unknowingly inserted by editors can be fatal for the journalists who write the stories but rarely for those who edit the reports. Regarding language, it was recommended to omit words such as “executions.” “The risk in the newsrooms is ignorance, and that can kill journalists,” Silva said.

Turati (*Periodistas de a Pié*, Mexico) shared some strategies used by journalists to report stories at the scene of a crime. For example, she said journalists from various media outlets, who in other areas often compete with one another, now phone each other and wait to go together to the crime scene for safety reasons. Also, male photographers disguise themselves as women, do their work quickly and leave the crime scene, so as not to attract attention and avoid further danger. Rodríguez (*El Diario de Juárez*) said that after the most experienced police reporter in Ciudad Juárez was killed in November 2008, some colleagues bought bullet-proof vests. Barely a year and a half later, however, things had returned to normal, and reporters left their vests at home and resumed old routines in which it was easy to commit safety “errors.” Corchado (*Dallas Morning News*) agreed that journalists should avoid working alone. He recommended group coverage of complicated and potentially dangerous events, especially for those who appear on the scene and are clearly identifiable as journalists, such as cameramen and photographers whose equipment leaves little doubt about their profession.

Other recommendations included—always inform editors of the topics one is working on and the places and people visited, and be cautious when using and interacting with sources, as noted by Islas (Risk Evaluation LTD–Mexico). Smyth (Committee to Protect Journalists) also stressed the need for journalists covering drugs on the border to receive training on how to deal with risks and post-traumatic stress. He said the training would serve to create cohesion and unity for journalists.

>>>> ANALYSIS

Journalists who cover drugs, particularly Mexican reporters who cover local news, are vulnerable to the power of drug trafficking organizations. Reporters from local newspapers are especially defenseless due to their general lack of training on dealing with hostile environments and post-traumatic stress, and their very limited salaries and lack of health insurance and other benefits. The critical conditions in which they live make them more vulnerable to violence and cooptation by criminal organizations that offer fast cash. Several seminar participants spoke of “narco-journalists” who are in newsrooms “controlling” what is published, trying to influence coverage while they closely monitor their colleagues.

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The corrupting power of drug trafficking organizations is great, and we must remember that entire police agencies in Mexico have been dissolved because many, if not all, of their men were taking bribes from drug gangs. The most recent case involved the Federal Investigation Agency (AFI), created by former President Vicente Fox as a modern police force. It was supposed to be an incorruptible model for other law enforcement agencies to follow. However, the AFI was abruptly dissolved in May 2009 amid allegations of corruption among its members. A few months earlier, the heads of Interpol in Mexico and the drug czar for the nation’s Office of the Attorney General were arrested for alleged links to the Beltran Leyva brothers, leaders of a feared smuggling syndicate. They were neither the first nor the highest-ranking Mexican authorities to be co-opted by drug traffickers. In 1997, Mexico’s then-drug czar, Gen. Jesús Gutierrez Rebollo, was arrested for protecting the *Juárez* cartel a few months after he was chosen to lead the newly established National Institute to Combat Drugs. The institute was closed a short time after Gutierrez Rebollo’s arrest.

Journalists need support and solidarity not only from their peers, but also from editors and owners of the media outlets where they work. Their em-

ployers need to be aware of the environment and take basic safety precautions in the newsroom to keep people working, while at the same time taking care of the employees. It is important to remember that threats come not only from drug traffickers, but also from state institutions, as stated in March by the president of the National Human Rights Commission, Raúl Plascencia: “Journalists and mass media professionals have paid a heavy price to keep the values of democracy in the view of collective consciousness, and I am concerned by attacks on their rights, ranging from intimidation and arbitrary arrests to the loss of life.”<sup>13</sup>

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13 Statements taken from Mexico’s Milenio newspaper, March 17, 2010.



Photo: Christian Palma

Journalists in the Federal District march against violence



Photo: Jorge Villalpando



The question of how to produce quality journalism while keeping reporters safe in the violent and constantly changing environment of drug trafficking on the Mexico–U.S. border will not be answered with a single workshop, especially when the violence is constantly evolving, bringing new challenges to the press in different areas every day. However, the Knight Center’s seminar in Austin was a very useful experience, providing a space where participants discussed the theoretical and real-world aspects of violence and drugs. They shared valuable perspectives and took advantage of the opportunity to meet colleagues working in similar circumstances on both sides of the border. As we have discussed, networking is important for reporters who cover the border. It helps keep them safe and gives them a support



system to assist them in times of violence. The panelists made it clear that the problems faced by U.S. and Mexican journalists are not the same, and that each cohort still faces its own battles. Those from the north of the Rio Grande are struggling to find space for news about the border in their media outlets, while journalists from south of the border are in a daily struggle to survive the drug violence and its physical and psychological effects.

The Mexican drug trade is evolving, and so are the dynamics that drive it. In the past, drug violence was limited to certain regions or territories, especially in areas with heavy concentration of drug production and trafficking. It was dominated by certain families who were already widely known.

Now, there are new groups, and the job of hit man has been professionalized. Instead of being a byproduct of drug trafficking, violence has become a strategy for criminal groups to gain access to, and control of, new businesses like piracy, kidnapping and extortion. It is precisely in this new world, as one of the participants of the seminar said, that journalism is most necessary: amid threats, censorship and violence.

The forum’s main take-away is that it raised participants’ awareness of the numerous challenges they face in trying to report, and how those obstacles both constrain them and present new opportunities in journalism. The world needs to know what

is occurring on the border, without censorship of any kind. At the same time, the global story of drug trafficking must be more fully explored. This story doesn't stop at the border. It is built on networks and actors in the United States about whom little is known, at least so far. Telling the full story is both a challenge and a great opportunity. In that sense, panelists stressed that collaboration among colleagues—including Mexican reporters from the capital and the states, and foreign reporters—is fundamental to breaking the information blockade. The Dallas Morning News demonstrated this with its recent story about the drug-gang-imposed media blackout in Tamaulipas in March of this year.

A sign of goodwill and cooperation along this line came when journalists who participated in the seminar agreed to stay in touch, and the Knight Center created a list-serv for everyone involved, thus making it easier for members of the group to remain connected.

By **Mónica Medel**  
Austin, Texas, April 2010



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JOURNALISM  
IN TIMES OF  
THREATS,  
CENSORSHIP  
AND VIOLENCE

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