

# Democracy for Mexico's Press?

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How a country not at war is the second-most  
dangerous to be a journalist

Jaclyn Barrientes  
[barrient@unc.edu](mailto:barrient@unc.edu)  
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Jaclyn Barrientes is a page designer at the Charlotte Observer in Charlotte, North Carolina. She has been in the journalism business since 2000, when she was hired as an intern copy editor/designer at The Brownsville Herald, in Brownsville, Texas, at 19. She spent three years there before moving to finish her journalism degree at the University of North Texas. She's a member of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, an organization created to help journalists of Latin descent find positions in America's newsrooms. Jaclyn is currently earning her Certificate of Technology and Communication at the University of North Carolina.

Jaclyn is originally from Brownsville, on the Texas/Mexico border. In her spare time, she likes to read books about history and draw. She lives in Concord, just outside of Charlotte, and is training for a half-marathon in Raleigh next year.

["I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance while preparing this assignment and I have written the code myself."]

## **Abstract**

Journalists in some countries face challenges everyday because of corrupt political system, wars and a lack of freedom for the press, a basic right to Americans, protected in the Constitution. Nearly a hundred journalists have died in the war-torn country of Iraq. But what's not as well-known is how many journalists have died for what they've written in Mexico. Problems for Mexican journalists stem far into their history, facing an uphill battle with shady politicians and corrupt law enforcement officials. But they now face one of their biggest challenges as Mexican Drug cartels fighting over territory spill more blood on the streets.

I tried looked to understand the difficulties Mexican journalists face. But as I did my research, I learned that many times, the journalists were not corrupt, nor were they exploring something they weren't supposed to. They were simply doing their jobs, and it was costing them their lives. Threats and the murders of reporters and television crews are mainly in the northern states of Mexico, on the United States border, but violence toward journalists has spread into other parts of the country, especially Oaxaca, where most of the fighting in the southern areas has occurred.

Much of my research relied on newspaper articles from around Mexico and from border cities in the U.S. where the violence is spilling over. Web sites, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Inter American Press Association, provided a lot of background information and ideas they hope will alleviate the situation.

After analyzing the information, I could see that the threats and murders would not change unless more drastic measures were taken to prevent them. A new law enforcement that cannot be bribed or bullied is needed to help the fight against the drug cartels, those who are most responsible for the deaths of journalists and thousands of others. Temporary and immediate asylum into the United States for threatened journalists is necessary to save lives. Finally, newspapers have to take extra precautions to ensure the safety of their staff while they are in their offices, using extra security and, perhaps, planned escape routes.

Acapulco was once one of Hollywood's famous getaways in the 1950s. A Mexican city on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, it was even featured in such films as "The Lady from Shanghai" and "I escaped from Devil's Island" [1]. But that's not the Acapulco Amando Ramirez last saw before he was shot in the back three times. On April 6, 2007, Ramirez, a correspondent from broadcast news station Televisa was killed by an unknown gunman in the beach resort [2]. While no reason was ever given as to why Ramirez was killed, speculation puts the blame on the drug wars that have taken over the area and turned a once-alluring tourist attraction into a deadly spot.

Sadly, Ramirez was not the first and won't be the last journalist to be killed in Mexico. It has become the second-deadliest country for journalists, behind Iraq. And it's not just Mexican reporters that have become victims, American journalists who cross the border have also been targets of violence.

More than 30 journalists have been killed since 2001 in Mexico, 10 in 2006 alone, more than in any other Latin American country [3]. Like Ramirez' death, most of the murders have been blamed on drug cartels or corrupt politicians in the country, although no one takes responsibility for the horrible acts. And in most cases, no one will be charged. Mexico lacks a strong law for freedom of the press and the inability to prosecute those responsible much of the time.

So how can journalists be in so much danger with so many people wanting to cause them harm in a country not in at war?

## History of the Mexican Press

Politics and newspapers go a long way together, since Father Miguel Hidalgo de Costilla, an independence leader, started *El Despertador Americano* in 1810.

Until the last decade, many journalists in Mexico were corrupt, bribed by politicians, drug lords and anyone else who had something they wanted. Editor-in-chief of *El Norte* in Monterrey, Alberto Garza, said ethics was the Achilles' heel of the Mexican press. Politicians would plant people in crowds to ask the questions they wanted during conferences. Also, the lack of competition in some places led some newspapers to be biased in what they reported. People became suspicious of newspapers, criticizing them for their ties to the old political regime [4].

One newspaper wanted to change the way journalists did their jobs. *Reforma*, the Mexican newspaper with a readership of 400,000 [5] in Mexico City, helped Mexico's journalists become more free and independent.

According to a 1995 article in *Editor and Publisher*, in 1993, the newspaper was founded on the idea that ethics should be a large part of journalism. When *Reforma* was being created, *El Norte* publisher Alejandro Junco de la Vega created a program to recruit new and inexperienced people to be trained as journalists. Then they became interns for six weeks.

*Reforma* went through tough times at the beginning, including dealing with stores that did not want the paper publishing on holidays, boycotts on the publication and selling the newspaper using streethawkers, people who stood on street corners to sell newspapers.. Eventually, it became one of the most elite newspapers in the country. *Reforma* helped break the mold for

journalism in Mexico [6].

While risk was always part of the profession, harassment and death threats for journalists increased in 1999 during the presidential election that eventually put Vicente Fox in office, thus ending the 70-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) [7].

Eventually, the threats were also made to American journalists in Mexico. Sometimes, they were merely caught in the crossfire. Too many times, their murders went unsolved. When Bradley Roland Will died during a protest rally in Oaxaca, the only people arrested for killing him and were released from custody by a judge and no one else was ever arrested. *San Antonio Express-News* reporter, Phillip True, was killed by the Huichol Indians he was covering in the mountains of Mexico. His body was found in an area northwest of Guadalajara and his killers have evaded capture.

With Fox in office, it started the end of the era of the corrupt politician. It seems now that one major source for the violence against journalists lies in the booming world of the drug cartels. The cartels have been responsible for nearly 3,000 deaths in a year and half in Mexico and now have their sights set on the journalists who write negative stories about them and their business.

### **The Impact of the Violence**

Carlos Moncada, a lawyer and former *Impacto* magazine director has said reporters are mainly assassinated for political motives or because of their investigations and knowledge of the drug trafficking business that has taken over Mexico. The threats on journalists and their families include jailings, beatings, torture and murder [8].

While most of the violence against journalists is in the northern states of Mexico, those bordering the United States, the southern state of Oaxaca is known for being especially dangerous and corrupt. In Oaxaca City, a reporter was badly beaten by police officers when he tried to get an interview with Manuel Moreno, the State Judicial Police Director [9].

The northern state known as the most dangerous is the border-state of Tamaulipas, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The capital, Nuevo Laredo, is one of the notorious cities where the largest number of journalists have gone missing or have been killed. In 2006, gunmen stormed the offices of *El Mañana*, Nuevo Laredo's daily newspaper, fired assault weapons and threw a grenade into the newsroom. One journalist was badly injured in the attack.

After the attack at *El Mañana*, the Inter American Press Association in Miami sent a letter to then-President Vicente Fox stating the assault "has shaken the foundation of press freedom in your country, and we demand that stronger measures and efforts be made so that this attack does not go unpunished [10]." The letter also said that at a convention held in 2006, journalists in the northern Mexican states "expressed that one of the most devastating aspects of the drug wars is the silencing of any publication that denounces these illegal activities." With that, Fox said he would seek to appoint a prosecutor to find and prosecute those who commit violence against the media in the northern states [11].

But the threats have taken their toll on the Mexican press. Many newspapers have temporarily shut down because of the attacks, while others are no longer digging as deep into information for their crime stories. Newspapers have started to censor themselves to stay safe, such as cutting back on reporting about drug trafficking, and some, like the weekly *Proceso*,

have started to run their crime stories without bylines [12]. Newspapers in Nuevo Laredo started self-censoring in 2004 when the turf war between two drug cartels intensified over the area between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels. And as the citizens of the city began to take cover in their homes, their newspapers gave them as little information about what was going on as possible, leaving out important details that could get the reporters killed if printed.

Since then, the kingpins of the drug cartels have moved into once-peaceful Monterrey, a city on the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range in early 2006. Now, not only has the community changed, but the way journalists in the area do their jobs has. They've started to receive threats for many of the articles they write, from crime stories to how sportswriters cover favorite soccer teams [13].

Newspapers have started to make tough decisions: get the story and risk the life of the reporter? Or back off from telling the real story, but possibly save the reporter's life.

According to the *Washington Post*, *Milenio* executive editor, Roberta Gomez, had to make a tough choice and issue a new rule: No more bylines on crime stories. "They've intimidated us," said *Milenio* reporter Alejandro Salas. "Their messages have had an effect." Even broadcast journalists are covering events in groups, collaborating their work.

Monterrey's other large newspaper, *El Norte*, has started blurring out the face of police officers in their photos, hoping to protect them. At the same time, officers have started wearing ski masks, hoping not be recognized by members of the drug cartels in newspapers [14].

But violence also hits cities like Tijuana, on the western coast of Mexico. Award-winning journalist, Adela Navarro Bello, general director of weekly magazine *Zeta*, was provided with bodyguards and a bullet-proof vest just to walk outside [15].

### **Getting the Word Out**

But why has it gotten this far? The press is protected under the first amendment of the Constitution of the United States, but how can there not be a similar law in place for the member of the Mexican press? How can these crimes against journalists going unpunished?

Mexico is the most dangerous country in Latin America for journalists to work in, accounting for more than half of the deaths each year. But because suspicion points the blame to drug traffickers and economic and political power groups, it's hard to charge someone with the crimes. It becomes an ongoing cycle, those not charged with the crime they commit think they're free to commit it again.

Brisa Maya, the head of the non-governmental National Centre for Social Communication, said impunity for those responsible for attacks and murders leaves the door open for more attacks in the future. "The situation is serious and getting worse," she said [16]. In 2006, there were 131 incidents targeting journalists. Twenty-seven of them were threats and 24 were actual physical attacks.

Like Fox before him, current Mexican President Felipe Calderón has said he is doing everything he can to guarantee safety to journalists in his country. But some of the pitfalls along the way occur at the governmental level. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization said the government can take more time making excuses for their delays than

investigating the crime. In some cases, they smear the victims' reputation. One example of this was referenced by *Express-News* editor, Bob Rivard. When in Mexico looking for Philip True, Rivard said the officials spoke badly of his missing reporter, more than they did of the ongoing investigation [17].

The Committee to Protect Journalist has a page on its Web site dedicated to news about violence toward journalists in various parts of the world, including Mexico. On that page, you can see many of the reports of deaths and threats in the last year, including a news crew that went missing in Monterrey in May and how a newspaper editor found red paint-stained bullets wrapped up in his morning newspaper on his front doorstep. On this site, there was also a story out of Oaxaca about an entire reporting staff resigning from their paper the day following the murder of three newspaper workers on a highway [18].

But the wheels of justice are starting to turn. In October 2007, the Mexican government revealed a bill that would make crimes against journalists a federal matter. Also, in March of the same year, the Mexican Senate voted to keep defamation and slander suits in the civil courts instead of the federal ones, thus preventing journalists accused of the crimes from spending time in federal prisons.

### **What can be done?**

Because of the subject I've chosen for this report, I could not find opposing views against trying to make a safer environment for journalists to work in. I see how this problem has gone generally unnoticed by the American public. In too many cases, the fact that journalists are being killed in a country just south of them shocks people. As the news is spreading, I hope more are

willing to work on providing answers. But for the governments that already know, it's a wonder why more solutions to help the journalists have not been brought up.

While politicians and angry readers will always be a problem for journalists, the most important thing to do is find an end to the violence from the Mexican drug cartels. Journalists are not the only ones at risk by these groups. Students, businessmen and police officers have also been victims. Just this month, two Mexican singers were killed in a fashion that makes officials suspect that drug traffickers were involved, but the cartels deny involvement. Unfortunately, most of the drug-related murders that occur in Tamaulipas have gone unsolved in recent years and it has taken a toll [19]. The former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza said, "drug cartels ... are destroying the economic and social fabric of our communities" [20].

More needs to be done to protect these journalists, including stronger law enforcement to fight against these cartels, not only for the sake of free press, but for the entire country. The law that made assaults toward journalists a federal offense was a great start, but there needs to be a solid law that everyone will abide by. Officials must find proper law enforcement that would carry out the law accordingly, and not allow themselves to be bribed or bullied by the drug leaders. Basically, show the criminals that there would be no easy way out of the charges. They will be found and prosecuted. Calderón has sent 25,000 troops to battle the cartels, but more are needed, and perhaps it's time for them to start searching for help outside of Mexico. They're unable to handle this on their own [21] as officers everyday are accused of corruption. A mandatory sentence for anyone charged with committing violence, including threats, toward a member of the press is also necessary.

Also, the American government could allow threatened Mexican journalists immediate temporarily asylum into the United States. Journalists who have received real threats to their lives, or their families' lives, need protection right away, and sometimes that means leaving the country. But bureaucratic red tape makes granting asylum in America a long ordeal and only 84 Mexicans were given approval in 2006. According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, Claudio Tiznado, a reporter for the *Periódico Géneros*, applied for asylum to the U.S., but decided to withdraw his application when learning that there would be a long wait to be approved, and in the meantime, he would not be able to work [22]. Someone's who life is at risk should not have to wait to see if the bordering country will help him. If the person can deliver proof that his life is truly in danger if he stayed in Mexico, the U.S. should give him the opportunity to come into this country on a temporary basis, for as long as the threat remains very real. Asylum is granted to the United States to those from other countries who are in fear of persecution, a punishment based on race, religion or political opinion [23].

In the meantime, more security must be added to Mexican newsrooms. Coded locks, bodyguards and bullet-proof glass should be standing between journalists in their offices and criminals wanting to harm them outside. While it's understandable that every journalist cannot be protected at all times, newsrooms should make every attempt to provide them some security while at work. Bodyguards and security at entrance areas should be armed, in hopes that they might be able to stop someone attempting to kill a reporter before significant damage is done. Also, the staff should be given an escape route in the case intruders make their way into the building. They should have more options besides hiding behind their desks.

## **Conclusion**

The bottom line is, we cannot be afraid to do our jobs, but that's a problem journalists in Mexico face every day. Through political corruption, bribery and drug trafficking, reporters who often dig deep into their stories find themselves in situations they didn't bargain for, and too many lose their lives in the process. While many things can be done to stop the violence, my suggestions start with governments taking the first steps. Fight the drugs: ending the violence associated with drugs can free the voices of the journalists. Arrest those who violate the essential journalism freedoms. Give the press their due justice. The U.S. must consider immediate asylum for threaten journalists. Don't make it an issue about illegal immigration; make it an issue about saving lives. Finally, provide them with the thought that if nowhere else, they can be safe in their own newsrooms; they can be safe enough to do their jobs right.

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