

# Censorship, Digital Media, and the Global Crackdown on Freedom of Expression



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Names: Andersen, Robin, editor. | Higdon, Nolan, editor. | Macek, Steve, editor.

Title: Censorship, digital media, and the global crackdown on freedom of expression / edited by Robin Andersen, Nolan Higdon & Steve Macek.

Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2024. | Series: Liberatory stories and voices from community colleges, 2835-9275; Vol. 2 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023051281 (print) | LCCN 2023051282 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433199752 (paperback) | ISBN 9781433199738 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433199745 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Mass media--Censorship. | Digital communications--Censorship. | Freedom of expression. | Freedom of speech. | Intellectual freedom. | Academic freedom.

Classification: LCC P96.C4 C46 2024 (print) | LCC P96.C4 (ebook) | DDC 363.31--dc23/eng/20231206

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023051281>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023051282>

DOI 10.3726/b21751

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 2835-9275 (print) ISSN 2835-9283 (online)

ISBN 9781433199752 (paperback)

ISBN 9781433199738 (ebook)

ISBN 9781433199745 (epub)

DOI 10.3726/b21751

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Published by Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, USA

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This publication has been peer reviewed.

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## ***21 Mexican Journalists Under Siege: Between the Harassment of Local Governments and the Lethal Violence of Organized Crime***

JUAN S. LARROSA-FUENTES

In the last decade, Mexico has faced backlash for its treatment of the press. This article presents some of the trends that explains this regression. Mexico developed a semi-authoritarian regime during the twentieth century. In this period, the state repressed, silenced, and even murdered journalists and activists for their opinions and reporting. By the end of the century, Mexico began a long process of democratic transition. Among other things, this transition improved freedom of expression and other communication rights. Information legislation protecting journalists' rights was approved, media industries were partially deconcentrated, and there was a slight but essential improvement in allocating official advertising and subsidies to the press. In short, the media and reporters had better conditions in which to perform their job. However, there has been a setback regarding freedom of expression in the last ten years. Recently, Mexico has transitioned from a semi-authoritarian state to a weak state—incapable of protecting journalists from organized crime and local government officials. In this context of weakness, at least three structural problems threaten freedom of expression: (1) a substantial increase in the murder of journalists; (2) a rise in the violence against journalists; (c) the appearance of "silence zones," which are large territories of the country where reporters cannot do their daily work because criminal cartels dictate what can and cannot be publicly discussed. Thus, now that it has gotten rid of a semi-authoritarian regime, Mexico must seek to improve its capabilities to protect journalists from many forms of violence.



### *The State of Journalism in Mexico*

Mexico was dominated by a semi-authoritarian regime under the control of a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), for most of the twentieth century. Throughout this period, the president and his collaborators in the PRI controlled what was and was not published in most national media. Many journalists received part of their salaries directly from government institutions. The media owners collaborated with presidents and governors in exchange for tax exemptions and payments for official advertising. This system, which journalists and scholars have thoroughly described, led to a substantial restriction of freedom of expression by public authorities.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the twentieth century, Mexico underwent a long democratic transition with rival parties on both the right (the National Action Party (PAN)) and the left (the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)) making significant electoral gains. This transition improved freedom of expression and other communication rights. The media published reports critical of the government without reprisals, censorship, intimidation, or economic boycotts that occurred in past decades. Columnists, editorialists, and cartoonists could criticize public officials without suffering censorship. And radio and television anchors were able to openly discuss and criticize the country's public life. In short, the media and reporters had better conditions in which to do their work.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, in the last ten years, freedom of the press in Mexico has endured constant setbacks. In the long democratic transition, Mexico went from being a semi-authoritarian State to a State with incipient and weak institutions. In particular, the institutions in charge of procuring and administering justice—the police and the judiciary—were not reformed and, therefore, remained under the sway of corruption. As a result, the country today is burdened with high rates of violence due to the growing activities and operations of criminal groups.

Paradoxically, by getting rid of an authoritarian and controlling state, Mexico has developed into a diminished state, incapable of protecting freedom of expression in the face of mounting violence emanating from organized crime and public officials. The multi-causal phenomenon of institutional weakening and corruption has led to dangers for journalists and a roll-back of freedom of expression in Mexico.

In this context of weakness, at least three significant problems threaten freedom of the press, which I examine in this chapter. The first problem is a brazen increase in the murders of journalists. In recent years, Mexico has topped the list of journalists assassinated for causes related to their work.

However, violence against reporters goes beyond murders. Therefore, the second problem is increased physical and psychological violence against journalists. Finally, the third problem is the appearance of “silenced zones.” These zones are large territories where reporters cannot carry out their daily work of news-gathering because criminal cartels dictate what can and cannot be discussed publicly.

### *The Killing of Journalists*

The murder of journalists is the most visible and cruel face of violence against those who dedicate themselves to informing the public. In a democratic society, journalists must be guaranteed rights to freedom of movement and expression. The assassination of journalists is the ultimate violation of those rights. It also signals the death of the political, economic, and cultural life of a community.

The Mexican case is alarming. In the last two decades, the number of journalists murdered has increased.<sup>3</sup> Article 19 has been one of the organizations documenting these trends. Between the years 2000 and 2022, Article 19 registered the murder of 157 Mexican journalists—145 men and twelve women. Their murders were related to their journalistic work.<sup>4</sup> Another organization, Propuesta Cívica, has documented the killing of 144 journalists from 2006 to 2021, and seventeen have been disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

Though differing timeframes account for the numerical differences between Article 19 and Propuesta Cívica numbers, the discrepancy does not diminish the seriousness of the many journalists who have been murdered. Moreover, this difference in numbers shows the inefficiency of the government, which, besides being unable to stop these crimes and human rights violations, is also unable to offer a single and consolidated record of the numbers of journalists murdered in Mexico.

On a social level, the execution of journalists has two serious consequences for freedom of expression. The first is that society loses dedicated professionals willing to produce information. At a historical moment in which the business model for news outlets is going through difficult times, and newsrooms have fewer and fewer journalists due to job layoffs, the murder of journalists reduces the already small universe of professional information gatherers. The second consequence is the ominous message these executions send to the community. Such murders communicate that there are people and groups who, after being impacted negatively by journalistic work, are willing to kill and disappear investigative reporters.

At the time of this writing, under the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the killing of thirty-eight journalists was recorded between 2018 and 2022. Reporters Without Borders pointed out that in 2022 alone, eleven journalists were murdered.<sup>6</sup> These extraordinary numbers indicate that members of the press in Mexico “are confronting a crisis that is exceptional outside of war zones.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Other Violent Attacks Against Journalists*

A common metaphor for describing a problem is visualizing an iceberg floating in the sea. Part of the iceberg can be seen out of the water. However, the most significant part of the obstacle, is hidden below the surface of the water. Therefore, when comparing an iceberg to a problem, some elements of a problem are more visible than others. It is easier to see just the tip of the iceberg without realizing the huge mass of ice hidden below the sea.

The iceberg that represents violence against journalists in Mexico has, at its tip, the annihilation of reporters for doing their job. However, there are additional violent situations that form the base of this mass of ice. Mexican journalists experience many more types of violence such as home invasions, threats, theft of information and material goods, disappearance, deprivation of liberty, illegal surveillance of communications, among others. For example, in the first half of 2022, Article 19 documented 331 acts of aggression against the press, equivalent to an attack every fourteen hours. These aggressions included 101 acts of intimidation and harassment, sixty-six threats, and forty-five physical attacks, among others.<sup>8</sup>

These figures show that journalism is a risky profession in Mexico. Reporters, especially those involved in political journalism, are constantly threatened in their daily lives. These threats and attacks against their safety directly affect their physical and mental health. Furthermore, these harsh conditions have drastically impacted the working life of Mexican journalists, some of whom have chosen to leave their jobs and dedicate themselves to other careers. This has had the effect of dramatically reducing the number of active journalists in Mexico.

### *State Attacks and Failing to Protect Journalists*

Mexico has suffered high levels of violence perpetrated by criminal groups during the last fifteen years. This could lead one to conclude that most of the threats and harassment against journalists come from organized crime. However, when reviewing the statistics, it is clear that violence and

harassment of journalists is a more complex problem in which the three levels of government—federal, state, and municipal—are highly involved, as are three types of political power—executive, legislative, and judicial—branches.<sup>9</sup>

In the last two decades, as documented by various organizations, attacks on journalists have been enacted by local public officials, i.e., municipal and state governments. In certain territories, it is common for people working in different government agencies to attack journalists. For example, in 2021, almost 40 percent of the attacks came from public servants. Of these attacks, 42 percent were from state governments, 35 percent from municipal governments, and 23 percent from federal governments. Eighty-three aggressors were public officials, forty-six were civilian security forces or police, and five were military.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the harassment and violence against journalists is committed by public officials working in the executive branch of municipal and state governments. Nevertheless, attacks against journalists occur not only through direct acts of violence but also through the corrupt justice system’s inability to punish crimes against journalists.

The rate of criminal impunity in Mexico is 94.8 percent. This means that out of a hundred reported crimes, only five are fully investigated and prosecuted. To this figure, we must add the number of unreported crimes, which is 93 percent. This figure indicates that out of a hundred crimes committed, only seven are reported by citizens.<sup>11</sup> These data show that it is profitable to commit crimes in Mexico since the probability that whoever commits a crime will be punished is very low.

The impunity problem is easy to illustrate. For example, between 2010 and 2018, the Federal Special Prosecutor’s Office for Crimes against Freedom of Expression investigated 1,040 cases, of which 16 percent were brought to court, and only ten cases resulted in convictions, equivalent to less than one percent of the cases.<sup>12</sup> Article 19 names this phenomenon as “impunidad,” which is nothing more than an epidemic of impunity. According to their reports, in 2020, impunity in crimes against freedom of expression had a rate of 98 percent.<sup>13</sup>

In this scenario, it is clear that those who attack journalists do so because they can, since the chances of being punished are slim. When a State, such as the Mexican State, does not point out those responsible for the murder or assault of a journalist and does not bring them to justice, the level of impunity fails to make the country safe for journalists. In this reality, those who decide to attack journalists will hardly be punished and will continue their attacks. As the violence spirals out of control, news coverage is nonexistent or on the brink of disappearing in some regions of the country.

### *Silenced Zones*

Criminal groups are also responsible for violence against the press. Many municipalities in the country are controlled by criminal groups who, in many cases, have usurped government functions, such as the collection of taxes, the administration of rights such as freedom of transit, and the management of justice. In these territories, journalists do not enjoy full freedom of expression. Consequently, their work is constrained by the designs of local rulers and organized crime leaders.

This situation, in which the media and journalists cannot freely do their work, has led to what the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) called "silenced zones". According to the IACHR, silenced zones are territories i.e., towns, cities, and municipalities, where journalists are systematically subjected to physical and psychological violence by criminal groups.<sup>14</sup>

In silenced territories, organized crime obliges journalists to stop publishing information related to their criminal activities and instead, publish information that benefits the cartels. The criminals use the "*plata o plomo*" (i.e., silver or lead) policy to achieve these objectives. If journalists comply with these requests and demands, they can be rewarded with money. However, if they refuse, they are assaulted or even killed.

In Mexico, there are many regions, at different scales, that could be called silenced zones. In many small towns and cities in the country, journalists are unable to do their work due to pressures from organized crime and the inability of the different levels of government to protect the right to information. Faced with this situation, journalists are forced to abandon their work or migrate to another territory to practice their profession safely. Meanwhile, these "silenced zones" have harmful social effects since they are areas where citizens lack journalistic services.

Tamaulipas, a northern Mexican state, is a paradigmatic case of a silenced zone. Between 2000 and 2022, fourteen journalists were murdered in Tamaulipas—a figure only surpassed by the states of Veracruz and Guerrero. In addition, there have been numerous violent attacks against the media. An emblematic case, but not the only one, is the newspaper *El Mañana*, which was attacked with firearms and explosives in 2006 and 2012; in addition, Roberto Mora, director of the newspaper, was murdered in 2004. In light of these events, *El Mañana* decided to stop publishing information related to organized crime. Unfortunately, this newspaper's case is not an exception but an example of high insecurity for journalistic practice that leads to the development of zones of silence. In addition to the case of Tamaulipas,

documented by the IACHR, other organizations, such as Reporters without Borders, have also detected zones of silence in the states of Veracruz, Sinaloa, and Guerrero.<sup>15</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have described, in broad strokes, the turbulent and challenging situation of freedom of the press in Mexico. Although this description does not exhaust all the causes and issues that make up this problem, it focuses on the significant issue of violence against professionals who are dedicated to informing the people they serve. Mexico tells the story of an ineffective state, incapable of protecting the freedom of the press and shielding journalists from the many threats of violence they face.

The complicated situations for journalists in Mexico have at least two terrible consequences. The first is infrastructural. The material infrastructure that sustains public communication systems comprises antennas, submarine cables, fiber optics, computers, and, among other things, personnel. A communication infrastructure that lacks human bodies simply cannot function. In the case of Mexico, this infrastructure is diminishing daily due to the murders of journalists and all those who decide to leave the profession for security reasons. Therefore, this situation directly impacts the development of Mexico's public communication infrastructure.

The second consequence, which draws from the first, is related to the production of news and information. The weakening of the material infrastructure that allows the production and distribution of information reduce journalistic information production. This phenomenon directly affects people's daily lives and the development of democratic institutions. A community lacking information will hardly develop democratic institutions that allow a harmonious political life. As shown in this chapter, in Mexico, there are silenced zones, where the production and distribution of journalistic information are conditioned by organized crime.

Mexico has a long and arduous road ahead to reverse the negative trends that threaten freedom of expression for its population and of the press for its journalists. There are many tasks to be done, among them the promotion of a profound reform of the institutions in charge of procuring and administering justice, including the police at all levels of government and the judiciary branch as a whole. These transformations should reduce the levels of impunity for crimes perpetrated against journalists and, therefore, offer better guarantees for them to exercise their freedom of speech and provide



information to people and communities, allowing them to participate in a democratic process.

## Notes

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