

Study reveals dangers to Mexican journalists along US border

January 28 2014, by Amanda Ballard



Close-up of a bullet hole left after an attack on a newspaper organization in northern Mexico from October 2011. Credit: Celeste González de Bustamante

Violence and threats to many Mexican journalists reporting along the U.S. border has led to less investigative and crime reporting, a phenomenon described as "self-censorship," the UA researchers found.

From intimidation threats to assassinations, the daily danger faced by many Mexican journalists is the focus of a newly published University of Arizona research study.

The study ranks Mexico as one of the most dangerous places in the world for reporters to work.

"Silencing Mexico: A Study of Influences on Journalists in the Northern States" (PDF), published by The International Journal of Press/Politics in November, focuses on five of Mexico's states along the U.S. border, an area that has experienced a surge of conflict in recent years due to organized crime warring over illicit drug and human smuggling routes.

The UA School of Journalism's Jeannine Relly, assistant professor, and Celeste González de Bustamante, associate professor, authored the study. They interviewed 39 Mexican journalists working in the area. Under the promise of anonymity, many interviewees shared stories of violence against themselves and their colleagues and threats against their families.

As the Mexican press has transformed into a more democratic institution over the last few decades, the production of more accountable journalism means journalists pose a greater threat to cartels, organized crime groups and corrupt authorities, Relly explained.

"They are witnesses to activities and uncovering information that these groups do not want to be made public," Relly said. "And, that's one of the reasons that they've become targets." One journalist recounted how the violent working environment led to a nervous breakdown. Another reporter shared that he would never start his car with his children in it after a colleague was killed in his car in front of his daughter.

"Sometimes we say something (on air) and we're terrified," one journalist shared in an interview.

"It was heartbreaking to hear in some cases," Relly said.



Students in the UA School of Journalism's "Reporting in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands" class hike the Atascosa Trail with Sky Islands Alliance biologist Sergio Avila. Credit: Lisa Button/School of Journalism

As a result of such violence, the study finds, that less Mexican journalists are willing to take on investigative stories and crime reporting. The phenomenon is described as "self-censorship," which can lead to widespread impacts on the community.

"Anytime there's an act of violence against a journalist, it doesn't affect just the journalists," González de Bustamante said. "When a journalist is silenced, then a whole community could be silenced as well."

"In one community on the northeastern side of the border, there was a gun battle on the street and one reporter looking out of the window wanted to report it," Relly said. "They got a call that said, 'You cannot report this.' What if you wanted to go downtown to shop or go to the bank, and you didn't know there was a [gun battle](#) going on in the street?"

Still, the researchers encountered some reporters and news organizations that remained committed to watchdog journalism and investigative stories – no matter how many threats they receive – by continuing to report or funneling stories to the U.S. that weren't safely publishable in Mexico.

"Those who are serious about the profession are staying in because they feel like it's worthwhile and it's important to inform the public," Relly said. "They are staying in with the hope that things will change."

David Cuillier, director of the UA School of Journalism and president of the Society of Professional Journalists, said it's an issue that needs addressing.

"I think it's really important that we as a university – and as a nation – address this problem because this is democracy threatened right in our own backyard," Cuillier said. "How are we going to know what's going on in Mexico if Mexicans can't even find out?"

Cuillier said the School of Journalism is forming several initiatives to help build relationships with universities in Mexico to foster a new generation of journalists south of the border. Some of these initiatives include sharing syllabi, organizing club activities and doing collaborative reporting to be published by media like the Border Journalism Network, a website that features students' multimedia news projects about the border.

"Rarely do we see reporting done that comes from both perspectives," he said. "That's kind of the really innovative, cool thing about this. We can have news coverage in our region that really reflects understanding from both countries."

Last month, students from the school's Reporting in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands class visited the Universidad de Sonora in Hermosillo, Mexico, and presented at a conference on "Border, Communication and Migration."

Cuillier said he's looking for ways to continue closely collaborating with the Universidad de Sonora and other institutions in the future to develop practices that could, one day, be used for border reporting all over the world.

"It's an opportunity for us to be here at ground zero of border relations," Cuillier said. "It definitely extends beyond the U.S. Mexico border. There are borders everywhere in this world, and we have to learn how to negotiate these borders. It goes beyond that big metal wall south of us."

González de Bustamante and Relly continue to examine the problem of violence and journalism, and said the next phase of their research project investigates the ways in which national and international organizations are attempting to improve freedom of the press in Mexico.

"I'm always trying to be hopeful, but I do see that it's a long road ahead for improving the state of freedom of expression in Mexico at this point," González de Bustamante said.

"We hope that institutional change will take place," Relly said. "I think that we're in a period of waiting to see what happens."

More information: The study, "Silencing Mexico: A Study of

Influences on Journalists in the Northern States," is available here:
[hij.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 61213509285.full.pdf](https://hij.sagepub.com/content/early/.../61213509285.full.pdf)

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