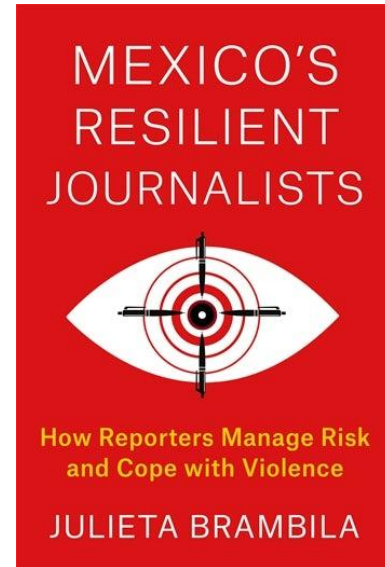


Julieta Brambila, **Mexico's Resilient Journalists: How Reporters Manage Risk and Cope with Violence**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024, 290 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Sumana Chattopadhyay
Marquette University

In *Mexico's Resilient Journalists: How Reporters Manage Risk and Cope with Violence*, Julieta Brambila, a media scholar with a PhD in communication from the University of Leeds and former head of communication at Mexico's Ministry of Finance, analyzes the social, economic, cultural, and symbolic forces behind violence against the Mexican press and journalists' resilience strategies. Based on 79 interviews with reporters, editors, activists, and officials, she explores why Mexico is so dangerous for journalists and how they persevere—redefining professional values, forging support networks, and adapting practices to confront threats from organized crime and corrupt authorities. This is a good book for people interested in journalism, politics, communication, and governance.



Brambila observes that post-Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) Mexico did not necessarily become safer for journalists, as democratic governance alone failed to establish the institutions and norms needed to guarantee genuine press freedom. Brambila portrays Mexico as a hybrid regime, where elections coexist with repression, corruption, and concentrated power. Limited protections leave journalists vulnerable, especially when exposing corruption. State governors, likened to colonial viceroys, wield outsized influence over security, justice, and media, sometimes allied with elites or criminals. This façade of democracy undermines accountability and freedom, creating a perilous environment for reporters—a central theme of the book.

The book establishes clear-cut objectives. The introduction starts out with the premise that collective outrage among journalists led to the events that eventually contributed to the narrative of this book. In the first part of the book, Brambila asks "What's going on here?" to examine the rise of violent censorship and why journalists are so easily killed. She opens the chapter with the disappearance and murder of Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz, a local reporter in Villa Allende who worked under precarious, low-paid conditions without security or training. Financial pressures pushed him toward covering dangerous, violence-related stories. Reporting on kidnappings and criminal clashes in a town of 20,000, he sometimes blurred reporting and opinion, used the pseudonym "El Pantera," but usually signed his real name—a visibility that heightened his vulnerability.

Brambila recounts how Jiménez de la Cruz's 2014 abduction and death sparked nationwide outrage, leading two dozen journalists and activists to form the collective "Prensa, no disparen" ("Press, Don't Shoot!"). Citing long-form journalist Ruiz Parra's interview in her book, Brambila notes that the outrage

united journalists, as the attack was seen not just as an attack on one person, family, or career, but on the entire profession. The group of reporters and activists aimed to demand the Veracruz governor's resignation at Mexico City's Angel of Independence and investigate Jiménez's murder in Coatzacoalcos. Supported by international press freedom groups, their report challenged official silence and exposed deeper political and criminal repression.

The case sparked a broader awakening among journalists, highlighting the political importance of their work and the need to defend both their profession and the public's right to information. Brambila frames the response to Jiménez de la Cruz's murder as a turning point, revealing the dangers faced by many Mexican journalists, especially those outside affluent urban outlets. His story also illustrates the resilience of independent, civic-minded reporters, who draw on networks and resources to continue reporting despite risks, demonstrating emerging survival strategies and a strengthened professional conscience.

These concerted efforts by Mexican journalists lay the foundation for the second part of the book, where Brambila focuses on the important question: "How do journalists persevere?" Through her analysis of Mexican journalists' resilience and how they leverage cultural, organizational, and social capital, she shows how they develop tactics to confront fear, counter threats, and practice journalism that is cautious, community-focused, and civic-minded.

Brambila refers to these as strategies of autonomous safety, drawing from Mellor's (2009) idea of "strategies for autonomy" (p. 319), used to discuss discursive tactics used by journalists in autocratic regimes. Unlike Mellor's concept, autonomous safety strategies aim to protect journalists while preserving their independence in risky or repressive contexts. These operate at three levels: personal (logistical foresight, extreme vetting, and adoption of discursive literary practices), organizational (organizational training, anonymous publication, and strategic news frames), and social (collective news startups, collective monitoring, collaborative reporting and publishing, collective news agenda, and news-sharing). Brambila emphasizes that such practices are essential for Mexican journalists but demand realignment and training.

One of the strengths of Brambila's book is the rich context she offers on autonomous safety strategies from her interviews. She describes an investigative journalist in Nuevo León who used inventive safety tactics: posing as a tourist with a colleague, quietly approaching sources, delaying publication, and merging stories while broadening sources. Despite some protection from his national magazine, he recognized the risks and helped found the Red de Periodistas del Noreste in 2015 to advance journalist safety. She acknowledges that not all journalists have the prestige (symbolic capital), significant professional experience in covering sensitive issues (cultural capital), support from their employer (organizational capital), or a strong network of journalistic and nonjournalistic contacts (social capital), that he had, but ascertains through later examples that resilient journalists can leverage certain forms of capital to offset the constraints or weaknesses of others. However, the support from the newspaper bosses proves to be a powerful factor in creating structures of resilience.

This is evident from *El Siglo de Torreón's* editor in chief Javier Garza's account of a shooting at Torreón's main soccer stadium in 2011 that created chaos in the newsroom. Facing rumors, uncertainty about those involved, and fear of retaliation, the paper had to verify facts while weighing reporting risks in

a region marked by intense criminal violence. Over time, the paper developed cautious editorial practices and safety protocols, emphasizing rigorous verification and prioritizing themes on social consequences of violence instead of sensationalist storytelling. Despite direct attacks on its facilities and threats to staff, the newspaper persisted, supported by owners willing to invest in security and uphold editorial independence—a commitment Garza notes is rare but vital for journalism in high-risk environments.

Brambila also highlights the notion of a “nose for survival” (p. 124), mentioned by a Sinaloa columnist and investigative reporter from the magazine *Riodoce*, whom she interviewed. According to this journalist, a “nose for survival” is not merely a matter of experience or professional training. Instead, it entails a form of self-awareness, allowing journalists to avoid putting their lives at risk for a story. In addition to this survival instinct, the Sinaloa columnist describes personal strategies such as logistical foresight, extreme vetting, strategic self-censorship, and the adoption of discursive literary practices.

Another interesting account is that of the Michoacán journalist Castellanos, who provides protection courses for journalists. Castellanos carefully plans his time in dangerous locations, determining how long to remain and where to stay, identifying possible contacts, and maintaining a low profile through choices in clothing and by using a small camera that would not attract attention. Other journalists interviewed, including a national correspondent from a national newspaper in Oaxaca, similarly attempt to contact municipal authorities in advance so that officials are aware of their visit and it does not come as a surprise.

The book also expertly highlights journalists’ storytelling strategies, such as drawing on numerous sources, protecting source anonymity, and adopting literary approaches like the *crónica*, a hybrid journalistic form. Rooted in a Latin American tradition, *cronistas* use first-person narration, richly reconstructed scenes, and in-depth reporting to amplify the voices of victims and marginalized communities.

Furthermore, journalists coming together as a community to support one another in the face of major acts of violence is one of the strategies the book celebrates as a form of resilience. The murder of Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz in 2014, was discussed as a turning point earlier in the book, and later the 2017 killing of Valdez Cárdenas was highlighted since it galvanized journalists into a united front—flooding the streets in protest and organizing a twenty-four-hour media strike—so that even politicians, including President Peña Nieto, could no longer ignore their demands for justice.

Although Mexico’s context is shaped by unique conditions—powerful cartels, entrenched impunity, U.S. drug market proximity, and a history of censorship—its journalists’ responses reflect global patterns. In places from Argentina to China, Russia, and Africa, reporters confronting repression or violence likewise build resilience through improvisation, selective self-censorship, discursive adaptation, and trusted networks. In the last chapter, Brambila addresses Rodolfo Walsh’s (1957) book *Operation Massacre* and his blending of journalistic nonfiction and literary resources to evade censorship in Argentina, Chinese journalists’ efforts to maintain relationships with state agents to gain access to official sources within state constraints, Russian reporters’ strategic self-censorship and self-preservation tactics to continue publishing on prohibited topics, and African journalists’ survival strategies through undercover reporting. She highlights these to show that journalists operating in nondemocratic conditions develop creative, protective mechanisms that enable them to continue reporting. The Mexican case discussed in Brambila’s book adds a

deeper understanding of journalistic repertoires of resilience shaped by localized risks and shared professional journalistic values.

Reference

Mellor, N. (2009). Strategies for autonomy: Arab journalists reflecting on their roles. *Journalism Studies*, 10(3), 307–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700802636243>