Journalistic Coverage of Organized Crime in Mexico: Reporting on the Facts, Security Protocols, and Recurrent Subthemes

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Mexico is among the most violent countries for journalism, with more than 100 journalists killed in the past two decades. Behind these murders, which have largely gone unpunished, are phenomena such as organized crime and corruption, as well as a lack of state presence in some regions. In this study, we focus on analysis of a relevant topic in the contemporary news agenda, namely journalistic coverage of organized crime. For this, we interviewed almost two dozen Mexican journalists who work in Mexico's main media outlets. Through journalists' responses, we observe the normalization of violence in their everyday work. Although the journalists interviewed recognize that they do not have, in general, specific knowledge of this type of coverage, their experience directs them to develop security protocols, including use of their media outlets' physical infrastructure and strategic use of social networks and the Internet.

Keywords: Mexico, organized crime, drug trafficking, journalists, journalism studies

In Mexico, 10 journalists died during 2019, the first year of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration. In turn, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recognized 2017 as the bloodiest year for journalists since 1992 based on the death of 13 journalists at the hands of organized crime. There are 30 unsolved crimes against journalists in Mexico and, according to the CPJ's impunity

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index—on which Mexico has been listed for 12 years straight—the situation has only gotten worse (CPJ, 2019). Not surprisingly, Reporters Without Borders (2018) recognizes Mexico as the deadliest country in Latin America for journalists.

These murders are in addition to numerous cases of physical aggression, threats, and other forms of intimidation, which have increased where organized crime operates (Rodelo, 2009), often with impunity on the part of and even in cahoots with public authorities (Solís & Balderas, 2009; Solís & Prieto, 2010; Waisbord, 2002). Impunity in cases of violence against journalists and activists remains at a staggering 99.13% according to the most recent report published by Article 19 (2019). Journalists who investigate the links between criminals and institutions of power receive the brunt of the threats (Waisbord, 2002, p. 99). Here, it is important to mention that journalists also receive threats that originate from both criminal organizations and political institutions. For example, Edgar Daniel Esqueda, a journalist from San Luis Potosí, received threats from local police before he was killed (Sandoval, 2017).

Indeed, when examining the history of violence against reporters in Mexico, we find that this phenomenon is nothing new. Manuel Buendía, a renowned journalist in his day, was the first victim of narcopolitical crime. He was murdered on May 30, 1984, right before he was apparently going to publish relevant information on the links between the federal government and drug trafficking (Granados, 2012).

In addition to murder, the independent organization Article 19 has established 12 other major types of aggression, with corresponding subtypes. They include raids; threats; destruction of property; attacks on networks, digital communications, and computer systems; physical attacks; blocking, altering, or removing information; disappearance; forced displacement; phone tapping or illegal communications surveillance; intimidation and harassment; torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; and the illegitimate use of public power (Article 19, 2018, pp. 70–72). Between 2015 and 2017, this same organization documented 1,330 instances of aggression against the Mexican press (Article 19, 2018, p. 21).

Given these staggering data, and with the aim of suggesting ways to mitigate them, in this study, we focus on analysis of journalistic coverage of organized crime. For this, we interviewed almost two dozen Mexican journalists who work in Mexico's main media outlets. As we show, their responses offer valuable suggestions in terms of training, protocol building, and mitigation efforts.

Academic Literature Review

Using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classification, Mexico is part of a so-called "Western peripheral journalistic culture" (Oller & Barredo, 2013, p. 46). As such, it shares numerous traits with the journalistic culture proper to the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model based on factors such as "weak professionalization, and strong state intervention" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 1043). Regarding organized crime coverage, Mexico shares weak safety policy and protocols (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2013) with tense zones such as Nigeria, where Boko Haram terrorists killed 30,000 people and destroyed property worth billions of dollars. During their five-year insurgency in Nigeria, individual journalists were

largely responsible for their own personal and professional safety (Pate & Idris, 2017), a situation akin to the current Mexican reality (Hughes & Márquez Ramírez, 2017).

The International News Safety Institute (2013) defines security protocols as

> an established code of procedures. Through targeted safety training for news editors and managers, some key media organizations have begun to promote the adoption of standard safety protocols distributed in newsrooms and press clubs. Such protocols include crisis management training, planning and preparation for news editors, managers and journalists. These protocols are meant to ensure the safety of journalists when covering difficult or dangerous topics and events, as well as their personal safety in the case that they receive threats. (p. 24)

Among these security protocols, one from Reporters Without Borders (2012) advises journalists on measures to protect their lives in situations of perceived threat. Although it does not specifically refer to coverage of organized crime, it gives specific tips for dealing with all kinds of coverage, ranging from basic materials, clothing, and accommodations. These elements are included to encourage journalists to look after themselves and even constitute suggested best practices for newsrooms. For its part, Chapter 5 of the CPJ guide (2012) offers advice to journalists who cover organized crime. This organization advises being cautious not only with the individuals who are part of criminal organizations, but also and above all, with the "corrupt officials that protect them" (p. 32). In Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation approved a manual aimed at guaranteeing journalists' safety (Horsley, 2012), including both media professionals and decision makers, with recommendations related to states' juridical and legal contexts.

In Latin America, it is important to highlight that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published standards for the prevention of violence against and protection of journalists (Botero, 2013). This document establishes the media's obligation to approve security measures that minimize the context of risk in which journalists operate and, at the same time, promote respect for their rights as professionals. In addition, it indicates a few special protection programs aimed at some of the most violent countries in the region, including Mexico. Description thereof is more legal than practical; all in all, however, it is a highly relevant document for exhaustive knowledge of the legal framework that protects journalists in each of the countries analyzed.

Leaving security protocols aside for now, Hallin and Mancini (2004) also refer to strong state interventions, which include violence, and journalists' frequent reaction thereto with censorship and self-censorship. Indeed, much of the Latin American literature on organized crime coverage revolves around the concepts of censorship and self-censorship. In northwest Mexico, Merchant (2018) highlights censorship as the main risk in journalism. She recognizes it not so much as a loss of freedom of expression, but rather as an attack on citizens' right to information (p. 85), although it is, in general terms, both.

In professional terms, self-censorship is the response intended by censorship (Pórtoles, 2009) and a way for journalists to protect their physical well-being or that of the social circles that surround them. In

this sense, Ramírez (2008) argues that, in Mexico in recent years, a hostile environment increasingly threatens freedom of expression, thus putting Mexico on a path toward an uninformed society. This same author sees weak institutions, which is a reality across Latin America, and a still-unconsolidated democracy as factors that define Mexico's reality (p. 49).

Among recent research into violence against journalists, the work of Celia del Palacio Montiel (2015, 2018) stands out, with studies on the various forms of silencing to which the media—especially print media—are subjected in Veracruz, Mexico. She chose this geographical area because it is the most dangerous region in Latin America to practice journalism (Reporters Without Borders, 2018), and she concludes that the murder of journalists has devastating long-term effects on democratic solidification because the existence of a free and critical press is fundamental for maintaining a vigorous, balanced, and accountable system (del Palacio Montiel, 2015).

González (2017) argues similarly when claiming that the pressures to which journalists who report on organized crime are exposed have both individual and institutional outcomes. Whereas the former is directly related to journalists and changes to their routines, the latter directly impacts the media in terms of self-censorship and, therefore, impinges on the free practice of investigative journalism. In short, the latter implies an attack on the freedom of expression and society's right to be informed (Holland & Rios, 2017). Consequently, corruption is encouraged at all levels and both the state and its institutions are weakened, as Rodelo (2009) argues. Rodelo studied violence against journalists in Culiacán (the capital of the State of Sinaloa) and met with correspondents from *Ríodoce*, *El Debate*, *Noroeste*, and *El Sol de Sinaloa*.

Outside Mexico, self-censorship is also one of the possible effects of violence against journalists. In Colombia, decades of murder, aggression, threats, and general pressure have engendered rhetorical survival strategies such as self-censorship, which has resulted in stilted discourse (Barredo Ibáñez, de la Garza, & Díaz-Cerveró, 2016). Meanwhile, in Ecuador, some have pointed to the fact that journalists tend to use "resistance tactics" (Henao & Barredo Ibáñez, 2019, p. 9) so that the topics they cover do not become unreportable. For example, journalists sometimes deliver information prone to censorship to other media, they spread it on social networks or blogs, or they cite public sources to downplay their responsibility.

Even farther south, Cabalin and Lagos (2009) investigated the pressures related to different kinds of censorship and self-censorship that 171 Chilean journalists faced during the first years of the third millennium. They include obstacles set up by official bodies, the obligation to pay for information, the withdrawal of public or private advertising, threats resulting from a publication, and even work harassment or dismissal based on the content of published information (Cabalin & Lagos, 2009, pp. 47−49). Additional research from Latin America highlights censorship and self-censorship as consequences of more or less dictatorial governments (Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2016; García de Madariaga & Solís, 2012; Henao & Barredo Ibáñez, 2019).

Returning to the Mexican case, we must clarify that censorship and self-censorship are not journalists' only responses. In contrast to silence, others use the tactic of reporting on organized crime and the violence it unleashes with popular *nota roja*[2] coverage. Finally, a third type of hybrid journalist has

[2] Mexican media phenomenon that sensationally covers news that almost exclusively involves violence.

emerged in recent years, offering both journalistic coverage and publishing books on organized crime (Arriaga & Marcial, 2018).

The present article contributes to the literature by filling a gap that exists on the numerous strategies that journalists use to combat the silencing to which the climate of violence in Mexico tries to subject them. The Mexican journalists we consulted are aware of the risks that their profession entails and, although self-censorship is one possible response, they have also developed numerous resistance tactics highlighted in the Results section.

Research Questions

This research relies on firsthand testimony from professionals who report in the most violent Mexican states to understand how journalists view organized crime and the possible differences between the coverage of this and other topics. Our research questions were as follows:

RQ1: *How do Mexican journalists manage media coverage of events associated with organized crime?*

RQ2: *On what security protocols do journalists who cover these issues rely?*

RQ3: *What recurring subtopics associated with organized crime are most covered in the states where journalists report?*

RQ4: *Are there differences between correspondents who report from Mexico's most violent states and those who do so from the capital (Mexico City)?*

This last research question is included because, as Rodelo (2009) argues, it is relevant to inquire into how freedom of the press is limited for Mexican journalism in terms of particular contexts, especially the regions in which correspondents work, for example, large cities versus the country's provincial regions.

Method

This research, which is descriptive in scope, is based on in-depth interviews, a qualitative technique that, as Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2015) explain, aids in the description and explanation of objects of study that are not directly observable. In doing so, we first established a rigidly structured script (Blasco & Otero, 2008) with questions based on (1) thorough examination of the previous literature and (2) validation from academics who are experts in this qualitative method.

With respect to sample selection, we used a nonprobabilistic sample because we could not determine in advance which journalists would want to participate in the study. Still, we selected a diverse sample of 22 journalists who closely cover violence in Mexico. Of these, 15 are journalists from the Mexican states in which journalists were murdered in 2017; some of our respondents work at the same outlets as murdered journalists did when they were killed. On this point, there is one caveat in that we replaced the State of San Luis Potosí for Tamaulipas given that, according to Mexico's National Human Rights Commission

(Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos México, 2019), the latter entity reported, after Veracruz, the highest incidence of journalist homicide from 2000 to 2018.

In addition to the interviews carried out in the aforementioned states, we also conducted another seven interviews with journalists from Mexico City's main print media outlets, including *El Universal*, *Reforma*, *La Jornada*, *Excelsior*, *Milenio*, and the magazine *Proceso*. All 22 interviews used the same structured script and the interviewer generally posed the questions from it in order (Valles, 2007). In total, the established questionnaire had 10 blocks, of which this article discusses three, including (1) reporting on the facts, (2) recurrent subthemes, and (3) security protocols. All interviews took place in the interviewees' workspace, except for those with journalists from Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, and Baja California Sur, which took place in Mexico City where they had been displaced with the help of Mexico's journalist protection program because of the dangers they were facing in their home states. The interviews were conducted between the months of February and November 2018; they were all face-to-face and lasted between one and four hours. Finally, the preliminary results of this study were presented and discussed at a meeting that 10 of the interviewed journalists attended in Guadalajara, Jalisco, on November 26, 2018.

To protect the identity of the participating journalists, as well as their outlets, each interview was transcribed and assigned a code from 1 to 22. Those identifier codes are those that appear in parentheses at the end of each statement. All responses cited in this article were originally spoken in Spanish and they were translated by the authors. The original Spanish version of each statement can be found in the footnotes.

After all interviews were transcribed, we first started with the coding process by highlighting categories and patterns (Taylor et al., 2015). To do so, we focused on locating indicators question by question. Second, the indicators that emerged were codified and compared. In this process, broad concepts and categories began to emerge. Third, we organized a general scheme to represent relevant categories, concepts, and incidents. Finally, the description provided in the following pages is an explanation of the scheme built around the organization and interpretation of the responses.

Results

Risks Associated With Coverage of Drug Trafficking and What Journalists Learn

When covering drug trafficking and associated topics, journalists perceive higher risks, especially those who work in local or regional media, as well as freelance professionals, as compared with those who work in nationally oriented media. In this sense, all journalists interviewed agreed that closely reporting on drug trafficking topics entails high risks that range from murder, disappearance, threats, harassment, and physical violence against their person or their family members. When asked about it, the names of murdered journalists, such as Javier Valdez, emerged as references, but there are also other types of threats that impinge on their profession. The most recurrent is deliberate attack on journalists' credibility by accusing them of having received bribes, of having falsified coverage, or of having reached some sort of deal with a given criminal group. By undermining their professionalism, aggressors seek to have journalists fired, replaced, or moved.

Throughout the interviews, the journalists' responses revealed the normalization of violence in their everyday work:

> Some reporters come to terms with it with surprising indifference. Like the way they receive telephone calls and already know or receive a bunch of spam and messages and with absolute disinterest do not even bother looking into who sent them this stuff.[3] (5)

Normalization of violence is also palpable in Mexican society in general to the extent that—as one journalist explains (4)—there are regions in which cartels take such an active role in public life that they have official spokespersons and recruit professionals to boost their external communication. Heads of criminal groups sometimes even offer journalists an interview.

Although the risk of reporting on organized crime is high, it must be contextualized within journalistic practice in Mexico, where violence against journalists also sadly affects those who cover other topics. This is so because, according to the interviewees, crime has evolved such that it is now present in the economic and political spheres and generally in all aspects of public life.

To minimize risks, the journalists interviewed rely, on the one hand, on the institutionalized security protocols offered by media outlets, if they exist, and, on the other, they associate with other journalists in search of greater protection. Private association helps journalists because they consider self-regulation more reliable given that professional organizations are less likely to be complicit with cartels. But, in a country as diverse as Mexico, there are still highly vulnerable professionals, especially freelance journalists and those working in regions where this kind of association is less frequent. Journalists acknowledge distancing themselves from the state because relationships with officials can make journalistic work more difficult: "The situation here has been very complicated for us journalists because we don't even ask for precautionary measures. I don't because if you are accompanied by the police, nobody will talk to you"[4] (19). Thus, distrust is a key factor in the relationship between the interviewees and the state.

Faced with the possibility that police forces or officials are somehow linked to criminal groups, journalists renounce greater interaction with the state for fear of being denounced and subsequently killed for trying to comply with the obligations of their profession. However, there are also some successful experiences, especially requests for precautionary measures in cases of serious physical threat:

> Right here in Veracruz I received a threat so we made some decisions. That is, we already made decisions and, in my case, I decided to rely on the program for protection of

[3] "Hay reporteros que ya lo asumen con una frialdad impresionante, en el asunto en el que les llaman a sus teléfonos y ya saben o les mandan mucho spam y mensajes y algunos ya con la absoluta frialdad no se preocupan ni siquiera por averiguar quién se los mandó" (5).

[4] "Se nos ha complicado mucho la situación aquí a nosotros los periodistas porque aparte no pedimos medidas cautelares. Yo no, porque si tú llevas policías la gente no te recibe" (19).

> journalists, without much hope and mostly out of fear. At that time, I wanted physical protection. Then, we started relying on the program and now are part of it.[5] (9)

Covering drug trafficking requires more precision than other beats because it involves reporters' and the citizenry's safety, as well as journalists' and media outlets' credibility. Perhaps for this reason, most of the journalists interviewed recognized that, on this beat, exclusive information predominates information that agencies send. Agencies are used when it comes to international issues or when the agency is faster: "Sometimes [news agency] EFE is way ahead; they hire very good people and have good sources, and can release a note that we don't have on our radar. We use and give them credit, but we are not affiliated or anything"[6] (8). But, in general, agencies are used to comparing and contrasting in terms of the approach they adopt, the data they use, and the extent to which the proposed piece approaches or distances itself from another. This is also related to recurring issues linked to organized crime, including violence, murders, massacres, and missing persons. On the opposite side, journalists noted that issues that deal with relatives of criminals are often silenced, as are those that have a purely local impact or that they believe have little public interest. Yet, half of the interviewees agreed that no issue regarding the coverage of crime is silenced; on the contrary, many of them concluded that all issues are of potential interest.

However, some of the interviewees stressed that, although no topic is silenced, some tread carefully when including more information when it comes to certain coverage: "No, everything is game, but we tread carefully not to reveal too much"[7] (18). Similarly, another journalist replied,

> Here things that might be silenced include things that may affect people's dignity or what we should silence. . . . Last year, in 2017, there were 28,000 casualties, almost all linked to *narco* issues. Think about that scale. This is the violence year after year, from 1997 to 2017. In '97, there were 16,000 causalities; these are official figures. . . . How many children does that include? So that topic, for example, I wouldn't really expect to be silenced, but rather to be covered a bit less. What would you do if coverage suddenly included a Dantean scene of murdered minors? You would have to be very careful.[8] (5)

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[5] "Ahí mismo de Veracruz sale una amenaza contra mí, entonces ya tomamos decisiones. O sea, ya tomamos decisiones y en mi caso yo decido entrar al mecanismo de protección a periodistas, sin mucha esperanza, pero más que nada por miedo. En ese momento lo que quería era protección física. Entonces, acudimos al mecanismo y formamos parte" (9).

[6] "A veces EFE se adelanta mucho, traen muy buena gente y tienen muy buenas fuentes y traen una nota que no traemos. Entonces la cachas por ahí y le das el crédito, pero no estamos afiliados, ni nada" (8).

[7] "No, todo se toca. Lo que pasa es que también se cuida no exhibir tanto" (18).

[8] "Lo que llegas a silenciar aquí es cosas que puedan afectar la dignidad de las personas o lo que deberíamos de silenciar. . . . El año pasado, en 2017, hubo 28,000 muertos, casi todos ligados a temas de narco. Fíjate esta escala. Esta es la violencia año por año, desde 1997 hasta 2017. En el 97 andábamos en 16,000 muertos, estas son cifras oficiales, estábamos en 16,000 muertos. . . . ¿Cuántos niños habrá aquí? Entonces ese tema, por ejemplo, es un tema que no espero tanto que se haya silenciado, sino que no se ha cubierto tan bien. Pues qué harías, ¿no? Si de repente te aparece una escena así medio dantesca de menores asesinados. Tendrías que ser muy cuidadoso" (5).

On this beat, to establish rigorous coverage and, at the same time, safeguard one's physical safety, professional experience is key. Learning is usually part of the day-to-day, of facing reality, and of using written and unwritten standards. Reporters do not usually have specific knowledge of this type of coverage, even if they studied communication or journalism during their university education. In fact, they all acknowledged that they never received university training aimed at informative coverage of matters related to organized crime. Those with some notion either learned about it on their own or took a specific course.

All but three of the journalists interviewed had completed a bachelor's degree at the time of the interview. Of the 19 journalists with a bachelor's degree, five majored in subjects other than journalism or communication, specifically in Spanish (two interviewees), pre-Hispanic languages, and culture with a specialization in communication, photography, and graphic design in digital, audio, and video media. One of the two journalists who studied Spanish went on to complete a master's in journalism. The other 14 interviewees studied communication (five interviewees, one of whom also received a master's degree in journalism), communication and journalism (three interviewees), journalism (four interviewees), political journalism (one interviewee), and information sciences (one interviewee).

In this regard, a little more than half of the journalists interviewed agreed that journalists' studies are not really taken into account prior to assigning them organized crime issues; rather, they acquire the necessary experience on the job:

> No, I think you gain experience along the way. For me, when returning to my alma mater, the university [name omitted], I always tell them that they must include a damn class that touches on security protocols. Many reporters get into trouble that may later cost them their lives because they lack experience, are a novice or because they are self-centered.[9] (15)

And, given their lack of expertise and prior exposure to this kind of information that involves so many dangers, the profession has a high turnover rate:

> The problem we have is that kids who recently graduated from university do not have the profile of a reporter. . . . When they cover drugs, they make many mistakes and they don't even know that they are making them, which is why these kids are at greater risk for direct threats. After a threat drops, most of them leave. Thus, there is constant emigration; they last two years tops as a reporter and then disappear.[10] (13)

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[9] "No, yo creo que uno va agarrando experiencia por el camino. A mí cuando me han invitado a mi alma máter que es la universidad (omitido el nombre), siempre en la plática les digo que es urgente meter una pinche materia donde te den protocolos de seguridad. Hay muchos reporteros que, por falta de experiencia, por novatez o egocentrismo, cometen pifias que después les pueden costar la vida" (15).

[10] "El problema que tenemos es que los chicos que están saliendo de la universidad no tienen el perfil para ser reporteros. . . . Cuando ellos hacen cobertura del narco pues cometen muchos errores y ellos no saben que los están cometiendo y por eso tienen un riesgo mayor de amenaza directa contra esos chicos. La

But quitting does not mean that threats disappear; on the contrary, some of the journalists interviewed acknowledged that, even when they move to other environments, they continue to receive harassing messages: "Even if you change your phone number, you still receive them; I don't know how. They tell you, 'Now we are going to kill you, you bastard.' Logically, you try to run, but you also get tired of running"[11] (20).

When developing professional skills, trainees typically interact with other journalists in the outlet or context in which they work. Although newsrooms have a mix of experienced professionals and novices, most of the interviewees noted that, in their outlet, there are no specialized teams and research is mostly carried out individually. A group dynamic is only activated with security issues, that is, collaboration on mutual protection:

> [In] the State of Guerrero, where conditions are super critical and where we have a first-line correspondent under threat, a journalist at risk, most journalists in Chilpancingo have learned to work as a team, that is, as a guild rather than just according to their outlet. The whole guild is involved.[12] (3)

Another interviewee noted, "The trend is toward collaborative journalism; violence does not allow you to work alone. I rely a lot on the rest of my colleagues to address the issues that concern us"[13] (22). Especially when going to crime scenes, journalists tend to adopt this group perspective among their main precautionary measures:

> I rarely go out alone and this is even truer if it is a matter of security. The car is always full or, when I had my car, it was always full, almost never an empty seat. I don't remember ever covering a security issue alone. Maybe in the city, but never outside of it.[14] (11)

Along with security issues, journalists turn to the group to propose topics, to check certain approaches, or to locate relevant sources. But, despite the importance of the group, especially for field research, many topics require solo work.

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mayoría de ellos después de que les cae una amenaza, se van. Aquí está sucediendo que hay una emigración constante, dos años duran a lo mucho de reporteros y se desaparecen" (13).

[11] "Aunque cambies de teléfono lo consiguen, no sé cómo. Te dicen, 'Ahora sí te vamos a matar, carbon.' Por la lógica te pones a huir. Pero te cansas de huir" (20).

[12] "En el Estado de Guerrero, donde las condiciones son súper críticas y donde tenemos a un corresponsal de primera línea y también amenazado, un periodista en riesgo, el núcleo de periodistas en Chilpancingo, no por medio, sino por gremio, han aprendido a trabajar en equipo" (3).

[13] "La tendencia es hacia el periodismo colaborativo, la violencia no te permite estar haciendo trabajo sola. Yo me apoyo mucho con el resto de mis compañeros para abordar los temas que nos preocupan" (22).

[14] "Muy rara vez he salido solo y más si es una cuestión de seguridad. Siempre va el carro lleno o cuando tenía mi carro lo llevaba llenísimo, casi nunca sobraba un lugar. No recuerdo una cobertura solo . . . de seguridad. Tal vez en la ciudad sí, pero afuera no" (11).

Security Protocols

Most of the interviewees stated that the media companies for which they work do not have security protocols. Rather, they take their own precautionary measures based on their exposure to and experience with violence. For example, one journalist answered,

> Protection is a personal matter; it's a matter of the self-protection that each person has built up through the years since 2010, when a gun was put to our heads. When you talk to someone from Mexico City or another state about what is happening in Tamaulipas, they sometimes say, "I don't believe you," but then you show them the logs we have or other colleagues tell them about risky situations and that's when they say, "Shit, yeah, you're right."[15] (6)

Similarly, another interviewee noted,

> I have to admit that my newspaper does not have a protocol. No. After several reporters were victims of violence, they advised us as a group to tell each other our plans. They said, "Let's establish a protocol: You call us so we know."[16] (21)

That is, in the absence of protocols, journalists protect their physical safety based on trial and error. This especially affects correspondents who are new to coverage of these issues:

> It took nagging from older reporters who told us: Look, if you are going to cover this, you cannot go without a vest, you cannot go without this and . . . we did not know, that is, we really had no idea; we had not covered a protest that had repressive measures, and of course we went.[17] (2)

On the other hand, approximately a quarter of interviewees said that there are security protocols in their media outlet. These protocols entail comprehensive security planning that covers the following aspects:

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[15] "La protección que tiene uno es de uno, autoprotección que uno fue haciendo con el paso de los años que desde el 2010 nosotros tenemos en la sien puestas las armas. Cuando le platicas a alguien de la Ciudad de México o de otro Estado lo que está pasando en Tamaulipas, hasta te dicen, 'No te creo,' pero después les enseñas las bitácoras que hemos hecho o los compañeros para informar sobre las situaciones de riesgo y es donde dicen, 'Ah, cabrón, sí es cierto'" (6).

[16] "Tengo que decir que mi periódico no cuenta con ningún protocolo. No. Lo que nos aconsejaron luego de que varios reporteros sufrieron violencia es que ahora entre varios reporteros nos decimos qué vamos a hacer. Dijeron, 'Establezcamos un protocolo, ustedes nos llaman y así nosotros ya estamos enterados'" (21).

[17] "Fue la regañada de los reporteros más grandes que nos decían: es que miren, si van a cubrir esto ustedes no pueden ir sin un chaleco, ustedes no pueden ir sin esto y . . . no sabíamos, o sea, realmente no teníamos idea, no nos había tocado cubrir una protesta que fuera, en la hubiera represión y pues claro que íbamos" (2).

The Media Outlet's Physical Infrastructure

This refers to the overall infrastructure that the news organization has to protect its reporters' safety. Along with more common elements such as cameras and fencing in the immediate vicinity, other measures specific to the crime beat stand out. Some interviewees indicated that their newsroom has numerous rooms for meetings with sources linked, for example, to cartels. These rooms are important because they help journalists avoid meetings in public spaces where they can be attacked or photographed and later extorted.

Dividing Responsibility

When a journalist may be put at risk based on coverage of a dangerous topic, his or her name is often replaced for another or the content may contain an anonymous byline such that the editorial department or the outlet is listed as the text's generic author. The topic may also be ditched in cases in which the journalist's life would be put at risk if he or she were to continue closely researching the matter. "The topic is no longer covered, it is not published, or it is common to suppress the author's byline as a protective measure. But, of course, we do not publish information if it would put the journalist at risk"[18] (3). Another interesting initiative to divide responsibility includes sharing the topic with other media outlets or journalists such that it is published in several places at once. Thus, authorship becomes generic—in this case, several journalists or the media community—which complicates criminal gangs' efforts to attribute responsibility to a single person. Journalists often use this tactic when a media outlet imposes hurdles based on journalists' safety or because of editorial matters related to the publication of certain topics.

Legal Resources

The journalists consulted tend to distrust public institutions, especially at the local and regional levels. However, we did receive responses related to the request for protection measures, particularly for journalists who have received serious physical threats, and from initiatives within institutions themselves:

> When that happened to me [the respondent's truck was stolen], the Secretariat for Home Affairs told me it was going to provide me with security measures, but in the end nothing. They asked me, "Aren't you going to file a report?" I told them no. I filed a police report that my truck was stolen to see if my insurance would cover it, but nothing. I recovered it, but I lost everything, I had to replace it because they stole equipment worth like 85 thousand pesos.[19] (19)

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[18] "Se dejan de cubrir hechos, es más no les publican, o una práctica muy común es que les suprimen la firma por medidas de protección. Pero claro que no publicamos información si implica un riesgo para el periodista" (3).

[19] "A mí cuando me pasó eso le robaron una camioneta me dijeron desde la Secretaría de Gobernación que me iban a dar medidas, pero pues yo no. Me dijeron, '¿No va a presentar denuncia?' Les dije que no. Presenté la denuncia de robo de mi camioneta para ver si salvaba con el seguro, pero no. Yo la recuperé, pero perdí todo, la tuve que cambiar porque le quitaron equipo como por 85 mil pesos" (19).

Some journalists mentioned other institutional initiatives, such as 30-day refuge in a house guarded by police forces or the CPJ's help in leaving the country.

Relationships Among Journalists

To avoid threats, a support network is very important. This includes other journalists covering crime, colleagues in the media field, and institutional representatives so that journalists do not go out alone to observation scenes. Journalist networks are good tools for breaking down fear because, as López and López (2017) point out, fear leads to isolation, although networks create self-protection measures and reporting channels, thus generating greater protection in the community. Maintaining relationships with family and friends is also seen as essential given that some threats originate from these areas.

Taking Precautions in One's Private Life

Professionals who cover organized crime often do not distinguish between their private and professional lives; physical threats are more likely to surface in the former, so they often take numerous precautionary measures:

> I feel that my own safety has helped me because every time I leave a place or scene of violence I always look around me. If I see a taxi coming, I'll turn and park for a few minutes. If I see that it's not coming anymore, then I'll leave and take another route. When I go shopping, even if it's just to the supermarket, as I'm putting things in the cart, I check the aisle. I wait. This is my life; it is hard because I'm always thinking about my safety.[20] (20)

Throughout the interviews, other details emerged. Some of the most common included always having a change of clothes in the car, a charged telephone, and a full tank of gasoline in case of pursuit; journalists also reported asking people close to them to keep track of when they come and go and where they go.

Social Networks and the Internet

Managing social networks worries journalists because they can expose data related to the places they frequent or people they hang out with, which can aid an aggressor's attempts to do harm. Although they cautiously use them for personal ends, journalists use social networks and the Internet to compare and contrast information, to defend themselves against verbal attacks, to publicly denounce severe threats, and

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[20] "Yo siento que me ha servido mi propia seguridad, porque cada vez que salgo de un lugar o hecho de violencia siempre me fijo alrededor. Si veo que viene un taxi pues doblo y me quedo más adelante estacionado uno o dos minutos. Si veo que ya no viene para acá, pues salgo por otro lugar. Cuando voy de compras, aunque sea al supermercado, voy subiendo mis cosas al carrito, veo al pasillo. Me espero. Así es de diario este tipo de vida, es algo complicado porque solamente estás pensando en tu seguridad" (20).

to legitimize themselves in the eyes of public opinion in an attempt to counteract the calculated effect of aggressors' manipulation:

> When I was in danger, the first thing I did was to tell the public, all of my Facebook friends so they know I'm not linked to crime . . . that's another question, they linked me to crime. That's the first way they kill you . . . your credibility as a journalist, calling you a *chayotero*, a sellout or linking you to crime. Then you examine the situation afterwards and coldly analyze it without the pressure of danger, and see what you did wrong. You tell everyone that the only thing you tried to do was to work and inform.[21] (6)

As seen from the above, protocols are not typically systematized or institutionalized, but rather mostly emerge from individual experience as journalists. Other variables can impact the development of these protocols, such as the size of the media outlet. At smaller outlets, these protocols tend to be more poorly managed and, therefore, journalists are more likely to be exposed to violence. Working at the regional level is also another significant variable. The regional media in states such as Sinaloa and Michoacán are more vulnerable to criminal groups and yet are poorly equipped to counteract the potential risks involved in coverage of organized crime.

Conclusions

In Mexico, journalists covering organized crime must be more precise than they are with any other issue given the repercussions their coverage can have on their lives or those of their families and friends, on the lives of an article's protagonists, and on their own credibility, as well as that of the news outlet(s) they work for. Thus, we have observed the prevalence of exclusive diffusion when it comes to this type of information such that, according to the journalists consulted, the media usually prefer to publish stories based on their own writing and investigation rather than information agencies. This is so because Mexican journalists have profound knowledge of this specific kind of coverage, the key actors therein, and its consequences. Thus, coverage from agencies is reprinted when it gets ahead of the headlines or when it contains data that journalists were not able to gather. It is also used as a standard for comparing and contrasting information given the accuracy attributed to it.

As highlighted, the Mexican media often lack systematized security protocols. Journalists themselves tend to build such protocols through the practice of their profession, with advice from other more experienced professionals and based on trial and error. The interviewees' responses—made up of media outlets' norms and, above all, of journalists' experience—could constitute a security protocol. However, to get there, the media should institutionalize individual precautions and standardize them.

[21] "Cuando yo estaba en peligro lo primero que hice fue decirle a la opinión pública, a todos mis amigos de Facebook, saben que no soy una persona ligada al crimen . . . esa es otra cuestión, me ligaron a la delincuencia. Entonces, esa es la primera muerte que te dan, la muerte que te dan es . . . de tu credibilidad como periodista, decirte *chayotero*, vendido o que tienes relación con la delincuencia. Luego ves la situación y analizas en cabeza fría y sin peligro y ves qué hiciste mal y dices que lo único que hiciste fue trabajar e informar" (6).

Following the International News Safety Institute's definition (International News Safety Institute, 2013), a protocol must involve safety training that includes key aspects such as crisis management and ensuring the safety of journalists under threat. In addition to these two points, we might also add the CPJ's (2012) suggestion to be cautious with criminals and the corrupt politicians who protect them (p. 32).

As the interviewees mentioned, the media should recommend basic guidelines to protect professionals' lives. In this sense, the present article contributes to the literature by describing numerous strategies that the journalists use to combat the silencing to which the climate of violence in Mexico tries to subject them. That is, journalists are aware of the risks that their profession entails and that make Mexico one of the most violent countries in the world for journalism and, although self-censorship is a possible response, they have also developed numerous resistance tactics.

These tactics mostly emerge individually rather than as part of public or journalistic institutions' express effort. Some of the tactics they employ include rigorous retelling of the facts, the introduction of official sources to diffuse responsibility and liability, and strategic processes related to the use of social networks, as well as the infrastructure that surrounds them. Thus, based on suggestions from the journalists, we believe that Mexican universities should include a specific class that prepares students for coverage of organized crime because this beat involves continuous threat to journalistic work given the connections between crime and other issues in Mexican public life. In addition to the narrative and investigative depth that this coverage requires, younger journalists in particular should learn how to investigate alone and, at the same time, build on collaborative journalism networks to bolster their security during field visits.

It is also important to emphasize the need for the Mexican state to support policies specifically aimed at protecting the work of these reporters. Above all, the Mexican state must try to rebuild trust with journalists such that the work of institutional representatives and police forces complements the work of reporters, and vice versa. Although we obviously cannot generalize about journalists' distrust with respect to the Mexican state—because this research is limited to a qualitative study that seeks to better understand reporters' perceptions rather than to confirm some consensus among them—according to our observations, distrust of the state among the professionals who participated in this project prevails.

Yet, informative coverage of organized crime requires trust; when unsure of whether an official is tied to a criminal group, journalists primarily tend to exercise their profession with support from their media outlet(s) or other colleagues. However, some professionals lack access to this kind of support, such as freelance journalists or those who work in provincial areas. The state should thus intervene by encouraging greater self-regulated association among journalists based on the notion that association and joint initiatives create a collective and organized target that is better able to dissipate threats.

These findings are a good start for identifying journalists' needs and promoting their protection. Future research should compare the informative coverage of this phenomenon to further shed light on the differences among local, regional, and national media in Mexico. In addition, future research could benefit the field by expanding on the impact that self-censorship has on this coverage.

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