

## **Mexico: News reporters caught in deadly crossfire**

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A Mexican newspaper editor calls for media solidarity to protect those most at risk: “I fervently hope that this Symposium opens an avenue of collaboration and shared experiences between editors and reporters that will allow us to create a safe environment for our work.”

It happened twice without a warning. The AK-47 fire piercing the midnight quiet in downtown Torreón, the bullets smashing against the offices of one of the largest newspapers in northern Mexico.

Then the phone calls: The building was attacked. The security guards didn't need to say anything else. It was clear the attack had come from one of the drug cartels fighting for control of the city of Torreón and the lucrative criminal market in a metropolitan area of more than a million people.

The problem was that we didn't know which one. We only knew that our paper, El Siglo de Torreón, and the rest of the media in this city ravaged by the violence of the drug war, was in the crossfire.

And nobody was trying to stop it.

The metropolitan area of Torreón spreads across the states of Coahuila and Durango in northern Mexico and since 2007 had become the scene of a turf war between drug cartels. The murders have increased more than ten-fold in the past five years. From 89 in 2007 to 995 in 2011, while the count in 2012 is likely to surpass one thousand. The same increase has been registered in armed robbery, extortion and kidnapping.

And from the beginning, the criminal groups have sought to do what every cartel does when it tries to control territory: control what the press is saying about them.

In 2011, Coahuila was the top-ranked state in the number of attacks against buildings of media companies, with a total of 11, according to a report by Article19.

The first attack against El Siglo de Torreón came three years ago. On August 18, 2009, two armed men drove in front of El Siglo's building and fired an AK-47 against one of the entrances. It was past one o'clock in the morning so the only people inside were well protected.

But the message was unmistakable, yet we didn't know what it said. We went back to what we had published in the previous days, looking for clues in stories that might have provoked a response from one of the cartels, but didn't find anything. There was no warning, either before or after the shooting, so the only thing we concluded was that we were in danger and that we had to take precautions.

Local and federal authorities opened investigations but there was no follow-up. Nobody was arrested or even identified as a suspect by investigators. So we also concluded that we were alone and whatever safety measures we needed to take, we had to take them on our own.

We had been shaken only a few months before the attack, by the kidnapping and murder of Eliseo Barrón, a police reporter for the newspaper Milenio, our main competitor. The crime opened for us a window into the dangers we were facing.

We established a protocol for covering crime stories, making sure reporters took precautions when covering crime scenes or violent episodes. We also set guidelines for writing these stories and for the way we display them, including taking special care of headlines and pictures so we didn't fall in sensationalism. We stopped identifying criminal groups that were suspect in crimes, to avoid "keeping score" of the turf war. While we don't know if these protocols have spared us further violence, because it's impossible to know what might have been, we are at least conscious of the fact that we must take precautions to minimize our exposure to risk.

However, the risk remained. At three in the morning of November 15, 2011, five men parked a car in front of the main entrance to El Siglo's building, doused it with gasoline and set it on fire. As they drove away, they fired AK-47's at one of our sales offices across the street.

Again, authorities promised cooperation. Again, they opened investigations and, again, nothing came from them. Almost a year later we do not know who attacked us, nobody has been arrested or even identified.

We seemed to have a clue of where the attack might have come from. The day before we had run the story of the arrest of a criminal group leader in the city, but we never had confirmation that this publication provoked the attack.

This second aggression forced us to review our safety protocols and become more strict in applying them. No further attacks have been directed against us or other media outlets in the region.

Of course, the risk is still real, as it is in the rest of Mexico, where more than 70 journalists have been killed in the past six years, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Dozens of newspapers and radio and TV stations have been attacked in this period, leaving a trail of fear among reporters and editors caught in the crossfire and forced to grapple the uncertainties of the drug war.

Attacks on the press are fueled by impunity. Only a handful of the murders and kidnappings of journalists, and the attacks against media companies have been prosecuted. More than 90 percent remain unsolved. The certainty that attacking the press carries no cost is a powerful incentive for criminals to continue down that path. This situation has underscored the need to take precautions on our own, as we know that we can expect little from the authorities. Recently, the Mexican government set up a Mechanism for the Protection of Journalists and Human Rights Defenders, but the bureaucratic structure makes it difficult to address the dangers.

For instance, the Mechanism is predicated on the existence of a prior threat that can be responded to by taking several safety measures to protect a journalist, such as bodyguards, armored vehicles or evacuation. But the majority of attacks happen with no warning and in a matter of minutes, so it's nearly impossible to take protective measures.

That is why we have to do it ourselves. Over the past five years the newsroom at El Siglo has been developing safety protocols and the company has been giving special benefits for reporters at risk, such as expanded life and medical insurance, as well as paid leaves of absence.

But few media outlets in Mexico have followed this path. Most operate under old assumptions hoping that violence won't touch them, a dangerous and naïve expectation in the current climate. Even newspapers where reporters have been kidnapped or killed have failed to develop security measures.

International organizations have been calling on media companies to address the dangers. At their request, I have shared our protocols with other media companies in Mexico and abroad, most recently in Honduras, where a wave of violence against the media has been slowly increasing.

However, much needs to be done to convince owners, publishers and editors of the need to set up protections for their staff. I fervently hope that this Symposium opens an avenue of collaboration and shared experiences between editors and reporters that will allow us to create a safe environment for our work.