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Report Says Drug Violence Promoted Self-censorship in Mexican News Media, Suppressed Press Freedom

by Carlos Navarro

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An organization that monitors press freedom in countries around the world has reduced its rating for Mexico because of the extreme drug-related violence that has forced many reporters and writers to practice self-censorship. In its Freedom of the Press 2011 Survey Release, the independent organization Freedom House reduced the rating for Mexico's press to "not free" from earlier ratings of "partially free." Mexico joined a half dozen other countries that experienced deteriorating press freedom in the past year, including Egypt, Honduras, Thailand, Turkey, South Korea, and Ukraine.

The deteriorating press freedom in Mexico did not happen overnight. Organizations such as Reporters sans frontières (RSF), the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have documented killings of reporters, editors, and publishers during the past several years ([SourceMex, April 18, 2007](#)) and ([July 14, 2010](#)).

The drug cartels have been brazen in their attacks on journalists and on journalistic institutions ([SourceMex, April 19, 2006](#)). They have targeted radio, newspaper, and television reporters and editors and even prominent columnists such as Jesus Blancornelas of Semanario Zeta in Tijuana ([SourceMex, March 6, 2002](#)).

Organized-crime groups have even launched attacks against newspaper offices, including those of in 2009, (Acapulco) in 2010, and (Monterrey) in 2011.

One newspaper in Ciudad Juárez, issued a public appeal to members of organized crime, asking for a truce after two photography interns were gunned down on a city street while leaving a shopping mall after lunch ([SourceMex, Sept. 22, 2010](#)).

While threats against journalists by organized crime have been a professional hazard for at least a decade, the attacks intensified after President Felipe Calderón launched an intense campaign against drug traffickers at the end of 2006 ([SourceMex, Jan 24, 2007](#)). Since then, the CPJ has documented more than 30 deaths of journalists.

Several organizations, including the IAPA and RSF, have labeled Mexico one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists ([SourceMex, Dec. 6, 2006](#)) and ([Nov. 11, 2009](#)). In a CPJ measure, released in April 2010, Mexico ranked as the ninth-most-dangerous country, but this was up from 11th in 2008 ([SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010](#)).

"Any mechanism that offers full protection [to journalists] represents a step toward justice," Catalina Botero, special rapporteur for freedom of expression for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR), said in August 2010. "If impunity is allowed to exist, then the message is clear that crime does not have any cost. There must be sentences with appropriate punishments for those who commit crimes against the press."

Recent reports from the UN and the IACHR said that the situation in Mexico has worsened in the last two years. "There is a very serious crisis in the protection of journalists," said Botero. "We are not even seeing any official information on efforts to prosecute and punish such aggressions."

The Mexican government has made some efforts to address the situation, even appointing special prosecutors to deal with the problem ([SourceMex, Feb. 15, 2006](#)) and ([Feb. 24, 2010](#)). The special prosecutors have been largely ineffective in stopping the attacks on journalists.

Drug cartels seek to manipulate media

But the Freedom House ratings consider much more than the killings and the threats to the lives of journalists. In many instances, newspapers and other media outlets have been forced to publish press releases from the drug traffickers as they would for any other source. In July 2010, drug traffickers held four journalists hostage, forcing their organizations to boost coverage aimed at rival drug-trafficking groups ([SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010](#)).

The self-censorship is not only related to fear of the drug cartels. Many media organizations in Mexico entered into an agreement with the government to downplay as much as possible the violence afflicting the country. The Calderón government, concerned that reports of violence in Mexico have been taken out of context outside the country, asked newspapers to put their coverage of incidents in Mexico in perspective relative to what occurs in other countries. Newspapers and broadcasters said they signed the pact to keep journalists safe and not to unwittingly become propaganda tools for drug traffickers, who should not, they say, be treated as either "heroes" or "victims."

Two news organizations, the left-leaning weekly magazine and the centrist daily newspaper refused to enter into the agreement with the government.

Views are mixed on whether the pact is appropriate in light of the press' responsibility to present accurate information. "If the pact leads to fewer journalists being killed, that would probably improve the situation," said Karin Karlekar, the managing editor of Freedom House's Freedom of the Press Survey. "On the other hand, a codification of self-censorship will also make the situation worse....It could be a situation where violence goes down but levels of self-censorship go up."

But others suggest that, as long as the newspapers are allowed to make their own decisions and are not forced by the government to take certain actions, then compliance with the pact is not necessarily bad. "I am extremely concerned about the general culture of violence and how the representation of violence contributes to the environment," Lucila Vargas, a professor of international communications at the University of North Carolina, said in an interview with . "[The media can offer] complete reports but they do not have to be full of blood."

Sinaloa governor imposes ban on drug ballads

While the drug cartels might have some difficulties obtaining consistent favorable publicity from the print and broadcast media, they have succeeded in using the music medium to their advantage through ballads that glorify the exploits of certain organized crime figures such as Sinaloa cartel leader Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as El Chapo ([SourceMex, Jan. 9, 2009](#)).

Some politicians, realizing the power of the songs, are attempting to place some restrictions on the ballads, known as . In late May, Sinaloa Gov. Mario López Valdez issued a decree prohibiting

broadcast-media outlets from playing these ballads. The decree also forbids bars and nightclubs from playing the songs or allowing musicians to perform the . The state government will sanction any bars and nightclubs that play this music by removing their liquor license.

López Valdez, who has reached an agreement with the Cámara de la Industria de la Radio y la Televisión (CIRT), said the move does not aim to censor the type of music that individuals can hear privately. Rather, the action simply attempts to send a message that society should not continue to act as an "apologist" for organized crime.

The governor said there have been many instances in which performances of these ballads have incited violence in cities like Mazatlán. In many instances, the ballads are performed in the context of a mode known as , in which singers play the parts of organized-crime figures and perform ballads glorifying violence and the killing of rival drug-cartel members.

The move received support from the spokesperson for the federal government's campaign against organized crime. " justify crime and promote false hopes," said Alejandro Poiré. "We have to face them with a culture of legality."

But López Valdez's actions are sure to be challenged by free-speech advocates. Additionally, the state legislature has already indicated plans to bring the matter before the Mexican high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN), arguing that the municipalities and not the state government should make decisions governing businesses within their boundaries.

But supporters of the restrictions said a precedent exists for regulating the , as the state of Chihuahua has imposed its own limits on the performance of the ballads.

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