

# How Do Journalists in Mexico Report on Organised Crime: Representing the Facts, Interpretation, and Self-Critique

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## SUMMARY

*Among the many outcomes of the so-called War on Drugs, Mexico has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalism. Besides killings and kidnappings, journalists are also frequent victims of beatings, arbitrary detentions, and online harassment, as well as many other acts of aggression. Anti-press violence has an evident impact on Mexican journalists' daily activities, particularly as related to the coverage of organised crime. The endemic risk that news workers constantly face determines how they represent and interpret the stories they report on when it comes to this issue. Thus, this inquiry aims to analyse the practices that reporters and editors implement during the news-making process when covering cartels' activities. In doing so, this paper draws on a set of in-depth interviews with news workers from Mexico's main*

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*national newspapers, and from all the states where journalists were killed in 2017. The main findings indicate that there is a lack of written norms for the coverage of organised crime, and that reporters refer to criminals with a sense of familiarity. In addition, this study contributes to the understanding of journalists' decisions in the field when doing their job, especially in dangerous conditions.*

*Keywords:* organised crime, journalists, Mexico, interpretation, self-criticism

## **Introduction**

Journalism is a high-risk profession in many parts of the world. Just recently, *The New York Times* reported that security forces arrested at least 56 reporters 10 days after seizing power in Myanmar (Paddock, April 4, 2021). Therefore, assaults on the press are neither a new phenomenon, nor exclusive to a particular country (Reporters without Borders, 2020). Nonetheless, there has been a perceptible shift in the nature of these attacks and their perpetrators: during much of the twentieth century, most news workers who died in the field could be classified as *casualties of war* since they were largely random victims of landmines, bombings, crossfires, or snipers. However, with increasing frequency, reporters have become a specific target for terrorists, mobs, drug lords, and even political elites (Cottle, Sambrook & Mosdell, 2016). Mexico belongs the latter category as it is the most dangerous place to practice journalism in terms of countries not at war (RSF, 2019). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2020) has registered 75 murders of journalists in Mexico since 2010, 11 of those during 2019, and eight in 2020. Although anti-press violence is not a new phenomenon, it is widely accepted that assaults on Mexican news workers significantly increased when, in 2006, then-president Felipe Calderón declared *War on Drugs*<sup>1</sup>. Coverage of this issue became a high-risk beat for reporters and some authors argue that said war brought about a 'normalisation of violence' in journalistic work (Díaz-Cerveró & Barredo, 2020:1).

When Enrique Peña Nieto started his presidency in 2012, the problem was too entrenched to be solved (Reporters without Borders, 2018; Arribas, 2016: 40). In fact, anti-press violence became a systemic crisis (Olvera, 2016), that is, Mexican journalists were forced to work under unfavourable conditions such as endemic corruption, increased public safety problems, and even institutional deterioration in several regions that, in the absence of a relevant federal or state government presence, became dominated by drug lords (Estrada, Moscoso & Andrade, 2016). The 2019 arrival of the newest and current Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has not meant any significant improvement for media freedom, evidenced by

the fact that 15 news workers have been killed since he took office (El Economista, April 11, 2020).

Besides the safety issues that journalists face, Mexican news organisations receive most of their revenue from government advertising. Media thus face pressure from both organised crime and the government. This situation is particularly evident at the local and regional levels because news outlets located outside of Mexico's most developed cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana) have less resources to counterbalance these pressures (González & Echevarría, 2018).

In light of this context, this article aims to analyse how Mexican journalists perceive their work when covering organised crime. In so doing, it draws on a set of 22 in-depth interviews with reporters and editors from Mexico City and from 10 states where at least one news worker was killed in 2017. The research questions that steer this study include the following:

RQ1: How do Mexican journalists perceive their work on organised crime in the news stories they produce?

RQ2: What processes determine factual interpretation of organised crime according to the imaginaries of those in the chosen sample?

RQ3: What general and specific regulations exist when it comes to coverage of organised crime from the point of view of the chosen sample?

To understand the phenomenon of violence against journalists in Mexico, it is important to take into account the high levels of impunity that abet it (Del Palacio, 2018; Solís & Balderas, 2009; Solís & Prieto, 2010; Waisbord, 2002; Bataillon, 2015). Specifically, in 2017, impunity surrounding cases of violence against journalists and social activists reached up to 99.7% (Reporters without borders, 2018). In this context, according to the latest Transparency Perception Index of Transparency International, the corruption of Mexican authorities is a fact and public perception of those authorities has significantly deteriorated (Forbes, 2019).

It is also important to point out the collusion between political power and organised crime, which, in addition to promoting impunity, encourages both de facto criminals and the authorities to author threats and acts of violence against journalists (Del Palacio, 2018; Collective Analysis of Security with Democracy, 2019).

## **Literature review**

### **Anti-press violence as a global phenomenon**

As mentioned in the introduction, anti-press violence is a global phenomenon (Reporters without Borders, 2020). The fact that news workers have shifted from being

considered collateral damage to a specific target is the result of a multi-faceted process involving a diverse set of circumstances and actors, as Cottle, Sambrook and Mosdell (2016) explain. First, organised crime has gained salience in shaping politics, particularly in unconsolidated democracies. Second, journalists have lost their neutral status when it comes to coverage of sensitive issues (e.g., corruption and collusion between government and cartels) in highly dangerous regions. That is, very frequently reporters are caught in the middle and, thus, are considered enemies by at least one of the parties involved. Third, the rise of digital technologies represents both a tool for and a weapon against the practice of journalism: On the one hand, electronic devices (for example, smart phones and portable computers) make the work of journalism easier. On the other hand, these same tools present risks in terms of digital security because, for instance, websites can be hacked or phones can be traced through GPS. Finally, due to the prevalence of 24/7 news cycles, problematic actors have become more visible and, thus, more aware of their image in the press. Overall, technology is frequently an ally for journalists, especially when it comes to avoiding censorship, restrictions or penalties, as observed in authoritarian contexts like China (Barredo, 2021).

As remarked in the introduction, Mexico is the most dangerous country to be a journalist, with 13 reporters killed in 2017 and eight in 2020. Trailing Mexico, Syria, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines and Iraq each had four journalist murders in 2020 (Reporters without Borders, 2020).

When it comes to countries not at war, we can start with India, where journalists are divided: some support government regulation with or without punitive measures and invite monitoring, while others favour self-regulation (Bhushan, 2013). With a study based on self-perception of what impunity means, Harrison and Pukallus (2018) compared Mexican and Indian journalism because both contexts lack public awareness of attacks on journalists and the difficulty of protecting independent journalism. Likewise, since 2001, Pakistan has lacked official state protection against threats and impunity, bringing about a normalisation of violence (Ashraf & Brooten, 2017). A study based on journalists' feedback reveals that journalism is a dangerous profession in Pakistan due to the physical, psychological, financial, social, emotional and topic-specific risks journalists face – risks that constrain their right to freedom of expression and affect them most while doing their job. In particular, this study revealed 'social and emotional risks' that are often ignored by international organisations that monitor journalists' safety in Pakistan (Jamil, 2017). Another Pakistan-based study used in-depth qualitative interviews to reveal that journalists who had been threatened or who had experienced the death of a colleague tend to blame themselves or their colleague for their fates (Ashraf & Brooten, 2017).

Feinstein and Pavisian (2017) discuss the state of Iranian journalists' emotional wellbeing, revealing that they are subject to a wide range of threats that are associated with clinical symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as barbiturate substance abuse. Taking into account that the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) identifies Iran as one of the worst offenders in the world when it comes to jailing journalists, the authors compare the work environments of Mexican and Iranian journalists (Feinstein & Pavisian, 2017).

A qualitative study carried out in Saudi Arabia concluded that journalists' freedom of expression there is curtailed by religion, avoidance of coverage related to women, adapting to tribes or families' judgement in a collectivist society, avoidance of reporting on bad news that could affect the Medina market, the inexistence of active organisation to protect journalists' interests and a lack of professional training (Al-najrani et al., 2018).

Although specific studies on freedom of expression in the Philippines are lacking, the Manila-based Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) has promoted interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies on journalist killings and the culture of impunity there. They point to the need for awareness and perception studies that, like the present one, seek to understand the need for news workers to protect themselves and others (Tuazon et al., 2017). In addition, in China, journalism is undergoing transformation in line with both social change and the generalised use of technology (Barredo, 2021). Despite the fact that public opinion is controlled by the Communist Party, and despite the existence of strong censorship, journalists in China use the anonymity of blogs and social networks to publish their work.

In Africa, one study identified the challenges surrounding reporting on Boko Haram's terror and violent activities, concluding that reporting in East Nigeria is deadly, risky and costly, and, 'In the course of duty, they struggled between the desire to stick to the code of ethics and threats of hanging made by the terrorists, the pressures of security agents and the expectations of the public' (Pate & Idris, 2017: 170).

In Latin America, Krøvel (2017) decried the threats and violence against indigenous journalists, which constitute a real and widespread problem that, to date, has received inadequate attention from the international community. The author concludes that, 'This is most likely because "indigenous journalism" is not easily recognisable as "journalism" to "Northern" observers' (Krøvel, 2017: 201).

It is not just indigenous journalists who suffer from violence in Latin America. While UNESCO and the Committee to Protect Journalists do not consider Venezuela one of the most dangerous countries in the world to exercise journalism, international organisations such as Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights have constantly denounced limitations on journalists

there, which, among other things, include harassment, illegal detention, kidnapping and assassination (Garrido, 2020).

In Colombia, decades of murder, aggression, threats, and general pressure have engendered rhetorical survival strategies such as self-censorship, resulting in stilted discourse (Barredo, de la Garza, & Díaz-Cerveró, 2016). Meanwhile, in Ecuador, some have pointed to the fact that journalists tend to use ‘resistance tactics’ so that the topics they cover do not become unreportable. For example, they 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 (Henao & Barredo, 2019: 9)

In Chile, 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 this century. They include obstacles set up by official bodies, the obligation to pay for information, withdrawal of public or private advertising, threats resulting from a publication, and even workplace harassment or dismissal based on the content of published information (Cabalin & Lagos, 2009: 47–49).

Journalists suffer the most violence in countries in which organised crime operates. For example, before Mexico rose to the top of the list, Honduras was the most violent country for journalists according to the 2012 United Nations Office of Drug and Crime data, followed by El Salvador and Guatemala. Violence against journalists in these countries reached such a fever pitch that freedom of the press became constrained by many risks and challenges (Benítez, 2017).

## **Covering organised crime in Mexico**

Coverage of organised crime in Mexico has evolved in proportion with the increase in violence that it has generated. Historically, crime news - commonly known as a *nota roja* – has played an important role in the media throughout the country (Hallin, 2000). Likewise, since the mid-1980s, the issue of drug trafficking has been a recurrent theme for journalists covering this beat (Arriaga & Marcial, 2018).

However, mainstream media attention on organised crime significantly escalated in December 2006 with the initiation of the aforementioned *War on Drugs*. From that moment on, coverage of cartels’ illicit activities quickly became an important part of the news agenda and related information began to be published with increasing frequency. These articles appeared on the front pages of newspapers or during the first segments of newscasts, and coverage took on a markedly spectacular tone (Gómez & Rodelo, 2012; Juárez, 2015). In addition to this, and under the logic that *bad news* is always *good news* in economic terms (Chibnall, 1980), this type of content turned out to be highly profitable in the short term (Schack, 2011).

However, coverage of organised crime has undergone transformations over time. During the first years of the drug war, journalists were taken by surprise and, with little collective experience in reporting on armed conflict, the information reported adopted features from sports and *nota roja* journalism. This resulted in constant emphasis on the daily body count and generated expectations around who was ‘winning’ (Hernández & Rodelo, 2010; Reyna, 2015). For example, the newspaper *Reforma* and its affiliates printed a now-famous ‘*executometer*’, a count of intentional homicides, also known as *executions*, allegedly linked to organised crime. This turned out to be problematic for the federal government because its propaganda message failed to reach the public. The authorities began to question the media and accused them of promoting the cartels’ agenda instead of the armed forces’ achievements. As a result, the second era of this coverage was marked by the government exercising stricter control over information flows with a proposal called the Agreement for Information Coverage of Violence (ACIV for its initials in Spanish), which was signed by 715 Mexican media outlets in 2011, but was rejected by others, such as *Reforma* and *La Jornada* (Lozano, 2016). In this way, and with increasing frequency, the authorities’ official version was adopted by the press (Hernández & Rodelo, 2010; Reyna, 2015).

Overall, the *War on Drugs* exposed the historical weaknesses of Mexican journalism, especially its inadequate investigation and contextualisation, clear dependence on the government’s press release, and lack of professional standards for covering such information, among other aspects, which fostered a poor understanding of the phenomenon. What is more, in order to encourage higher profits, coverage focused on bloody details rather than on explaining the facts (Hernández & Rodelo, 2010; Schack, 2011; Gómez & Rodelo, 2012; Reyna, 2015; Lozano, 2016).

In addition to the above, cartels quickly began to grasp the ins and outs of agenda management; thus, they began to control the information, frames, and exposure times of a large part of the news stories covering their activities. This strategy brought them favourable results not only in terms of coverage; it also facilitated the media’s adoption of their lexicon when narrating events<sup>2</sup>. Using the formula *plata o plomo* (a bribe or a bullet, i.e., money or aggression), members of organised crime groups began to expect the press to exclusively disseminate information aligned with their interests (Hernández & Rodelo, 2010; Gómez & Rodelo, 2012; Lozano, 2016; González, 2018).

Beyond the logic of a *bribe or a bullet*, some criminal groups adopted more or less elaborate communication strategies. For example, they began leaking information to certain journalists, sending photographs and/or videos, monitoring the coverage they received and analysing how they were presented in each medium. In some cases, they appointed their own press officers or spokespersons to interact with re-

porters in the area, or even infiltrated newsrooms with their own staff (Hernández & Rodelo, 2010; Gómez & Rodelo, 2012; Tuckman, 2015).

In addition to the above, the most violent gangs also used their crimes as messages, relying on the symbolic value of certain murders. Through the torture and beheading of certain victims, whose bodies were publicly displayed, drug traffickers sent messages to both their rivals and to the authorities. In short, they organised their own media events for the purpose of garnering journalistic coverage (Gómez & Rodelo, 2012; Tuckman, 2015).

However, in mid-2016, with the implementation of the New Accusatory Criminal Justice System, coverage of the *War on Drugs* took another turn. Unlike its predecessor, this model guarantees the presumption of innocence, eliminates preventive arrest, and streamlines the resolution of processes, among other reforms (SEGOB, 2015; EFE, 2018). Its implications for journalistic practice include the fact that, except in certain cases that impact national security, hearings are public and open, digital files can be accessed, and reporters can interview the actors involved (authorities, victims and lawyers) from the beginning, but the language they use to refer to these actors must be implemented with care<sup>3</sup> (Leñero & Carranza, 2014; SEGOB, 2015; Díaz-Cerveró & Barredo, 2020).

## Materials and methods

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 22 journalists who cover organised crime in Mexico's principal newspapers. On the one hand, 15 interviews were conducted in the states where 13 journalists were killed in 2017, as follows: Guerrero, Veracruz, Chihuahua, Baja California Sur, Morelos, Sinaloa, Jalisco, Michoacán, Baja California, and Tamaulipas. In addition, we also interviewed seven journalists from the main print media in Mexico City: *El Universal*, *Reforma*, *La Jornada*, *Excelsior*, *Milenio* and the news magazine *Proceso*.

The 22 in-depth interviews were carried out based on a structured script, that is, with a previously prepared questionnaire made up of fixed questions that the interviewer generally posed in order (Valles, 2002). The questions were organised into three blocks in line with this study's central research questions, i.e., representation of the facts, interpretation of the facts, and self-critique.

The participants were selected from a non-probabilistic judgmental sampling. Specifically, we first selected 15 journalists, each from one of the Mexican states in which journalists were murdered in 2017, some of them from the same mediums where the victims had worked. All of the interviews were carried out in the informants' workplaces, except in the case of the journalists from Chihuahua, Tamaulipas

and Baja California Sur since, at the time of the interview, these professionals had been relocated to Mexico City for protection based on threats they had received under the Mechanism to Protect Journalists. The interviews were carried out between February and November 2018; they were all face-to-face and lasted between one and four hours.

## Results

### Representation of the facts associated with organised crime

More than a quarter of the journalists interviewed believe that a crime's degree of violence is a determining factor in its placement in the news. For example, one of the interviewees responded as follows:

When it is a body, which is relatively nothing compared to the tragedy we are experiencing, then [coverage] occupies a small space. When it is a shocking note, "they found three" or "they found eight" [bodies], then it gets headlines in eight [columns]<sup>4</sup> (116).

This is consistent with the fact that *bad* news is *good* news in terms of visibility and earnings. Likewise, a story's impact on the regional or national agenda, as well as its association with other topics - such as politics, the economy, or entertainment - determines the size and resources invested in its coverage. Finally, a cartel or drug trafficker's notoriety also influences the scope of these issues.

On the other hand, a quarter of the journalists interviewed point to possible audience impact as another factor that affects the ranking of content on organised crime. That is to say, the professionals who attest to this assure that they tend to receive feedback from other workers related to the medium - such as distributors, in the case of print. In short, the more striking the subject or crime presented is, the more newspapers are sold. Another way to predict impact is through previous experience: journalists recognise the issues that attract attention. Additionally, the interviewees admit that they usually take into account lists of topics of interest, especially through the online versions of their outlet (most read, most commented), which also influences the priority given to certain topics over others.

Finally, some of the journalists affirm that managing editors are in charge of choosing the priority of the news reports. In other words, information is hierarchised or prioritised based on decision-makers' interests, i.e., those on boards of directors or drafting tables.

There are other aspects that play a key role in the ranking of topics. For example, if coverage is exclusive to a medium, it will tend to be privileged in the relevant

spaces, such as the front page, or with the provision of more resources. The timing associated with the release of information is also influential. From this angle, during electoral campaigns, the media are perhaps more reluctant to publish topics related to organised crime, given the possibility that this content may be associated with political candidates.

The interviewed journalists recognise that public interest is essential for a story to be published. However, some responses frame a clash between public interest and the medium's interest, whether based on economic reasons (if the news affects advertisers or managers' strategic partners), on a lack of resources, or on poor-quality reporting.

### **How journalists refer to the accused when covering organised crime**

In accordance with the interviews conducted, we observed that the legal system and the creation of regulations may motivate a change in the routines surrounding information production. How journalists address the accused is a clear example of this. Thus, before 2016, journalists could use suspects or accused persons' personal data or photos for profit, while some admitted to having received a bribe in exchange for omitting them:

Furthermore, the Attorney General's Office sent out the bulletin and it was both complex and fun at the same time. They got the guy and took his photo and "for failure to comply, so and so was arrested". Socially, he was detained because his dough was missing, and they were telling you to remove the photo. And if you said no, they replied "no, well, how much do you want?" (I12)

However, as mentioned, in 2016, the new Mexican Criminal Accusatory System was approved, regulating how personal data is used during judicial processes. Although it does not impose editorial regulations on the media that minimise the use of nicknames or aliases, most of the interviewed journalists refer to alleged criminals by their nicknames, with either their full names, or with the initials corresponding to their last names, partially in line with the new penal model.

On the other hand, the use of nicknames depends, fundamentally, on popular custom. If a drug trafficker is known by his nickname(s), then journalists are forced to use it, as is the case of Joaquín *El Chapo* Guzmán: 'The law is very clear, you cannot use last names, although many still use them for very famous drug traffickers like Joaquín *El Chapo* Guzmán. You no longer use surnames for "minor" criminals. It would be Joaquín G. now' (I22). Nicknames also help journalists create a context for audiences: they simplify the individuality of drug traffickers, describing their daily lives in a few words. However, the handling of names and nicknames gener-

ally occurs only in the most recognisable cases, when the audience can immediately identify the drug trafficker or public figure in question. Conversely, in more minor cases, the interviewed reporters tend to anonymise the protagonists' personal data. Additionally, nicknames appear when security forces thus identify alleged criminals in their bulletins.

In addition, nicknames establish a kind of complicity between journalists and their most informed audience members, who share a code specifically linked to this type of address. To understand, for example, Joaquín Guzmán Loera's nickname as *the Lord of the Tunnels*, the reader must first know Amado Carrillo Fuentes' nickname, i.e., *the Lord of the Skies*. From these puns, journalists synthesise and project pointed interpretations from the specific cultural context from which they report.

All the participants in this study are very aware of what can and cannot be done according to Mexican regulations, although they articulated some resistance tactics, even from a syntactic point of view:

The norm forces you to not identify the detainee. That's what the norm says, and in the copy room, one learns how to evade the norm. How can we write it so that it is not Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera? Well, I use Joaquín A. Guzmán Loera. One uses syntactic norms to evade the legal norm (113).

In addition, to contest the law, which, as pointed out, obliges journalists to hide the last name until the alleged criminal is sentenced, the interviewees confess to using tactics based on context association. In this way, audiences can quickly understand who is being talked about - even if they do not know the last name - based on an account of past events.

### **Interpretation of the facts**

In dealing with this kind of content, journalists are aware of the effects that their coverage may have on, for example, the families of victims. Almost all of the interviewees affirm that information and opinions on issues related to organised crime are clearly differentiated in the media where they work. In fact, this type of coverage mostly includes the informative genre, that is, descriptions based on hard data and articulated with great precision. However, most of the interviewees recognise that, in general, there is a thin line between the informative and interpretive genres:

Once you order a reporter to cover something, there is already a great deal of subjectivity. Then more subjectivity arises when the reporter asks questions, or when he selects which answers to include, or when he decides how to start the story, and more arises when the editor titles it, or when the closing editor de-

cides where to place it. All of this makes objectivity go to hell [sic]. You must work honestly. You can comment on a story and interpret the facts, but you have to do so with great responsibility (I8).

The impact of interpretive genres, which goes beyond the scope of the present study and requires an additional one based on journalistic messaging, reaches approximately half of the interviewees, who point out that they tend to print their points of view based on a certain interpretation of the facts. They frequently use interpretive genres, such as chronicles, because they help introduce journalists' evaluations of elements that may be key to coverage, including things like how a crime scene is described, possible delays or errors in the police or judicial apparatus, the description of a direct participant in a conflict, such as a shooting, or of the spaces or objects used by criminal gangs. For the interpretation of phenomena that lack a statistical basis in Mexico, this also includes comparative works given the lack of objective data with which to contextualise the figures related to the Mexican case. Interpretation is found not only in texts, but also in photographs or videos that the interviewees report producing.

However, a quarter of the interviewees assure that, rather than expressing opinions within a news story, they try to contextualise the information with data so that the reader can interpret the information:

More than an interpretation, I wonder how I can help the reader understand the facts... Then you have to start tracking information from other places, get it from other sources that are coming out so that you can tell which criminal organisation he belonged to because, if not, people don't know who he was working for (I7).

Finally, another quarter of the journalists indicate that they do not interject their opinions or interpretations when preparing informative pieces. For this reason, they try to use neutral language that avoids interpretation and is more related to objective coverage when describing criminal cases:

You cannot do that. They would find out because they review all the information you send. You go with what there is, what you can find in the file you narrate, but I'm not going to say, "that damn guy". No, you can't do that (I18).

Despite this, cartel slang constantly flows into the coverage of organised crime. In other words, colloquial words or terms coined by criminal groups are often used in news content. As mentioned, by using the lexicon distilled from criminal organisations, violence may be normalised. Thus, some journalists use the term *execution* to refer to a murder: 'For example, here we say, "they executed him with six bullets". Because it is an action. And so we understand it. It is murder' (I19). In these cases, journalists appropriate these words, legitimise and generalise them, in order to pique

audiences' interest, seek their complicity, and avoid being tied to excessively rigorous language. In this sense, each journalist manages a style, a personalised way of describing the reality they report on:

I almost don't use "hitmen" anymore. I say, "gunmen". This was my idea because it sounds very strong to say hitmen. Because, in the end, it is their job and they're paid for it; it is their job, whether we agree or not. They collect their salary (*I19*).

Approximately half of the journalists interviewed believe that they have never contributed directly or indirectly to the mythology surrounding a drug trafficker. In a country where a large part of the population lives in extreme poverty, a kind of mythology can be constructed through description of the luxuries and eccentricities associated with the cartel lifestyle: 'We do our best not to advocate crime and not to make social figures out of criminal group members; of course, we do not intend to make these people larger than life' (*I1*).

All the journalists consulted are aware of the damage that organised crime inflicts on Mexican society. From this position, they try, as much as possible, to balance their descriptions, to associate criminal groups with the cruelty and serious public danger they represent, and especially try to avoid audience interpretations based on criminals' supposed kindness. It is important to clarify that, in some parts of the country, drug traffickers are considered benefactors who actively contribute to the community, building churches and schools, or generating jobs:

For example, there is a character in Tierra Caliente who is frequently called out for [trafficking in] methamphetamines and everyone calls him "Grandpa". The whole community loves him because he helps them, gives them work, money, maintains control. So, you report, "the Navy arrested Grandpa". They nabbed him, put him in a helicopter and, after four hours, the man was free. So, these are topics that you have to take like this: They nab him and release him; Who?... "Grandpa". It stops there (*I11*).

All in all, approximately a quarter of the interviewees affirm that they do not contribute to building a mythology around criminals, nor do they treat them with sympathy or familiarity:

I think not, because, that is, in my heart of hearts, I know that they are bad. I do not know if there are people, journalists, who consider there to be a certain kindness or justification in these criminals' acts. Maybe there are, but not for me. I have always tried so to avoid praising criminals (*I5*).

Although some journalists deny it, previous investigations (Díaz-Cerveró, Barredo & Hueso, 2017; Díaz-Cerveró, Veres & Barredo, 2018) show that national media

have in fact contributed to the fictionalisation and mythologisation of drug traffickers. *El Universal*, for example, recurrently used ‘The Lord of the Tunnels’ nickname in opinion and news pieces on the escape, recapture and extradition of Joaquín Guzmán (Díaz & Padilla, 2018: 146).

### **General and specific regulations on the coverage of organised crime**

Most of the journalists interviewed assure that the media where they work do not have a specific stylebook or manual for how to represent the facts when it comes to organised crime: ‘It is a good question. Interesting. As such, there is no document entitled *Manual of style for news stories that have to do with crime*. No’ (15). In that sense, another participant adds:

No, we don’t have one. For example, we do not have a written code of ethics and there are media that have a code of ethics that they use as a kind of support. But we don’t have a style manual either, which we need (18).

Almost all the journalists mention that they do not have a stylebook for the coverage of organised crime, and consider it a shortcoming with negative consequences for journalistic practice:

We have a style manual, but not particularly for drug trafficking. We do not have, for example, simple definitions, such as do we echo or maintain the language used by drug traffickers? All Mexican press has been clearly wrong by uncritically reproducing these expressions and that seems disastrous to me (118).

In some of the answers, we find that the most experienced journalists or editors acknowledge unwritten norms, a situation that is widely highlighted in the literature on the sociology of journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), and that especially helps journalists who are just beginning on this beat. But, in general, journalists do not even have basic guidelines for dealing with this type of coverage, such as, for example, whether they should reproduce criminals’ words and, if so, what tone to use, when to use interpretive language and go beyond the mechanical description of the facts, or if they can include popular terms to refer to certain situations.

Among the interviewees, who, it is worth recalling, work in media that are considered important in Mexico’s capital and regional areas, opinions are very diverse, which is the result of being mostly self-taught. Thus, the rules depend on individual assumptions, on intuitions, and on routine training, rather than on horizontal and professional structures: ‘I don’t know if they have them, but I have my own rules. I do not give names’ (114).

In addition to pressures from criminal groups, another actor promotes the erosion of both written and unwritten rules, namely the Mexican Government at its three levels (federal, state and municipal), by imposing approaches, styles and vocabularies:

The most prohibited word for those who have an agreement with the government is “femicide”. Nothing that is specific to women, or “infanticide”, because people will understand it that way. State government bulletins say, “the lifeless body of a minor was found”. Things like that to divert attention, so that the reader does not catch the meaning (I12).

Within the minority of journalists that confirm that the media they work for do have specific manuals for this coverage, the following guidelines were identified:

- Omission of photographs of minors, and concealment of their faces when their appearance is essential, to safeguard their identity.
- Do not publish videos that present cruel images, such as shootings or affected individuals. No bloody images with clearly affected victims that may be unpleasant to audiences.
- Avoid degrading symbolic associations in crime scene images.
- Coverage, in the case of video, that includes a variety of shots, to avoid simplification.
- Accuracy in language, with concerted effort to compare and contrast, and to verify.
- Indispensable protection of sources, both out of respect for privacy and to avoid retaliation, in the case of members of criminal gangs.
- Regulation of the use of drug traffickers’ nicknames.
- Avoid mentioning criminal groups to avoid possible consequences.
- Avoid any element that seems to advocate crime.

On the other hand, some of the journalists mention that these written norms are used, among other reasons, in order to protect the integrity of victims or to avoid directly pointing to drug traffickers:

Nothing that advocates violence, you do have to be very strict, having full respect for the victims, although not everyone applies it. Bosses sometimes do not realise that what the reporter is doing is wrong, especially when it comes to language (I22).

## **Self-critique**

The interviewed journalists have mixed views regarding how they contribute to the understanding of organised crime in Mexico through their work. On the one hand,

half of the interviewees think that, thanks to what they publish, the average reader can understand the real scope of organised crime because they contextualise the facts and investigate them:

I think so. For example, one day there were three [people] executed from the north to the south of Veracruz... In cases like that, I try to explain that, in Veracruz, the Huasteca [region] is dominated by the FECS [Grupo Sombra Special Forces], an armed arm of the Gulf Cartel that managed to displace the Zetas. I explain that, according to figures from the executive branch and CISEN [the Mexican intelligence service], in Veracruz, 200 homicides occur on average per month. I give the whole context and not just that they killed 3 “bastards” [sic] (I15).

On the other hand, the other half of the journalists think that their publications fail to achieve an understanding of the real scope of this social problem. This is because of the danger they run into when exploring related events (I16, III), the lack of more in-depth content, such as reports (I5), and because the recipients of the information they offer are often irresponsible. Specifically, audiences tend toward passive, uncritical consumption in which the assimilation of photographs or videos, reading headlines, or comments on social networks predominate. As such, readers form a poor image of organised crime, despite having an abundant number of sources of information that would facilitate more reasoned interpretation. In this sense, in an exercise of self-critique, some of the interviewees claim that many of their stories lack depth since they are framed more in the reporting of events than in interpretive genres, such as in-depth reports. That is, due to a lack of resources, or to an overload of functions and tasks, these journalists point out that, sometimes, their content focuses more on descriptive, rather than on analytical, approaches.

The complexity of this coverage is such that, for this group of informants, it is essential that audiences seek out other sources, such as books that have been published in the last decade on the topic. This idea and the problem posed by generally low readership rates in Mexico are reflected in the following statement:

We try. But I also see a problem on the other side. Today, many, many citizens, due to technology and social networks, just read headlines. Since there is no taste for reading, they stay on the surface. Since they keep to the headlines, they don't have a general understanding (I7).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Among the vast literature on anti-press violence and its impact (see for instance Relly & González, 2014; Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; Del Palacio-Montiel, 2018),

this study is innovative because it does not just offer Mexican journalists' perceptions and experiences when covering organised crime activities, it also presents their critique of their own performance. That is, contrary to a mere evaluation of journalists' performance through, for example, quantitative content analysis, this inquiry contributes to the understanding of reporters' decisions in the field when doing their job. In addition, this article's central argument is that the coverage of the *War on Drugs* is shaped by spectacularising and mythologising certain drug lords, that government authorities are the main sources of information, and that interpretation of the relevance of the issues is not rigorous and clear enough for the average news consumer to understand the complexity of organised crime activities in Mexico.

The coverage of organised crime involves various risks— for informants, for the media that cover it, for frequently used sources and, in general, for Mexican society. This is a common feature in several countries across the globe, as seen in the literature (see for instance Jamil, 2017). From this angle, we have shown the importance of legislation on this subject for modifying professional routines. The journalists interviewed acknowledge the existence of a before-and-after when it comes to the 2016 approval of the Accusatory Criminal System of Mexico. Previously, the misuse of personal data led to abuses by journalists, who even received compensation in exchange for not associating a person with a crime. But, since the creation of this norm, and forced by the threat of sanctions, journalists have incorporated it into their work.

Although norms are important within this coverage, interestingly, most of the Mexican media where the interviewees in this study work lack a specific manual (only a minority of journalists claimed that their medium had one) to help journalists frame their coverage. This does not mean that there are no internal regulations in newsrooms; on the contrary, we observe that the general deontological code, as well as unwritten norms (disclosed based on the experience of senior professionals, editors-in-chief, etc.), are determining factors for the routines found on this beat. This finding is also consistent with previous international studies (e.g., Pate & Idris, 2017). However, the professionals consulted noted that there are no specific manuals where they work, which amounts to assigning responsibility for the development of this coverage to experience and to unwritten standards.

Likewise, the government is associated with restriction in various ways; because government advertising in Mexico is such an important source of revenue for the media, many of the journalists interviewed recognise accepting official guidelines as a commercial survival mechanism. Such mechanisms are not just limited to the use of certain terms, but also to the inclusion or exclusion of topics that impact authorities' interests. In this regard, the present study contributes to the abundant literature on the instrumentalisation of the media by political elites in Mexico (e.g., Salazar, 2017; author, 2018), and abroad (see for instance Cabalin & Lagos, 2009).

The resources available to journalists who cover organised crime in Mexico depend on things like the relevance of the story, the notoriety of the criminal group involved, public opinion, audiences' potential interest, and the interests of publishers and editors-in-chief.

Interestingly, as one of the main assumptions of this work, between half and three quarters of the interviewees admitted having contributed to the mythologisation of drug traffickers through the terms and expressions they use to refer to them and their activities, for example, *executed* or *lifted*. Likewise, the interviewees, especially those who work in small towns where it is common to run into the criminals they cover in person, tend to treat the leaders of criminal groups with some familiarity, which can strengthen the positive impression that the inhabitants of those localities may already have of certain criminals. This point is significant because a substantial part of the literature on organised crime coverage assumes as much, but had not yet explored it in light of journalist's own words.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On December 11, 2006, the federal government, under the administration of Felipe Calderón, mobilised Mexican armed forces (Federal Police, Army and Navy) in a joint operation to combat organised crime. The state of Michoacán, where the then-president is from and one of the Mexican states most affected by illegal cartel activity, was the starting point of this operation with national scope. Although figures differ from one source to another, it has been estimated that, by mid-2018, there were more than 250,000 violent deaths associated with this War on Drugs (RT, 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> For example, instead of using the words *abducted* or *kidnapped*, some reporters began to refer to the victim as being *lifted*. The same for *murdered*, which was frequently replaced - and in many cases continues to be replaced, as seen in the interviews - by the word *executed*.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, based on the presumption of innocence, a reporter must consider the different ways to address those allegedly responsible for a crime, including as *charged* (indicted by the Public Ministry as a possible author or participant in a criminal act), *accused* (after a formal accusation), and *sentenced* (after a sentence has been passed down) (SEGOB, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> In journalistic slang, when a story is the most important in the newspaper, it is published in the most prominent space on the front page. At the beginning of the Mexican written press, a page consisted of eight columns, so a story that occupies all eight columns is necessarily the most relevant in that edition.

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# Kako novinari u Meksiku izvještavaju o organiziranom kriminalu: Prikazivanje činjenica, tumačenje i samokritika

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## SAŽETAK

*Jedna od brojnih posljedica takozvanog rata protiv droge jest da je Meksiko postao jedna od najopasnijih zemalja na svijetu za bavljenje novinarstvom. Osim što su žrtve ubojstva i otmice, novinari su često izloženi premlaćivanju, proizvoljnom pritvaranju i internetskom uznemiravanju, ali i mnogim drugim oblicima nasilja. Nasilje nad novinarima očigledno se odražava na svakodnevne aktivnosti meksičkih novinara, osobito kad je riječ o izvještavanju o organiziranom kriminalu. Rasprostranjena opasnost s kojom se novinari neprestano suočavaju utječe na njihov prikaz i tumačenje događaja o kojima izvještavaju povezanih s tim problemom. Stoga je cilj ovog istraživanja analizirati prakse koje reporteri i urednici primjenjuju pri stvaranju vijesti o aktivnostima kartela. Rad se oslanja na niz dubinskih intervjua s novinarima glavnih meksičkih nacionalnih novina iz svih saveznih država u kojima su 2017. ubijeni novinari. Glavni rezultati upućuju na nedostatak pisanih normi u pogledu izvještavanja o organiziranom kriminalu i na to da reporteri o kriminalcima govore kao o poznanicima. Osim toga, ovo istraživanje doprinosi razumijevanju odluka koje novinari donose na terenu pri obavljanju svog posla, posebno u opasnim uvjetima.*

*Ključne riječi:* organizirani kriminal, novinari, Meksiko, tumačenje, samokritika