



Attacks on Journalists and “New Media” in Mexico’s Drug War: A Power and Counter Power Assessment

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This paper examines the impact of attacks on journalists on media reportage within Mexico’s drug wars, known as “la Inseguridad” in Mexico. It examines two concepts in communication theory (agenda-setting theory and “mind framing” for power and counter-power) to frame the impact of drug cartel information operations (info ops).¹ Specifically, It examines cartel attacks on media outlets, and kidnappings and assassinations of journalists by narco-cartels to gauge the potential impact of the attacks in terms of censorship, cartel co-option of reportage, and the use of new media (horizontal means of mass self-communication).

Introduction

Mexico is in the midst of a significant conflict between drug cartels and the state. This war for control of illicit economic space (transnational drug trafficking and the criminal economy) is also a battle for legitimacy, turf, and power. As part of this contest for control of the *plazas* (drug transshipment nodes), cartels and gangs are seeking to remove the control or interference of the state so they can freely operate. Since 2006 when President Calderón declared war on the cartels, over 28,000-30,000 persons² have been killed in the brutal drug wars (Trans-Border Institute, 2010).

An increasingly significant component of this violence has been directed against journalists and media outlets in an effort to silence the media so the cartels can operate with impunity. Television stations (such as Televisa in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León) have been attacked with grenades, journalists assassinated, kidnapped or disappeared. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2010), at least 30 journalists have been killed or disappeared in Mexico in the past four years, and 11 have been killed in 2010 alone. A detailed map tracking violence against

¹ Information operations (informally known as “info ops”) describes the military concept (doctrine) of shaping the battlespace through propaganda, access, control, surety, and denial of information.

² Media accounts of cartel killings range from 28,000-30,000 killed since 2006. The *Los Angeles Times* tally counts 28,228 persons killed as of 15 December 2010 based on Trans-Border Institute analysis of data from the *Reforma* newspaper.

Mexican journalists has been developed by The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas, Austin (Knight Center, 2010).

Communications Theory and Narco-conflict

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) postulates that the media influences audiences through their choice of coverage. This is widely described as “salience transfer” where the media transfers its agenda to the public through the media’s emphasis of various issues. In this framework, media, public, policy, and corporate agendas are determined in part through media reportage. As we will see, cartel info ops negate (or at least severely challenge) the media’s agenda setting capacity.

Communication power and counter-power are key components of the evolution of the network society (Castells, 2007). The media has become the social space where power is decided. As a consequence, politics, media politics, and political legitimacy are at stake in the global competition for power in the network society. Indeed, communication and information are now fundamental sources of power and counter-power, domination and social change.

Power is the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actors. The state, traditionally a main locus of power, is being challenged globally by a number of factors, including globalization, market forces, and crises of legitimacy. Mexico’s drug war is a salient example of the challenges faced by states from one variety of globalization: transnational organized crime. Mind framing is the process through which power is exercised. In the Mexican situation, I believe we will see evidence that cartels are exerting raw power (symbolic and instrumental violence) as part of their efforts to shape their operating environment(s). Cartel power-making includes mind framing, and by influencing or censoring media reportage, cartels are shaping the media space where power is decided.

New media is an emerging component of this battle for ideas, the power-counter-power contest. A range of actors (*i.e.*, the media, citizens, bloggers, and cartels) are reportedly appropriating new forms of communication (blogs, wikis, micro-blogs, etc.) to navigate the cartel wars. As a result, the rise of “mass self-communication” is an integral element of the drug war and has the potential of becoming an important medium of transmitting information and shaping the outcome of the conflict. The concept of “counter-power” or the capacity of social actors to challenge and eventually change institutionalized power relations is a critical component of understanding the cartels’ information operations. As Castells (2007) observed, “The emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects.” For the drug cartels, this means to control the *plazas* for the trans-shipment of drugs, limit competition from other cartels, and eliminate interference from the state.

The Drug War: Mexico's "Criminal Insurgencies"

Mexico's criminal gangs and drug trafficking organizations (cartels) are expanding their reach and power. They are essentially engaged in a protracted war against each other and the state. Since 1996, when the Government of Mexico declared war on the cartels, between 28,000-30,000 persons have been killed in the cartels' quest to dominate lucrative global narco-markets.

The cartels are fighting at three levels: within their own enterprises for dominance, against other cartel alliances, and against the security forces of the state (police and military) to fend off interference. This in my view amounts to a series of interlocking "criminal insurgencies" (Sullivan & Elkus, 2010) and an effort by the cartels to secure a form of "dual sovereignty" (Grayson, 2010) where the cartels can operate without interference and with impunity.

At least eight cartels (and a number of smaller affiliated gangs) are engaged in this battle for dominance of Mexico's criminal economy. The major players include Los Zetas, the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf cartel, the Juárez cartel, the Tijuana cartel, the Beltran-Leyva Organization, and La Familia Michoacana. Influence operations and shaping communication through violence and attacks on journalists are becoming an important element in support of their economic strategy and emerging political goals.

Censoring the News

It is widely reported that cartels are conducting information operations to further their campaign to dominate Mexico's illicit economy. For example, in a recent essay "Analysis: A PR department for Mexico's narcos" at *GlobalPost*, Mike O'Connor notes that newspapers in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas are running press releases for the Zetas. This development, occurring in the midst of a battle for supremacy among the Los Zetas and their former allies the Cartel del Golfo (Gulf Cartel), seeks to shape public perception and intimidate adversaries.

Essentially, it is a battle for legitimacy—to determine who rules. Zetas promote stories of military human rights abuses to turn the public against Federal intervention and stories about police prowess to support co-opted police allied to their cartel. As O'Connor noted, "Cartel control is growing across Mexico, and the press is often one of the cartels' first targets. Their objective is to keep the public ignorant of their actions." This paper seeks to frame this situation with theory and empirical observations.

Assault on the Press: Assassinations, Kidnappings and Attacks

On 18 September 2010, *El Diario*, Ciudad Juárez's newspaper (currently edited across the international frontier in El Paso) printed an unprecedented editorial *¿Qué quieren de nosotros?* In English, simply "What do you want from us?" Published the day after one of its photographers was murdered, the editorial provides a stark illustration of the intense assault against Mexico's free press by cartel gangsterism. The *El Diario* editorial (translation at *Los Angeles Times, La Plaza*) read in part:

Gentlemen of the different organizations that are fighting for the Ciudad Juarez plaza, the loss of two reporters of this news organization represents an irreparable breakdown for all of us who work here, and in particular, for our families.

We'd like you to know that we're communicators, not psychics. As such, as information workers, we ask that you explain what it is you want from us, what you'd intend for us to publish or to not publish, so that we know what is expected of us.

You are at this time the *de facto* authorities in this city because the legal authorities have not been able to stop our colleagues from falling, despite the fact that we've repeatedly demanded it from them. Because of this, before this undeniable reality, we direct ourselves to you with these questions, because the last thing we want is that another one of our colleagues falls victim to your bullets.

Attacks against journalists in Mexico have been rising throughout the drug war and the consensus in the media and among journalists is that it has reached a critical mass. As a result Reporters Sans Frontières characterizes press freedom in Mexico as being in a “difficult situation” (see Figure One) for 2011.



Figure One: Press Freedom Nations at Risk, 2011

Source: Reporters Sans Frontières

Indeed, the two leading press freedom indices (Freedom House Freedom of Press Index and Reporters Sans Frontières Press Freedom Index) have been deteriorating since the start of Mexico's Drug War in 2006 (see Table One). The Freedom House index gives Mexico a score of 60 (partially free) for 2010. That score is on the cusp of being rated “not free”(a score of 61-100). In 2005 the year before the current “inseguridad” began, the score was 42. Similarly, the Freedom House index has deteriorated each year from 45.50 in 2005 to 48.25 in 2009 (where 0 is perfect).

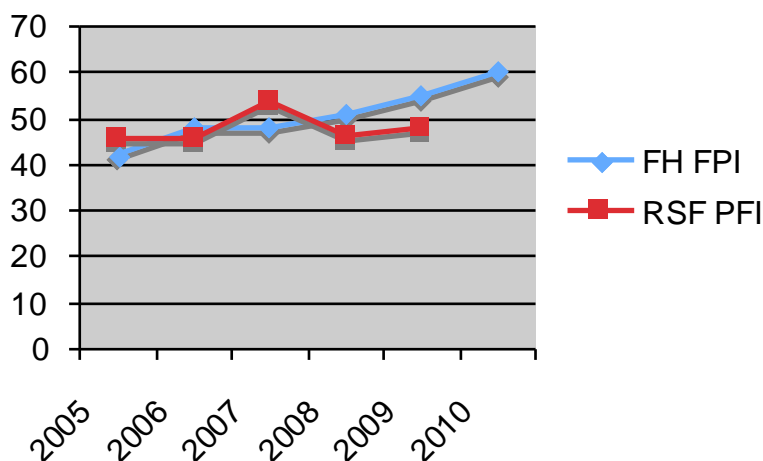


Table One: Press Freedom Indices: 2005-2010

Source: Freedom House and Reporters Sans Frontières

In its report “Silence or Death in Mexico’s Press,” the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (2010) suggested that attacks on journalists are not simply a matter of cartels suppressing some damaging stories, rather “Their motives are much more complicated and sinister.” According to the CPJ, cartels suppress stories about their own violence while paying journalists to play up the savagery of their rivals and damage competing operations by planting stories about corrupt officials. The CPJ observes that competing cartels throughout Mexico have developed aggressive media tactics as a component for their battles for the *plazas*. As a result, “The traffickers rely on media outlets they control to discredit their rivals, expose corrupt officials working for competing cartels, defend themselves against government allegations, and influence public opinion.”

Consequently, “Competing criminal organizations are controlling the information agenda in many cities across Mexico” (CPJ, 2010, p. 2). Violence is one means of gaining this control. According to CPJ, 22 journalists have been murdered since December 2006, at least eight in direct reprisal for reporting crime and corruption. In addition, three media support workers have been slain and at least seven journalists have gone missing (potentially “disappeared”), while dozens of other have been attacked, kidnapped, or forced into exile. The impact of this operation seems concentrated in specific contested areas. For example, “In Reynosa, the Gulf criminal group controls the government, the police, even the street vendors. You won’t see that story in the local press. The cartel controls the media, too” (CPJ, 2010, p. 15).

As a result, Mexican journalists are facing a serious emergency and threat to their safety and profession. According to the Knight Center’s report *Journalism in Times of Threats, Censorship and Violence* (Medel, 2010) a cartel news blackout in Reynosa in March 2010 involved a cartel blockade on entry of foreign journalists into the contested region. In August 2010, four reporters in La Laguna were kidnapped (Medel, 2010). According to the Knight Center: “Mexico is going through a phase of open warfare and shifting alliances among seven or eight large criminal groups (and many small ones) that each have a capacity for damage and corruption.” For the media, this means, “The *narcos* impose totalitarian regimes on local communities under their

control, and freedom of the press is their first victim. Mexico is home to dozens of “zones of silence”—and in some cases, entire regions—where, if news is published it is only if ‘spokespersons’ designated by the narcos gather journalists, authorize what to say and what to censor, and dictate to editors by phone even how to frame photographs in their newspapers” (Medel, 2010).

Assessing News Blackouts

News blackouts have become a feature of the Mexican drug war. This has two facets: government information operations and cartel info ops. According to the Knight Center, “coverage of drug trafficking in Mexico has been based generally on an official view of the facts...Releasing information a bit at a time allows Mexico’s government to construct a public image of winning the war” (Medel, 2010, p. 22). Coupled with cartel efforts to obscure their hand through instrumental attacks and threats against journalists, the resulting pressure has resulted in near complete media blackouts in some areas.

The Fundación MEPI (*Fundación Mexican de Periodismo de Investigación*) recently completed a six-month study of 11 regional newspapers in Mexico to gauge the impact of cartel interference or influence on reportage of cartel crime. The Fd. MEPI study relied on content analysis of the papers’ coverage and interviews with journalists. The report found that the regional newspapers were failing to report many cartel/narco crimes. In order to conduct the study, Fd. MEPI constructed a list of execution-style murders tied to cartel actions and then compared it to regional coverage. In all regions, the number of stories mentioning cartel violence from January to June 2010 amounted to a small fraction of the actual incidents. Consider for example that cartel murders in Cd. Juárez averaged an estimated 300 per month in 2010, but during the study period *El Norte*, the regional paper mentioned less than 10% or 30 per month. The impact appears even greater in eastern Mexico, where *El Mañana* in Nuevo Laredo published only 3 stories out of a potential 98 in June. Areas controlled by the Gulf and Zeta (e.g., Tamaulipas) cartels appear particularly impacted by the cartel blackout effect with between 0-5% of cartel violence stories reported. (Drug killings in Mexico by State for the same time period are displayed in Table Two.)

Number of 'Drug Killings' in Mexico

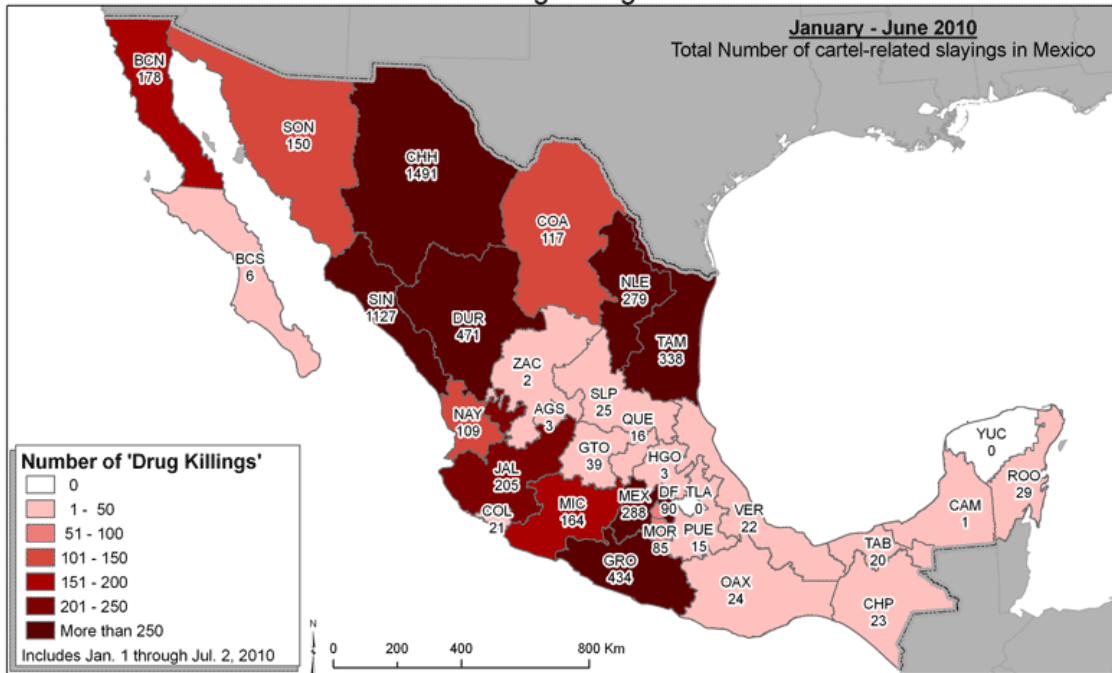


Table Two: 'Drug Killings' in Mexico: January-June 2010

Source: Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego

The Fd. MEPI analysis is presented in Table Three. Specifically, it reviewed the crime stories published in January-June 2010 from the following newspapers: *El Noroeste* (Culiacán), *El Norte* (Cd. Juárez), *El Dictamen* (Veracruz), *Mural* (Guadalajara), *Pulso* (San Luis Potosí), *El Mañana* (Nuevo Laredo), *El Diario de Morelos* (Morelos), *El Imparcial* (Hermosillo), *La Voz de Michoacán* (Morelia) and *Milenio* (Hidalgo). In 8 of the 13 cities studied, the papers reported only one of every ten narco violence stories; in the cities with more reportage, only 3 out of 10 were published.

Stories Published by Provincial Media on Drug trafficking compared to Gangland Slayings

NUEVO LEÓN (EL NORTE)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	262	16	44	2
February	236	14	42	5
March	219	34	81	9
April	245	29	52	11
May	238	40	118	9
June	254	13	41	7

Morelia (La Voz de Michoacán)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	188	21	67	5
February	173	17	41	4
March	210	22	68	1
April	183	21	60	4
May	179	14	85	0
June	187	11	61	3

HIDALGO (MILENIO)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	45	6	19	2
February	34	7	9	0
March	64	6	12	0
April	50	11	12	2
May	49	9	12	4
June	58	4	6	1

CULIACÁN (EL NOROESTE)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	48	16	27	12
February	63	16	23	8
March	70	19	29	8
April	133	46	29	32
May	169	48	21	33
June	190	23	11	20

MORELOS (EL DIARIO DE MORELOS)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	30	6	10	5
February	34	4	9	3
March	21	14	15	8
April	17	21	9	14
May	16	15	8	8
June	41	34	6	14

VERACRUZ (EL DICTAMEN DE VERACRUZ)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	39	3	11	0
February	33	5	23	3
March	38	1	26	2
April	52	3	27	1
May	56	2	39	1
June	70	4	28	2

C.D JUÁREZ (NORTE DIGITAL)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	n/a	n/a	280	0
February	58	16	226	21
March	47	23	299	28
April	40	15	248	22
May	60	27	329	31
June	36	38	260	26

SONORA (EL IMPARCIAL)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	38	38	53	12
February	48	37	36	15
March	55	38	34	14
April	72	35	35	8
May	46	37	34	11
June	50	24	21	9

SAN LUIS POTOSI (PULSO)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	95	0	2	0
February	285	1	4	1
March	323	0	5	0
April	291	0	4	0
May	348	2	6	0
June	295	1	4	0

GUADALAJARA (MURAL)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	178	26	11	5
February	156	10	24	0
March	210	18	26	5
April	209	20	27	6
May	193	14	39	0
June	193	25	28	5

NUEVO LAREDO (EL MAÑANA)

	Police stories that do not mention drug trafficking	Police stories that do mention drug trafficking	Gangland Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	259	5	2	0
February	n/a	n/a	41	0
March	271	5	83	0
April	268	0	81	0
May	288	2	59	0
June	276	3	98	0

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Table Three: MEPI Analysis of Cartel News Blackouts: January-June 2010
 Source: Fundación MEPI; <http://fundacionmepi.org/media/img/investigacion1/tablas.jpg>

Out of concern over the situation facing journalists in Mexico, the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas developed a Google map tracking attacks against journalists (Knight Center, 2010). Thus far this year the map tracked 24 incidents (including 10 murders, 5 kidnapping incidents-including multiple victims in some cases, and 9 other type attacks). A comparison of Fd. MEPI reports of gangland executions and Knight Center incidents tracked between January-June 2010 is contained in Table Four.

City/State (Paper)	Stories Mentioning Gangland Executions	Journalists Killed	Journalists Kidnapped	Other Attacks on Journalists
Monterrey/ Nuevo León (<i>El Norte</i>)	43	1	0	1
Pachuca/ Hidalgo (<i>Milenio</i>)	9	0	0	0
Cuerneva/ Morales (<i>El Diario de Morelos</i>)	52	0	0	0
Ciudad Juárez/ Chihuahua (<i>Norte Digital</i>)	128	0	0	0
San Luis Potosi /San Luis Potosi (<i>Pulso</i>)	1	0	0	0
Nuevo Laredo/ Tamaulipas (<i>El Mañana</i>)	0	0	8	0
Morelia/ Michoacán (<i>La Voz de Michoacán</i>)	17	5	1	0
Culiacán/ Sinaloa (<i>El Noroeste</i>)	113	1	0	2
Xalapa/ Veracruz (<i>El Dictamen de Veracruz</i>)	9	0	1	0
Hermosillo/ Sonora (<i>El Imparcial</i>)	69	0	0	0
Guadalajara/ Jalisco (<i>Mural</i>)	21	0	0	0

Table Four: Stories Mentioning Gangland Executions Compared to Attacks on Journalists by Type, January-June 2010 Source: Knight Center and Fd. MEPI

Specifically, attacks on journalists were found at *El Norte* in Monterrey (Nuevo León), *El Mañana* in Nuevo Laredo (Tamaulipas), *La Voz de Michoacán* in Morelia (Michoacán), *El Noroeste* in Culiacán (Sinaloa), and *El Dictamen de Veracruz* in Xalapa (Veracruz).

The impact of reportage at the 11 papers studied is depicted in Table Five.

City/State (Paper)	Violence	Coverage
Monterrey/ Nuevo León <i>(El Norte)</i>	↑ Increased	↓ Decreased
Pachuca/ Hidalgo <i>(Milenio)</i>	↑ Increased	↓ Decreased
Cuerneva/ Morales <i>(El Diario de Morelos)</i>	↑ Increased	↑ Increased
Ciudad Juárez/ Chihuahua <i>(Norte Digital)</i>	↑ Increased	↑ Increased
San Luis Potosi /San Luis Potosi <i>(Pulso)</i>	↑ Increased	= Same
Nuevo Laredo/ Tamaulipas <i>(El Mañana)</i>	↑ Increased	↓ Decreased
Morelia/ Michoacán <i>(La Voz de Michoacán)</i>	↑ Increased	↓ Decreased
Culiacán/ Sinaloa <i>(El Noroeste)</i>	↓ Decreased	↓ Decreased
Xalapa/ Veracruz <i>(El Dictamen de Veracruz)</i>	↑ Increased	↑ Increased
Hermosillo/ Sonora <i>(El Imparcial)</i>	↑ Increased	↑ Increased
Guadalajara/ Jalisco <i>(Mural)</i>	↑ Increased	↓ Decreased

Table Five: Change in Violence and Coverage by paper, January-June 2010

Source: Fd. MEPI

The specific results at the papers that experienced attacks is as follows:

El Norte: Monterrey, Nuevo León experienced a rise in violence and a decrease in coverage. Nuevo León has seen an increase in narco-executions from 217 in the first half of 2009 to 552 during the first half of 2010. Los Zetas and the Gulf cartel both operate in the state and are engaged in a bloody contest for control of the territory. Local reporters no longer use individual bylines. During the study period 43 stories mentioned gangland executions; one journalist was killed, and journalists were subjected to one other attack.

El Mañana: Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas experienced a rise in violence and a decrease in coverage. During the first half of 2010 it experienced a major rise in executions: 379 in January-June 2010 versus 49 in all of 2009. The area is considered a Gulf cartel stronghold. The paper's editor was killed outside his home in 2004 and in 2006 two hooded gunmen attacked the newsroom paralyzing a reporter. The paper admits self-censorship after these attacks. It ran no stories about gangland executions during the study period and eight journalists were kidnapped in the state during the study period.

La Voz de Michoacán: Morelia, Michoacán experienced a rise in violence and a decrease in coverage. During the first half of 2010 executions rose significantly to 1,605, up from 220 in 2009. The area was involved in a ballet between La Familia and the Milenio cartel. Two staff members of the paper were killed between April and July of 2010 both following cartel threats. The paper ran 17 stories about gangland executions, during the study period. Five journalists were killed and one kidnapped in the state during the same period.

El Noroeste: Culicán, Sinaloa experienced a decrease in both violence and coverage during the study period. While Sinaloa is firmly under the control of the Sinaloa Cartel, it experiences high levels of violence. The paper ran 113 stories about gangland executions, while the state had one journalist killed and experienced two other attacks on journalists during the first six months of this year. After the study period (in September 2010), gunmen attacked the paper's office in Mazatlán.

El Dictamen: Xalapa, Veracruz experienced a rise in violence and a decrease in coverage during the first six months of 2010. The state also experienced a significant rise in executions during the first six months of this year with 45 incidents compared to 55 for all of 2009. The Zetas are believed to exercise complete control over the region. During the study period nine stories on gangland executions were printed and one journalist was kidnapped in the state. In 2008, 96 complaints of attacks against journalists were filed with state authorities.

These papers' experiences appear to be illustrative of the crisis in Mexican journalism in the face of the drug war. After the study period (January to June 2010) the assault against journalists and the media continued. According to the IAPA (Inter American Press Association) armed men attacked the Televisa facility in Torreón with AR-15 rifles; in July four journalists were kidnapped after covering a prison mutiny in Durango; in September the Mazatlán newspaper *Noroeste* was victim of a drive-by shooting. In October *El Debate* in Mazatlán was attacked with assault weapon fire. IAPA notes that seven journalists were murdered between May and

November 2010. In total, 65 journalists have been reported murdered in Mexico since 2005, 12 are suspected “disappeared” and 16 news media buildings have been attacked (IAPA, 2010).

Information Operations and Attacks on Journalists

The Knight Center found that: “Journalists, especially those who work for local news outlets in cities that are most affected by drug violence have become the preferred targets of criminal organizations. Pressures, beatings, kidnappings, torture and killing are all tools that are frequently used to intimidate and silence independent investigations into drug trafficking in certain zones and its relationship with power” (Medel, 2010). Cartel censorship and control is enforced with threats, attacks, and bribes (CPJ, 2010, p. 16).

Not only do the cartels seek silence and impunity, they increasingly seek to influence perception, using a type of “narco-propaganda.” This strategy employs a range of tools. These include both violent means—beheadings, *levantóns* (kidnappings), assassinations, bombings and grenade attacks—and informational means—*narcomantas* (banners), *narcobloqueos* (blockades), *manifestacións* (orchestrated demonstrations), and *narcocorridos* (or folk songs extolling cartel virtues). Simple methods such as graffiti and roadside signs are now amplified with digital media.

As a consequence, the cartels employ a virtual “public relations” or “information operations” branch to further their economic and increasingly tangible political goals. In some cases (for example La Familia Michoacana) cartels are trying to assume the mantle of “social bandit” (Hobsbawn, 1969) to secure public support to thwart government counter-cartel initiatives. President Felipe Calderón warned that this interference or manipulation has become a threat to democracy and press freedom as cartels seek to impose their will and challenge the state and civil society. According to Calderón, “Now the great threat to freedom of expression in our country, and in other parts of the world without a doubt is organized crime.”

Journalists’ Impressions

I conducted a small sample of telephonic and e-interviews of journalists to gain an appreciation of the situation’s impact and context. Carlos Rosales, a producer at an El Paso television news outlet suggested that attacks on journalists were not necessarily chilling reportage, but were “impacting the reporting of cartel related incidents.” He noted that in Juárez (which has experienced 3,000 cartel killings so far this year) “many journalists no longer apply their byline to stories in newspapers about drug cartels.” Rosales also observed that “Some Mexican newsblogs run their operations from El Paso.” Finally, Rosales commented that “Truth is the first casualty of war and the drug war has taken its toll on reporting, from journalists’ lives to lack of reporting on incidents that impact the way governments are run” (Rosales, 2010).

Terry Poppa, author of *Drug Lord*, believes that attacks on journalists, such as ambushes are instrumental. “While they are not new, they are getting worse.” Their purpose is “to silence the media and reign as anonymous as possible.” Poppa believes media reportage is slowed by interference from cartels and that attacks obscure understanding of the situation. Poppa suggests that “citizen media” is a response to the attacks on formal journalistic outlets (Poppa, 2010).

Ioan Grillo, a print, radio, and video journalist in Mexico City, noted that “Attacks on journalists are having a definite effect on reporting by Mexican journalists especially in the hardest hit areas.” The attacks have made “journalists refrain from using bylines, refrain from naming sources, hold back from investigating,” and in “some cases refuse to report stories altogether.” Grillo observes that “Cartels are shaping reportage by bribing journalists, by producing videos that they post on the Internet or give media, by the use of *narcomantas*, and by the use of extraordinary acts of violence that is often designed for media impact.” Finally, he notes that “new media” is a popular “alternative to mainstream media to communicate attacks, shootouts, etc.” in hard hit areas (Grillo, 2010).

Additional ethnographic study along the lines of Campbell’s *Drug War Zone, Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* is warranted.

A New Communication Space?

As Tracy Wilkinson (2010) reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, journalists are under siege, causing reporters to “practice a profound form of self-censorship, or censorship imposed by the narcos.” As a result, many reports assert that social media, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs—such as *El Blog del Narco*—are taking the place of traditional media. Wilkinson notes that in Reynosa the city is virtually under siege, with cartels dictating media coverage. She adds, “Throughout the state of Tamaulipas, in fact, journalists practice a profound form of self-censorship, or censorship imposed by the narcos... It is also the only place [thus far] where reporters with international news media have been confronted by gunmen and ordered to leave.” According to Wilkinson, “Social media networks such as Twitter have taken the place of newspapers and radio reports, with everyone from security officials to regular people tweeting alerts about a gun battle here, a blockade there.”

As a consequence of the battle to control information, journalists, the public, and the cartels themselves have embraced “new media” technologies (*i.e.*, social networking sites, Twitter, blogs, and other forms of horizontal self-communication). According to *Latin America News Dispatch* (O’Reilly, 2010), “people have been using blogs and Twitter accounts to cover what many of Mexico’s mainstream media outlets will not. *El Blog del Narco* is one of the most notable of these outlets, according to its administrator, it receives four million visitors a week” (O’Reilly, 2010).

El Blog del Narco (<http://www.blogdelnarco.com>) which was established in March 2010 (Tuckman, 2010) also maintains a Facebook page. As of 14 December 2010, the page has logged 25,853 persons that “liked” the site. The site’s Twitter account “Infonarco” has registered 2,648 Tweets; 29,071 followers; and 755 “listed” on the same date. Other notable Twitter feeds covering the narco-conflict include “gabrielregino” with 53,080 Tweets; 6,876 followers; and 357 “listed” and “Narcomexico” with 2,143 Tweets; 2,678 followers; and 99 “listed” (on 14 December 2010).

According to the Knight Center (Medel, 2010, p. 23) a reaction to official news control or manipulation has stimulated cartel info ops: “A recent twist on this tight control has been the

emergence of organized crime groups trying—successfully—to dictate the news agenda and impose restrictions that reaches the public.” This narco-info includes intimidation and pressure: “These threats come in public statements, as well as via social networks, Internet chat rooms, e-mail, and their own news releases” (Medel, 2010, p. 23). As we have seen, some of this interference and pressure has led to complete or partial news blackouts in Mexico’s contested regions. In areas subject to blackouts, social media and information communications technology (ICT) appears to be filling the vacuum. Again from the Knight Center, “Before the foreign press revealed what was happening in Tamaulipas, the media blackout was broken by residents of the affected towns. Armed with video cameras and cell phones, they filmed the drug smugglers’ roadside checkpoints, hundreds of bullet shells on the ground after shootouts, and shoes strewn in the streets, which raised the question of what happened to their owners” (Madel, 2010, p. 24).

In the current drug war, we see ICT and “new media” filling a variety of roles for a variety of actors. The traditional media uses social media to facilitate reportage and transmit information around blockades (for example from Cd. Juárez to El Paso); bloggers and Twitter reporters use it to transmit stories; and the cartels themselves use social media and ICT to project their information platforms. This situation amounts to one where a range of social actors are engaged in what Castells (2007, 2009) calls a “power-counter-power” conflict where communication and power relationships are shaping a new communication space within the network society. This new informational space includes efforts by cartels to cast themselves in the mantle of community protector or social bandit (Hobsbawm, 1969).

Conclusion

Mexico’s cartels are increasingly using refined information operations (info ops) to wage their war against each other and the Mexican state. These info ops include the calculated use of instrumental and symbolic violence to shape the conflict environment. The result: attacks on media outlets, and kidnappings and assassinations of journalists by narco-cartels to obscure operations and silence critics. Editors and journalists turn to self-censorship to protect themselves; others have become virtual mouthpieces for the gangs and cartels, only publishing materials the cartels approve. Cartels are now beginning to issue press releases to control the information space—through censorship and cartel co-option of reportage. Finally, the public, government and even cartels are increasingly using new media (horizontal means of mass self-communication) to influence and understand the raging criminal insurgencies.

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