Chapter 60
Journalism in Violent Times:
Mexican Journalists' Responses to Threats and Aggressions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to describe Mexican journalists' responses to constant threats and aggressions. In doing so, it draws on 93 semi-structured interviews conducted in 23 of the most violent states of the country. The results indicate that violence against news workers has a twofold set of implications for the practice of professional journalism: On the one hand, constant attacks on media staff have promoted the development of a more elaborated journalistic performance, based upon factual reporting, diversification of sources, collaborative coverage, and the creation of journalists' associations. On the other hand, however, in many cases the same situation has also inhibited reporters' and newsrooms' jobs by forcing them to self-censorship and the dependence on government official versions of sensitive issues such as crime news or corruption, amongst other passive routines. The simultaneous coexistence of both outcomes provides evidence of the operation of multiple journalisms within the Mexican media system.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is a dangerous profession in Mexico. Only in the last decade, more than 100 news workers have been killed (Article 19, 2019; PGR, 2018; CPJ, 2019), not to mention the large number of threats and other kinds of aggressions that they have to constantly deal with (Article 19, 2019). In addition, there is an almost complete impunity for the perpetrators, because less than one out of ten attacks results in a criminal conviction, and many of them are not even properly investigated (Article 19, 2019). Under these circumstances, and in order to stay safe, Mexican journalists face a twofold dilemma: They either improve their practice via professionalization, or they adopt self-censorship.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to describe both of these paths. In doing so, the study draws on a set of 93 semi-structured interviews with journalists from 23 of the most dangerous states in the country. The findings indicate that, as a response to the endemic risk, many reporters have found that certain practices - such as factual reporting, diversification of sources, or collaborative coverage - minimise potential dangers. Nonetheless, many others have decided to reduce - and even avoid - the coverage of sensitive issues (e.g. crime news or government corruption).

Interestingly, these decisions are not only made by individual news workers. On the contrary, there is an increasing number of newsrooms that are forced to follow one path or the other. Hence, the empirical evidence suggests that adopting one of these logics is both an individual and organizational measure. Furthermore, the results also indicate that this situation is consistent across the country and not confined to specific regions. This is because nationwide media and their staff have to operate in a context of permanent risk, thereby reinforcing the idea of multiple journalisms that simultaneously operate within the Mexican media system.

BACKGROUND

This section presents a review of the relevant literature and, hence, serves as a context for the empirical evidence that will be presented and analysed in the following pages. In doing so, there are three key issues that will be discussed in this part of the chapter: the endemic state of violence against news workers in Mexico, the concept of journalistic professionalization, and an overview of the limitations to the Mexican journalism practice.

Violence Against Mexican Journalists

Mexico is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalism. Diverse reports consistently stress that freedom of the press in this country is very limited compared to other democratic nations (IFJ, 2016; CPJ, 2019; *Article 19*, 2019). In addition, violence against journalists has become a highly complex phenomenon in which different actors intervene (Cottle, Sambrook & Mosdell, 2016). Therefore, this initial part of the section presents an overview of the precarious safety conditions that Mexican news workers are forced to face in order to do their job.

Before describing the specific Mexican context, it is important to explain that current violence against journalists worldwide is the outcome of a complex process, in which different overlapping factors intervene (Cottle, Sambrook & Mosdell, 2016): First, there is a significant growth of organised crime as an actor that actively shapes politics and economics in emergent democracies. Second, journalists have lost their neutral status during the coverage of certain topics in particularly dangerous regions. In these zones, rather than as objective observers, they are considered enemies by one of the many parties involved and, hence, are treated as such. Third, the rise of new communication technologies has become both a tool and a weapon for journalism. On the one hand, devices such as laptops and smart phones have fostered not only the creation of an increasing number of online news outlets, but also have made the job for mainstream media staff easier. On the other hand, the same tools represent a risk for their own digital security, because – for instance – web sites can be hacked, or phones can be located via GPS. Finally, and as a result of the permanent flow of news and information, conflicting actors have gained visibility

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