

# Silencing Mexico: A Study of Influences on Journalists in the Northern States

The International Journal of Press/Politics  
2014, Vol 19(1) 108–131  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1940161213509285  
ijpp.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

During President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's administration, the military was called on to confront organized crime, and dozens of journalists were killed in Mexico. Attacks on journalists have continued under the new administration. This study focuses on the erosion of the democratic institution of the press in Mexico's northern states, for the majority of journalists murdered in the last decade worked in that region. Utilizing Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences model, this study examines pressures constraining the press working in a tide of violence. The thirty-nine semistructured, in-depth interviews with Mexican journalists, who report in five of the northern states, indicate the strongest influences came from outside newsrooms, where intimidation and unthinkable crimes were committed against the press along the entire border. Individual-level influences, such as lack of conflict-reporting training, safety concerns, and handling the trauma of covering violence, were among the strongest pressures often leading to self-censorship. Organizational-level influences, including newsroom policies and financial arrangements with government and business, also influenced journalistic practice. The study added an inter-media level for analyses of news organizations and individual journalists working together to increase safety. Additional findings show major disruptions in border reporting where news "blackouts" exist amid pockets of lawlessness.

## Keywords

violence and the press, hierarchy of influences, conflict reporting, democratic institutions in Mexico, press–state relations

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## Introduction

Crime reporter Armando Rodríguez Carreón was gunned down in his driveway in the Mexican border city of Juárez as his eight-year-old daughter looked on (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010a). Eight reporters were kidnapped in one month in Reynosa, a northern Mexican border city across from McAllen, Texas (Estévez 2010). And during one week in the summer of 2012, two northern border news outlets were attacked with grenades and gunfire “to silence reporting on criminal groups” (Archibold 2012).

By all accounts, Mexico is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. Violence against journalists increased precipitously after former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa launched a war against organized crime in 2006, and by the end of his administration in 2012, 630 attacks were reported against the press, with more than 67 journalists killed and 14 disappeared (Human Rights Watch 2013; *The Associated Press* 2012).

Reporting in Mexico still is an enormous risk, with attacks on journalists continuing under the new administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto (Chavez 2013). This study examines to what extent journalism practices have undergone radical change amid the violence. Furthermore, given that the majority of journalists murdered in the last ten years leading up to our study were working in the northern border states (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010b) and that some news organizations there were among the leaders in the democratic consolidation of the media system in previous decades (Hughes 2003, 2006), our research focuses solely on journalists working in that region.

In this study, we address an overarching research question that examines how the democratic institution of the press has been influenced in northern Mexico during a period of rising violence related to organized crime and corrupt government officials. In our analysis, we use the framework of Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) hierarchy of influences model to which we add an inter-media level to accommodate a strong association among journalists and news organizations with distinct interactions within the profession during the tide of violence. We also draw on theoretical conceptions of press–state relations (Hallin and Mancini 2004), the hybrid civic news media model<sup>1</sup> in Mexico (Hughes 2003, 2006), the literature focused on professional journalism roles (Weaver et al. 2007), and journalism culture (Hanitzsch 2006). The study also builds upon other scholarship that examines the perceived effects of reporting in conflict zones and post-crisis situations (Carter and Kodrich 2013; Fahmy and Johnson 2005; Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008), media censorship in conflict environments (Ferreira 2006; Sharkey, 1991), and antipress violence in lawless regions (Waisbord 2002, 2007).

## News Media as a Democratic Institution in Mexico

The old system of media control in Mexico “has antecedents that stretch back to the pre-revolutionary era” (Lawson 2002: 26). The country’s Constitution of 1917 guarantees freedom of the press and expression, though it has been noted that the

conditions for these liberties were not necessarily supported (Ferreira 2006). The country's post-revolutionary government controlled the news media through subsidization (Benavides 2000).

From the 1940s to the 1980s, Hughes (2006: 7) noted, "Clientelism, corporatism, and a state-centered ideology of social justice had attached most Mexican social, economic, and political organizations to the government or its party." For decades, the news media largely were subordinate to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), passing on information sanctioned by the state (Arrendondo Ramírez and Sánchez Ruíz 1986). The 1968 and 1971 student protest massacres served as critical junctures for a nascent social movement with only a few news outlets attempting "assertive journalism" in the 1970s and none surviving that decade (Hughes 2006: 18).

By the 1980s, the PRI found it was too expensive to hold together its heterogeneous coalition during the structural crisis, leading to various sectors being cut away from support to stem the financial bleeding and leading to divisions within the party related to economic and political reform (Lawson 2002). Increased civic engagement in that same decade and into the 1990s sparked the Mexican press' transformation toward democratic consolidation, with a few innovative news organizations, several of them in northern states, publishing news critical of the regime (Hughes 2003, 2006).

One of the major turning points in the country's political transition has been placed with the 1996 political reforms, the loss of seats in Congress the following year, and the opposition National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox Quesada's presidential election defeat of the party that had ruled for more than seven decades (Lawson 2002: 24). By the 1990s, too, many national papers reflected journalism that was more "civic" than authoritarian, ultimately becoming a hybrid press system of a varying mix of "civic," "market-driven," and state-centered orientations<sup>2</sup> (Hughes 2003, 2006: 10–12).

In her exhaustive research of press models in Mexico, Hughes (2003, 2006: 110) found that three of the seven "first wave" civic papers in her study were in northern Mexico. Three of the nine news organizations identified in Hughes' (2006) conceptualization of the second phase of change for civic newspapers were in the north and considered an example of the diffusion of professional journalism norms. The recent shift to increased violence against journalists in that region makes our study all the more relevant.

## **Violence as a Constraint on the Democratic Institution of the Press**

Although institutionalized violence against the news media has received little scholarly study or theoretical focus (Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008; Waisbord 2002), research has investigated the practice of journalism during conflicts (Fahmy and Johnson 2005; Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008; Tumber and Webster 2006). Scholarly work also suggests that the relative strength of the institutional environment is critical for the protection of journalists from violence (Waisbord 2002), and we submit, for support of watchdog or "civic" news media in a fragile democratic system.

For decades, Mexico has been among the most dangerous countries for journalists in Latin America (Estévez 2010; Waisbord 2002). Although great attention has been dedicated to the bloody period after President Calderón called on the military to fight organized crime along the border, the previous ruling party's ties to drug trafficking date back to the end of World War II (O'Neil 2009). As the PRI lost monopoly control of government, so slipped the patron–client tie in which organized crime groups used the political party to “create a system-wide network of corruption that ensured distribution rights, market access, and even official government protection for drug traffickers” (Shirk 2011: 9). The 2000 presidential election of opposition PAN candidate Vicente Fox, and the PRI's loss of power, further eroded the old model, leading organized crime groups to embrace autonomy and to establish new ways of ensuring illicit goods received safe passage crossing the northern border through buying off local officials along the route (O'Neil 2009).

With rising profits, organized crime groups in Mexico developed militarized enforcement strategies and began a brutal struggle to gain control of smuggling routes along the northern border (O'Neil 2009). There have been more than 60,000 deaths in the country that have been linked to drug-related violence, organized crime, and corrupt government after the Calderón administration's proclaimed drug trafficking war (Human Rights Watch 2013), which was coupled with more than \$1.1 billion of U.S. financial support delivered through the Mérida Initiative toward militarizing the border on the Mexican side (Ribando Seelke and Finklea 2013). By the year of our study, the majority of killings of Mexican journalists had occurred in the northern border states (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010a), away from the capital where it “appears to be politically too costly for criminal organizations” because of the concentration of diplomatic embassies, three branches of government, and headquarters of political and social groups (Estévez 2010: 274).

One of the many risks of institutionalized violence is its potential for undermining the country's fragile democratic system (O'Neil 2009), which we argue includes investigative or “civic” journalism. In the year of our study (2011), for example, the number of organized crime-related deaths in the six northern border states reflected how drug trafficking turf wars gained momentum along the eastern side of the northern Mexico border. From the northwest border to the northeastern border that year, there were 351 organized crime-related deaths in Baja California Norte, 320 in Sonora, 2,925 in Chihuahua, 851 in Coahuila, 1,472 in Nuevo León, and 1,257 in Tamaulipas (Molzahn et al. 2012; Ribando Seelke and Finklea 2013). That year, the Committee to Protect Journalists' (2011: 1) impunity index ranked Mexico among “the world's most murderous countries for the press . . . where authorities appear powerless in bringing killers to justice.” Thus, we study the extent that the democratic institution of civic journalism (Hughes 2003) is in peril in these northern states. For political theorist Robert Dahl's suggested minimal conditions for democracy, one of the most widely accepted (Schmitter and Karl 1996), include citizens' rights to freely express themselves and the right to seek and obtain information (Dahl 1982).

## **Hierarchy of Influences Framework**

As scholars have noted, the hierarchy-of-influences model is a strong framework for examining reporting in conflict zones (Fahmy and Johnson 2012; Kim 2010). Our study used Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences model, informed by other scholars' work in a global context (Hanitzsch 2006; Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Kim 2010; Reese 2001). The structure was used to analyze recent influences on journalistic culture and practice in a year that the number of attacks on press freedom in Mexico rose by nearly 11 percent from the previous year to 172 (Forced Silence 2012).

In the model, the five levels of influences on journalists are nested with the higher levels subsuming lower levels of influence (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). The individual-level influences form the core followed by the news media routines level, organizational level, extra-media level, and the outermost ideological level (Reese 2001; Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

### *Individual-Level Influences*

We investigate individual-level factors that could influence journalists' work- and ethical decision making, including demographics, such as age, gender, education, work experience, and personal factors, such as family beliefs and values, professional background, and occupation (Hughes 2006; Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Kim 2010; Reese 2001; Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Weaver et al. 2007). We also draw from studies that have examined the individual-level toll of exposure to violence toward journalists (Feinstein 2012; Kim 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008).

### *News Media Routines Influences*

We use Shoemaker and Reese's (1996: 105) description of the news media routines level, which will include "patterned, routinized, repeated practices" that journalists perform in the course of working. The literature has been mixed on the extent that professional routines influence news judgment (Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Shoemaker et al. 2001; Zhu et al. 1997).

### *Organizational-Level Influences*

We use the organizational level to analyze influences on journalists in northern Mexico through news media organizations' policies and structure (Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Shoemaker and Reese 1996) in a time of violence. The influences of editorial managers' business decisions related to staffing and competition also fall under this dimension (Berkowitz and Limor 2003). Furthermore, in Mexico, we assert, decision-making at the organizational level could be critical as news outlets struggle in a challenging financial and violent environment (Lowrey and Chang 2010), where concentration of media outlets in a few private hands has had direct implications on the strength of the press and democracy (Organization of American States 2011).

## *Extra-Media Influences*

The influences on journalists from outside of news organizations are theorized as extra-media level influences, or, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 175) note, “extrinsic” to news media outlets. In an environment of violence, we examine these extra-media influences, which include news sources, business advertisers, governmental authorities including the military, nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations, and organized crime groups (Reese 2001; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), and other scholars (Zhu et al. 1997), extra-media influences may have more impact on the profession than lower levels of influence.

## *Ideology as an Influence*

Ideology includes values, attitudes, and perceptions about the role of journalistic work in the broader context of society (Reese 2001; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). We examine the extent that some influences may be stronger than others in the context of violence and build on scholars’ work that focused on the democratic transition of the news media in Mexico (Hughes 2003, 2006; Hughes and Lawson 2004; Lawson 2002).

Based on this literature and the framework of the hierarchy of influences model, our study examines the following research questions.

**Research Question 1:** What are the political, societal, and economic influences on the country’s journalists in the context of violence along the northern border?

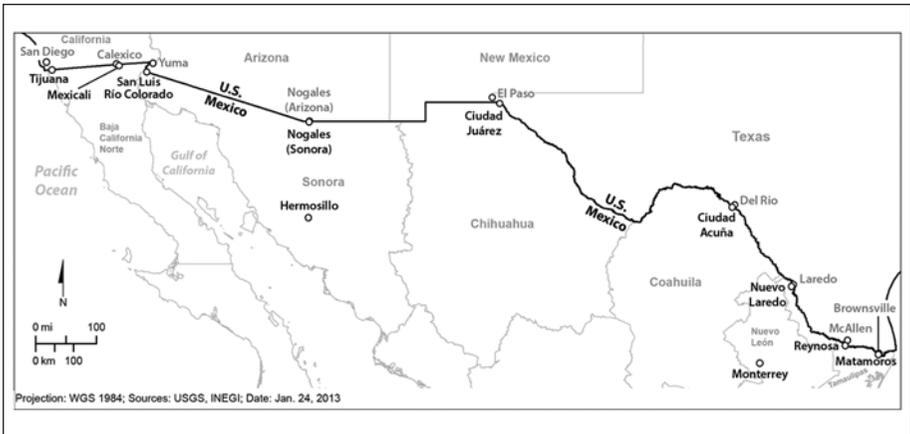
**Research Question 2:** What types of violence and intimidation are visited upon Mexican journalists along the country’s northern border states?

**Research Question 3:** How has increased violence along the country’s northern border changed journalism practice for Mexican journalists since the period when civic journalism was introduced?

## **Method**

We focus on the country’s journalists working on the northern border because these journalists frequently are more at risk than those based near power centers of a country (Estévez 2010; Waisbord 2002). Several factors contribute to this heightened level of vulnerability in northern Mexico: (1) distance from political and economic centers in the country, which often results in fewer resources and recourses when journalists/news outlets are subjected to aggression; (2) news organizations located in peripheral areas tend to be smaller with less economic and political power to protect their employees; and (3) Mexico’s northern border is the location of drug and human smuggling routes.

We developed a list for a purposive sample of journalists from large, medium, and small news organizations from print, online, radio, magazine, and television news in the six states along the entire northern border of Mexico (Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas). In developing the list,



**Figure 1.** News media markets in the six northern border states of Mexico.

we consulted representatives from four major organizations that had contacts along the border: Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Inter American Press Association (2012), the Binational Association of Schools of Communication, and chapters of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. To recruit, we contacted journalists based in eleven representative media markets in six northern Mexican border states (Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California Norte; San Luis Río Colorado, Nogales, and Hermosillo, Sonora; Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila; Monterrey, Nuevo León; and Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas; see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

The questionnaire was developed from a modified version of Kim and Hama-Saeed's (2008) framework utilized to study journalists performing in zones of conflict. Interview questions were designed to examine factors that impact the work of journalists in an unpredictable environment. We piloted our questionnaire with six journalists.

The reporters, photographers, videographers, editors, and producers whom we contacted had a range of experience, including coverage of public affairs, crime and corruption in northern Mexico. Of the forty-five Mexican journalists contacted, thirty-nine journalists agreed to be interviewed in person for an 86.67 percent response rate. We conducted in-depth interviews that were semistructured in nature from September 17, 2011, through December 16, 2011. Participants were offered anonymity, and every journalist opted for this. With participants' permission, all of the interviews were audio-recorded.

The audio files were translated into English and transcribed. We then analyzed and aggregated interview responses from the transcripts that corresponded to the study's research questions. We used Corbin and Strauss' (2008) coding schemata as an analytical strategy to identify concepts; and we further developed themes and categories using axial coding.

As we analyzed our data, we determined that an inter-media level should be added between the organizational and extra-media levels of the hierarchy framework to accommodate our data.

## Findings

We recruited journalists from five states<sup>4</sup> in northern Mexico during the last full year of President Calderón's administration. Twelve of the thirty-nine Mexican journalists in the study were women (30.77%) and twenty-seven were men (69.23%). Participants' ages ranged from twenty-five to fifty-six years with a mean age of 39.6 years ( $SD = 7.89$ ). Participants' journalism experience ranged from three years to thirty-five years with a mean of 16.49 years ( $SD = 7.37$ ) working in the field. Education was from a high school diploma to holding a master's degree.

We found that journalists across the country's northern border had similar influences, though the intensity of those influences varied. In the following sections, we address the three research questions in this study, describing the political, societal, and economic influences on journalists in the context of violence along the country's northern border, the types of violence and intimidation visited upon these journalists, and how the violence in the region has drastically changed journalism practice since Hughes' (2003, 2006) civic journalism research.

## Individual-Level Influences

The strongest influences on journalists at the individual level were lack of training to work in a conflict zone and extreme concerns about personal and family safety, risks that had become major influences on journalists' abilities to perform investigations about the government, and crime or other public interest issues. Most journalists in the study discussed the personal toll from working in an uncertain and violent environment with mass executions, which directly impacted their psyches, and thus their work, in what one editor [CH1] characterized as a "living nightmare" that has "all the ingredients to terrify anyone." One journalist anxiously recounted how the violent working environment led to a "nervous breakdown" and self-committing to a hospital [T7].

Journalists described altering their driving routes, changing automobiles, and concealing identities. One journalist [CH4] scrubbed links to his addresses and vacated his house. An editor [CH8] in Ciudad Juárez noted that many reporters fear for their lives. "I had colleagues who came to me and said, . . . 'If something happens to me, I trust my child with you.'" A Tamaulipas journalist [T4] received a bulletproof vest as a gift from his father. Another longtime reporter from that state [T8] noted, "I wake up at night seeing the dead, smelling the death, and shaking and crying . . . I try to forget . . . But honestly, it's something that you'll never forget. You can't."

In the states of Baja California Norte and Sonora, where turf battles had been settled, at least temporarily, and violence had dropped somewhat by 2011, reporters noted that they still were shell-shocked. "We still haven't shaken that fear we had at one point," said one reporter from Tijuana. "That's to say there are many things that could

be investigated but that aren't investigated" [BC8]. Still, in that same city, there were journalists at one news organization who would not be intimidated, even after a "hit" price was put on three of their lives and they had to use government bodyguards. One editor from that news organization, known for investigations, said, "If they call us to tell us what to do, or what not to publish, we're going to publish it twice over and we're also going to write that they called us to tell us not to publish" [BC11].

## **Media Routines Influences**

A few journalists in the study noted technological innovations, which allow rapid news dissemination and increased use of social media, along with the faltering economy and local job layoffs, had led to increased workloads, longer workdays, and superficial reporting in an already challenging and often violent environment. Further, journalists spent more time backgrounding sources because of their potential connections to organized crime. Some reporters complained about working as many as fifteen hours at a time. Some wrote up to fourteen stories a day. "There are journalists who have to cover, and have covered, twenty deaths in one day. Different cases," said a Ciudad Juárez reporter [CH5].

Journalistic work has changed completely, just as personal lives have changed. One editor [CH1] noted, "We're more careful in our communications, especially because we know that criminals have teams and ways of finding out what we're talking about. Even when we talk on our cell phones, we know that they're listening to us."

Some reporters used radios instead of cell phones, and limited e-mail and phone calls, to avoid being detected. Some drove in unmarked cars, wore disguises at crime scenes, and used caution when handling equipment, such as cameras, to avoid the appearance of carrying a weapon.

Television and radio news reporters described facing larger challenges with not drawing attention to themselves compared with those in print work [T7, T8, T11]. "We want to report but have to ask, 'Do we do it? Do we not do it? Where can we go? Where can't we go?'" Sometimes we say something (on air) and we're terrified," said one reporter, who wept [T11].

## **Organizational Influences**

We found that most news organization owners, top editors, and producers interviewed for this study had developed policies that were, in large part, reacting to the violence and economic downturn rather than setting visionary goals. They also distanced themselves from organized crime to project a neutral position. Most communicated that they were conscious of the critical public interest role of journalists in society, as Hughes (2003, 2006) described in her research.

Although Hughes (2003, 2006) found a diffusion of civic journalism in the second wave of news media transformation process in Mexico, we found a diffusion of news practices among news outlets that largely retracted from investigative journalism, though there were exceptions. A journalist/co-owner [T10] from a news outlet along the

northeastern Mexico border said that after two staff journalists were killed within the news outlet, practices were adopted from another news organization with a similar history of civic journalism and violence against the staff: “We began self-censorship . . . We just stopped publishing anything to do with crime. Right now, they have left us alone” [T10]. Other news organizations quit publishing news reports with bloody images, ceased covering crime group street battles, eliminated bylines and replaced them with “staff,” and changed datelines of news events to protect reporters. Other news organizations increased security by fortifying walls around their buildings, installing cameras, steel doors, bulletproof glass, fingerprint swipes for building entry, and vault-like security rooms. News organizations allowed journalists to sleep in the building when the streets were too unsafe to return home.

Although the owners of a number of news organizations used armored vehicles and bodyguards and set up consultations with security assessment experts for their staff, a number of news outlets lacked safety protocols and training for journalists. Nearly a half dozen news outlet owners and news managers arranged to send their reporters to the United States or other parts of Mexico after they received death threats. And in some of the more dangerous areas, news organizations had brought in war correspondents, U.S. Embassy representatives, and other experts to discuss security assessment. Still others chose not to purchase protective gear for employees.

After the death of a reporter and the disappearance of another reporter from one news organization known for investigative journalism, the owners and management became deeply worried about the remaining staff. In response, a news manager [BC3] there said,

A policy was created—to not publish information related to drug trafficking or related to organized crime . . . with the exception of press releases, the information sent to us by an official source—the attorney general, the national attorney general . . . No more investigating for us.

One longtime and respected journalist from Chihuahua, who is spearheading an organization that assists journalists in distress, said some news organizations have abandoned reporters who have been hurt, often after discussions with Mexican law enforcement. “I mean I haven’t heard of any case where the opposite has happened,” the journalist said [CH7]. A veteran reporter in Ciudad Juárez [CH5] noted, “One of the challenges of journalists today is the lack of support from companies. I think that’s one of the biggest problems. It’s not just the risk from outside.”

Insecurity related to the violence also impacted the marketplace, and thus news organizations as well. Businesses had pulled back on advertising to avoid being targets of extortion and kidnapping, leaving newsrooms’ management to deal with tighter budgets and forcing some to close. One news organization that practiced civic journalism in the past had consolidated costs to the point that the advertising department was sharing space with the newsroom. A news manager [BC5] there said, “In a political sense, we don’t have any firm positions. But when it comes to advertisers and everything else, yes, they do limit us” [BC5].

In 2011, in response to the decline in commercial advertising, some news organizations derived as much as 80 percent of their advertising from government with the balance made up by business, which is similar to the period before the transition to democracy. More than a dozen journalists spoke about the issue of business advertising decline and the increased use of, or consideration of, government advertising [BC1, BC3, BC8, BC12, CH1, CH2, CH7, CH9, SO2, SO3, SO4, T1, T3, T5, T6, T8, T10]. At one news organization that was sprayed with gunfire by a criminal organization, a top editor [CH1] noted that the company laid-off journalists to avoid taking a larger proportion of advertising from government sources:

So the challenge of news organizations is to level out that imbalance . . . Try to get different numbers, at least 50-50, which is a place where if suddenly the government's 50 percent is taken away, you can still survive with the 50 percent from business, right?

A tough financial environment also resulted in some news outlets trimming journalists' fringe benefits, such as stipends for gasoline, training, and continuing education in an already strained work environment, where according to Estévez (2010), journalists earn between \$300 and \$500 a month on average outside of Mexico City.

We found only a few journalists and news organizations that still conduct watchdog journalism, though a number still file public records requests. And only two longtime news organizations continued investigative practices no matter what the level of violence, in spite of each losing journalists and receiving many threats. One top investigations journalist from one of those outlets [BC11] explained, "We enjoy a freedom that other news organizations don't have . . . Our decision is to not publish any advertising from the government . . . For us, it's more than economic resources . . . Freedom costs."

## **Inter-Media Influences**

Although there are numerous exceptions, as a whole, Mexican borderland journalists have come to support one another, professionally and personally, mostly within cities, and occasionally, among cities and states and across the Mexico-U.S. border, whether working within the same news organization or a competing one. We introduce inter-media-level influences to the framework of this study, to examine interactions among news organizations and journalists from different news outlets to isolate factors that either discouraged or sustained journalists.

To ensure that news was reported, inter-media-level relationships included simultaneously reporting on news with other newsrooms to increase safety. Newsrooms also sent information that was too "hot" to other news outlets in other states, Mexico City, or to the United States. Journalists from different news organizations drove together or in caravans to report at crime scenes to ensure witnesses of potential abuses by security forces, local law enforcement officers, or members of organized crime groups. Other inter-media work included news outlets offering reporting courses and bringing in experts to speak about such issues as self-care and care of victims. Journalists also

have accompanied one another in filing complaints with state attorneys general over government or organized crime abuses against colleagues. Regional coalitions also have replicated national-level journalism support organizations along the border. One group developed a census of journalists in their city. Reporters also noted that they had visited other northern border states to learn strategies from other journalists.

One Sonoran journalist [SO1] acknowledged that these newfound relationships in an environment of uncertainty were a shift from earlier times:

Before, there was more envy or competition or more rivalry as far as work. You'd go alone, and you wouldn't tell the rest, or tell the competition because, well, you want to get the scoop. And, so the lack of security, I think, was one of the things, among other things, that led us to be more united and more in touch.

The presence of growing inter-media relationships does not necessarily represent ubiquitous solidarity or community, however. In Baja California Norte, for example, some journalists complained about lack of solidarity. Others noted that Mexican journalists along the northern border are not only far from the power center of Mexico City [BC8], but they also are largely isolated from U.S. colleagues. One journalist in Mexicali noted,

I think there is a serious problem because there is no communication among us. I feel it doesn't exist. And even less with the other side of the border. If there were constant communication—not just here on this side of the border, but also on the other side, it be a different thing. We'd be a block. And a very strong block. And it would be very important [BC1].

## **Extra-Media Influences**

Criminal organizations, governments, academic institutions, business, civil society, and transnational organizations, all had an impact on journalists along the northern border. The Mexico City-based National Center for Social Communication (CENCOS) and the London-based Article 19, which researched 155 attacks against journalists and news organizations, found that nearly one in two of the reported assaults were committed by government authorities and one in four reported organized criminal groups as responsible (CENCOS 2011).

### *Criminal Organizations as an Extra-Media Influence*

Journalists spoke about a generally unsafe environment, though those based in the states of Baja California Norte and Sonora suggested that there had been a reprieve in pressures on their work since the violence related to warring crime groups had died down by fall 2011. In some interviews, journalists spoke about corrupt politicians or government functionaries involved with criminal groups, which infiltrated newsrooms with moles or through buying off reporters, most commonly, with envelopes of cash, cars, and other gifts. One Ciudad Juárez investigative journalist [CH8] noted, “The

profession has been infiltrated and sometimes you don't know who you are working with."

Journalists in every state indicated that police beat reporters were the most at risk because of illegal activity taking place at crime scenes after killings and because of battling gangs, corrupt government officials, and organized crime groups' efforts to use journalists as propaganda tools for their own messages. At one point, said an editor from a newsroom that once practiced serious journalism in Tamaulipas [T10], more than three quarters of the newsroom was on the payroll of organized crime until management "cleaned house" and got it down to about one in five reporters. In some newsrooms in that state, reporters said that criminal organizations dictated to news executives or police reporters what to report and what to hold back. Study participants said these groups also had threatened news executives, producers, editors, reporters, and photographers in their news outlets. Along the entire northern border, journalists said criminal groups send lookouts to monitor crime scenes to observe when reporters arrive and what they report. A longtime investigative reporter noted: "It's like the city has eyes, and everyone knows what you were doing" [T8].

### *Government as an Extra-Media Influence*

Journalists complained about government officials refusing to provide them with information for news reports and the overall insecurity in their practice related to weak government institutions. This was reflected in part by the high level of impunity that they witness regularly. Furthermore, the role of extensive government-backed advertising in the vacuum of business advertising has led to a largely unspoken threat of "government censorship" from officials who threaten to pull advertising when unfavorable stories are published. This was occurring in an environment of long-standing media consolidation and concentration (González de Bustamante 2012; Trejo Delarbre 2011).

Study participants also noted that because local law enforcement and other government agencies have been infiltrated by organized crime more than in the past, journalists have to be more careful when reporting, which takes more time. This confirms work by Freedom House (2012: 2), which noted, "Local political authorities and police forces appear to be involved in some cases, creating an environment where journalists do not know where threats are coming from or how to avoid the violence."

New law enforcement protocols at crime scenes also made reporters and photojournalists uneasy. Some reporters said law enforcement banned taking photos at crime scenes. In Baja California Norte, some reporters said politicians and government officials blacklisted those who do investigative journalism. Other journalists reported that their sources have been killed after leaking information to them about the government.

Grenade attacks, shootings in public places, and streets blocked by government or organized crime group convoys made it difficult for reporters to distinguish among corrupt government officials and battling crime groups on the street, further challenging the work within some cities in Tamaulipas. In Reynosa, Tamaulipas, at times, all

communication infrastructure had been shut down in sections of the city where street battles were in progress, making it difficult to communicate with colleagues, sources, the government, and others [T7].

Journalists in each state also spoke about the impunity of the crimes against journalists and the tepid responses from government agencies. According to one editor [CH8]:

I mean the impunity is so great with these attacks that we've suffered, the investigations of the crimes [against] our colleagues so neglected, that it makes us more vulnerable . . . Because in the end we saw that the authorities don't do anything. They fold. And the drug traffickers decide who lives and who dies.

In some of the study's cases, journalists reported that government officials suggested their news outlets acquiesce to organized crime group demands. One of the most jarring examples in our study was of political pressure exerted on a newsroom with an investigative journalism tradition. A manager [BC5] from that newsroom noted just one year earlier most news outlets in the city agreed to forego crime coverage for more than a week as Tijuana sponsored an event with high-profile appearances to recast its image for economic development. But when several decapitated bodies were discovered hanging in the city, the news organization reported it, leaving off the organized crime group's message on a public banner (*narcomanta*), an internal newsroom policy adopted by many news organizations in the region and around the country to avoid becoming a propaganda tool. The next day, a decapitated head of a young man with the same message was thrown near the news outlet's security guard, which the management immediately reported to the state attorney general's office. According to the news manager [BC5]:

I told them, "Hey, well, what do I do?" And what they told me there in the attorney general's office was, "You know what, that was because you didn't publish what they put on yesterday's blanket. And so what I recommend is that you publish this one." . . . So we decided to publish what the *manta* said [BC5].

### *Sources as an Extra-Media Influence*

Journalists in all of the northern border states in the study talked about the level of uncertainty with all sectors of society. The extra-media influence of sources dodging interviews with journalists cannot be underestimated. Affluent citizens decline interviews to avoid extortion or to stay out of public view. Sources on the street from unknown backgrounds produce risk because of their potential connection to organized crime. Sources presumably without any drug-related ties on the street were less willing to be interviewed for fear of retribution. The gap in sourcing compounded by a general state of fear in some communities in the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas in the year of the study had led to a news vacuum and "news blackouts" in some cases.

### *Business and Market Forces as an Extra-Media Influence*

Business advertising was down for news organizations, though neither the global economic downturn nor the state of the news industry was the key reason cited. Many businesses were pulling ads for fear of becoming targets of extortion or kidnapping. In Baja California Norte and Chihuahua, journalists noted business advertisers who have been crime victims asked that crimes not be reported. When mass killings occurred, for instance, hoteliers and restaurateurs were known to pressure news organizations to downplay the violence because negative coverage hurt business.

Banks pulled credit access for journalists because news media workers were a perceived security risk. A journalism organization leader and longtime reporter in Ciudad Juárez [CH7] noted that life insurance companies no longer were available to journalists in that city that had nearly 3,000 deaths (Wilkinson 2011) in the year of our study. The veteran reporter [CH7] noted that among a journalism organization group in Ciudad Juárez, sixty members lost life insurance:

And so the government had to intervene in this, to be like our guarantor. If the government hadn't intervened right now, we would not be insured. It's a situation I mentioned to the people who came from the [United Nations], that right now we're almost completely vulnerable. So, I think that something has to be done because we are defenseless . . . The day the government says, "We're not going to insure them anymore," we're going to end up without it [CH7].

### *Civil Society as an Extra-Media Influence*

The majority of journalists interviewed for the study indicated that by and large they were buoyed by a few academic institutions and national and transnational organizations, as well as journalists from outside of the country, who have taken interest in their plight and offered support. Journalists in nearly every state spoke about organizations that have offered counsel, workshops, and other support, as some journalists continue to attempt to report on government and organized crime, societal issues related to the violence, and political and bureaucratic corruption.

Our analysis of interviews with journalists in the northern region indicates that most of the efforts to effect change have been reactionary to the violence, or the potential for violence, which Hughes (2003, 2006) found to an extent in the new millennium as violence began to rise, though her earlier research along with Pinto's (2009) also found that civil society and press groups were moving forward with vision toward advancing access to public information and public interest journalism. Still, some organizations lobbied for legislation and an amendment to the Constitution, which now give power to federal authorities to prosecute crimes against journalists and human rights defenders. In the last months of the Calderón administration, nearly a year after our study, the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists was enacted, yet implementing and utilizing the protections has proven to be a challenge (Freedom House 2013).

At the local level, the support of civil society has been enormous, noted one journalist [CH7] who is the leader of a professional group in Ciudad Juárez. And this support is largely because citizens can relate to the terror that many journalists face because violence is meted out throughout society, the veteran journalist indicated [CH7].

## **Ideology as an Influence**

As expected, ideological-level influences on journalists in the study were not uniform across the profession in the northern states, and the study found nuance within the profession at this level. Although nearly all of the journalists interviewed believed that the role of a journalist is to inform society and to work in the public interest, we found in each state a loss of trust in government and dignity in the profession as an institution of democracy among some journalists, a diminished sense of news media independence, and a lack of hope about the future of the profession, contrary to scholarly literature from a decade or less ago (Hughes 2003, 2006).

In the context of journalism as a democratic institution, there also was a perception among some journalists that there is a disconnect between journalists and society with the decreased capacity to include citizens in news reporting. Exacerbating this is the decline in trust in politicians, political appointees, and local officials, including local law enforcement authorities, and fear that the constant presence of violence would become normalized through the constant presence of *la nota roja* (violent crime reports). Self-censorship and censorship became a new norm that is tolerated in some newsrooms. And reporting and news coverage were dictated, in part, by violence. One journalist in Tamaulipas [T11] noted, “If we analyze all of these situations, we could ask ourselves, ‘What kind of journalism are we practicing here?’”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In an era in which Mexico’s news media are encountering an unprecedented level of aggression in a region with pockets of lawlessness and varying levels of violence, we found the hierarchy of influences model to be a strong and valuable framework for examining constraints on journalists. Our qualitative study of journalists who work in ten cities in five states along the 2,000-mile northern border with the United States examined the political, societal, and economic influences on journalists in a region that is far from the country’s political power center (Estévez 2010). The study found that the democratic institution of the press, at all levels of influence, has been greatly disrupted in the country’s northernmost states most directly by violence, weak governmental institutions, and market barriers. This finding is similar to earlier work of Hughes and Lawson (2005: 9) that identified factors in Latin American media systems that hampered “independent, pluralistic, and assertive media systems in the region.” Our study affirms their argument that to foster the democratic institution of the press, journalists must be protected from violent retribution with a legal framework and enforcement of the law.

There was great nuance from newsroom to newsroom, city to city, and state to state in the levels of influences in our study. Generally, though, violence had increased at some point in the entire region within the previous five years (Ríos and Shirk 2011), and at the macro-level, political, societal, and legal structural change was brokered by representatives of domestic and transnational organizations, and the national Congress, with input from the states (O'Connor 2011, 2013; Ribando Seelke and Finklea 2013). However, these legal changes did not seem to diminish the increased risk that journalists faced on the periphery.

This discussion first assesses broadly the institutional relationships within our findings in the study and then reflects on the specifics of the model that we used. As we revisit Hughes' (2003, 2006) research, which demonstrated that six news organizations in northern Mexico had founded or transformed newsrooms into civic-style institutions, beginning in the 1980s and into the next decades, we note that our findings indicate the tide of violence has reshaped the hybrid model that Hughes introduced.

In some jurisdictions in the northern states, it appeared organized crime groups wielded more power than local politicians, political appointees, or government functionaries in their relationships with journalists. And across the border, journalistic autonomy often was traded for personal security, which included reporting only one version of events, that of government officials. Although these newsroom policies often were born out of a sense of terror in the practice along the northern border, this distinct trend can be likened to some semblance of Hughes' (2006:4,12) conceptualization of the "adaptive authoritarian" news model in its "passive approach to new gathering" with "traded autonomy," though in our study it did not appear to be for "partisan or personal advantage" and was complicated by the more prominent role of organized crime groups. Nonetheless, there appeared to be vestiges of the old guard ways, consisting of stenography from press releases, which Hughes' (2003) work a decade ago described as a model that was fading.

We found two other major issues with press-state relations in northern Mexico. News outlets had a growing dependency on government subsidies, and there were journalists in every state in our study who indicated that human rights abuse complaints were minimized or dismissed by law enforcement and attorneys general offices. This latter issue was validated in a report a year later. Although Mexican state and federal governments had set up special prosecutors' offices and committees during the Calderón administration, with the goal of tracking and investigating violence against journalists, the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (2012: 8) decried this as "institutionalized pretense," noting in the report that most investigations of violence fall under state and local jurisdiction where many government offices lack resources or have been infiltrated by criminal organizations.

It is important to note that in nearly every city in which news media in our study worked, journalists spoke about the level of uncertainty in the workplace and murky boundaries among organized crime groups, political appointees, government functionaries, and politicians. Although it apparently was not always clear who was involved with the violence against the news media, the context of nearly complete impunity exacerbated this issue. According to our study, organized crime groups filled

the governmental power vacuum in some jurisdictions with corrupt politicians and government functionaries colluding, in some cases, in pressing news organizations to compromise their ethics, news reporting, and investigations. And in other cases, news organizations adopted policies of other news outlets in the region in a diffusion of norms that are antithetical to Hughes' civic journalism model during less violent times, where for security reasons, news outlet owners and managers cited decisions to only use government authorities as the exclusive "official" account. In the most extreme case in the easternmost coastal state of Tamaulipas, bordering the eastern part of the U.S. state of Texas, the fragile institution of the press appeared to be in greatest jeopardy. We submit that the historical, political, and bureaucratic context in that state, coupled with one of the most violent drug cartels, the Zetas, fighting virulently for territory, created an idiosyncratic scenario for journalists not present in some other border states in the study.

The intersection of violence and the market-driven side of the hybrid news media model, which Hughes described, also has taken on unexpected consequences in the northern states, which has seriously undermined press autonomy. With organized crime groups extorting business owners who advertised with news outlets and the subsequent plummeting of private-sector support, the study's participants noted the tensions and risks with filling that void with government advertising and other subsidies, such as life insurance and government bodyguards. Furthermore, corporatist agreements between some news organizations and business advertisers to advance or avoid news coverage appeared to be another corruption of the democratic institution of the press.

In studying the press as a democratic institution, the hierarchy of influences approach offers a parsimonious model that allows researchers to examine patterns and relationships among influences in conflict zones or jurisdictions with sustained levels of violence. Our two main contributions in this area are the introduction of the inter-media level and the finding that the levels in the model are quite permeable and appear to be susceptible to bidirectional influences, particularly in an environment of intense violence. In crisis or conflict environments, this inter-media level creates a space in the model, between the organizational and extra-media levels, allowing nonhierarchical data among journalists and news organizations to be analyzed more closely. In this study, it allowed us to see there were areas in the border region where, at a very local and reactionary level, individual journalists and news outlets banded together to deeply examine ways to address the violence against the profession in order to do their work. This, in small part, is counter to Farah's (2012: 5) suggestion that heads of some news media outlets in Mexico have "remained virtually silent and have abandoned efforts to create a unified strategy, carry out common investigations, or highlight the plight of journalists."

Not surprisingly, we found influences on every level of the hierarchy. The violence coming from the extra-media level appeared to be the strongest influence, affecting every level above and below it in the hierarchy. We acknowledge that at the same time that violence may be exerted on journalists and news organizations from the extra-media level, there are other forces at the extra-media level, perhaps not as powerful,

such as domestic and transnational civil society, and intergovernmental and governmental organizations, which provide financial, educational, security, legal, and psychological support.

In some cases, similar to Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) conceptualization, the higher level influences subsumed lower levels of influence. Thus, an organized crime group (extra-media) killing and disappearance of journalists from one news organization influenced newsroom policies (organizational level). Similar to other scholars (Fahmy and Johnson 2005, 2012; Kim 2010), we found lower levels of the hierarchy, such as the organizational level, influenced higher levels in the hierarchy, such as ideology. We also observed bidirectional influences in the model. For example, sustained organized crime group violence (extra-media), such as killing journalists and mass numbers of people in a city, had a profound influence on the individual level for those in the profession, and consequently, influenced the ideological level about the role of the profession in society. In one city, a top editor [BC3] at a news organization that has cut investigations in response to the violence, noted, "The steps forward we made—with the freedom of expression that came with the transition to democracy in Mexico—we've gone backwards" [BC3].

Notably, the two levels that appeared most influenced by violence from the extra-media level were the individual and organizational levels. Many of the journalists interviewed for this study indicated that the violence deeply traumatized them (individual level) in some way, as Feinstein's (2012) survey found. The insidious level of intimidation, with assassinations, kidnappings, and beatings of journalists (extra-media) coupled with newsrooms infiltrated with "reporters" on cartel payrolls, and vendors and others planted on streets to conduct surveillance in the service of organized crime, has created an understandable heightened level of fear and distrust among journalists at all of the other levels in the hierarchy. Furthermore, these findings support Waisbord's (2002) suggestion that violence (extra-media level) against journalists leads to self-censorship (individual level) stemming from fear, which tamps down watchdog reporting (news routines level) on drug trafficking, corruption, human rights, and environmental issues.

This study has a number of limitations. Security issues, to an extent, impacted our ability to recruit. We also acknowledge that the findings from a purposive sample of journalists in the country's five northern border states are limited to this group in a relatively limited time period.

There is a need for additional theorizing and research that focuses on violence, impunity and press-state relations, and the issues with the market model, as threats and prolonged aggression persist against the news media, and continue to place the democratic institution of the Mexican press at serious risk. We suggest that other researchers could utilize and test the pathways of influence from the northern Mexico case by applying the framework to studies conducted in other conflict zones, specifically in countries with consolidating democracies.

With the election of President Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI, new border policies may shift the landscape once again along the border, which some suggest had been changed after the PRI lost its seven-decade grip on power to the PAN at the turn of the

millennium, disrupting the clientelistic organized crime-government system in a fragile political environment (O'Neil 2009). Although there has been a president elected from the former ruling party, a simple return to the old order is doubtful in the northern border region as some of the powerful organized crime groups have greatly fractionalized, and new relationships will be negotiated, all of which will influence the environment of violence and press-state relations.

Looking forward, journalists in the northern states are on the frontlines to witness and experience any outcomes from President Peña Nieto's pledge to prioritize protection for human rights and crime prevention in the country's shifting security strategy such as has been laid out in his Pact for Mexico. At some point, a transformation of newsrooms may again be required, as occurred in a seemingly different and less violent era for journalists in Mexico in the 1990s (Hughes 2003, 2006). This vision for transformation within current "newsrooms in conflict" may be apt given what is at stake.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The study received funding from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Emerging Scholars Program, The University of Arizona's Center for Latin American Studies, the Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute, and the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy.

### **Notes**

1. Hughes (2006: 4) defines the civic model as news media that provide "information that helps citizens communicate their needs to government, hold government accountable, and foster deliberation and debate."
2. Characteristics of the authoritarian news model include "the absence of newsroom autonomy, a representation of only points of view that support the positions of the current regime, and a passive approach to news gathering" (Hughes 2006: 4). The market-driven concept of journalism, according to Hughes (2006: 4–5), "involves the quid pro quo of news for material gain, but in a liberal political system and market-based economy."
3. By the end of the study, we were not able to recruit participants from the state of Nuevo León; and in the state of Coahuila, we only had one participant in the study.
4. Participants in the study are from five of the six northern Mexico states: Baja California Norte [BC], Sonora [SO], Chihuahua [CH], Coahuila [CO], and Tamaulipas [T].

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