

Corruption & Calamity: Limiting Ethical Journalism in Mexico and Central America

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Preface

In the culture of journalism, ethical lapses are often greeted with the same disdain a U.S. Marine might show to a colleague accused of having “no code.” A transgressor may be demoted, marginalized, or leave the business through disgrace.

But in the changing ethical tableau of Mexico and Central America, other results are often possible. Journalists who strive to attain an ethical code may find themselves more than simply shunned by corrupt colleagues: they could be the focus of threats, victims of physical assaults, or become statistics of another lethal attack against journalists in one of the most dangerous regions of world to test the limits of free expression.

In the past decade, journalists in Mexico and Central America have created their own ethical codes and formed more organizations to support the move toward more objective reporting, while morphing the media landscape with more U.S.-styled publications and broadcast programs. However, an older culture of bribery, special deals, and dangers for those who step outside the corrupt system still exists.

This paper examines the changes in the ethical culture of journalism in several countries in the region where there has been an extensive history of violence and repression aimed at the media. Using various cases, this paper will illustrate how an emerging culture of nonpartisan and ethical journalism is being confronted by an older guard which was used by powerful governmental or oligarchic forces to control information systems in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. In the end, although outside forces continue to exert tremendous pressure on journalists in this region as a way to limit free expression, this paper will show that often the enemies of journalists are inside the gates of the media citadels: they are the very colleagues journalists work alongside on a daily basis.

The Essential Journalistic Function

In the past decade, Mexico and Central America have begun a transition to real democratic systems, instead of the democratic facades of the past. The essential function of journalism and the media in such systems is to connect the governed to the government; allowing opinions to bubble to the surface of the political system and influence the direction of these states. Philosopher John Stuart Mill (1961) tells us that journalists should strive toward this goal using ethical methods while keeping in mind to defend the rights of individuals in democratic systems.

This is the ideal. But in practice, media systems in Latin America have sometimes proved deficient in living up to that promise.

For example, Brazilian journalist Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva (2000) writes about the collusion between strong central governments, prominent media owners, and elite power structures in his country to show how following a communitarian ethical course toward democratic structures is undercut by interests of power and monetary gain. In Brazil, media owners and leading media figures are also part of the political and business system that bred the corrupt practices that ethics codes mean to curtail. Although

journalists are asked to be independent observers, they cannot separate themselves completely from their political and corporate realities. How those realities end up undercutting efforts for different standards and practices in Mexico and Central America have often been ignored.

In her work on Latin American broadcasting, Elizabeth Fox (1997) writes extensively on the dependency between the media sector and government, in connection with elite forces in Brazil, Mexico and other countries. This is not a true utilitarian ethic. The community has little voice in how such systems are governed. The media are not keepers of a two-way street of communication between the citizenry and the powerful. Rather, such systems are one-way streets of communication and the community is shaped by the opinions of a powerful few. Although such governments have called themselves democracies they were far from the ideal.

The source of many of the problems for journalism in the region begins with media owners who refuse to confront the problems of their workforce. First, the salaries of many journalists in the region are extremely low. Many journalists must find other means, often through corrupt practices, to attain status in the middle class. Often compounding this problem is the fact that many publishers, media owners and editors actively turn a blind eye to the problem of corruption inside newsrooms. The system of corruption helps support the controlling means of using violent actions to enforce boundaries on the limits of free expression against journalists who refuse to take payments, or who may disappoint their patrons within the corrupt system. Therefore, the owners and those who accept the bribes and special favors within the system are also complicit with the sometimes-violent reactions against the investigative journalists who refuse to play by the rules of this older media culture. The atmosphere of corruption supports a system where violent acts against journalists are often committed with impunity by narcotics traffickers or those in government linked to the traffickers. This paper will outline those linkages.

However, as democracy has begun to grow, a tug-of-war of sorts has evolved not just within the political systems but also the media systems of these countries in transition. These tensions have revealed just how corruption and violence are used as flip sides of the same coin -- the means of media control.

PANAMA

In Panama, an attempt at a new culture for journalism began in the mid-1990s. To break with the older culture, Panamanian journalists looked inward and began exposing their own internal corruption, called *la botella* (the bottle) in Panamanian slang. The first major story concerned Edwin Wald. Wald was a journalist who worked in the National Assembly's public relations office. He revealed that the president of the assembly, Balbina Herrera had approved regular bribes for reporters, ranging from \$400 to \$2600 per month (Guerrero, 1995). Because the average salary for a journalist in Panama is about \$300 per month, these were significant bribes. Wald's allegations appeared in four of Panama's major national papers and were carried by one of the country's networks, Canal 2. This was the first time journalists openly discussed the casual bribery that was a foundation in the system. Two newspapers, *La Prensa* and *El Panamá Americano* actually revealed the names of their own reporters in the expose. Both of these papers had owners and managers who had embraced new, stronger ethical codes for journalists which made this exposé possible. Journalists from one of the nation's most popular radio stations and the national television channel, Canal 4 were also named in the scandal.

But these revelations met with defiance. Herrera denied the allegations and noted the only people on the legislative payroll to provide positive coverage were members of Wald's office. The leaders of the national association of journalists and the journalists' union also came to Herrera's aid. The national journalists association (*El Colegio Nacional de Periodistas*) and its president at the time, Barbara Bloise, noted that perennially low salaries in the Panamanian system encouraged outside work. The association defended the journalists on the grounds they had the right to accept payment for work outside their normal business hours for their primary employers since salaries are so low. Bloise argued the journalists should have the freedom to associate with those they chose after business hours and to work with others at a side job if their primary positions did not pay a sufficient salary (Guerrero, 1995). Bloise argued the payments were for public relations work done for the legislature, although it was obvious to all concerned that this work was not separate from the writing these journalists had done for their primary

employers.

Panama's La Prensa, once regarded as one of the best newspapers in Latin America, counterattacked. In a series of articles, the paper cast light on Bloise's own conflicts of interest. They revealed she not only held a reporting position with national Canal 13 (generally regarded as supportive of the right-wing government of the time) but she held other outside jobs as well. The paper revealed she often worked for a Panamanian business concern as well as doing public relations work for the University of Panama. Her work with the university put her on the public payroll and thus made her accountable to politicians like Herrera (Guerrero, 1995). However, it was clear through this media war of words that La Prensa's standards, molded on a strong foundation of ethics espoused by its long-time editor Winston Robles, were very different from many of the other media organizations in the country. Robles' standards were more in keeping with Mill's ideals for journalists operating within a democracy.

At radio stations, television stations, and many newspapers in the Panamanian system, if an organization wants its activities covered or a press release run, usually there is an exchange of cash involved or the swap of some sort of favor. Maribel Rodriguez Munoz (1998), the director of a non-governmental organization (NGO) devoted to cleaning up the streets in Panama's small neighborhoods and communities noted how such a system can be expensive for nonprofit organizations to get their message out to the community. However, she said, sometimes she preferred this system to a degree, despite its drain on her budget, because she could at least guarantee that her organization would receive coverage. With media outlets like La Prensa, which do not accept payment for space outside of the regular system of advertising, this NGO leader was not always successful with convincing editors or reporters that her group's activities were newsworthy. Ten other nonprofit NGOs were contacted about media practices concerning charging for articles in 1998. Most confirmed what Rodriguez said in her interview. But most civil society leaders in Panama agreed that in a system where paying for space was the accepted way of being granted coverage, that system, by its fundamental nature, also casts doubt on the veracity of what was published and only opened the news to people or organizations with sufficient power or cash.

In the Panamanian system the reporters and editors at La Prensa have often been journalistic lightning rods for controversy because of their culture of cleaner news standards. Gustavo Gorriti, a Peruvian who served as an investigative reporter and editor at La Prensa, personifies how courageous new era journalists often run afoul of the customs of the older, compromised media culture. During his stint at La Prensa, Gorriti faced expulsion from the country because of his reporting; an expulsion which would send him back to Peru where he has been a victim of kidnapping and where he has received death threats because of his work during the Fujimori era. After a rash of legal problems involving accusations of libel for his investigative work and threats regarding his visa, Gorriti eventually returned to Peru when Alejandro Toledo became president, after the Fujimori era.

Originally, Gorriti (1998) relocated to Panama because he saw that country as "an investigative reporter's paradise," a regional banking hub where much of the hemisphere's drug money is laundered. After his arrival in 1996, his first investigative target was the failure of the Panamanian Agro-Industrial and Commercial Bank. Gorriti revealed how drug lords used the bank to launder money and covered their tracks with help from government officials (Chasan, 1998).

Gorriti also managed to embarrass Panama's former President Ernesto Pérez Balladares. Gorriti dug up information about a \$51,000 campaign contribution to the president from a drug trafficker with ties to the Cali cartel. Although the president denied his campaign had accepted the contribution, eventually he was forced to admit Gorriti was correct.

The Panamanian government under Pérez Balladares sought revenge against the troublesome Peruvian editor. In the summer of 1997, when Gorriti's work permit was up for renewal, the government attempted to deport him and deny his work permit.

The international journalism community came to Gorriti's aid. Groups like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the International Press Institute (IPI) publicized the editor's plight. Gorriti called in the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS to intervene. The U.S. media latched on to

the editor's cause and he was profiled by some of America's largest newspapers. After months of international pressure, the Pérez Balladares administration backed down and reissued a visa and work permit for the embattled investigative editor.

Gorriti's problems and those of other investigative reporters in Panama arose because of his challenge to the system of cozy partnerships between reporters and the government. By trying to expose the workings of the drug gangs and their connections to government, investigative journalists are bucking the customs of a country where corruption exists inside journalistic circles too. The accepted norm is not to expose elites or members of the government without approaching them for a bribe first. During the Pérez Balladares administration, journalists could easily obtain payoffs from the national assembly, the national prosecutor's office and the office of the president.

Despite the attacks against them, ethical journalists in the Panamanian system advanced their new culture by not just exposing corruption within their own ranks, but using that incident as a springboard to serve notice on the government that journalists were moving into a more activist, watchdog role. As Mill has noted, the press must serve to illuminate the real workings of government so the populace can be more than dilettantes in representative government but true citizens. Corruption is one effective method that serves to undercut that role (Tulchin & Espach 2000).

HONDURAS

In near-by Honduras, journalists tried to advance a newer, ethics-based culture, only to eventually retreat to some middle ground acceptance of below the table arrangements. Two years before the Panamanian breakthrough, a similar media corruption scandal hit the newspapers in Honduras.

When a reporter mistakenly left a list of journalists who were on the payroll of the National Election Tribunal on a photocopy machine at Tiempo of San Pedro Sula, management was forced to confront those who were taking bribes. Vilma Gloria Rosales, Tiempo's editor, decided to publish the list, despite a death threat from the reporter who had left the list in the newsroom, because he was sorting out how much was owed to each reporter. Rosales also shared the list with her competition.

At her crosstown competition, La Prensa (no connection to the Panamanian newspaper of the same name) managing editor Nelson Fernández (who was later promoted partially because of his actions during this incident) also decided to print the list of reporters who were on the take, despite the fact the list contained the names of journalists in his own newsroom. This was a significant development, because Tiempo and La Prensa are considered two of the most influential national newspapers in Honduras. Fernández and Rosales both decided to fire members of their staffs who had accepted the payments from the government. This confrontation with corruption was credited by Honduran journalists with driving open corruption out of most newsrooms in the country (Martinez, 1998).

However, this did not solve the problem. Less than six years later, the current managing editor of Honduras' La Prensa, Maria Antonia Martinez admitted she knew corruption was still alive in her newsroom, but she said reporters were wise enough to keep it hidden from management. In general, she said most Honduran newsrooms were still infected by corrupt practices although the amount of journalists accepting bribes had decreased.

In the current Honduran system, Martinez said corruption came in various forms. Sometimes, it worked like blackmail. A reporter would research a negative story, then approach the person or business at the center of the story for a bribe to drop the piece. Sometimes, powerful patrons would hire journalists to dig up dirt on their enemies. In 1998, Martinez caught a member of her staff doing just that. She chose not to fire this reporter, but to issue some disciplinary measures including a demotion and a change of beat assignments. The reporter had cultivated his corrupt patrons through his beat. Often editors are part of these systems of corruption and take a percentage. Such a system, however, allowed information and news articles to be sold in a way similar to advertising. Much like in Panama, the directors of NGOs in Honduras confirmed that to place stories in most papers in the country a pricetag

was attached. Although influential papers like *Tiempo* and *La Prensa* had changed this practice, their changes had not eliminated corruption from journalism altogether.

In Honduras, why did journalists retreat after their initial attempts at driving out corrupt colleagues in 1993? What made the Honduran example different were official reactions to the new aggressiveness of the media. Instead of the sophisticated legal and bureaucratic response of the Panamanian system, in Honduras the threat of physical violence may have slowed the evolution of the system, which has resulted in today's compromised status.

In 1993, the emboldened Honduran media also began experimenting with criticism of the military. Although Hondurans elected civilian governments at the time, the system was still basically run by the military. However, the early 1990s were a period of change. Slowly, civilian government and civil society were acquiring more power within the system. With these new freedoms, the media finally felt it was time to expose the dirty war the Honduran military had conducted against opposition forces in the country during the 1980s. Honduras' *La Prensa* ran an award-winning series which exposed extrajudicial killings and disappearances at the hands of the military.

But the Honduran media soon discovered that reporting history was one thing, and reporting on current events was another. One of the nation's television networks revealed linkages between the military and the murder of a prominent businessman in San Pedro Sula in 1993. The television reporters who worked on those reports were soon receiving threats for their work. In an attempt to show support, *Tiempo* ran a series of reports on the threats and the original allegations linking the military to the murder (Newman, 1994). Immediately following the series of reports in *Tiempo*, Yani Rosenthal, one of the owners of the newspaper had his house firebombed. One of the television reporters who had broken the initial story fled the country due to the number of death threats he received.

After the firebombing, Col. Mario Hung Pacheco, the head of the military's police forces issued a statement. Hung Pacheco's forces were responsible for police duties in the capital and in San Pedro Sula. He noted in his statement that the military was keeping files on all journalists and the nation's security forces regularly monitored their activities. Such news had a chilling effect on journalists who were fearful of violence directed by the military. The announcement seemed to curtail the media's new-found aggressiveness and it may have signaled an end to aggressive campaigns to rid newsrooms of journalists suspected of having monetary links to the government or the military.

Later, Hung Pacheco was promoted to general and eventually headed Honduras' armed forces. In effect, this made him the highest power in the country, because at the time the head of the Honduran armed forces was not appointed by the president and the country's Congress routinely approved the choices of the military's top generals (Ruhl, 1997). However, Hung Pacheco was the last commander to be above such review and appointment in the Honduran system which reverted to presidential control in 2000. But Hung Pacheco's announcement and his later ascension into ultimate power in the system signaled an end to the media's probing of military wrongdoing.

During the late 1990s, Honduras' transition to civilian rule has been marked by the rise of media owners into positions of political power. Former President Carlos Flores Facussé is the owner of one of the country's most powerful newspapers, *La Tribuna*. During the Flores administration, media insiders said Flores and a cabal of other media owners, who also wield power in the country's Liberal Party, weeded out voices of dissent from major media outlets, clamped down on competitors who weren't aligned with their party, and secretly set the editorial agenda for this Central American nation (Sarmiento, 1998). This powerful group of media owners and political elites seems content to leave corruption under the surface of the system, giving the appearance that the political and media systems have cleansed themselves of past abuses.

Self-censorship is the end result for most Honduran journalists who have left the battle for free expression to the forces of the military and emerging civilian powers who have strong ties to the most powerful forces in the country's economic system and little interest in social justice (Guevara, 1994).

One of the reporters and news anchors in Honduras who is known for her truthfulness, honesty and ethical principles, Sandra Maribel Sanchez has also chosen to become one of that nation's chief critics. At a symposium in Panama to review Central American media in 1999, Sanchez said she agreed with those who have branded the Honduran media as "insatiable gangsters" for their appetite for bribes (Fliess, 1999). Although she also noted the system had more objective reporters now than in the past, she blamed media owners for not pushing ethical reforms enough.

Interestingly, Sanchez is one of the last reporters in Honduras to openly report she was the focus of death threats because of her reporting. In 1996, Sanchez received a series of telephone death threats after she reported on corruption in the Honduran Congress and among members of the military (Chasan, 1997). Once again, someone who challenged the system in Honduras was sent a message to restrain herself.

Although these messages are certainly more chilling and ominous than the legal actions against reporters in Panama, in the end they amount to similar tactics in each of these nations. In Panama when an investigative force such as Gustavo Gorriti established himself in the country and began exposing corruption, the state reacted by using various mechanisms as a reaction to his reporting. Direct attacks on Gorriti, although legal and nonviolent, nevertheless were attempts to limit his free speech rights and send a message to his colleagues in the Panamanian system. In Honduras, the reaction was more threatening and blunt.

Importantly, those in power in Honduras found that when they could not use corruption as a means of co-opting journalists that they had to turn to violence. As the violent reactions against editors and reporters and threats against them show, when the system of corruption is challenged, violent reactions seem almost inevitable. In this way, those who support and participate in compromised journalistic systems also are supporting violence as the ultimate means of control against journalists and members of the media who refuse to accept the controls imposed by these corrupt systems.

GUATEMALA

In Guatemala, the state also had an over-riding effect on the level of corruption in the 1990s. But state policy actually had the unintended effect of reducing media corruption. The government of President Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen decided to use its economic clout to change the media system. To gain leverage, Arzú ordered an official halt to all payments to journalists -- both illicit payments and above-board subsidies. He also ordered that a list of all journalists who had accepted bribes be posted.

Arzú's policies produced a ripple effect. Media outlets were forced to confront some journalists about their corrupt practices, because the government had exposed their corrupt ways. Also, other businesses and institutions that had used bribery as a method to place stories, and as a method to prevent stories from publication, also followed the government's example and discontinued their use of illicit payments, what Guatemalan journalists refer to in slang as fa-fa.

At the same time, the Arzú administration stopped advertising in many of the nation's newspapers and magazines, and only retained advertising links to media outlets deemed to be friendly to the administration. Because the Guatemalan government is the largest single advertiser in the country and because the government's secret payments to journalists were also estimated to be the largest source of illicit cash support for journalists, these new policies carried quite a bit of economic clout.

They also proved to be a way to reduce fa-fa. Other factors were also at work to fight corruption and reduce it in the Guatemalan system, however. Guatemalan media managers credited a new generation of younger journalists with rejecting bribes. Media outlets also began paying higher salaries as a way to combat bribery. All of these factors combined, media managers said, to cut the amount of corruption in the system.

But that reduction has not eliminated fa-fa completely. Editors at the nations' largest dailies said they had disciplined several of their reporters for accepting bribes during the Arzú administration. Some of

the papers now have explicit written personnel policies prohibiting the acceptance of bribes.

“One reporter can make us all lose our credibility,” explained Gustavo Berganza, the managing editor of Siglo Veintiuno in 1998. “We have to fight every day, because the government, businesses, and publicity firms all offer us money.” As noted earlier, although the Arzú administration had also stopped its practice of giving government subsidies and advertising to publications as a way of exerting editorial control, Siglo Veintiuno was one of the only publications which retained some government accounts, mainly because it was perceived as being tacitly aligned with Arzú’s branch of the PAN (National Action Party, by its Spanish acronym).

But the reduction of corruption in Guatemala has not stopped the practice of some newspapers charging for the placement of articles, although it may have made the practice more secretive. Many leaders of non-profit organizations in the country noted that the media usually never raised the issue of payment for placement. However, a minority of leaders of civil society groups and NGOs did complain about being solicited for bribes by members of the media. José Serech, a representative of one Mayan cultural organization reported that one Guatemalan newspaper had asked for \$5,000 to run a story about the group’s educational programs. The group refused to pay and the story did not run (Serech, 1998).

Although Guatemalan newspapers have improved policies concerning bribes and corruption, in television the atmosphere remains clouded. Television workers are the lowest paid media workers in the country, and corruption remains pervasive in their ranks. One journalist who was willing to talk about corruption was José Eduardo Zarco, who is the former editor of Guatemala’s Prensa Libre, and at one time had the only independent television news magazine in the country. (When newly elected President Alfonso Portillo of the FRG, or Republican Front of Guatemala, took power in 2000, the option Zarco held for his television time was revoked by the monopoly interest that controls Guatemalan television. Zarco’s program had been critical of the new president during the campaign.) Although Zarco has campaigned for higher ethical standards among journalists, he said many of his colleagues in television were willing to accept something that could compromise their reporting. “Someone will offer an expensive gift, now,” Zarco said because direct cash payments were considered socially unacceptable, so more sophisticated means were necessary (Zarco 1998). He said reporters accepted such gifts and favors, and “just look the other way.”

Although journalism corruption did not disappear in Guatemala, importantly, like in Panama and Honduras, it was reduced. And just as in those other countries in the region, once that reduction was noticeable, reporters began to test the limits of what they could report within this changing system. Although the Arzú administration retained the controlling measure of economic clout to either sanction or curb critical reporting, Guatemalan journalists began to experiment with more confrontational or investigative journalism after the peace accords were signed. During the years of the country’s civil war, Guatemalan journalism was renowned in the region for usually being weak, passive and easily controlled by the government.

Although journalists in the capital found their cautious advance into critical reporting was perhaps only economically painful, the story in the provinces was different. International journalism groups believe Jorge Luis Marroquín Sagastume, the editor of the monthly Sol Chortí, was murdered for his reporting on corruption in the provincial city of Jocotán in 1997 (Chasan, 1998). Brazenly, two assassins shot the editor to death on one of the town’s streets. At trial, the gunmen implicated the town’s mayor José Manuel Ohajaca. The men said Ohajaca had hired them to kill the editor to stop his critical reporting on the city’s government. Guatemalan law gives mayors immunity from prosecution in many crimes, including this one. The Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala City petitioned to have the immunity lifted. Although that request was rejected, the case is pending before the country’s Supreme Court. The men accused of killing Marroquín were sentenced to 30 years in prison by a Guatemalan court (Rockwell, 1999, Nov. 14). Guatemalan courts are reviewing Ohajaca’s immunity, because he is no longer the mayor of Jocotán. In the face of the turn toward this type of judicial review Ohajaca fled the country.

Besides Marroquín, the CPJ lists four other journalists among the murder victims in Guatemala since the

peace accords were signed late in 1996. However, the CPJ was unable to determine if they were killed because of their journalistic endeavors or were the victims of common criminals. The threat to personal safety is very high in Guatemala because of a rash of crime, partially brought on by the post-war availability of guns and the high poverty rate (Chasan, 1998).

What makes this case interesting is the journalist's attackers were found and prosecuted. Many attacks against journalists in this region of the world usually go unpunished. The Marroquín case signaled an end to such impunity against journalists in Guatemala, at least for the time being.

However, the Marroquín case also illustrates the spectrum of reaction to shifting media rights in repressive countries. In Panama, once journalists had exposed their own corruption and moved to report on official corruption, the system reacted by using legal and bureaucrat means to attempt to curb the criticism. In Honduras, once journalists had attempted to reveal their own corruption and then moved to expose abuses by the military, the reaction was threats and violent warnings against the media. In Guatemala, although journalists in the capital faced only economic pressure and boundaries on reporting because of corruption (and these boundaries were lifted somewhat once Arzú left office, leading to a rash of post-Arzú stories on his corrupt administration) the reaction and message were clearly different in the countryside: brutal means could still be seen as an option to provide a chilling effect on critical reporting. This dichotomy may be connected to how the state and leading media outlets both were working to diminish corruption in the late 1990s, while journalists in rural areas remained in a culture where local and departmental governments still depended upon corruption as a mechanism of control. Those who sought to break such cultural norms, such as Marroquín, might face the pressure of violence. However, the prosecution of the Marroquín case also points to the changing culture even in Guatemala's violent rural areas.

MEXICO

In neighboring Mexico, although journalism and the system for repressing free expression has been changing throughout the last decade, less progress seems to have been made when compared to Central America. Unlike the small countries of Central America noted in this report, Mexico has not had a nationwide expose of its past corrupt journalism practices. Sometimes news of such corruption does leak out into the media, but usually after a journalist is killed. During the late 1990s, journalists did work to create new journalism associations with stronger ethical codes within the country. This organization of journalistic groups came as a reaction to the continued waves of violence that seem to periodically claim victims from the ranks of journalists. These new groups were set up to call attention to threats and violence aimed at journalists.

Mexico has also seen a transition away from official state repression of free speech; now the most dangerous elements opposed to free expression seem to be narcotics traffickers and those in league with them in the police or military ranks. During the administration of President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, Mexico officially curtailed payments to journalists (although unlike in Guatemala, the list of corrupt journalists was not published in an attempt to hurt credibility) and the president officially ordered army troops to guard several journalists and writers whose work had spurred threats or attacks by drug gangs or their surrogates (Rockwell, 1999). This has been an important development because the IPI and other journalism organizations acknowledge that since 1970 more journalists have been killed in Mexico than any other nation in the hemisphere.

Mexico's transition to a more ethical form of journalism began with a push from the top by rich owners like the Junco family, with its papers *El Norte* in Monterrey and *Reforma* in Mexico City (Fromson, 1996). These papers strived for objectivity and for an appealing graphic presentation as a way to modernize and break with Mexico's past. Rich publishers like the Juncos and Juan Francisco Ealy Ortiz of *El Universal*, who retooled his paper after competition from *Reforma*, were making enough in profits from private advertising lineage to be able to do without government advertising if the editorial content of the newspapers began to cross the government. These papers also didn't need *gacetillas*, paid government press releases disguised as regular portions of the newspaper which are common in many Mexican papers. The Mexican economy had improved enough to make these large circulation newspapers

profitable. Once that happened the papers were able to chart a more independent course. Papers without such profitability or owners with deep pockets, however, still had to depend on the government dole, and thus hewed closer to a pro-government editorial line.

Although the government had officially ended the *embute*, the Mexican slang term for journalistic graft, many journalists still collected such fees for friendly treatment from state or municipal governments and political parties (Fromson, 1996). However, unlike in Central America, where the press moved to expose its own members for accepting these fees, in Mexico usually the news has leaked out for political reasons.

For instance, in 1997, journalists in the Mexican state of Guerrero marched to protest the death of Jesús Bueno León, the editor of the weekly *Siete Días*. Bueno León had published stories critical of José Rubén Robles Catalán, Guerrero's former Interior Secretary and a powerful politician in Mexico's ruling party, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, by its Spanish acronym). Not only had Robles resigned his state post because of his links to the cover-up of a massacre of peasants by state police, but the stories in *Siete Días* recounted Robles' long-standing feud with a former mistress that led to her imprisonment on false charges and the murder of her attorney, along with police misconduct and involvement in the feud (Dillon, 1996, Aug. 26). Robles responded by filing a criminal defamation suit against the editor.

Three months after the suit was filed, Bueno León's body was discovered on a road near the state capital of Chilpancingo. He had been tortured and shot numerous times.

As a way to spur the investigation, after the murder, the editor's wife released a letter written by her husband in case he was killed. It read in part: "I ask the first line of investigation be the examination of José Rubén Robles Catalán and his group of corrupt police" (Simon, 1998). The letter also accused state officials and other journalists of being involved in a murder plot.

Again, this is an important notation. Victims of journalism repression often realize that some of the agents of the state or other corrupt parties are often fellow journalists. Those who are willing to accept bribes are often willing to not just spread rumors or create other pressures within the media systems, but they are also willing to turn a blind eye to the violence within it. Instead of directing public pressure and civil society to end such violence, the culture of the media is to accept such occurrences.

In the months after Bueno León's murder, Guerrero's new governor Angel Aguirre revealed the murdered journalist had been on a surreptitious state payroll. He had been paid for media advice and for his public relations work, or less euphemistically for slanting the stories in his weekly appropriately. For some journalists, Bueno León's exposure by the state showed how those willing to accept bribes also opened themselves to violent reprisals when they step beyond what such violent and corrupt cultures demand. Those who murdered Bueno León may have felt justified because they felt the journalist had gone back on the agreement to slant the truth.

In light of all the facts, Carlos Marín, then an investigative editor at Mexico's highly respected magazine *Proceso*, noted, "It would have been an embarrassment to be marching for someone who was corrupt. Corrupt reporters in this country can't use journalism as a defense. They have sold that right already. Too often reporters have used their journalism jobs as an excuse to hide other secret activities. Journalists need to check these stories out instead of trusting other journalists, especially in a country where corruption is a problem" (Rockwell, 1999, p. 207). In Marín's opinion, many of the murders of journalists in Mexico can be linked to corruption or involvement in politics beyond ethical journalistic behavior.

In this atmosphere of mistrust, the latest attacks against journalists in Mexico are often judged against the political context. For instance, when Lilly Tellez, an anchorwoman for Mexico's national network, TV Azteca, was attacked by three gunmen on a Mexico City street, although investigators immediately suspected drug dealers were behind the unsuccessful hit (Tellez was unhurt, although her three bodyguards were wounded) politics was also part of the discussion (Rodriguez & Sanchez, 2000, June

24). The Mexican network (along with its competitor, Televisa) has been accused of supporting the ruling party PRI and slanting its political coverage in 1997 and during the presidential elections in 2000. After the 1994 presidential elections, scandals revealed TV Azteca had received special considerations from PRI administrations and had paid kickbacks to PRI political figures (Fromson, 1996). When left-wing political forces took over the prosecutor's office in Mexico City after the 1997 election, TV Azteca accused the new prosecutors of dragging their feet in the murder investigation of Paco Stanley, one of the network's popular comics. Mexico City prosecutors made statements that Stanley and perhaps others at the network were linked to drug dealers. This political feud spilled over into the investigation of the Tellez shooting, so federal prosecutors were asked to investigate. Thus the investigation into the Tellez shooting immediately became less of a search for journalistic causes and linkages and more an extension of the brutal politics linked to narcotics trafficking that too often is at the core of attacks against journalists in Mexico.

Even the newly packaged newspapers, Reforma and El Universal have been sucked into the maelstrom of Mexico's dirty politics. During the elections of 1997 for Congress, some governors' spots and the prestigious office of Mexico City's mayor, Reforma's top-notch investigative team resigned en masse when management spiked a story linking Junco family associates to the corrupt administration of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (Rockwell, 1999). Also El Universal was criticized for what some journalists felt was a partisan financial investigation of the left-wing candidate for Mexico City's mayor, who eventually won the position as the first non-PRI mayor in the city's modern history despite the investigation.

To extend the argument put forward by Carlos Marín, the respected former editor of Proceso, journalists in Mexico in many cases have poisoned their own well. Although the federal government has officially curtailed corruption used to control the system, many journalists remained tethered to financial rewards that keep them from using an objective voice. In such a system it is hard to know which sources have credibility and which have been bought and sold. In Mexico, especially, since many of the journalists have compromised their integrity, they become easier targets for corrupt members of the government, police and military, not to mention drug dealers. These monetary patrons may decide to take their complaints to journalists in the form of threats and violence instead of the more customary forms of filing an angry letter to the editor when the views expressed by the journalists differ from what their patrons tell them to print. Perhaps this accounts for the greater level of violence and brutality on display in Mexico compared to Central America. In all of the Central American nations examined here, all tried to come to some general cleansing of their systems with investigative articles on journalism corruption during the past decade. Journalism corruption has not been talked about openly in the Mexican media except on rare occasions, and usually as an ugly post-mortem. Unlike Central America, where attacks and threats have declined or leveled off in the past decade, Mexico continues to be one of the hemispheric leaders in violence aimed at journalists. This speaks not only to the corruption of journalists in the system, but also to the violent methods of control used by corrupt police and drug lords to keep free expression penned inside prescribed limits. Besides the Tellez shooting with its political overtones, the killings of three Mexican journalists along the border in 2000 and 2001 show elements in Mexican society linked to drug gangs continue to use violence as a primary means of discouraging investigative journalism and to encourage participation in corrupt practices. As the Mexican saying goes, you must choose between plata or plomo: choosing between silver or lead. Many journalists in the Mexican system opt for the safer choice, and choose to compromise their integrity. This system also keeps the journalist tethered and self-censoring; should they choose to write freely again, they know the lethal penalties. Without a repudiation of such linkages by a wide variety of journalists and strong post-attack coverage by the media, this system of intimidation and corruption seems destined to continue to infect the Mexican media, despite its modern evolution.

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen in all these media systems, negative reactions to more independent and investigative journalism. From Panama, where investigative journalism linked politicians to the financing of drug dealers, the reaction was one of bureaucratic and legal attacks. To the other extreme, in Mexico, where journalists are attempting to shine light on the corrupt and brutal connections between drug lords,

police, and politicians, but the corruption of many journalists in the system makes them easier targets for more violent controlling mechanisms, and they often see lethal penalties for stepping outside the invisible boundaries for commentary set secretly by powers outside of the media field. Guatemala and Honduras provided other examples. In Honduras, reporters retreated quickly to a safe, compromised territory where corruption still existed but not as openly as it had during the 1980s. The Honduran retreat was due to strong warnings and violent threats linked to the country's powerful military. In Guatemala, although corruption still existed, the federal government and journalistic forces combined to clean up some of the system, thus providing more space for critical commentary. Although journalists could still pay a lethal price for criticizing government officials, this penalty seemed less acceptable than within the Mexican system.

What these examples also show is that although journalists are not primarily responsible for repression -- that is primarily due to the primacy and force used by state forces or drug lords -- they are often cooperative co-creators of the culture surrounding the media, which allows the use of force to restrain free expression. In our examples, the system with the most diligence toward attaining a more objective and less compromised media culture, the Panamanian system, also proved to be the least dangerous for the journalists involved. In Guatemala, although lethal extremes against critical journalists were still possible, the rule of law was attempting to make those responsible pay for such retribution. Throughout Latin America, such prosecutions of the killers of journalists are extremely rare. Using Mexico and Central America as a comparative zone for this study, journalists should also take note that when the media aggressively set out uncompromising ethical standards and work toward exposing corruption after cleansing their own ranks, the results can be extremely positive. But lacking a wide acceptance of ethical norms, the media culture becomes the prey of larger, dangerous, more corrupt forces, which also threaten the rule of law and civil society.

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Rick Rockwell teaches broadcast journalism and ethics at American University in Washington, D.C. He has two decades of experience in the media: as a reporter, producer, and news manager. He has worked for the ABC network as a TV and radio producer, The Discovery Channel as a senior producer, and PBS' News Hour as a freelance reporter. He's written articles recently about human rights and freedom of expression for The Baltimore Sun, Newsday and In These Times magazine. As a freelance writer he's also written for The Chicago Tribune, the American Journalism Review and the L.A. Reader, among other publications.

In 2000, he covered the historic Mexican elections for In These Times along with contributing to the book, Mexico: Facing the Challenges of Human Rights and Crime. Also, he is a contributor to the new book, Latin Politics, Global Media. In 1994, he covered the Mexican presidential elections for the Associated Press. He is the co-author of the forthcoming book, Media Power in Central America. He has lectured on a variety of topics in Mexico, Central America and Venezuela. As a reporter and television producer, he's also worked in Cuba, Nicaragua and Guatemala. As a television reporter and producer, Rockwell reported from Nicaragua during the Contra War and covered Pope John Paul II's visit to Central America in the 1980s. As a consultant on media projects he's traveled extensively in Panama, Honduras, Guatemala and Venezuela.

As a television producer, Rockwell has also produced documentaries in various Western European countries (France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg) Russia, Canada, and Pakistan.

He taught journalism for three years at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Chicago, where he also earned his undergraduate degree in journalism. He received a masters' degree in international journalism from the University of Southern California in 1994. He's taught at American University since 1997.

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