

Murders, threats and duopoly: the state of press freedom in Mexico

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Deadly attacks on journalists are on the rise in Mexico, and perpetrators operate largely with impunity

On 2 January, journalist Moisés Sánchez was kidnapped by an armed group. Nine people with covered faces stormed into his house in Medellín de Bravo, a town in the wealthy eastern state of Veracruz. They searched and grabbed documents, and took Sánchez, along with his camera, laptop, mobile phone and tablet. The police took hours to come to the house. Sánchez [was found dead](#) 23 days later on the outskirts of the town.

Sánchez, editor of [La Unión](#), is the eleventh journalist to be murdered in Veracruz since Governor Javier Duarte de Ochoa took office on 1 December 2010. As well as murders, four media professionals have gone missing and there have been [132 attacks](#) against the local press in the same period.

Events in Veracruz state are serious, but they are far from exceptional. In vast zones of [Mexico](#), especially on the United States border and in areas where drug trafficking prevails, journalists at all levels have been threatened or attacked. Victims include some of the most nationally well-known commentators but more frequently are reporters writing for regional and local media, online and on social media.

The free press defence organisation [Article 19](#) documents three chilling facts: attacks against communicators are rising in Mexico, in most cases impunity prevails, and in more than half of cases the perpetrators are linked with the state.

During the investigation into Sánchez's disappearance, the entire police force of Medellín de Bravo [was detained](#) by state prosecutors. A former police officer confessed to participating in the murder, claiming he did so "by direct order" of Martín López Meneses, deputy director of the municipal police in Medellín. Sánchez had been threatened by the mayor three days before being kidnapped.

In June 2011, Frank William La Rue – then UN special rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression – [warned that](#) Mexico was the most dangerous country in the Americas for communicators. La Rue documented 66 cases of murders against journalists between 2000 and 2010, and 12 disappearances between 2005 and 2010, of which few have been solved.

As with diseases that have a new outbreak after they were believed eradicated this evil came back to life eight years ago, when then-President Felipe Calderón, of the conservative PAN party, declared a "war on drugs", with logistical support and funding

from the US. Violence against the press walks hand-in-hand with the violation of human rights, the criminalisation of social protest, and the so-called war on drugs. Impunity gives criminals carte blanche. Organised crime and its networks of complicity with those in political power have further aggravated the tense situation in Mexico.

Many reporters and media organisations are terrified. With increasing frequency, journalists are seeking asylum in the US. Others choose to publish anonymously and many avoid writing about events that could endanger their lives.

“There is a border where dirty money becomes apparently clean ... and it is on that border where the journalist runs a greater risk,” [states a report](#) by Article 19. “It is not the consummate criminals who threaten the journalists. It is the apparently legal powers and seemingly reputable businesses that feel most threatened by the journalist’s work, precisely because it is on that border where the journalist may denounce the politician, policeman, soldier, or businessman that is in collusion with organised crime.”

On April 2012, a new law, *Ley para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas*, was approved and certain mechanisms to protect journalists were implemented, including the adoption of cautionary actions and, in some cases, police protection of individuals under threat.

But far from diminishing, violence against journalists keeps growing. In 2013 alone 330 attacks against journalists, media workers and offices were documented, making it [the most violent year](#) for journalists in Mexico since 2007.

On 3 February, the [Washington Office on Latin America](#) and [Peace Brigades International](#) [described](#) the new legislation as insufficient, and said it does not provide for timely responses to demands of protection. They blame the Mexican government for discrediting and criminalising human rights defenders and organisations, and highlight the levels of impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of crimes against journalists and human rights defenders.

The flip side of the lack of freedom of the press in Mexico is the high concentration of mass media ownership and control. Almost all (96%) of Mexico’s commercial television channels are in the hands of two corporations, Televisa and TVAzteca, and 80% of radio broadcasters are owned by 13 commercial groups. Some of those groups control dozens of networks.

This duopoly simultaneously provokes an enormous absence of information as well as great scepticism about the news broadcast in Mexico. During the general election campaign in 2012 thousands of young people mobilised outside the studios of Televisa and TVAzteca to protest the manipulation of information. The government passed new legislation but the rules of the game essentially did not change.

A new federal law of telecommunications and radio broadcasting was enacted in 2014, aiming to break down the media duopoly by creating a new private television network. It

has not yet materialised. Civil society organisations were strongly critical of the new law, stating that it limits the powers of the regulating body (which should be autonomous), avoids the necessary mechanisms to fight monopolies efficiently, restricts public and social media, and ignores the rights of audiences.

Press freedom in Mexico faces severe obstacles. To give guarantees allowing journalists to exercise their profession, to fight impunity, limit the power of monopolies and open spaces to public communication media are important challenges. International attention is essential. More murders like that of Moisés Sánchez must be prevented.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/feb/25/press-freedom-mexico-murder-threat-duopoly>