

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

# The Challenges to Mexico's Press, Past and Present

Andrew Paxman

CIDE, MX

[andrew.paxman@cide.edu](mailto:andrew.paxman@cide.edu)

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**La red de los espejos: Una historia del diario Excélsior, 1916–1976.** By Arno Burkholder, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016. Pp. 187. 140.00 pesos paperback. ISBN: 9786071637208.

**Callar o morir en Veracruz: Violencia y medios de comunicación en el sexenio de Javier Duarte (2010–2016).** By Celia del Palacio Montiel. Mexico City: Juan Pablos, 2018. Pp. 424. 300.00 pesos paperback. ISBN: 9786077114598.

**Historia crítica del periodismo mexicano.** By Humberto Musacchio. Mexico City: Luna Media Comunicación, 2016. Pp. 259. 200 pesos paperback. ISBN: 9786079736705.

**Unwanted Witnesses: Journalists and Conflict in Contemporary Latin America.** By Gabriela Polit Dueñas. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. Pp. xv + 168. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822945833.

**“Se solicitan reporteros”: Historia oral del periodismo mexicano en la segunda mitad del siglo XX.** By Ana María Serna. Mexico City: Editorial Mora, 2015. Pp. 383. 229.00 pesos paperback. ISBN: 9786079475161.

**The Mexican Press and Civil Society, 1940–1976: Stories from the Newsroom, Stories from the Street.** By Benjamin T. Smith. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 366. \$37.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469638089.

**Narcoperiodismo: La prensa en medio del crimen y la denuncia.** By Javier Valdez Cárdenas. Mexico City: Aguilar, 2016. Pp. 109.00 pesos paperback. ISBN: 9786073147118.

---

One of the ironies of the ideologically diffuse presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador is that a politician long supported by most of Mexico's independent media has made no progress in stemming violence against the press. According to the NGO Article 19, more than 130 Mexican media workers have been killed since 2000. This sum includes forty-seven murders during the term of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), or roughly eight per year, and another sixteen during the first two years in office of López Obrador. Further, the current president's dismissal of media critical of his regime as “*la prensa fifi*” (the posh press) or even “*el hampa*” (criminals) has raised anxieties that he lacks not only the ability but also the will to safeguard press freedoms.

Concern about violence—not only murders, but each year hundreds of beatings, thefts of property, and death threats, as well as what some term the “structural violence” of low salaries and vulnerability to sudden dismissal—has been one of two major factors of an unprecedented boom in research on Mexico's press. Media scholars, NGOs, and journalists themselves have documented and analyzed the plague of aggression, part of a global trend that outside war zones such as Syria and Iraq has been felt most acutely in Latin America. Since 2000, Mexico has been the region's deadliest arena, with Colombia and Brazil not far behind. In each case the causes are similar: powerful criminal organizations, corrupt local politicians, and collusion between the two, amid a context of police incompetence, judicial inefficiency, and public apathy toward journalists.

The second major factor of the research boom is historiographical. More historians are exploring press history, especially since 1940, as they seek to add nuance to our understanding of the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI; 1929–2000). Theirs is largely a revisionist project, part of a more general move to cast the hegemony of the PRI not as a monolithic *dictadura* but as an uneven and porous *dictabanda*. For media history, this means a less uniformly submissive press than critics have long described, an interpretative tradition encapsulated in the title of the best-known chronicle of press-state relations, *Prensa vendida* (sellout press).<sup>1</sup> This essay reviews recent monographs to have emerged from both trends, but it begins with a general work, the only comprehensive history of Mexican newspapers from their inception to the present.

### From the Colonial Era to the Present

Humberto Musacchio is not an academic, but he brings to *Historia crítica del periodismo mexicano* nearly five decades of experience as a journalist and a name for knowledgeability as editor of Mexico's most-consulted encyclopedias. The latter quality shines through most of this book. While periodicals were long read by a small minority, with print runs especially limited until the 1890s, and while the existence of almost all of them ran to a few years or less, Musacchio treats each of them with devotion. He implies that their impassioned editors embodied the intellectual history of Mexico's elite, with its perpetual tensions between conservatives and liberals, or autocrats and their critics.

"Journalism is an eminently political activity" (7), Musacchio begins, a thesis he fine-tunes to the effect of "particularly in Mexico." The gist is that nineteenth-century journalism was so markedly politicized, even by global standards, that the professionalizing of the activity—which began during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz with hiring of reporters and modernization of presses—was never able to wrest the medium from partisanship. A complementary thesis is that Mexican journalism "was born with a marked tendency toward submissiveness" (8). Most media toed the government line most of the time, largely because they depended on state subsidies. It thus fell to handful of newspapers and magazines to hold the powerful to account. Given the authoritarian tendencies of Díaz, those who replaced him, and Mexico's presidents as of 1940, and given their own financial precariousness, critical periodicals survived by choosing their battles. Those that opted for unbridled independence did not last long before authorities shut them down, a suppressive tradition extending at least from 1769, when a viceroy nixed the *Diario Literario de México* for publishing rationalist scientific thought, to 1967, when president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz extinguished *Política* for its hard-left criticisms.

Musacchio surprisingly devotes half of his pages to the period from independence to the fall of Díaz, a ninety-year stretch of much lower media impact than the subsequent century; contemporary accounts estimated combined readership at between 1 percent and 5 percent of the population. There are too many passages listing ephemeral publications and bygone writers for the sake of completism. But these chapters are otherwise edifying. They trace the press as a forum for propaganda, confrontation, occasionally debate, and they illustrate practices that would endure after the 1910–1920 Revolution. Much of the modern state's carrot-or-stick playbook was written during the 1830s and 1840s: monthly subsidies or their punitive withholding, fines for maligning government actors, beatings by contracted thugs, jail terms for so-called sedition, dispatch into exile. Similarly, politicians began to finance newspapers. Bribes to journalists would be normalized in the 1860s, under the French Intervention, and many of the recipients were themselves French—a detail that complicates the conventional wisdom about Mexico's endemic culture of press corruption.

Musacchio's narrative usefully interweaves technological context. The Porfiriato welcomed the telegraph and the telephone, which helped shift periodicals from opinion toward reporting; the accelerated building of railways, which widened the reach of the capital's papers; and the typewriter, camera, linotype, and rotary press, which combined to speed production, enhance readability, and establish the daily as a viable format. Such advances coalesced in *El Imparcial* (1896), the first mass newspaper, which, though cutting-edge in its technology and employment of reporters, was conservative in its role as chief mouthpiece of the state. Meanwhile, censorship and jail terms became more common, as did payment of subsidies. Historians seeking further continuities between the Porfiriato and the new regime can find plenty here. As of 1915 there were fewer jailings and more papers backed by individual politicians, but the fundamentals remained: a largely subservient press, largely subsidized by the state, and largely given to the project of national unity. After a period of relative freedom in the 1930s, levers of press control were strengthened anew, first by increased

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda, *Prensa vendida: Los periodistas y los presidentes* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1993).

subsidies during World War II, next by the routine handing of cash-stuffed envelopes to reporters by flaks from the ministries they covered.

The remainder of the book narrates the workings of *oficialismo* and occasional censorship. It devotes oddly little space to the main holdouts: *Siempre!* in the 1950s, *Política* in the 1960s, *Proceso* as of 1976, and *La Jornada* as of 1984. In line with leftist orthodoxy, Musacchio views the brutal suppression of the 1968 student movement as an awakening for a new generation of reporters, who would go on to play leading roles in the left-wing press. But it is a pity that the closer we get to the present, the quicker the pace becomes; 1988 to 2015 rushes by in a mere seven pages. Perhaps Musacchio, a veteran of *El Universal*, *Unomásuno*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, and *Excélsior* (i.e., most of the major national dailies), felt himself too close to the material—or too disappointed at the failure of publishers to live up to expectations of integrity—to study it objectively. The brevity of the final section is the only significant deficiency in this excellent book, although specialists may also wish for footnotes.

### Challenges to Traditional Readings of the Press

One thing that various media historians share with Musacchio is a willingness to tackle lengthy periodizations. Arno Burkholder surveys the first six decades of *Excélsior* in *La red de los espejos*. There is an ample literature on *Excélsior*, Mexico's most influential daily during the mid-twentieth century, but the majority consists of memoirs and focuses on 1976, when president Luis Echeverría backed an internal revolt against Julio Scherer, its independent-minded editor. Scherer responded by founding the muckraking newsweekly *Proceso*; through its deft direction, he came to be lauded as Mexico's patron saint of investigative journalism. A diaspora of former *Excélsior* personnel would dominate civic journalism until the 1990s. Meanwhile their alma mater gradually settled into a rut of lickspittle mediocrity (a few columnists and correspondents excepted) from which it has never emerged. Burkholder argues that to understand Echeverría's "coup," as it became known, one needs to know the history of the cooperative that ran the paper.

Burkholder's contribution rests upon a great find: the archive of that cooperative, which had lain unnoticed in the national archive since 1990. This trove promises to facilitate two important tasks: tracing the history of the paper using inside sources of a kind rarely available to researchers; and challenging the standard narrative of the coup, which posits Scherer as a Mexican Émile Zola, exiled for having confronted on principle an authoritarian president. The second task is well accomplished. When Scherer was elected editor in 1968, having earned his stripes as reporter, he inherited a rigidly hierarchical organization. Despite its transformation from private company to cooperative in 1932, *Excélsior* was run as a fiefdom by a sequence of editors-for-life; general assemblies were usually rubber-stamp affairs. Scherer therefore donned a royal sash, and he exercised his prerogative not only by fostering critical coverage of the state (as is well known), but also by firing opponents, hiring friends, and hobnobbing with elites. As a leader, he comes across as bold, autocratic, and, as one interviewee puts it, "enclosed in his ivory tower" (163).

Scherer also inherited two destabilizing forces. Like all newspapers, *Excélsior* relied on government handouts, including subsidized newsprint and state advertising—supports that any dissatisfied president could withdraw, putting pressure on the leadership. Second, a factional split had developed between old-hand conservatives and younger, ascendant leftists. Tensions had come to a head in 1965, when a dispute over control was adjudged by the state in the leftists' favor, for it deemed the conservatives too chummy with right-wing opposition parties. Many employees were purged, their numbers later swollen by further purges under Scherer. Many of those suspended worked in the printing division, which would form a key support base for the leadership challenge of 1976. This was orchestrated by a former ally of Scherer's, Regino Díaz Redondo, who would preside over the paper's stagnation for the following twenty-four years. The coup, in Burkholder's telling, was no simple matter of journalistic principles versus presidential vengeance, it also had much to do with media economics, internal factionalism, and a growing belief within the cooperative that the boss had become too big for his boots.

*La red de los espejos* is lucidly written and persuasive. But the execution of its other main task, telling the story of *Excélsior* as a newspaper (not only as an enterprise), lacks ambition. The tale begins well, using multiple sources to trace the paper's 1917 launch and its early decades, during which it balanced loyalty to the revolutionary elite with an instinctive Catholic conservatism. This ungainly tension was upset by the murder of former president Álvaro Obregón shortly after his reelection in 1928; its even-handed coverage of the assassin's trial was too neutral for national strongman Plutarco Elías Calles, who forced the paper's sale. Four years of revolving-door ownership culminated in bankruptcy. In 1932, to save *Excélsior*, Calles let employees set up a cooperative in apparent exchange for a new pledge of loyalty. Then began the long

editorship of Rodrigo de Llano (1932–1963), who restored the conservative-loyalist equilibrium. It is here that Burkholder starts to privilege the story of the company over that of the newspaper.

To fully reconstruct the life of a periodical, one needs archives—Burkholder consults several, including that of the secret service—and interviews with former personnel and knowledgeable observers; thirty are listed in the introduction. Yet one also needs to match inside sources with the evidence of the published item. There is too little attention to the latter. We seldom gather how behind-the-scenes changes and strains affected daily coverage, let alone how that coverage impacted the country. The middle chapters too often read like inside baseball, and the whole, at 166 pages of text, is oddly short. With most of the necessary materials to hand, Burkholder misses a golden opportunity to write the definitive history of *Excélsior*.

The idea that media history is greatly enriched by oral sources finds an apogee in Ana María Serna's "*Solicitan reporteros*". The in-depth interviews with nine veteran journalists that Serna conducted in 2005–2006 finally saw publication a decade later. Most of her subjects began as reporters between the 1940s and 1970s and most became editors at leading Mexico City periodicals. Given that each wrote for multiple publications—changing employers being a commoner trait within the Mexican press than in the United States or United Kingdom—the interviews collectively cover a majority of Mexico City's prominent newspapers over a sixty-year span.

The introduction provides an excellent overview of postrevolutionary journalism. In thoughtful and elegant prose, Serna dissects the "complex network of connivance and conflict" (14) that persisted between press and government. Of press subsidies she writes: "It was not a world in which there existed prior censorship, but one in which the state attempted to pasteurize the public sphere with premeditated, well-financed maneuvers, in order to eradicate the exercise of criticism" (17). The common thread of the book's interviews is therefore the possibility of agency, and journalistic dignity, within a semi-authoritarian society.

Collections of interviews are inevitably a mixed bag. An interviewer can only do so much shepherding if a subject is determined to avoid specifics or pursue tangents. But most testimonies here are richly rewarding, thanks to Serna's willingness to return for more, and her agile interweaving of varied types of questions: open-ended or highly specific, historically informed or deceptively innocent. Starting the collection are Javier Romero and Luis Javier Solana, old soldiers who began to fence with a quill at midcentury. Both offer a long view, as of the era of president Miguel Alemán (1946–1952), under whom the distribution of cash-filled envelopes was standardized. Both are remarkably candid about industry economics. In the 1950s, at the left-wing *El Popular*, Romero received most of his monthly salary from whichever secretariat he was assigned to cover. In the 1970s, at *Excélsior*, he saw how Scherer lost shop-floor support by overpaying his friends. Solana is revealing on matters of media ownership. He also offers a stinging verdict on self-censorship: "the newspapers were more submissive than governments demanded" (105). There is too much chaff in these chapters—the book as a whole could be one-fifth slimmer—but the grains of discernment are plentiful.

Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, arguably the most respected journalist of the era, offers a frank critique of media practices, especially those stemming from dependence on state subsidies. His views include a detailed appraisal of Manuel Buendía, the first high-profile journalist to be killed because of his work, for exposing state links to drug cartels, in 1984; in this telling he is worthier of remembrance for his workaholic commitment and willingness to train young reporters. Even franker is Humberto Musacchio (author of the *Historia crítica*, reviewed above), who sets his tone with "I was a politicized student and in the demonstrations of 1968 I'd shouted 'sellout press!,' but I'd no idea that the prostitution of the press was such a highly organized business" (205). Like others in this volume he is happy to take Scherer down a few pegs, a reckoning applied as well to *La Jornada* founding editor Carlos Payán; each is qualified as a *cacique* (feudal lord) of his paper. The interview is a fascinating medley of judicious evaluation, catty put-downs, and concise narrative.

Three interviews disappoint. Federico Campbell and Francisco Prieto Echaso were more novelists and essayists than journalists. It would have been more informative to include veterans from *Proceso* and, say, Monterrey's *El Norte*. Roberto Rock, by contrast, very much belongs here: as long-serving editor of *El Universal*, he drove the paper's mid-1990s transformation from propaganda organ of the PRI into chief competitor of *Reforma* for the independent-minded reader. But the conversation never delves into this feat, lingering instead on matters of ethics, often in abstract terms. Still, the compilation provides a smorgasbord of insights, and its utility as a reference tool is enhanced by an index (too few Mexican histories have them).

The telling of journalists' stories, especially those of the uncompliant, is key to Benjamin Smith's *The Mexican Press and Civil Society, 1940–1976*, the most thoroughly researched, stylishly written, and altogether engaging of the books reviewed here. This monograph offers the best-supported argument to date that "*prensa vendida*" is far too broad an epithet with which to dismiss Mexico's midcentury media. As a window

onto independent journalism, it serves as a de facto companion to a simultaneously published volume that Smith coedited: *Journalism, Satire and Censorship in Mexico*.<sup>2</sup> Both books argue that while the majority of periodicals, at both national and provincial levels, were indeed pro-government, a significant minority were critical in tone and civic in mission, at least in spells, and that such nonconformism occurred more often in the provinces than in Mexico City.

Smith structures his study in careful parts. His first chapter argues for a rapid growth in newspaper readership post-1940, due to high pass-around rates and the popularity of oft-ignored tabloids. The rest of the book is divided between the Mexico City press and the regional press. Each section begins with an exceptionally well-documented review of state actors' growing repertoires of co-optative and coercive tools, followed by case studies of magazines or newspapers that defied such pressures and refused to self-censor. The overviews, salted with arresting and amusing quotes, are also very good on orthodox newsroom practice, in all its camaraderie and venality, and the inability of even the most individualistic voices (e.g., Scherer, Buendía) to free themselves entirely from the culture of collusion. No case-study chapter profiles a pro-government paper, an omission that at first glance might prompt the misimpression that critical periodicals were typical, but the overview chapters substantially show the market domination of the state-friendly press.

The two capital-city studies begin with the late 1940s satirical weekly *Presente*. It only existed for nine months, falling victim to state-sponsored violence. But the magazine set a precedent for critical journalism under the semi-authoritarianism of the PRI, in its willingness to name the corrupt and skewer the powerful. The second study, on radical correspondent-cum-editor Mario Menéndez, fuses useful context and shrewd analysis with strong narrative momentum, a mix that Smith maintains for the rest of the book. Born to members of Mérida's ultraconservative upper classes, then moving to Mexico City to pursue his dreams as a swashbuckling radical, Menéndez threw himself into revolutionary causes. First as an editor (for the magazine *Sucesos*), then as publisher in his own right (of the daily *¿Por qué?*), he made common cause with Fidel Castro, travelled to Guatemala and Colombia to embed himself with guerrilla insurgencies, and often confounded observers. Was he indeed a communist or an informant for the CIA? Was he a critic of Díaz Ordaz or a supporter? Though much was sui generis about Menéndez, his gadfly career illustrates the range of views that the more creative and daring journalist could get away with expressing.

The provincial case studies kick off with a portrait of José García Valseca, a self-styled colonel who in the 1940s founded Mexico's biggest newspaper chain. Smith dubs him "the real Artemio Cruz," in reference to the Carlos Fuentes antihero who spins postrevolutionary military and political connections into a lucrative business career. García Valseca's newspapers, most of them branded *El Sol*, gained a reputation for conservatism and toadying to presidents. So it is surprising to learn how, behind each local edition's dull facade, there operated a ruthless "gangster journalism" (190), whereby editors and reporters routinely extorted politicians and industrialists, ensuring profitability. As Smith illustrates, such extortion persisted in the provinces after García Valseca lost the chain (heavily indebted due to over expansion) in 1972. In fact, it continues to this day.

The final two chapters inspect much tinier fish: weekly or fortnightly "artisan newspapers," published by idealists with a strong sense of civic mission. Here the "civil society" mentioned in Smith's title comes most to the fore, as Alfredo Ramírez Villavicencio, a Oaxaca City taxi driver, and Judith Reyes, a roving cabaret singer turned Chihuahua City publicity agent, made local successes of their respective papers by staying close to the concerns of their readership and reproducing their voices. They did so in stories about corruption, incompetence, and unfulfilled political pledges; in coverage of popular protest; in their letters pages; and even in surveys of readers' opinions. Since media history, especially in Latin America, is typically a history of elite practices, these two chapters offer compelling examples of activist journalism-from-below and how it often brought results.

Smith's case-study approach necessarily means that there are thematic and geographical gaps, but the book's only analytical weakness has to do with circulation statistics. Although the author admits that papers tended to inflate their print runs, he opts to use official numbers by reasoning that discrepancies between stated and actual figures were minor. However, when this writer worked for *Novedades Editores* in the early 1990s, its flagship paper *Novedades* claimed a circulation of two hundred thousand, while we employees knew the real figure to be just ten thousand. Further, Smith cites third-party audits without considering that the auditors may have been bribed. The public influence of the press, vis-à-vis radio, newsreels, and television,

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gillingham, Michael Lettieri, and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Journalism, Satire, and Censorship in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

may therefore be somewhat overstated. Otherwise, the level of research is phenomenal—painstaking but never dull—with recourse to a great array of national and foreign archives, journalist memoirs, and scholarship.

### Reporting Violence/Violence against Reporters

Work on violence against Mexican journalists first emerged in academic conferences around 2005, and since that time the problem has worsened. The war on the drug cartels launched by President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) set Mexico's homicide rate spiraling. As of this writing, it has yet to subside from some thirty thousand per year, and among the dead number many journalists: killed by order of criminal organizations, by approval of local politicians, as collateral damage during the murder of others, and due to causes unknown. A general climate of impunity (only 5 percent of homicides result in convictions) and a more specific climate of impunity for killers of journalists (hit men have been convicted in just five cases, masterminds in none) exacerbate the problem.

Book-length studies of journalists' working conditions have most often come from reporters themselves, and the best-known is *Narcoperiodismo* by Javier Valdez. The book appeared just eight months before the author himself was gunned down, by a faction of the Sinaloa cartel, in his native Culiacán. His title is a play on words: journalism about narcos but also in the service of narcos, the latter phenomenon something of a taboo topic and yet illustrated in a forceful opening chapter about Tamaulipas, the state where cartels have most co-opted the press. With the help of four informants, Valdez documents how as of 2006 rival cartels battling for turf also competed to own the narrative. They bought off reporters or bullied them into cooperating, planted informants in newsrooms, even appropriated entire papers. They phoned in directives about which stories should run and which should not, sometimes supplying extra photographs. Naturally this put staff at risk for taking sides or heeding the wrong threatening phone call. Several were murdered; many quit.

Valdez's catchy title is a little misrepresentative, as his broad purpose is to chronicle the range of aggression against reporters and editors, much of it having little or nothing to do with narcotraffickers. In the lengthiest chapter, set in Jalisco, the principal culprits are the majority of newspapers publishers whose operations depend on state subsidies and who therefore suppress reporting into corruption, narco-linked or otherwise. Their policies strike at the dignity of their employees, who find themselves stuck in ten-hour shifts of "alienating work" (51), much of it writing up bulletins and press conferences, or who are moved to a new beat whenever they upset some functionary with their line of questioning. There are also the de facto aggressions of low salaries and the constant threat of being laid off without severance pay. In two chapters on the state of Veracruz, the chief aggressor is the apparatus of notorious governor Javier Duarte (2010–2016). His police force beat and robbed photographers covering protest marches, tailed and otherwise harassed independent reporters, and refused to investigate the murders of media workers, thereby fomenting a culture of impunity that facilitated further killings. Duarte's reign of terror over local media is more thoroughly analyzed by Celia del Palacio (see below), but Valdez's account better captures the fear experienced on a daily basis by those Veracruz journalists trying to practice civic journalism, and it better exhibits their bravery.

Like Valdez's other books, *Narcoperiodismo* is less a work of investigative journalism than a *crónica*. This style of reportage, popular throughout Latin America, is less concerned with exposé (though it may well incriminate) than with giving voice to the affected and promoting social justice via sympathy. Valdez never casts judgment; as a reporter for the independent Sinaloa weekly *Ríodoce*, he was well aware of the ethical minefields that many provincial journalists must traverse. Dangers stem not only from cartel pressures but also from financial ones, as falling revenues prompt editors to rely ever more on bloody crime stories to sell copies, and meager salaries create incentives for staff to stray. The latter point emerges most dramatically via the testimony of a crime reporter for the Sinaloa daily *Noroeste*, who earned an overtime bonus of twelve dollars for each dead body reported. Where there is admission of unethical practice, it comes from those interviewed.

*Narcoperiodismo* is deliberately impressionistic, so one should not fault it for ignoring large swaths of the country. As raw material for analysis of journalism in the provinces, it is richly suggestive. It evinces great skill in getting peers to speak frankly about painful or shameful episodes. Less compelling are a couple of chapters involving question-and-answer sessions with media analysts that rarely rise above generalization. The text also suffers in the editing, which is poor even by the lax standards of Mexico's commercial publishers. Repetition and misspelling are frequent, even years are miswritten. Various off-topic sections should have been shorn. Valdez deserved a better editor.

Aggression against the press is not the focus of Gabriela Polit Dueñas's *Unwanted Witnesses*, but it is crucial to its context. As her title aptly suggests, the study profiles journalists whose work meets resistance, including from criminal organizations and those politicians who would cover up murders or minimize their importance. They risk falling victim to the same violence that is their subject. Here we meet five contemporary writers, each of them female practitioners of *crónica*. As Polit Dueñas notes, studies of contemporary Latin American journalism have tended to offer either quantitative or sociological analysis of changes in media practice. Her own contribution is to provide a close reading of violence-themed *crónicas* and contextualize them with interview-based accounts of how they were reported, composed, and received. Her analysis is literary, seasoned with elements of journalism and anthropology. This is a promisingly novel approach to media studies, although her introduction is saddled with the likes of Bourdieu and Foucault using complex language to state the obvious, an irritant that peppers the book.

Following a chapter that sketches the ethical issues of crafting *crónica*—centering on the need for reporters of violence to be first of all listeners, with all the therapeutic responsibility that this entails—Polit Dueñas offers Colombia's Patricia Nieto as her principal subject, the only writer to whom two chapters are dedicated. In 1998, Nieto traveled to Machuca in Antioquía, where eighty-five people had been killed by a crude-oil fireball resulting from the sabotage of a pipeline. The main ethical challenge of reporting violence is balancing a duty to inform with sensitivity toward survivors, and Nieto found townspeople too much in a state of shock to articulate what they had witnessed. Unlike the other reporters swooping in, Nieto opted not to file a story, but the experience informed her later dedication to recording the testimonies of victims of dire poverty and violence in edited volumes and monographs; one of the latter, the remarkably poetic *Los escogidos*, forms the focus of chapter 7. The first chapter about Nieto's work, with the ethical debates it broaches, would very well serve any class on reporting.

There follows a Mexican triptych: Marcela Turati, Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, and Daniela Rea have each reported at length on the violence surging through their country. Each has won prizes for her work; each has lost journalist friends to hit men. Turati stands out as a selfless journalist-activist, one of the first to report the state's war on the cartels and related human rights abuses from the perspective of the vulnerable. Rodríguez Nieto is the author of the celebrated *La fábrica del crimen* (2012), which explores the violence that made her native Ciudad Juárez the world's murder capital through the startling case of a middle-class sixteen-year-old who killed his family. That strategy, rather than basing her narrative on a femicide or narco hit, enabled her to show how her city's extreme culture of violence and impunity arose from a mix of factors more complex than is routinely admitted. Like the chapter on Nieto's *Los escogidos*, this analysis whets one's appetite to read Rodríguez Nieto's work. The same is true of the portrait of Rea, who discusses her compilation *Nadie les pidió perdón* (2015) and its attention to forced disappearances. Here the central theme is the empathic voice and the role that Rea's experience of motherhood played in developing it. Finally, a chapter on Argentine *cronista* María Eugenia Ludueña illustrates how certain journalists helped to hold their country's former military rulers to account for their crimes by documenting the testimonies of victims' relatives. Here the broader impact of such work is unclear. How did prosecutors make use of the testimonies and to what effect?

*Unwanted Witnesses* is worthwhile for its celebration of valiant reporters and its evidence that journalism can make a difference even in the most forlorn circumstances, at least in terms of public memory of victims and the dignity of their relatives. Analytically it is persuasive, except for some overgeneralizing about "the state" as the main source of violence in Mexico. Stylistically, it is a shame that the meat of the matter is often dressed in unhelpful language. Since Polit Dueñas likes to entangle her subjects in the thickets of theoretical esoterica, one occasionally loses sight of their achievements, and her incessant references to herself (including what she is and isn't "interested in") border on solipsism.

A much less heavy-handed insertion of author into text marks Celia del Palacio's *Callar o morir en Veracruz*. Del Palacio is the dean of Mexican newspaper history, author of more than a dozen books and edited volumes. She found herself so disturbed by the fast-mounting murders of journalists in her adoptive state of Veracruz under Governor Duarte that she dedicated five years to studying contemporary violence against the press. This effort produced two books, the first being the edited volume *Violencia y periodismo regional en México*.<sup>3</sup> By the time Duarte fled from office shortly before his term was up (he would later be jailed for corruption), the six-year death toll among local media workers had reached twenty, plus five disappearances, making Veracruz the most lethal state of all.

<sup>3</sup> Celia del Palacio Montiel, ed., *Violencia y periodismo regional en México* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos, 2015).

Del Palacio situates this violence within a wider period to show how Duarte's tolerance of aggression and his complicity with impunity, while heightened in degree, was not exceptional. Duarte's predecessor Fidel Herrera (2004–2010), under whom six media workers were killed, appears responsible in part for an initial surge in unpunished aggression. But so was the early 2010 decision of the Zetas, the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel, to go independent, which prompted a bloody turf war. A second war erupted in September 2011 as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel muscled in on Veracruz. Extraneous factors are crucial to understanding much violence against the press, which some writers are too ready to attribute wholesale to state actors. Like Javier Valdez, del Palacio illustrates the painful truth of cartel success in co-opting some reporters.

Del Palacio offers a dual focus: aggressions against journalists and coverage of violence. The former topic is conceived to include structural violence, such as low salaries and summary firings, co-opting and thereby quieting of media via generous state ad spending, and the microaggressions committed by Duarte's spokespeople, who fiercely policed press loyalty. The holistic nature of this approach clarifies, for example, why an ill-paid reporter might be willing to take a bribe in exchange for biased coverage, even when the cash comes from a criminal source, and especially when the offer comes with the old threat *plata o plomo* (silver or lead; take the bribe or get a bullet). Del Palacio shows how independent editors and journalists are squeezed on all sides: excluded from government advertising, verbally attacked by politicians or their lackeys, criticized by state-subsidized colleagues for not playing the game, physically attacked by thugs hired by local functionaries, or targeted by hit men. Less satisfactory, however, is del Palacio's unwillingness to pursue her analysis to explain the likely causes of specific killings. In several cases, evidence seems sufficient for the drawing of conclusions; in others, another interview or two—thirty-six are listed in an appendix—would likely have filled the gaps. Where state judiciaries refuse to prosecute, academics could usefully hypothesize.

On the coverage of violence, del Palacio highlights two themes: the means by which the Duarte regime covered up or minimized the rising body count, largely controlling the story via its allies in bought-off media; and the role of *nota roja*, a collective term for crime pages or police-blotter tabloids, with their euphemism-free stories and gruesome photographs. A key problem with the latter is their normalization of violence, including the "objectifying of human beings that become mere expendable bodies" (180). The author provides much material with which to substantiate that claim, but the section does not move beyond description.

The final third of the book consists of appendices. Usefully for researchers into freedom of the press, these include a seventy-page tabulation of aggressions: murders, disappearances, firings (often for not toeing the government line), attacks on specific media (from hackings to hostage situations), and, by far the most common, nonlethal physical attacks on journalists. These are all footnoted for sources, generously so in the case of the murders, which in several cases include the allegation that the victim was on a cartel payroll. The final appendix comprises six portraits of slain reporters: civic crusaders and *nota roja* writers who gained little compensation for their efforts. Most of these profiles are the elegant work of local journalist Ignacio Carvajal. *Callar o morir en Veracruz* is an important book. Despite its bagginess (excess of context, quotations of half a page), and despite its greater resemblance to a compendium than to an analytical monograph, the rigor of del Palacio's research and her inclusion of well-wrought obituaries suggest a model for documenting the struggles of the press elsewhere.

Most of the books reviewed here break new ground in analyzing the history of postrevolutionary journalism and the contemporary dangers of covering corruption and violence. Yet they also suggest the quantity of work still to be done: in writing complete histories of Mexico's leading newspapers, probing media-state relations since the 1970s, and investigating the plight of regional journalists to encourage the authorities to take their protection more seriously. While Veracruz is the bloodiest state for the media, NGOs report that Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas are also especially dangerous. We await monographs on those states and many others.

### Author Information

Andrew Paxman is a historian of modern Mexico and former reporter. His first book, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (2000), coauthored with Claudia Fernández, is a biography of the Mexican media mogul Emilio Azcárraga Milmo. His second book, *Jenkins of Mexico: How a Southern Farm Boy Became a Mexican Magnate* (2017), is a life-and-times study of expatriate US industrialist William Jenkins. He edited *Los gobernadores: Caciques del pasado y del presente* (2018) and is working on a history of the Mexican press from 1988 to the present. Paxman teaches in the history and journalism programs at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) in Mexico.



**How to cite this article:** Paxman, Andrew. 2021. The Challenges to Mexico's Press, Past and Present. *Latin American Research Review* 56(1), pp. 260–268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1458>

**Submitted:** 27 July 2019

**Accepted:** 18 September 2019

**Published:** 09 March 2021

**Copyright:** © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 