

## Explaining Murders of Journalists in Mexico

Friday February 4, 2022

Virtual webinar – 9:00 AM PST (San Diego)

### Panelists:

- Wendy Fry, Senior Reporter, The San Diego Union Tribune
- Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul, Founder, Defensores de la Democracia
- Jan-Albert Hootsen, Mexico Representative, Committee to Protect Journalists
- Jorge Nieto, Freelance Journalist and Fixer

### - Key Takeaways -

#### *Without journalists we can't have democracy*

- The jobs of academics studying these issues rely upon the quality work of journalists on the ground.
- We need to help people understand the role of journalists as democracy defenders. - Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul

#### *Lack of protection and institutional support: the system is failing*

- After a journalist is killed, there is a lack of a coherent response from leaders in Mexico. This signals to us that they are tolerating this kind of violence.
- Journalists are continuing their work in the face of increased risks. Seeing the lack of government response is discouraging as journalists try to find a solution to the threats.
- It is important to distinguish between the state protection mechanisms and institutional protection mechanisms at the local and federal levels.
- System is inadequate at best and doomed to fail at worst - Jan-Albert Hootsen

#### *The response from the U.S. matters*

- There is an important role for U.S. media and institutions to play to bring attention to these issues.
- While covering these issues to the U.S. and international audience, it is important to keep in mind the privilege international correspondents enjoy. We must remain aware of the risks that local journalists face on the local level in Mexico and be sure to not exploit their work.

### - Discussion -

#### *Overview of the violence and what it is like on the ground in Mexico:*

- Violence against journalists is typically framed in context of the drug war
- Six attacks, four murders in 2022 so far
- Mexico is like an active war zone for journalists

- “The violence that is suffered by journalists who are murdered is not crossfire... They are targeted.” - Alejandra Ibarra
- The public eye usually will instantly connection this violence to the narcos, but often the reality is much more simple and maybe just involves local governments and other actors that are putting journalists in danger.
- Weapons being trafficked south into Mexico is also adding to the problem.

*Discussion and reflection from the speakers about the recent killings in Mexico as many reporters are processing and mourning.*

- Colleagues are in mourning as they continue coverage
- Threats to journalists continue as they work now to cover the crime scenes of murdered colleagues.
- There is a high amount of emotional stress for journalists right now from covering the death of a colleague and then another death the following week - Jorge Nieto
- Preservation of memory: journalists killed are only remembered as victims of the crime to people outside their community. It is important to remember Lourdes and Margarito not because they were killed but the important work they did.

*Examination of the failing systems in Mexico:*

- Institutions are weak or do not exist in Mexico to protect journalists from threats and there is an unwillingness from leadership to explain the facts and who is at fault.
- Federal vs. State protection mechanisms: the majority of state mechanisms do not work because governments have shown disinterest in creating them or if they do exist, they are small, have low budgets, and are not autonomous - Jan-Albert Hootsen
- “A handful of journalists who were under state protection and a very large number of human rights defenders who were in federal protection have been killed while they were at least on paper enjoying state protection is definitely a sign that the system is failing” - Jan-Albert Hootsen
- “You never get an answer to ‘Why was this journalist killed, Why was this human rights defender killed,’ we can guess, we think we know, but because nobody gives any answers that often, I think, allows this impunity to continue and allows these crimes to keep continuing” - Wendy Fry
- Impunity of the 90%; 9 of 10 murders go unpunished
- Implementation of the protection mechanism can come in too late

*What are the differences in risks for international journalists vs. local Mexican journalists and women vs. men journalists?*

- It feels less risky for international journalists than local reporters. This has to do with the level of privilege and access to RSF or Article 19 etc. There is a different level of protection that also comes with skin tone. As for gender, it can be a double-edged sword in machismo culture in Mexico. You are sometimes not taken seriously or considered a possible threat. - Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul
- There has never been an attack on a U.S. journalist in Mexico. Also, the gender bias is the same in the U.S. - Wendy Fry

*How can we keep pressure on this issue? What can be done to help?*

- What can U.S. institutions do to help:

- Covering what happens: who is responsible and who dropped the ball. This helps clarify the facts especially when the Mexican government tries to muddle the facts.
  - Universities can gather and interpret data to complement the work of journalists to get the information out there.
- An important effort is needed to change how we think about the work of local journalists. People are tired of this topic and tend to be dismissive when another story about the violence against journalists hits the news. We need to go out to a large audience to help people understand the role of journalists as democracy defenders. U.S. media and universities are well equipped to take this on - Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul
- We cannot tell the story of human right abuses if not for often a small handful of journalists on the ground. This is why the U.S. should care about protection - Michael Lettieri
- Accountability starts with the truth about what happened, who was responsible, and who were the victims and what they worked on and what challenges they faced. We need to be as complete and factual as possible. The best way to combat this misery is to keep the truth at the center - Jan-Albert Hootsen