

Informally Governing Information: How Criminal Rivalry Leads to Violence Against the Press in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

A well-functioning press is crucial for sustaining a healthy democracy. While attacks on journalists occur regularly in many developing countries, previous work has largely ignored where and why journalists are attacked. Focusing on violence by criminal organizations in Mexico, we offer the first systematic, micro-level analysis of the conditions under which journalists are more likely to be violently targeted. Contrary to popular belief, our evidence reveals that the presence of large, profitable criminal organizations does not necessarily lead to violence against the press. Rather, the probability of journalists being killed only increases when rival criminal groups inhabit territories. Rivalry inhibits criminal organizations' ability to control information leaks to the press, instead creating incentives for such leaks to be used as weapons to intensify official enforcement operations against rivals. Without the capacity to informally govern press content, rival criminals affected by such press coverage are more likely to target journalists.

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1. Introduction

A free and vibrant press is crucial for sustaining a healthy democracy. In order for citizens to effectively participate in political life, they must have access to independent sources of information from which to better understand issues and form opinions (Dahl, 1998). In this light, violence against journalists is particularly troubling: such violence not only threatens the lives of those who serve to inform the public but can also inculcate an environment of fear that inhibits general freedom of expression. Over 1,000 journalists have been killed as a result of their work since 1992 worldwide (Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2014)), and violence against the press is so pervasive in some developing countries that independent media are virtually nonexistent (Karlekar & Dunham, 2013). Despite the vital role of the press in maintaining a functioning democracy, as well as persistent violence against journalists in many developing and consolidated democracies, we know very little about the patterns in violence against the press. While one recent study examines country-level differences in the use of violence against the press by governments (see (VonDoepp & Young, 2013)), to our knowledge there have been no studies analyzing violence perpetrated

by non-state organizations and no analysis of the local determinants of violence against the press. Given that nearly a quarter of all killings of journalists can be attributed to non-state actors and that non-state actors make up the vast majority of culprits in many of the most dangerous countries to practice journalism, limiting analysis to cases of state violence leaves us with an incomplete understanding of violence against journalists¹. Additionally, there have been no rigorous studies of differences or patterns in violence against journalist within countries across space. Even in the most dangerous countries to practice journalism, violence is typically not evenly distributed throughout the territory; overlooking micro-level variation within countries inhibits a complete understanding of the local processes driving violence against the press. In this article, we address these gaps by developing and testing a theory of violence against the press in Mexico. We focus our analysis on Mexico because it is a consolidated democracy that since 2004 has been among the most dangerous countries in the world to practice journalism (CPJ, 2010). Despite increasing media attention to violence against journalists in the country, the patterns of such violence have eluded systematic empirical study. By examining criminal organizations (COs), the actors responsible for the majority of killings of members of the press in Mexico, as armed groups informally governing flows of information, we clarify not only the patterns through which Mexican COs employ violence against the press, but also their varying ability to create informal institutions to peacefully govern the information that reaches the public. In doing so, we advance our understanding of the impact of drug trafficking on the quality of democracy in Mexico as well as our general knowledge on the ways in which powerful armed actors use their authority to impact flows of information. Our central theoretical claim focuses on the relative ability of COs to informally govern the information flowing to and from the press. Because journalists typically rely on insider informants when reporting on illicit activities, COs have the ability to control at least a portion of the information on their own illegal activities and the activities of their peers that reaches the press. They may thus have the capacity to peacefully govern the content of the press by deciding what information to leak to journalists or by bribing and/or threatening them to withhold certain information. However, this capacity to peacefully govern information is more likely to break down when rival organizations operate in a single environment. Rivalry turns information leaks into effective weapons by drawing the attention of authorities to the activities of enemies. In such contexts, because information leaks are an effective way to increase the probability of authorities cracking down on rivals, journalists are more likely to be provided with and report on information that triggers violent repercussion. Empirically, we examine our foundational theory using micro-level data on the industrial organization of illegal business in Mexico, along with a data on events of violence against journalists obtained from files of journalist assassinations gathered, classified, and analyzed by the CPJ. The CPJ has gathered the most extensive and reliable data set tracking journalists who have been assassinated as a result of their journalistic activities, classifying each of these cases according to the type of actor that committed the crime. Our findings are consistent with the proposed theory: territories inhabited by COs that are in conflict have been significantly more likely to experience fatal violence against the press. Overall, the evidence presented in this article challenges existing assumptions on the relationship between potentially violent COs and the press. Contrary to popular belief, which points to the increased strength of COs as the cause of violence toward journalists, we show that violence against the press is actually more likely when rival COs cohabit a

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given area and compete to control public information. Powerful COs that dominate a locality have the ability to maintain secure control of information and thus are less likely to employ violence against journalists. In contrast, organizations that compete for local dominance are less able to establish such institutions of control and are thus more likely resort to violence against the press. In this context, it is troubling to note that journalists are in the most danger when they face competing COs that are more likely to provide a robust and less biased supply of information on which to report. The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, we briefly review relevant literature on armed groups' attempts to control flows of information. Second, we provide background information on Mexico's COs, pointing to their increased ability to govern local behavior as well as their increased propensity for violence against the press. In the third section, we develop a theory to explain differences in the use of violence against the press by COs in Mexico, pointing to the relationship of mutual dependence that exists between criminals and journalists. The fourth section then outlines the data, methods, and results of our quantitative analysis. Finally, we briefly conclude by discussing the implications of our findings from academic and policy standpoints.

2. Governing Information and the Press

This article fits within a broader scholarly literature that addresses the ways in which armed organizations govern the dissemination of information. We define governance in terms of the exercise of authority. The authority of an armed organization is at least partially backed by the capacity for violence. We are specifically interested in the ways in which groups use such authority to influence the way in which information is spread, framed, or publicized through the press. Given the critical role of the press in the provision of public information and the shaping of public opinion (Baum, 2003; Zaller, 1992), a number of studies have examined attempts by organizations, armed or otherwise, to influence press coverage. Many of these studies focus on efforts by actors operating under the world's preeminent armed organization—the state. For example, some scholars focus on the ability of state actors to put pressure on members of the press to influence coverage (Schudson, 2003; Whitten-Woodring & James, 2012). Other studies examine the ability of the government to influence information reported by the press through its ownership media outlets or providing incentives for certain types of coverage (Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova, & Shleifer, 2003). While work in this field has examined differences in the degree of hostility toward the press under different types of political regimes (Egorov, Guriev, & Sonin, 2009), as well as the type of public information that is likely to be censored (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), we know much less on what drives the different methods (violent or nonviolent) that are employed to influence press reporting. One recent study investigates the country-level political variables that make governments more likely to attack members of the media (see (VonDoepp & Young, 2013)). Although this work represents a push in a helpful direction in understanding dynamics of violence toward the media, ignoring within-country spatial variation in patterns of violence is likely to obscure important processes driving such attacks. Additionally, this literature focuses mainly on governance of public information by political actors in a dominant state apparatus, ignoring the impact of lower-level armed organizations.

Ignoring non-state armed organizations leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the ways in which actors outside the state influence flows of information through the press. Even within relatively well-functioning states, there often remain powerful

groups that, without being officially part of the state, hold the capacity to systematically influence the spread of information in order to impact social behavior and government policy. For example, in the context of civil war, armed state and non-state groups have been shown to place great importance on the spread of information on their own activities to rivals and vice versa; in this context, the ability of a combatant to govern the dissemination of information is crucial in determining the violence it employs against residents (Kalyvas, 2006). Additionally, terrorist organizations attempt to govern information in a manner that facilitates communication between members while avoiding the flow of information to authorities (Enders & Su, 2007). Similarly, armed criminal groups often have strong incentives to prevent the dissemination of information on their activities to police, using their capacity for violent retribution as a disincentive to potential informants (Reuter, 1983). However, while this literature highlights the efforts of non-state organizations to informally govern the spread of information, it largely overlooks the ways in which such actors may use their capacity for violence to impact the spread of information through the press.

Although in some cases state actors may be complicit in the operations of COs in Mexico, COs typically do not seek formal political authority. By examining the processes underlying their violence against the press, this article serves as a bridge between literature on influencing the press, which typically focuses on more formal political actors, and literature on the governance of information by armed non-state actors, which typically ignores the role of the press. In doing so, we provide what is, to our knowledge, the first micro-level systematic analysis of the varying methods through which armed organizations attempt to govern information disseminated through the press. This provides insight not only into general processes of control of information but also contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of violence against journalists in Mexico, a country in which practicing journalism has become increasingly dangerous.

3. COs, Violence, and Informal Governance in Mexico

COs in Mexico have received increased attention in the international media in recent years due to massive increases in violent competition for territory and the brutal methods they often employ against enemies. While Mexican COs coexisted relatively peacefully through the 1990s, between 2006 and 2011, homicides linked to COs increased by an average of 80.47 percent (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP, 2011)). Although substantial increases in violence began in the mid-2000s, the process through which COs became heavily armed can be traced to changes in Mexico's political institutions beginning in the 1990s, when COs increasingly gained incentives to arm and protect themselves rather than outsourcing protection to corrupt state institutions (Corchado, 2013; Rios, 2015; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009)². These incentives combined with an increased profit share from cocaine trafficking for Mexican COs at the expense of weakened Colombian organizations led Mexican COs to develop high capacities for violence, often adding distinct armed wings to their organizational structures (Rios, 2015). While most academic and popular literature examining these increasingly well-armed Mexican COs focuses on the tendency for groups to violently confront one another, it is also clear that COs have used their increased capacity for violence to exert often massive levels of authority over behavior in the territories in

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which they operate. We label the use of such authority as informal governance. Such governance is typically backed by the explicit or implicit threat of violence and is used to shape behavior by attaching a cost to particular actions (Kalyvas, 2006).

The exercise of this informal governance can take many forms. In some cases, COs have been shown to act as informal police of their territories, defining behavior they deem socially acceptable, and doling out punishment to those who violate these informal rules. For example, in Michoacán, COs have been shown to pursue and punish residents who rape, steal, engage in prostitution, or become addicted to drugs (Kostelnik & Skarbek, 2013). Likewise, in Veracruz, a criminal group called “Mata-zetas” is well known for torturing and beheading rapists, extortionists, and kidnapers, leaving messages next to their bodies. For example, a note left next to the body of a man killed in the state in 2010 warned, “this happened to me because I raped a 4-year-old girl” (*Al Calor Politico*, 2010)³. Throughout many areas of the country, from northern states bordering the US border like Nuevo Laredo (Soy periodista 2010) to southern states bordering Belize like Quintana Roo (*El Universal* (2007)), COs use often extremely violent methods to informally govern local behavior.

Additionally, COs sometimes also use positive inducements to impact local behavior through the distribution of public goods and club goods to residents of the territories in which they operate (Diaz-Cayeros, Magaloni, Matanockand, & Romero, 2011; Kostelnik & Skarbek, 2013). The informal authority of drug traffickers is so strong in some areas that 40 percent of middle-class survey respondents reported having turned to drug traffickers for help with an issue (Diaz-Cayeros et al., 2011).

The Mexican press is not immune to attempts by COs to informally govern local behavior. Such efforts have at times resulted in violence, with journalists often facing increasingly hostile and fearsome environments. On the whole, Mexico has become the most dangerous country in the Western Hemisphere to practice journalism, with various sources reporting between 85 and 100 journalists having been killed or disappeared since 2000 (Edmonds-Poli, 2013). In many recent years, journalists in Mexico have faced levels of danger comparable to countries in war like Iraq and Pakistan (CPJ, 2010). In fact, in 2010 and 2011, more journalists were assassinated in Mexico than in any other country in the world, except Pakistan (CPJ, 2010). Although incidences of violence toward the press account for only a small fraction of the total drug-related violence in the country, the specific context of the killings and the resulting fear that they spread are particularly concerning for the prospects of democracy in Mexico and thus warrant specific attention.

4. The Political Economy of Violence against the Press in Mexico

While the high level of violence against press in Mexico is alarming, it is important to note that such violence is not uniformly distributed throughout the country. Even when limiting our attention to the areas of the country in which drug traffickers operate, it is clear that the likelihood of a journalist being fatally attacked is far greater in some areas of the country than others. Despite the increased strength of COs in nearly all areas of the country with high levels of drug trafficking, not a single journalist was killed in 61 percent of the municipalities in which the media regularly covered drug trafficking activity over the last ten years. This means that in places like Nogales, Mazatlán, and Agua Prieta, where there is significant coverage of strong COs, COs refrained from

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fatally attacking members of the press. Even when just considering municipalities where COs are generally violent, some municipalities have not experienced violence toward journalists. For example, journalists have not been victims of homicide in municipalities like Santiago Amoltepec and San Jacinto Tlacotepec, despite homicide rates comparable to municipalities like Juarez and El Oro, where journalists have been more frequently victimized. To better understand this variation, in this section we develop a theory of CO informal governance of the press.

The press in Mexico plays a critical role in providing information about illegal activity in the country. For this reason, organized criminals have enormous incentives to attempt to informally govern the information disseminated through the press. Drug trafficking in Mexico is a multibillion dollar-per-year industry that relies on high levels of secrecy to secure profits; these profits are thus permanently susceptible to destruction by information leaks. Individual traffickers have strong incentives to not be publicly identified, as such identification increases the chances of pursuit and prosecution by the federal government. Additionally, press coverage that provides specific names, photos, and/or hints on operational details can be used by both governmental enforcement agents and rivals to disrupt the business of a given CO. For example, COs often invest vast amounts of money to bribe local officials in order to prevent pursuit by local authorities and even provide information on and protection from potential rivals; press coverage on these corrupt ties has the potential to not only attract the attention of federal authorities but also negates the investment of cultivating the reliable allies who are crucial to continued profits (Corchado, 2013).

Even coverage that does not present specific identifying information has the potential to bring unwanted federal attention to local illicit drug markets. Traffickers refer to the increase in federal attention as “heating up the plaza [drug territory]” (Moore, 2011). Agents at the federal level, who must strategically decide where to deploy resources to combat criminals, may receive increased pressure to use these resources to combat crime in the areas where the press thoroughly covers criminal activity. Press coverage of general illicit activities alerts citizens of crime in their community, which in turn puts pressure on the federal government to attempt to intervene; a “hot” territory thus creates additional obstacles to running a successful enterprise and has the potential to disrupt the flow of illicit profits (CPJ, 2010).

Press coverage thus plays a critical role both in how COs are publicly perceived and what specific information on illegal activity becomes available to the public and law enforcement. Given these dynamics, it is perhaps not surprising that drug traffickers are responsible for the majority of killings of journalists in Mexico (Edmonds-Poli, 2013). Violence is indeed a quite powerful mechanism to silence the press. It does so directly by assassinating the journalist who had access to the most information and/or indirectly by reducing incentives for other journalists to gather information about the subject. A brief survey of cases from various areas throughout the country demonstrates the potential effectiveness of violence in influencing press coverage. For example, after the killing of a journalist in the state of Durango, local in-depth reporting on crime essentially stopped (CPJ, 2010). Similarly, after the killing of one journalist, the disappearance of another, and a threat on the life of its director, in 2013 the editorial board of one of the most important newspapers in the state of Coahuila proclaimed that the paper would stop publishing information related to organized crime (*El Pais*, 1986). Such examples of self-censorship in the face of violence are far from uncommon. In Ciudad Juarez, a major city across the border from El Paso, Texas, violence against the press became so pervasive that the city’s main newspaper published an editorial titled, “What do you want from us?” asking the various COs

operating in the city what they expected out of a news outlet in order to avoid future violence (*El Diario de Juarez*, 2010).

However, although such informal governance of the press through violence and fear may be effective in impacting the content and/or amount of press coverage, it is also likely to have costs for traffickers. One potential cost to violence against the press is that it may lead to increased federal attention and enforcement on local illicit activity. In other words, while COs may have incentives to govern the information presented in the press in order to prevent the “heating up of the plaza”, violence against the press itself can potentially lead to a “hotter” territory. Although acts of violence against the press may make local press and residents fear pointing out the specific perpetrators, such events have the potential to receive high levels of national attention; indeed, cases of violence against journalists have often led to protests imploring the federal government to take action. However, to date, such costs have rarely materialized. Nongovernmental organizations and the press itself note the environment of near impunity for acts of violence against the press in Mexico, where over 90 percent of cases go unsolved and often uninvestigated (CPJ, 2010)⁴. Rather than repercussions from the federal government for violence against journalists, the most acute cost to COs for violence against journalists have stemmed from opportunity costs. While killing a journalist permanently silences the particular journalist and is likely to lead her organization to self-censor and/or remain silent on issues pertaining to drug trafficking, the CO also forgoes a potentially valuable opportunity to build relationships with and use the press as a de facto mouthpiece. As further elaborated below, given the ever-present threat of competitor encroachment, maintaining this resource can be very valuable in future territorial disputes. COs are thus likely to prefer to informally govern press coverage peacefully, rather than resorting to violence.

The potential for traffickers to peacefully govern press information is buoyed by the fact that in many ways the two worlds are codependent. While traffickers are strongly impacted by press coverage, journalists obtain a good share of the information on which they report through the use of informants who have access to prime knowledge through their direct or indirect involvement in the criminal world⁵. There

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