‘LOVE AND COURAGE’: RESILIENCE STRATEGIES OF JOURNALISTS FACING TRAUMA IN NORTHERN MEXICO

by

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ABSTRACT

Mexico is widely known as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, according to advocacy groups and human rights organizations. The phenomenon is especially true in northern Mexico, where journalists have to cover violence committed by drug cartels that seek to hold on to turf in which to conduct operations to sell narcotics to the lucrative U.S. market. This study focuses on the types of trauma that journalists working in an environment marked by violence and threats experience, as well as the resilience they must employ to continue working as a professional there. Twenty-six print journalists in eight cities near the U.S. border have been interviewed to discover the types of trauma and the extent of resilience they have achieved, as well as the way they go about doing so. The study utilizes Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences model to examine trauma and resilience.
‘Love and Courage’: Resilience Strategies of Journalists Facing Trauma in Northern Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Journalists in northern Mexico work in an environment marked by violence and threats, and suffer mental trauma as a result. Understanding how they deal with the trauma they suffer and the degree of resilience they demonstrate in the performance of their duties despite that trauma are questions I seek to address in this study. Resilience, as defined by Masten, is phenomena marked by positive outcomes despite serious threats to development. (2001, p. 228).

Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world in which to be a journalist, according to Freedom House (2011, 2012, 2014), an independent watchdog organization that monitors freedoms worldwide. The six states that border the United States are particularly dangerous, especially since they provide access to the major drug market represented by the United States, and violent activity by drug cartels is widespread. Among other troubling assessments Freedom House makes about Mexico is that journalists in the country operate in an environment plagued with widespread violence and impunity; thus, the organization categorized Mexico as “not free” in 2011, 2012 and 2014. In 2013, Freedom House characterized Mexico as “partially free.” (Freedom House). Reporters Without Borders calls Mexico one of the deadliest countries in the world for media personnel, and the deadliest in the Americas, citing three journalists killed in 2014 in direct connection to their work, along with a blogger. (Reporters Without Borders, 2015). The organization’s 2015 index of press freedom ranks Mexico 148th out of 180 countries. (DeFraia, p. 2).
Danger to journalists in the region has been studied and documented. Relly and González de Bustamante (2014) note that some U.S. reporters who cover Mexico must do so without entering the country. (p. 2). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) reports that 11 of the 24 media workers murdered in Mexico since 2000 for whom motives were confirmed were from the six northern states. While it’s slightly less than half the murders of journalists where motive was confirmed, it’s clear that those states are disproportionately dangerous, given that the country has 31 states. The Mexican federal agency tasked with tracking crimes against journalists and freedom of expression in the country, La Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos, documented 106 crimes against journalists between July 2010 and February 2014 in the six northern border states. The crimes included robbery, kidnapping, murder, property damage and 22 others. (Procuraduría General de la Republica, 2015).

Waisbord (2002, p. 107) points to the role government officials and criminal organizations play in violence against journalists in the region. “Carrying the heavy legacy of violence inherited from dictatorial periods, Latin America continues to be wracked by the discretionary use of state force and the violence perpetrated by criminal organizations that escape democratic control.”

At least 85 Mexican journalists were killed between 2000 and August 2013, and 20 more were disappeared between 2005 and April 2013, according to Human Rights Watch (2014). The organization also points out that Mexico created a special prosecutor’s office to investigate crimes against freedom of expression in 2006, but “to date it has obtained only one criminal sentence from the 378 investigations it has opened.” (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The threat to Mexican journalists is much more severe in the northern states than in Mexico City. Waisbord points out that only one in 10 Mexican journalists murdered between 1986 and 1996 worked in
Mexico City. (Waisbord, 2002, p. 101). Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, symbolizes the violence that is so prevalent in the northern states. Approximately 3,000 murders occurred in the city in 2009 (Carter & Kodrich, 2013), and journalists working there have to report on those events.

This study examines strategies of resilience employed by journalists in the region to achieve the resilience that allows them to work and succeed in their professional and personal lives. It also examines some of the ways in which psychological trauma manifests itself among the reporters. Based on interviews with 26 journalists, the study is the first on-ground research to look at the relationship between trauma and resilience in Mexican journalists, along with how they achieve it and to what extent. I chose to study trauma because an understanding of the psychological effects of violence on journalists is crucial in knowing how instability affects the people who are tasked with covering public institutions and serving as watchdogs in a free society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalists At Risk

Working with the constant threat of violence hanging over journalists’ heads has a deleterious effect on their reporting, as Relly and González de Bustamante point out through an interview with an investigative reporter from Ciudad Juarez. “We began self-censorship … We just stopped publishing anything to do with crime. Right now, they have left us alone.” (2014, p. 117). They also note the extraordinary measures that news organizations have been forced to take, such as eliminating bylines and changing them to “Staff,” changing datelines, fortifying the walls of their buildings, installing things such as cameras, bulletproof glass and fingerprint
swipes for building entry, and allowing journalists to sleep in the building when it’s too unsafe to
go home at night. (2014, p. 117). They note that the fear journalists feel even extends to their
communications methods, saying some journalists resort to using radios instead of cellphones.
They also assert that some reporters limit their use of email and telephone calls to evade
detection by people who may do them harm. (2014, p.166).

In another study, González de Bustamante and Relly cite the prevalent use of social
media by Mexican reporters. They say “heightened levels of violence are seriously affecting
journalists’ work by increasing their reliance on social media.” (2014, pp. 7-8). In doing so, they
find, journalists can circumvent government institutions, criminal organizations and even their
own news media organizations. (2014, p. 8). However, they also point out the dangers that
accompany such reporting in a country where journalists are routinely watched and silenced.
They cite the case of an investigative reporter in Baja California who used made-up accounts on
social media. The reporter even had to cancel those accounts after receiving threats. (2014, p. 9).

In speaking to one veteran reporter in Ciudad Juarez, Carter and Kodrich (2013, p. 7)
write of one who said his fears were not for himself, but for his family. The reporter said cartels
will target family members as a means of retribution for coverage they don’t like. They point out
that another journalist who has lived and worked in El Paso his entire life said journalists in
from El Paso who receive telephoned death threats from cartel members who were angry that
they were being covered in the newspaper. (p. 10).

A Reuters article dated April 22, 2015, notes that drug violence in Altamira, Tamaulipas,
flared up “for the second time in a week” in talking about gun battles in the street between law
enforcement and gang members from the Gulf Cartel. The same article discusses how parts of the city of Reynosa was paralyzed because of gun battles in the street and burning cars. (Reuters, 2012). Sheriff Sigifredo Gonzalez of Zapata County, Texas, which is across the Rio Grande from Tamaulipas, speaks to the drug-related violence that spills over into the United States in an MSNBC article. “The feds say our side of the border is safe,” he said, “but we have bullet holes in our schools and businesses that say otherwise.” (MSNBC, 2011). A 2013 article in the New York Times refers to Ciudad Juarez as a “symbol of drug war devastation,” and a Huffington Post article in 2010 reports that two men in Tijuana had been beheaded and hung from a bridge “in a Mexican border city where hopes had risen that cartel violence was decreasing.”

**Journalism And Trauma**

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a well-documented psychological phenomenon that Uddo et al (1993, p. 44) say “first appeared in the psychiatric nomenclature with the publication of DSM-III (American Psychiatry Association, 1980).” They also note that investigations into the phenomenon had been carried on for many years previous to that.

Flannery (1999, pp. 78-79) says PTSD has three characteristic symptoms: intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms and arousal symptoms. Intrusive symptoms refer to the unbidden nature of thoughts that persist in people who have PTSD, in which they imagine themselves to be re-experiencing the traumatic events. (1999, pp. 78-79). Avoidance is the phenomenon of avoiding thoughts and places that will naturally conjure memories or associations with the triggers that caused the trauma. (1999, pp. 78-79). Arousal refers to hypervigilance, difficulties with sleep, exaggerated startle response and difficulty concentrating. (1999, pp. 78-79).
Figures on the incidence of PTSD in the United States vary. Breslau et al (1998, p. 626) point out that “surveys in the general population have estimated that approximately 1 adult in 12 has experienced PTSD at any time in life, roughly 15% to 24% of those exposed to traumatic events.” The 1 in 12 figure equates to a percentage of roughly 8.3 percent. The types of traumatic events that lead to PTSD vary as well. People who have been exposed to sexual assault or abuse, physical assaults or abuse, automobile accidents, natural disasters and combat are some of the most common victims of PTSD. Frequency of exposure to traumatic events also plays a part. Hilberman states that repetitive trauma generalizes the symptoms of PTSD. (1980, p. 1340). Breslau et al (1991, p. 221) show that vulnerability to PTSD was found to be greater in women than men, and that other factors, such as neuroticism, a family history of instability and deviance and other factors bring it about. First responders are particularly vulnerable to PTSD and other forms of psychological trauma. A group typically thought to comprise firefighters, paramedics and police officers, first responders work in highly dangerous and stress-filled professions in which they are exposed to significant amounts of human suffering. As such, it stands to reason that their prevalence for experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and depression are higher than the majority of other professions. As Marmar et al (2006, p. 2) find, studies have shown first responders to suffer from occupation-related psychological trauma at a rate of up to 19 percent. Duarte et al (2006, p. 302) point out that the rate for the general population is shown to be between 6 and 9 percent in studies.

Besides the danger inherent in first responders’ jobs and the human suffering they witness, a dysfunctional or unsupportive workplace can also contribute to PTSD symptoms, as found by Maguen et al. (2009, p. 755). Evidence indicates that factors such as the relative horror of the event, first responders’ training and things that happen to the person following the event.
can affect the first responder’s experience vis a vis trauma. Benedek et al (2007, p. 65) speak to that, writing, “Recent studies demonstrate that the range and severity of psychological responses vary with characteristics of the disaster, the particular responders, and the nature of past traumatic experience and training, and with events that occur and support that is present after the disaster.”

Journalists work in an occupation that is often dangerous and trauma-inducing. Covering events such as murders, rapes, fatal car accidents and war, just to name some work-related circumstances, can bring about psychological difficulties like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. One of the most in-depth studies to shed light on the issue of trauma and journalism is that conducted by Feinstein, Owen and Blair (2002). The researchers sent questionnaires to 140 war correspondents, and conducted interviews with them. The same work was repeated with 107 journalists who had never covered war, by way of comparison. The authors conclude that war journalists have significantly more psychiatric difficulties than journalists who have not been war correspondents. The lifetime prevalence of PTSD is similar to rates reported for combat veterans, they show, while also pointing out that the rate of major depression is greater than that of the population at large. (p. 1570).

Feinstein and Nicolson (2005) find similar phenomena in regard to journalists covering the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and further show that the differences between embedded journalists, meaning those who were attached to a U.S. military unit, and so-called unilateral journalists were negligible. (p. 132). Dworzynski (2006) notes a similar phenomenon in her study as that of Feinstein, Owen and Blair, and finds that war correspondents are significantly more likely to show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression than reporters who have never been in that professional situation. Weidmann, Fehm and Fydrich’s 2007 work expands on that, and
says higher rates of depressive symptoms have been seen among journalists. (p. 1). Though those studies show that being in a combat environment raises the likelihood of suffering from PTSD or depression, Frank and Perigoe (1999, p. 1) point out that their work on journalists indicates that trauma is not the exclusive domain of war journalists. They assert that it’s not only foreign correspondents who are traumatized, but also local journalists and other people who may be witness to or exposed in some other way to traumatic events. (p. 1)

Not only is the relative nature of the work a factor that lends itself to a greater possibility of psychological trauma for journalists, but the duration of journalists’ professional exposure to disturbing images, events and sources’ stories also plays a role. Simpson and Boggs (1999, p. 13) show that the longer a reporter or photographer has worked and witnessed potentially traumatic scenes, the more likely it is for that person to demonstrate symptoms of PTSD. As Feinstein (2012, p. 482) demonstrates in looking at Mexican journalists specifically, just backing off from coverage of dangerous stories does not necessarily mean journalists who live in generally violent areas will be immune from the stressors that lead to trauma.

And Flannery (1999, p. 78) points out that traumatic events may be classified as those in which a person is “confronted with actual or threatened death” or some other serious threat or injury. Trauma may also occur from witnessing such events. (Benedek et al, 2007).

**Resilience**

Bonanno and Mancini (2008, p. 372) propose a working definition of resilience in quoting a separate Bonanno work, calling it “the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation to maintain relatively stable,
healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning, as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions.” Resilience following exposure to traumatic or potentially traumatic events is not uncommon. Bonanno and Mancini (2008, p. 369) point out that, following such events, more than half of people have been shown to display resilience. In another study, Bonanno (2005, p. 136) finds that, following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, people studied in New York City showed resilience at a proportion of more than 50 percent. Pietrzak et al (2009, p. 748) expand on the notion of the importance of a person exerting control over one’s life by noting that, in a study of 600 sexual-assault survivors, the only factor protecting them against PTSD symptoms was their belief that they had greater control over their recovery. They also point out the importance of social support in fostering resilience by saying it reduces the likelihood of developing trauma-related psychopathology. They cite a study of 1,632 Vietnam War veterans that finds “hardiness and postwar social support were negatively associated with PTSD symptoms and that functional social support accounted for a substantial amount of the indirect hardiness on PTSD.” (p. 750). In the longer term, Pennebaker and Susman assert that people who disclose their traumas to others around them in a verbal form show much better resilience and mental healing. (1988, 327).

Hierarchy Of Influences

As Reese (2001, p. 178) states, Hierarchy of Influences model “establishes a theoretical framework for analyzing media based on levels of analysis, which help classify influences operating both separately and in conjunction with each other.” The five influences include the individual, routines, organizational, extra-media and ideological levels. The influences journalists experience in these aspects of their personal and professional lives guide and inform their work and lives not only within the distinct levels, but also interrelate with one another and
have effects in the other areas. This research uses the Hierarchy of Influences to examine trauma and resilience.

**Ideological Level Of Influences**

Understanding this research in a cultural context is essential. Reese (2001, p. 183) says, “Each of the ... levels may be thought to subsume the one before, suggesting that the ultimate level should be an ideological perspective.” Every aspect of trauma, resilience, and levels of influence studied can be understood and placed within a larger social context.

**Extra-media Level Of Influences**

Reese (2001, p. 182) says, “At the extra-media level we consider those influences originating primarily from outside the media organization. In the context of this study, this role this level plays is crucial. The violence, intimidation and threats that Mexican journalists receive from criminals, as well as the violent imagery they witness related to the activities of those people, are what essentially drive the organizational, routines and individual levels. The external stimuli imposed upon journalists lead to adaptations and changes within the individual, the routines followed and the ways in which they interact within their organizations. The extra-media influences introduce trauma, which is then countered and tempered by resilience. Since extra-media influences penetrate those levels, it makes the separation of them difficult, and they must be understood to exist simultaneously.

In their study of journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan, Relly et al (2014, p. 17) show that “at the extra-media level, the significant and positive influence of violence on perceptions of the professional role of ‘watchdog’ may reflect those in the practice who practice this type of work.”
Organizational Level Of Influences

Reese (2001, p. 181) explains that the organizational level considers how humans relate to and interact with one another within a larger structure. The byproduct of these inter-organizational dynamics is the content and the editorial tenor of the publication. (p. 181).

Routines Level Of Influences

Reese (2001, p. 180) speaks of routines as “the constraining influences of work practices,” and says they are patterned practices that inform our perceptions and conceptualization of the social world as it relates to the professional environment. Journalists’ routines are affected by violence and the threat of violence. In order to evade detection from potentially dangerous people who may wish them harm, journalists in northern Mexico have taken to covering their tracks in ways that would be unthinkable to journalists working in safer countries. González de Bustamante and Relly find that journalists have to censor themselves, specifically when using social media. Their findings point to a journalist in Tamaulipas who uses euphemisms and vague language to describe violent incidents because of danger it may invite, saying the workarounds function “because people already know.” (2014, p. 8).

Individual Level Of Influences

On the individual level, violence and psychological trauma can manifest itself among journalists in immediate and relatively obvious ways. Carter and Kodrich (2013, p. 10) speak to the stress and anxiety reporters can absorb from living amid violence. The authors say, “This reporter also talked of the pressure of these warnings for himself and his family. He said, ‘The cartels have proven they will retaliate. It used to be that anonymous calls were considered to be prank calls … now they are taken seriously.’” (p. 10). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out
that while suppression of personal beliefs is part of a professional communicator’s role, it is less possible in environments like northern Mexico, where one’s life or the lives of one’s family may be placed in jeopardy. So living with the constant threat of violence could compromise and place pressure on a journalist’s charge to remain unbiased.

**EVOLUTION OF MEXICAN DEMOCRACY AND THE PRESS**

Mexico was much more a democracy in name than in practice from the late 1920s until the turn of the 21st century. In 1928-29, President Plutarco Elias Calles created a single ruling party that dominated all aspects of Mexican political life throughout the twentieth century. The PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party, and its “sprawling political coalition,” as Lawson (2000) terms it, held itself together through corruption, patronage and pork barreling. (p. 270). The system was characterized by an omnipotent president and weak legislative and judicial branches, in which officials aligned with the presidency enriched themselves. The media was also part of this all-encompassing power structure. (Wallis, 2014, p. 118). A more pluralistic system began to make itself apparent in the 1960s, partly because of a shift in journalistic values. Wallis concludes that the “media in contemporary Mexico were part cause of, part consequence of democratic transition.” (p. 129).

**Effects On Mexican Democracy**

The omnipresence of violence and intimidation that pervades Mexico and the daily working lives of members of the Mexican press specifically has a debilitating effect on democracy in the country. Not only do the forces of organized crime compromise the Mexican media’s ability to report honestly through violence, threats and buying off journalists, but government officials also have the effect of silencing journalists in the country. Journalists are
squeezed from both sides, and the sense that the public has a democratic voice in Mexico’s affairs is reduced. Schedler (2014, p. 15) asserts, “If democracy rests on the principle of popular sovereignty, and ... the public space is the institutional locus of popular sovereignty, then democracy appears feeble and frightened across sizable portions of Mexico.”

Mexico has a long history of authoritarianism and capricious law enforcement. Since authoritarian states are weak at their core, actors such as drug cartels can fill the power vacuum. Hughes and Lawson (2005, p. 9) argue the regional tendency to violence can affect the press because weakness in rule of law allows or leads to violence against the media by both state and nonstate actors. The hostility toward the press from state actors is exemplified by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon, who said the media helps organized crime get its message out and helps contribute to Mexico’s negative image abroad. (Estevez, 2010, p. 9). Sullivan (2011, p. 7) shows that many Mexican publications have experienced a rise in violence that have corresponded with a decrease in coverage of crime and politics, as well as a marked increase in self-censorship. Adding to the challenges for journalism directly and democracy secondarily are poor pay and a tendency for journalists to seek patronage from powerful interests. (Leyton & Herrera, 2011, p. 12).

Lawson and McCann (2004) point out that televised media played a strong role in the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox, of the National Action Party, or PAN, when he finally broke the PRI’s grip on power. Lawson and McCann find television significantly influenced the results because it presented the average Mexican greater choice. (p. 1). So again, a freer media in Mexico could be seen to simultaneously be the consequence and cause of greater democracy.
Further underscorning the evolution of the Mexican media are debates that take into consideration the merits of adopting classic U.S. journalistic values such as objectivity and editorial detachment as opposed to a more partisan stance. Ramirez (2010) says, “In the terms that Mexican journalists re-enact and interpret news values, it appears as if factuality, editorial detachment, and ‘objectivity’ are counterproductive and politically debilitating for the ‘watchdog’ role of the press.” (p. 18).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on this literature, I propose the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the types and extent of the psychological trauma that journalists in Mexico experience as a result of working in a dangerous environment?

(RQ1a) How does psychological trauma affect Mexican journalists or their ability to work?

(RQ1b) What influences does working in a dangerous environment have on Mexican journalists’ interpersonal relationships with their families?

(RQ2) What aspects of resilience do the journalists exhibit in the face of psychological trauma?

(RQ2a) How successful are they in overcoming the trauma in the performance of their duties?

(RQ3) What are the ways that Mexican journalists cope or deal with the psychological trauma and stress that they experience as a result of their work?

METHODS

The study was approved by The University of Arizona Institutional Review Board, and the study was conducted in accordance with the IRB protocols. Participants were offered
anonymity, and every journalist opted for this. I developed a list for a purposive sample of journalists from large, medium, and small news organizations from print. With participants’ permission, all of the interviews were audio-recorded. The audio files were translated into English and transcribed. I then analyzed and aggregated interview responses from the transcripts that corresponded to the study’s research questions. The interviews were conducted between July 2015 and October 2015. Twenty-five of the 26 interviews were conducted in Spanish. I am bilingual in Spanish, in large part because I lived and worked in Venezuela for about a year and a half. I also studied the language in high school and college, and use it in my home with my bilingual wife. Eighteen of the interviewees were male, and eight were female. All 26 worked as print journalists, though three also had worked in television or radio. In total, I contacted 38 journalists to request interviews. I recruited journalists from a few of the largest cities along the border, including Tijuana, Baja California; Mexicali, Baja California; San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora; Hermosillo, Sonora; Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua; Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; Reynosa, Tamaulipas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The most compelling reason for studying this specific area is that it has a history of drug-related violence, which has a negative effect on the ability of journalists there to work. This, in turn, decreases journalists’ power to act as watchdogs in the nation and to serve as protectors to the country’s citizens and institutions.

**FINDINGS**

(RQ1) What are the types and extent of the psychological trauma that journalists in Mexico experience as a result of working in a dangerous environment?

Mexican journalists are subject to threats, verbal intimidation, attacks with weapons like grenades and guns, physical assault and sometimes murder, and experience significant stress and anxiety in the execution of their duties as media members. The psychological effects manifest
themselves in various ways, and the levels of trauma and resilience that are displayed vary as well. Of the 26 journalists interviewed, 20 reported receiving email threats, 11 reported verbal threats (on the telephone) or other forms of intimidation, and one was beaten. They all had colleagues who had been threatened, and 14 had colleagues who had been murdered or lived in a city where journalists had been murdered within the last decade.

(RQ1a) How does psychological trauma affect Mexican journalists or their ability to work?

One reporter writing for a newspaper in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a city just across the U.S. border from Brownsville, Texas, endured years of threats for continuing to cover stories of violence related to drug traffickers. It finally culminated in criminals saying they were going to beat him. He was initially defiant and indignant, and stood by the public’s right to know what was happening, regardless of whom the coverage angered. However, his stance didn’t dissuade assailants from beating him severely in an effort to silence him. He displayed resilience by taking steps to continue his career, including moving with his family to Reynosa, also in Tamaulipas, where he is still working in the same capacity for the same publication. However, he continues to deal with the psychological effects of the attack. “I think it has affected me, yes. I … still feel impotence, anger, helplessness. In general terms, it left me feeling fearful. I am no longer a person with the same zest for life.” Though he wishes to remain a journalist, he said he would do it somewhere far from Reynosa, if he could.

A female reporter in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, who covered homicides from 2009-2013, also reported being affected emotionally. “I cried sometimes. … It hits you. At the end of the day, it feels like an attack on your dignity.” She also suffered emotionally when her colleague was murdered. She said her daughters played with her colleague’s children for years, and the
murder affected her on a personal level, too. But she continues, she said, because “it’s a duty,” adding, “It requires courage and love for the profession, your company and your readers to keep going after a colleague is killed.” She reported various ways of maintaining the resilience required to keep working by reducing stress, including exercising, weaving and avoiding violent scenes on TV. “I come home from that kind of scene, and my husband is watching those kinds of things. I just listen to music.”

A male print journalist in Tijuana talked of his feelings after the co-editor of his publication was murdered. “In the beginning, you’re afraid. Then comes helplessness, then anger. You can’t do anything, and the only thing left after anger is to cry. There are some who quit the profession. People understood and respected that. It’s understandable.” A male in Mexicali talked of seeing mutilated bodies stuffed in plastic bags. “And they really affect me. The first time I came to see something like this, there were a lot of emotions. You feel awful for the people there crying, you feel a lot of their pain.” He also described one case where a man who sold bottled water in the street was murdered, and seeing the victim’s wife and 6-year-old daughter arrive to the scene. “The woman was crying out the man’s name, and the girl was screaming, 'Dad! Dad! Dad!' There are moments like that that really affect you, especially if you’re a father.” Another reporter in Ciudad Juarez said, “We felt like the police every day, leaving for work, because you don’t know if you’re going to return the next day. We had to cover a battlefield without experience. ... It was very stressful, the worst stress of my life.”

(RQ1b) What influences does working in a dangerous environment have on Mexican journalists’ interpersonal relationships with their families?
The trauma journalists suffer also can affect the people around them. Nineteen interviewees expressed some concern for their families’ safety or for the worry their loved ones experience due to their work. One woman talked about shielding her children from her work. “I have protected them very well, and do not allow them to see the news. When the news comes on, I tell them it’s time for bed. I’ve somehow managed to shield them from reality.” Some echoed the theme of keeping information from spouses as a means of maintaining their mental well-being, as one journalist did in speaking of his wife and children. “I don’t think it’s right to put her through that. I prefer not to talk about it so they don’t lose their peace of mind.” A veteran reporter in Tijuana said he tries to ease his daughter’s anguish all he can, but admits he’s “still trying to figure out” what he can do. Twenty-two pointed to their spouses and other family members as an important outlet for talking about things they had seen that may have been troublesome to them. This aligns with Pennebaker and Susman’s finding that social support fosters resilience.

(RQ2) What aspects of resilience do the journalists exhibit in the face of psychological trauma?

One aspect of resilience that journalists interviewed display is taking precautions at work to counter the threats they face. Ten reported heightened communication among peers as a way of taking back control and empowering themselves. This again aligns with Pietrzak’s finding that humans seek control over their environments and lives in trying to attain resilience. Some reported security measures taken at their place of work, such as steel doors or ID cards. Another common adaptive behavior is for journalists to avoid bylines, instead often attributing stories only to “Staff.” Though it’s certainly a compromise of their professional norms, it nonetheless demonstrates a workaround that allows them to continue to do their work. Referencing Masten’s definition of resilience as being marked by positive outcomes despite serious threats, the
majority of the journalists interviewed continue to pursue their profession willingly, take pride in their work, and believe they are performing well as journalists. This shows resilience. Only two said they would prefer to find some other kind of profession.

(RQ2a) How successful are they in overcoming the trauma in the performance of their duties?

The journalists I interviewed exhibited a high degree of success in overcoming the challenges they face vis a vis threats or physical violence in the performance of their duties. Their output is compromised at times, because they sometimes scale back their coverage due to concerns for their safety. But that is a separate issue from the question of whether trauma blocks their basic ability to work.

(RQ3) What are the ways that Mexican journalists cope or deal with the psychological trauma and stress that they experience as a result of their work?

Not all subjects mentioned specific ways they try to achieve resilience. However, the ways journalists facing threats in their daily duties deal with psychological trauma are varied, though 22 of the 26 interviewed cited unburdening themselves to some person through dialogue, whether it be with a family member, colleague, friend or clergy member, as a source of comfort. A man in Mexicali said he plays a musical instrument to destress. Three people cited their Catholic faith and the comfort they found within it. Eleven people mentioned exercise, including jogging. No one mentioned drug use or excessive use of alcohol, though six people said they like to have a beer with friends. One interviewee spoke anecdotally of a journalist from Veracruz he met at a conference who drinks heavily while on the job to deal with the stresses. Fourteen mentioned the joy they get from their children as being something that could uplift them.

APPLYING THE HIERARCHY OF INFLUENCES

23
Ideological Level Of Influences

The ideological level, in the Shoemaker and Reese model, is the overarching influence on journalists. Analysis of interviews found that values, attitudes and perceptions about the work that journalists perform (Reese; Shoemaker and Reese 1996) did seem to influence how journalists reacted to trauma, as well as the strategies of resilience that they employed. At the same time, similar to the work of Relly and González de Bustamante (2014), the study found that the ideological level was not the most prominent in the midst of an environment of violence that was in flux. This research found that extra-media influences in an environment of violence appeared to have the strongest relationship between the journalists, trauma and their strategies for resilience.

Extra-media Level Of Influences

I found several influences that factor into resilience and trauma. As mentioned, extra-media influences penetrate the organizational, routines and individual levels, and serve to drive them all. The most onerous of the extra-media influences is the criminals who introduce trauma to the journalists, which in turn leads to resilience. Corrupt and apathetic government officials also play a role, as they abdicate their duties to provide security for journalists. Other factors that can be seen as extra-media influences are clergy and family members, as they help facilitate resilience.

Organizational Level Of Influences

At the organizational level, journalists in northern Mexico make numerous compromises in their work due to threats and physical violence. The most obvious to the general public is the fairly ubiquitous practice of signing stories as having been written by “Staff” or simply putting
the name of the publication. Using a standard byline is often seen as too risky for the journalists. They also sometimes feel compelled to communicate with one another far more often than they otherwise would, in order to reassure and inform themselves about one another’s safety and whereabouts. Sometimes, the method of communication changes, too, and what would’ve once been an everyday, technological convenience turns into something too dangerous to risk. As one journalist in Mexicali said, “We don’t communicate by phone or internet. We speak in person about situations. Basic things, but we’re in constant communication. Undoubtedly, though, the most common change to the work routine is the coverage itself. Speaking of the most violent time in Ciudad Juarez, one journalist there said, “We simply decided not to publish some stories. There was a time when that was worse. One day, 10 dead. The next day, 11 or 12 more. And you keep quiet about a lot of it, because the risk was so much.” Another journalist in Ciudad Juarez echoed that thought. “I change everything. Many things I refrain from writing.” And a journalist in Hermosillo bitterly expressed some of the frustration and resignation that goes along with compromising professional instinct in the form of killing stories that deserve coverage. “Telling the truth is very dangerous. Here in this country, liars survive. Those who tell the truth are playing with their lives every day.”

**Routines Level Of Influences**

The journalists interviewed reported changes in their work routines, such as taking precautions they wouldn’t have normally taken or hiding attribution of work they otherwise would’ve taken credit for. One journalist in Mexicali who had had co-workers killed or beaten, said, “For a long time … I was identified as being from (his publication) on online videos. I began to leave (the publication’s name) off.”
Individual Level of Influences

Effects on the individual are the most pronounced of any of the levels analyzed in this study. Journalists who were subjected to threats and physical violence reported stress, anxiety, fear and hypervigilance. As a reporter in Ciudad Juarez said, “Personally, the impact makes me want to cry.” Another journalist in Matamoros said of his feelings after being threatened, “I took three or four days off. I felt awful, and wanted to leave the whole thing.” A journalist in Reynosa said, “I got to the point where I was either afraid to open my email or, actually, too worried not to open it. I was almost torn between the two emotions. I feared I may see another threat, but I also feared not seeing it in time. I began to perceive threats all around me when I was out. It was a very hard period in my life.”

DISCUSSION

Mexican journalists display significant resilience in the performance of their jobs, despite working in an environment marked by violence, threats of violence, or at the very least the understanding that violence is a possibility constantly looming in the background. All those interviewed not only reported being able to continue with their work, but many also spoke of the commitment and dedication they feel that drives them on. This spirit of perseverance and defiance of danger is not the attitude displayed by people who are cowed into submission show.

One noteworthy phenomenon was that the more recent the spate of violence in a city, the more concerned and cautious the reporters seemed. Immediacy and proximity to danger are factors. That is to say, in a city that had undergone a period of violence that significantly abated a few years prior, as in the cases of Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, the journalists seemed more at ease in discussing the troubles they had faced, and had an air of relief in their demeanors and in their
answers. Reporters in Reynosa, Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo, however, where the violence is still heightened, seemed far less comfortable and seemed more worried about meeting. That was evident not only in their questions and the concern they expressed when they asked about what specific time I would be somewhere and where exactly I would be, but also in less concrete ways, such as tone of voice or a general wariness and sense of unease in their attitude when we spoke. The journalists in all the other cities besides those three were markedly calmer, less concerned about the specifics of the meeting time and place, and generally seemed to be far more comfortable with the whole interview process. Journalists in the cities where the worst violence had abated conveyed the attitude of a person who has lived through some great danger, but no longer feels the fear or worry of it, and can speak of the events in a more detached way.

This points to the presence of resilience in the journalists. When danger becomes less immediate and more a product of memory, their minds allow them to assume less of a guarded or defensive posture. Their demeanor display a sort of recovery from fear or agitation. It also underscores the role of control over one’s environment as an important factor in showing resilience, as Pietrzak points out. If the city in which a journalist lives is actively beset by frequent, violent incidents, that person will believe they have less control over their environment, and thus their lives. And those feelings of loss of control would be some of the more severe a person could be subjected to, since it would call into question one’s own safety and mortality. Added to that is the stress journalists in those areas are bound to feel because they have to involve themselves in those events in some way, unlike other citizens, who can choose to hide and dissociate themselves from violent events. Journalists who wish to live in peace and without threat of violence can see those hopes drained away by externally imposed events and actors. So
it makes sense that resilience and a sense of calm would be achieved to a greater extent when the element that’s uncontrollable is eliminated.

Seven of those interviewed reported a loss of joy in their lives, and many said they have moments that bring them low emotionally. Twelve also said they knew of colleagues who had left the field altogether, and two said they would like to find another profession, if possible. However, despite the dangers that challenge the professionals working in the border areas of Mexico, the journalists there by and large forge ahead with their jobs, significantly demonstrating remarkable resilience.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this research was geographic. I was not able to travel to certain areas along the northern Mexico border because of security and safety issues. It’s an issue that presents difficulty for the people who live there, as well as visitors. I dealt with that on one occasion by requesting that the journalists cross over to the U.S. side to speak. Without being able to travel freely and also communicate electronically and over the phone in an unfettered fashion, I was not be able to study as wide a population as I otherwise could have and would have wanted to. Constraints of time and finances also added to my inability to get a wider sample.

Another thing that may have affected the interviews were the dynamics that developed between me and the journalists whom I interviewed when we spoke about subjects that may have been traumatic or painful for them. Interviewees may have felt uncomfortable, and perhaps weren’t as communicative when we spoke about traumatic events. To add to understanding of trauma and resilience, future research could focus upon former journalists and comparing their
sense of well-being after they have left the profession. Another possible avenue of future research would be to study the organizational influences that affect Mexican journalists. Beyond that, a longitudinal study focused upon journalists interviewed for this research could be another area of future research. For example, how different does resilience look when it's 10 years removed from the worst violence as compared to two years? In addition, studying the children of these journalists once they become young adults also could expand knowledge in this area of research. For example, how, if at all, did having a parent faced with these stresses affect the children, as they see it? I also believe comparing the perceptions of journalists from other areas of Mexico who are far less touched by violence with journalists with major exposure to violence also would be a future area for research. Additional research could examine how these traumas affect news coverage and the functioning of the press as an institution of a democratic society.

CONCLUSION

This study can add to the body of work analyzing the challenges facing Mexican journalists working in areas along the U.S.-Mexico border. It can add insight to studies looking at the difficulties facing those journalists, and how those problems affect the institutions of journalism and democracy in Mexico. Interviewing former journalists and comparing their senses of their own mental well-being after they've left the profession might be one future area of study that would add to our understanding of this issue. I also recognize that another possible avenue of future research would be to study the organizational influences that affect Mexican journalists. Beyond that, I believe just following up with the journalists interviewed could be an area of future research. How different does resilience look when it's 10 years removed from the worst violence as compared to two years? I believe studying the children of these journalists once they become young adults could also be a good area of research. How, if at all, did having a
parent faced with these stresses affect the children, as they see it? I also believe comparing the perceptions journalists from parts of Mexico that are far less touched by violence have of their own well-being might be a good area for future research. It would also be interesting to know how these traumas affect coverage and the functioning of the press as an aspect of a democratic society.

I also believe the high response rate by potential interviewees (68 percent) points to a level of dedication and social responsibility among journalists in northern Mexico, perhaps because they are interested in spreading knowledge about the pressures they face, and perhaps because they would like to see protections for them implemented.
### TYPES OF TRAUMA SUFFERED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of trauma</th>
<th>Verbal threat</th>
<th>Emailed threat</th>
<th>Physical attack</th>
<th>Office attacked with grenade or guns</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number reporting</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>2</td>
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### STRATEGIES/TYPES OF RESILIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES</th>
<th>PHYSICAL</th>
<th>FAMILIAL</th>
<th>SPIRITUAL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking with anyone -- 22</td>
<td>Jogging -- 5</td>
<td>Talking with family -- 22</td>
<td>Going to church, faith -- 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having beer w/friends -- 6</td>
<td>Taking walks -- 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Appendix

Below are the questions I asked. They were created to elicit responses that shed light on the trauma the journalists experience, as well as the methods and types of resilience that they demonstrate to help them continue to be productive in their professional and personal lives:

1. In what year were you born?
2. In what medium do you work?
3. How long have you been a journalist?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. Did you receive training to become a journalist, and if so, what type? (Individual level)
6. What types of stories do you most commonly cover? (Routines)
7. How many stories per week do you write? (Routines)
8. Where does your work take you in this city or anywhere else? (Routines)
9. Could you tell me about the beats you cover? (Routines)
10. In the training you received, did you learn how to deal with stories that may have elements of violence or human tragedy in them? (Individual)
11. How often do you cover a story where someone has been physically hurt, kidnapped, murdered or otherwise harmed? (Routines)
12. What emotions do you feel when you cover stories that include elements of human suffering? (Individual)
13. Who, if anybody, do you talk to about the experiences you have at work? (Individual)
14. Who do you find provides you the best outlet to talk about your experiences, and why? (Individual)
15. How does your organization support you when it comes to helping you with any difficult feelings or work issues that may come from experiencing or seeing violence in the course of your work? (Organizational)

16. What characteristics do you think a journalist needs to persevere and succeed in getting their work completed satisfactorily in your city? (Individual)

17. What precautions do you take to protect yourself while you’re working? While you’re at home? (Routines)

18. Do you feel your work affects your family? Could you tell me why or why not? (Individual)

19. What, if any, is a situation in which you would decline to cover a story? (Routines)

20. Do you think criminal organizations should be confronted and covered by the press? Could you tell me why or why not? (Individual)

21. What do you think the role of the press in Mexico is? (Ideological)

22. Do you believe the press can help alleviate violence in Mexico? Could you tell me why or why not? (Ideological)

23. Do you feel the public supports your efforts to expose criminal organizations? Could you tell me why or why not? (Ideological)

24. Is the press in Mexico doing enough to expose criminal organizations? Could you tell me why or why not? What more, if anything, could be done? (Ideological)

25. What actions would you like to see the government take to protect journalists? (Ideological)
26. Why do you believe the violence against journalists is as severe as it is? (Ideological)

27. What do you see yourself doing in the future? Will you continue as a journalist? Could you tell me why or why not? (Ideological)
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https://freedomhouse.org/search/Not%20Free%20Mexico


symptoms in soldiers returning from operations enduring freedom and Iraqi freedom.

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