An Investigation by Fundacion Mexicana de Periodismo de Investigacion MEPI

Pachuca, Hidalgo State--The gleaming cross, silvery and tubular and some thirty feet high, and the large modern church painted in bright orange, are hard to miss. They loom over the low rising houses and the rough paved streets of Tezontle colonia, a working class barrio home to laborers and maids in the city of Pachuca, Hidalgo, located about an hour away from Mexico City.

They mark a stark difference standing next to the original tattered one-story chapel which was built by local parishioners two decades ago and was not demolished. The new additions were built in 2009 thanks to the hefty donation of a local benefactor whose name appears on a metal plaque tucked away behind an interior wall. The plaque would be unimportant if it wasn't the name of a man who left his hometown years ago to make something of himself: Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano.

Lazcano is none other than "El Lazca," the crime boss of the feared military-trained drug gang known as Los Zetas. He is one of the most wanted drug traffickers in Mexico and the U.S. Department of Justice offers a $5 million dollar reward for information that leads to his arrest or conviction (www.justice.gov/dea/fugitives/houston/LAZCANO-LAZCANO.html)

His presence in Pachuca, and his generous gift to this church, has been widely known here but it was not reported by the press until late October, when the Mexico City newspaper *La Razón* splashed the news on its front page, complete with pictures of the orange church and the plaque.

The reason for this silence can be best explained by what occurred in Pachuca during this year´s Valentine's Day.

"You got a letter," his mother told him one evening after work this year. The journalist from Valle del Mezquital, a hamlet in the state of Hidalgo, opened the envelope and found out he was invited to a Valentine's Day party in a ranch, the Santa Inez, in Tepeji del Río, a nearby town. "There was going to be alcohol, women and gifts for all the guests, everything for free," said the reporter, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. Several reporters from various media outlets in the area also received the same anonymous invitations.

He did not attend the party, but two friends told him what happened. A group of men and welcomed and guided them to a large partyroom. Soon after their arrival, Several women arrived aboard fancy cars. During the party "someone stopped the music and told those present everything was for them: the women, the alcohol, the gifts," says the reporter, who heard the story from two colleagues. "The only condition they were warned of was, do not mess with our business." Soon after the party, reporting on drug related violence in Hidalgo plummeted.

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It was the Zetas clear announcement of their arrival in their boss' home state and their way of posting a warning to the local press: they were the new bosses –and there were new rules– in town. Nobody wrote about the Valentine´s Day party either.

The fact that church, plaque, party and all– went unreported, is an example of how the power of drug cartels has metastasized like a cancer taking over swaths of territory across Mexico, and silencing journalists along their path. In the northern, southern, and center regions of this large nation, the drug organizations have created black news holes where little, or nothing, about incidents related to the brutal drug war makes it to the media. Editorial decisions about what appears on the front pages of newspapers or the first minutes of television news programs are today less dependent on basic news worthiness, than on the whims of *narcos* who are not shy to express what they want printed or broadcast. The new bosses have crafted relations with media with the help of unwritten, and sometimes even unspoken, agreements between traffickers, reporters and editors.

That many news stories are not seeing the light of day is preventing Mexico from understanding how far and how deeply encrusted drug cartels have become throughout the country.

To measure these news black holes and understand the rules that have developed between drug cartels and the media, the Fundacion Mexicana de Periodismo de Investigacion (MEPI) reviewed six months of crime news reports in thirteen regional newspapers published in Mexico´s most violent cities. MEPI also interviewed regional reporters who were promised anonymity.

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In 1986, twenty-four years ago, the signals of drug violence that are so pervasive today were only noticeable in faraway places like Matamoros, the Gulf border town where the Cartel del Golfo (Gulf Cartel) was born. Norma Moreno Figueroa was only 24 years old, but she wrote the most influential –and much despised– column in the local newspaper *El Popular*. Her propensity to give thrift to rumors and innuendo when writing about powerful local figures had earned her a few enemies. Her last encounter, according to fellow reporters, was a column that attacked Matamoros Mayor Jesús Roberto Guerra Velasco, a relative of Cartel founder Juan Nepomuceno Guerra. The next day, July 7, 1986, shortly after 7 a.m., unknown assailants mowed down Moreno Figueroa and her editor, Ernesto Flores Torrijos, with automatic weapons. The crime was never solved.

The meaning of her death still resonates in the minds of local reporters. "That murder," said a veteran reporter this year, "defined the limits of our job as journalists in Matamoros." Rule number one: don´t publish the names of capos, said the reporter. The MEPI study found that Matamoros and other regions of the northern state of Tamaulipas which is still partly controlled by the Gulf Cartel, are veritable black news holes— 0% of violent incidents connected to drug trafficking appear in news pages. The only exceptions are found in the Nuevo Laredo newspaper, *El Mañana*, which ignores drug

stories from its hometown, one of the most violent ones in the border, but carries stories on drug-related violence in Laredo, Texas.

"Different cartels have different methods for controlling the media," said a senior journalist from Sinaloa, another state ravaged by drug violence. The methods that are becoming the norm across the country are those that started emerging when Moreno Figueroa, the young columnist, was murdered. Those are the methods created by the Gulf Cartel henchmen, which became more deadly under the Zetas when this group worked as Gulf Cartel enforcers. After their split from their former bosses, the Zetas have wrestled away large swaths of territory and imposed a new media order in other cities in Central and Southern Mexico.

MEPI reviewed crime stories published during the first half of 2010 in the following newspapers: El Noroeste (Culiacán), El Norte (Ciudad Juárez), Norte (Monterrey), El Dictamen (Veracruz), Mural (Guadalajara), Pulso (San Luis Potosí), El Mañana (Nuevo Laredo), El Diario de Morelos, in Morelos, El Imparcial, (Hermosillo) and the newspaper Milenio´s national and Hidalgo editions. The study measured stories that used words that are utilized to describe drug war incidents: "narcotráfico," "comando armado," "cuerno de chivo" (a popular nickname for AK-47 automatic rifles,) and so on.

Government crime statistics for the same period were not available, thus MEPI gathered data on the number of gangland executions in each city during the months studied and found stark statistics: in 8 of the 13 cities studied, the media only reported one of every ten drug related violence. In those where there were more stories, only three out of ten were published. The newspapers' crime pages were not empty, but filled with stories on minor crimes not related to the drug conflict. In the combative daily *Notiver,* in the city of Veracruz, which is also under the aegis of the Zetas, the newspaper focused on stories on home burglaries, pedestrians hit by cars, or family violence. “We have become publicists, and only cover organized crime through official communiqués,” explained one top editor here.

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The Zetas were started by handful of special forces Mexican army deserters who joined the Gulf Cartel in 1999 and improved the groups military training. They introduce psychological operations and other war expertise. Their methods are among the most violent from other cartels —they were the first to decapitate their victims and leave their heads nearby—and because they understand the role of propaganda, they use the mainstream media effectively to gain and maintain total control over a territory. Their methods are beginning to influence how other drug cartels treat the media.

"The journalists could help multiply the force of delivery of their (the drug traffickers´) message," said Eduardo Guerrero, a drug trafficking expert who works for Lantia Asociados en Mexico City. For the Zetas, especially, journalists serve as good informants, since they have access to high places with their press credentials.

"For the narcos, it's very important to communicate their message to their enemies and to society at large," Guerrero said. According to the analyst, traffickers have multiple manners in which they send messages. One way is in the manner in which they kill the victim—cut off hands means the victim was a thief, for example. They also leave leave messages on cardboards left lying next to the bodies. And then there are the large banners called *narcomantas* they hung from bridges and highway overpasses. Some of the traffickers also post their messages in YouTube and in blogs. "But the media and national television are the most efficient way of sending a message," added Guerrero.

The Valentine´s Day party for journalists in Hidalgo, also served another purpose. It may have been a sly attempt at registering the faces of some of the key reporters in their territory—and identifying those who may be easy targets for collaboration. In Ciudad Juarez, a veteran crime reporter explained how the Juarez Cartel used to work the same way with the local media. "There used to be about twenty radio, TV and newspaper reporters here who worked for the narcos." Today "it's too dangerous to take their money," he said. The city is being fought over by rival organizations and violence has spiked, with Juárez seeing 20% of all execution-style murders in the country.

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Today, the territories controlled by the Zetas and the Cartel del Golfo are the ones that suffer the worst drug cartel restrictions, according to the MEPI analysis. The news media in those states, which comprise about one third of the country, publish or broadcast only between 0% y 5% of drug trafficking related violence. Even editors in the beleaguered city of Ciudad Juarez pity their colleagues: "Well the censorship there is 100 percent," said one editor.

Taumalipas state, in the northeast of the country is the place where both the Zetas and the Cartel del Golfo have flexed their muscle to stymie the free flow of information. Eight journalists from various cities in this state, including Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Victoria and Matamoros gathered for a private discussion last May and compared notes. All said both gangs had perfected their control of the media and even made periodic meetings with reporters and editors where they handed out edicts and instructions on how they should treat special stories. Both drug groups appear to be in competition as to how far they can push the limits, said the reporters. "I look forward to the day when I can be a journalist again" said one. Another reporter complained that even reporting on traffic accidents can be problematic; if the victims are cartel members, reporters run the risk of violence.

It was in the state of Coahuila, another state where they are fighting for control, where the Zetas pushed the envelope. The local cartel representative began demanding that the director of a small local newspaper bring the page one dummy for him to put a red pencil to the stories he did not want as he sat every night in his parked car, according to a Mexico City editor who knew about the case.

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Last July, when drug cartel hechmen kidnapped three local journalists and a national television correspondent working for Televisa, in Torreón, Coahuila, the Mexican and international press went into a frenzy, out of concern that the four would be killed by their captors. In Sinaloa, however, a journalist told MEPI that when he learned that the kidnappers belonged to the Cártel de Sinaloa, he knew the four men would walk free unharmed. It is not that there are good and bad cartels, he said. Only there are different manners to control the media. Murdering journalists is not the norm for the Sinaloa Cartel, said the reporter.

The Sinaloa Cartel has controlled its region on the northwestern part of the country for 30 years reaching a *détente* with the local news media. There were a few murders of journalists in the 1970s but since then the group has gone to dominate one of the most prosperous marihuana production regions and lucrative cocaine and heroin trafficking networks. The cartel is considered the richest group in the country. Its leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, is listed among one the richest Mexicans, according to Forbes. The Sinaloa press has learned to work along its *détente*, a non-aggression pact, whereby the media has tacitly agreed not to publish the names of cartel leaders, nor logistical details connected to cartel operations, according to a former official from the Attorney General´s office.

Together with this non aggression pact, it helps that "Cartel leader Chapo Guzman, has not crossed the line of killing journalists," said one reporter. Along the limits of this détente and perhaps because of it, in the MEPI investigation *El Noroeste*, one of the principal dailies in Culiacán, the capital city of the state of Sinaloa, had one the highest percentages of news coverage related to drug trafficking, publishing 3 out of ten stories.

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This year, a wave of murders and disappearances of journalists in Mexican states most affected by drug trafficking caught the attention of Mexico, including the national media. Until this year, few national newspapers reported extensively on the disappearance or murders of journalists in the rest of the country. The interest arrived twenty years too late. In 1986, the Mexican Association of Newspaper Editors AME, published a list of journalists murdered since 1971 and requested the government at the time to protect journalists from criminals and powerful people. Today, the number of journalists disappeared and murdered hovers around 30 since December 2006. A questions pops out: Why did the press in Mexico City and other national institutions failed to pay attention to the situation of journalists in provincial cities?

"There is an arrogance from Mexico City towards our cities," said Alfredo Quijano, director de El Norte of Ciudad Juárez, who pointed out that there were few effective independent networks linking journalists in the capital city and the states and provincial cities. The kidnapping of journalists in Torreón, Coahuila last July pushed the Mexican national press to react and say "basta". But provincial journalists are quick to point out that the main reason there was nation-wide media indignation was because one of the kidnapped journalists worked for the national Televisa network. Whether this is a true

observation or not, it is hard to prove. However, Quijano pointed out that more foreign journalists have come to Juárez than journalists from Mexico City.

The violent wave against the media has arrived as Mexico´s state and national media confronts a most serious financial crisis. Small and large news outlets have felt the pinch, and many national newspapers have reduced the number of correspondents, widening the gap of information between the capital city and the provinces. Mexico´s provincial media has seen it worse. Local advertising has shrunk and many local news outlets have to depend more and more on local government advertising. In Veracruz, for example, many news outlets depend on the state government largesse, but this dependency leads to a shrinking in the number of stories on drug trafficking violence, because the Government of Veracruz does not want tot give the image of their cities controlled by drug trafficking.

In Ciudad Juarez, Quijano said his newspaper lost 70% of its publicity. "We had to cut the police and crime section from two pages to one page. We also cut some reporting and editorial jobs, but we are surviving."

The lack of critical reporting prevented journalist from seeing how the influence of drug trafficking organizations advanced state by state and few journalists put together the statistics that show how the media across the country was facing being silenced. The black news holes spread across the Mexican panorama and the nation ignored the problem until earlier this year.

"We let the problema spread," said one journalist in Veracruz. "Nobody from the main cities took the care of reporting about the problems in the provinces." Then he added: "Many acused the state-based media of being cowards and going silent; but how could they blame us, if they don´t know reality as we do."

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