The Global Threat to Journalists' Safety Online and Offline: Lessons from Mexico

The safety and security of journalists is under threat globally, but with greater intensity in certain parts of the world. Mexico is one of those places. Reporters Without Borders states that Mexico is one of the [most dangerous](#) countries to be a journalist and a 2022 [report](#) by Article 19 found that over 40% of documented attacks (both online and offline) against journalists in Mexico were connected to government actors. Since 2000, the Committee to Protect Journalists has [documented](#) 144 journalist and media worker deaths in Mexico.

Driven by these concerning developments, CNTI co-sponsored a convening in Mexico City with the [Organización Editorial Mexicana](#) (OEM), a leading news organization in Mexico. We assembled a group of local leaders from civil society, technology, government, news and academia to discuss the topic of [Sustaining Journalism in the Face of Security Threats](#).

The conversation was especially illuminating to those who do not live in the constant state of threat and uncertainty that Mexican journalists experience. While recognizing the great challenges at hand, the group identified several practical steps to mitigate harms. These steps, while oriented around Mexican journalists, are applicable around the world. Among these strategies is the creation of a global community to provide both connection and support.

This report lays out these strategies in detail with references to the current environment in Mexico and other elements of the discussion. Participants agreed to follow a modified [Chatham House Rule](#) allowing their direct, unattributed quotes to be included in the report. We thank the participants for sharing their perspectives and expertise.

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The Environment: Multiple Kinds of Violence

Violence against the press in Mexico comes in many forms, such as "sexual harassment, online harassment, defamation" as well as spying and threats, and is carried out by a range of actors including "organized crime, [government] authorities, civil movements and citizens." Violence towards journalists and the press flows between the digital and physical worlds with attacks in one context often leading to attacks in the other.

Participants shared examples of how many attacks are unpredictable in nature. They cited instances where a journalist might be targeted after a seemingly benign act such as taking a photo of the "wrong" vehicle or person. Additionally, because most journalists in Mexico need to work two jobs to pay their bills, an attack would often be explained as the result of something they had done in their non-journalistic job. This unpredictability instills a state of fear among journalists and underscores the government's ability to exercise its power arbitrarily. The rate of impunity — according to data from [Amnesty International](), the [Committee to Protect Journalists]() and [Propuesta Cívica]() — is over 95%.

The nature of this violence varies with the different ways journalists do their work across Mexico. In some regions and localities, journalists handwrite their stories which are then delivered within local communities, increasing the risk of encountering physical threats and violence.

- *"[I]n some very marginalized areas, there are journalists who write newsletters by hand and distribute them. That is the journalism that is done in some regions. And it is important to consider them because, as mentioned here, these types of journalists are the ones at greatest risk of suffering attacks." (from Spanish)*

In the digital realm, one major concern is the security of journalists' personal data. In January 2024, over 300 journalists had their personal information from a government database — containing personal addresses, passport identifiers, phone numbers and more — [leaked online](). The Mexican authorities are investigating the breach. There are also several instances of Mexico's outgoing president [doxxing]() journalists during live broadcasts. Concerns also surround the use of [Pegasus]() spyware to monitor journalists' actions and investigations. Cyber threats are becoming more severe and difficult to combat as the aggressors become more technologically advanced.

Recommended Steps

A major goal of CNTI's convenings is to identify actionable, collaborative steps that journalists, technologists, civil society and policymakers can take in tandem.

- *"All of this is going to take coordination and collaboration among a number of organizations if we're going to start creating the outcomes that we want to create for journalists."*

Several such steps emerged from this discussion.

Improve Journalists' Digital and Cybersecurity Literacy

Strong consensus emerged around the need for deeper digital and cybersecurity knowledge among journalists. This kind of knowledge requires journalists and their employers to dedicate themselves to new training that builds ongoing knowledge of and comfort with technology, the ways to use it for their protection and the ways current practices and programs can compromise it. Some described it as "First Aid style training" and "cyber hygiene." Currently, many aggressors are more technically advanced than the journalists they target, leaving journalists without digital shields to protect themselves.

One participant said:

- *"There is a significant lack of knowledge on how journalists should be using devices and software to protect themselves and their sources. […] Many journalists are freelancers or fixers and have even fewer opportunities to attend seminars or courses. They are more vulnerable than those working in newsrooms or as correspondents for national or international media." (from Spanish)*

And another suggested:

- *"The first place we should implement mechanisms for media literacy is within the media itself, especially for journalists. It's somewhat ridiculous, but journalists in this country, reporters, photographers, and especially columnists, often lack critical media literacy skills…" (from Spanish)*

An additional challenge in Mexico, and likely other parts of the world, is that many journalists are using older devices (e.g., cellphones, laptops, desktops, etc.) incapable of running the most up-to-date cybersecurity software. Furthermore, many

journalists in Mexico — particularly freelancers — use personal devices for their professional work. In these situations, personal data (e.g., family information) and professional data (e.g., sources) live on the same device, increasing the risk and consequence of their devices being compromised.

The continuous building of deeper knowledge could also help alleviate some of the conflicted feelings many have about technology. While journalists in Mexico find technology beneficial for their work (e.g., allowing them to share content immediately and communicate with sources), it can also put them at risk. For example, there is evidence that members of the Mexican government and military have targeted Mexican journalists by using Pegasus spyware.

- *"On one hand, technology itself allows them to do their work with better quality, making the journalistic work easier. But on the other hand, it puts them at risk. Technology itself is a risk." (from Spanish)*

Participants also discussed the disparity in digital safety training that exists between populated urban centers in Mexico and other areas of the country.

- *"Most journalists outside the major capitals of Mexico and outside the major media outlets in these cities know little to nothing about tools to protect themselves digitally. And something related to this lack of training is not just about knowing how to protect oneself from attacks, but it also means that many journalist colleagues do not even make proper use of technology." (from Spanish)*

Importantly, this training cannot be a one-time effort. To be effective, all members of the press must continuously update cybersecurity practices. And news organizations themselves, as one participant remarked, will need to drive part of this change by shaping the culture to accept continuous digital literacy and cybersecurity as a requirement for practicing journalism.

- *"Training a journalist to protect themselves is not a one-time thing. Making sure they have the right tools on their devices is not a one-time thing. It's an ongoing effort."*

Cyber resilience efforts must also be comprehensive. They need to teach journalists about the tools available to them as well as how to use them effectively.

- *"[C]ybersecurity today must be part of routine activities. In this way, institutions and companies must create a culture of information security and adopt appropriate measures." (from Spanish)*

Fortunately, no organization has to do this alone. Collaborative efforts with international organizations, as well as organizations within Mexico, can facilitate the adoption of cybersecurity protocols and practices.

- *"We have to work collaboratively with the models that we have, train the trainer, localize, contextualize, but also lean into new technologies."*

Expand Research to Provide Context and Understanding of the Problem

Another recommendation was to expand research about the current conditions for journalists as well as an examination of the broader landscape of violence in Mexico.

Participants recommended gathering better data about current conditions in Mexico related to violence, experiences specific to journalists and their technology habits. It is difficult to know the scope of security threats to journalists across Central and South America because there are so few comprehensive surveys or databases of journalists' experiences. Conducting more research would allow for a better understanding of the security threats facing journalists and provide metrics to measure the impact of protections.

- *"Unfortunately, we don't have studies like those by the Pew Research Center in the U.S., which provide insights into journalists' technological habits or their labor conditions, such as how many have been laid off since the pandemic and what their current situations are. There is a significant lack of knowledge on how journalists should be using devices and software to protect themselves and their sources." (from Spanish)*

Further research about journalist safety can also increase understanding of the complex landscape of violence in Mexico. Participants discussed how violence against the press in Mexico is part of larger "ecosystems of violence" and how research needs to take a comprehensive approach to understand the broader landscape of violence in the country.

- *"It's crucial to understand the violence against journalism in Mexico within these ecosystems of violence, where non-state armed groups and state apparatuses often converge… it's essential to study these attacks not in isolation within the journalism profession but within their broader contexts of violence. Only then can we develop joint strategies that have a stronger impact on prevention and response." (from Spanish)*

CNTI shared with participants that we will be contributing to further research in this area ourselves through a global survey of journalists. This survey will seek, in part, to gather deeper knowledge about the online safety and security challenges experienced by journalists. More information about this initiative will be forthcoming.

Further Develop Technological Tools and Use Artificial Intelligence

There was also a call for building stronger, more practical and comprehensive technological tools to guard against online attacks. Such tools, along with greater digital literacy, can help the benefits of technology outweigh the harms.

For example, many of the existing tools and methods to decrease online and offline threats toward journalists are *reactive* rather than *proactive*. Thus, journalists are left to respond to attacks and online abuse and to consistently play "catch up."

- *"One thing I have always noticed is that all these organizations and initiatives are reactive. They ask what to do after something has already happened. Little work is done on mechanisms that can prevent these situations." (from Spanish)*

What kinds of tools could offer more proactive actions and methods? Further collaboration and testing about how best to implement proactive measures to protect journalists deserves priority. One such effort shared at the event is work done by [Dromómanos](#) to develop AI-assisted tools to identify, track and report online abuse and threats directed at journalists working in Central and South America.

Developments in artificial intelligence (AI) were also talked about more broadly. AI is not as much of a central focus in Mexico as it is in other news environments around the world. However, discussions about and implementation of AI tools are beginning. One attendee raised the importance of considering how AI technologies can be used to protect journalists — particularly for those covering sensitive issues — instead of limiting their application to automation and efficiency.

- *"I think journalistic organizations should also ask themselves how they are using the adoption of information and technology within their own organizations for their teams of journalists. Because, for example, regarding artificial intelligence, my impression is that many media outlets are quickly rushing to see how they can adopt artificial intelligence to automate processes, generate content, and create better distribution methods. But I believe there needs to be a better discussion within the media themselves with their journalists in terms of how it also benefits them in matters of their*

own safety and how they can use technology to cover sensitive topics." (from Spanish)

Explore Regulatory Options

A particularly challenging dynamic in Mexico is that the Mexican government has played a major role in targeting journalists, including high-profile leaders like the outgoing president. This makes regulation a challenging strategy. Regulation could not only fall short of its intended goal but also backfire. Many participants shared that they have been working toward legislative protections for decades without seeing any improvement to the security of journalists in Mexico. One example of these efforts is the federal government's [Mechanism](#) for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists. It is laid out as a means for providing security protection to journalists who have received threats and/or experienced attacks. Some journalists receiving protection have [critiqued](#) the program on its effectiveness, raising concerns about some security personnel who have conflicts of interest, and/or having their applications for security denied.

Nevertheless, there is still a sense among many that we need to continue to try to develop regulations for digital privacy and security that will minimize potential abuse. Regulations are viewed as a crucial reference point. Even with the government as a part of the problem, there was agreement that some form of regulation enforced by the government — albeit risky — is needed.

- *"[R]egulation is a risk, especially in countries like this one. But not regulating is a danger because it leaves it open to indiscriminate treatment from those in power." (from Spanish)*

- *"[W]hile we have legal frameworks for the protection of journalists at both federal and local levels, although poorly implemented and operationalized, there is an absence of a specific regulatory framework for the protection of privacy and security in the digital world..." (from Spanish)*

Part of the desire for more regulation to support journalists stems from the recognition that regulations serve as benchmarks that journalists, academics, government officials and others can use to advance protections for the press.

- *"It's necessary to have regulatory frameworks, normative frameworks, even though sometimes they are not applicable, but it's important that they exist and that we continue pushing and demanding that authorities implement them." (from Spanish)*

It is also critical that any approach acknowledges and includes the diverse spectrum of journalism in the country. As one participant shared, areas outside of the major metropolitan locations are "invisible" when it comes to understanding the needs of journalists. In some rural areas of the country, for example, journalists craft handwritten newsletters for readers in their community which require different kinds of protections than technology-driven approaches to journalism.

- *"[A]ny response we attempt to elaborate to solve this problem must consider one thing, and that is that there is no such thing as Mexican journalism. There is no single Mexican journalism. [...] In that sense, any measure that is proposed, discussed, must necessarily understand that there must be a regional perspective. That is, understanding that each region has different economic, political, and social challenges." (from Spanish)*

Recognize the Importance of the State

Several participants shared the perspective that for journalism to be protected and supported, the Mexican government must be involved. This is a tenuous prospect given government officials' continued threats and admonishments toward the press — like [sharing](#) the personal contact information of journalists during live television broadcasts — but attendees stressed that unless the State prioritizes a free press and protections for journalists, all of the valuable work being conducted to bolster the press will fall short.

- *"Any measure that we, together, academia, NGOs, and journalism, can propose will never replace the responsibility of the State. We cannot replace the responsibility of the State." (from Spanish)*

Often the State — across multiple levels of government — is a major player in targeting journalists and the press. Participants voiced the tension that currently exists in Mexico between the government and the press. The State serves as an arbiter with the authority to enforce protections for journalists, while at the same time journalists are threatened by official actors of the State.

- *"For us, continued militarization means that the trend of violence against journalists and human rights defenders is unlikely to change." (from Spanish)*

This is a complex, difficult situation. The incoming Mexican president, Claudia Sheinbaum, will assume office on October 2, 2024. She is [expected](#) to pursue many of the same policies as her predecessor, outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, but possibly take a [less hostile](#) posture towards the press. While some in attendance were cautiously optimistic about the potential for an improved

relationship between the president and the press, many believed the current situation would not markedly improve.

Increase Pressure from the Global Community

Also stressed many times over is the important role the global community — including international government bodies, nation states and non-governmental organizations — needs to play in addressing journalist safety.

The global community should step up its pressure to hold the Mexican government (and other governments that attack the press and/or do not uphold protections) accountable for failing to support and protect journalists. External pressure has the potential to shape (1) what regulations are considered within a given country and (2) what the leaders are willing to say to disparage the press.

- *"So, I believe we shouldn't stop international pressure; we should continue to apply it, and that's important to support." (from Spanish)*

The global community can also provide important examples and morale boosts by continuing to take cases to court and bolstering protections through legal victories. As one participant shared, cases against political officials who target journalists are yielding positive results because they create legal precedent. These results foster protection for journalists even beyond the geographic bounds of a particular case.

- *"I think regulation is extremely important because not only it could prevent part of these attacks, but it creates an institutional and judicial space for legal action. And legal victories are extremely important. They set examples. We're seeing this in the case of Maria Ressa. We're seeing the case of Patrícia Campos Melo in Brazil. Patrícia is a Brazilian journalist who has been attacked by Bolsonaro systematically. She has been winning case after case. And it has been extremely important to make other political figures think twice before attacking a journalist."*

We also need safe ways for journalists to connect with each other around the world. Journalists can learn from each other, share experiences, tools and techniques for improving digital and physical safety, build moral support and more.

Build Public Support for Journalism

Many of the recommendations above will not be as effective without the support of the public. The public needs to care about journalism and the safety of journalists, which many participants felt is currently not the case. A recent report by the Reuters

Institute for the Study of Journalism found that only 35% of adults in Mexico trust the news media most of the time.

- *"I think that the fact that our profession is less and less liked and appreciated by society has also contributed to the lack of sympathy and to the lack of understanding about the risks..." (from Spanish)*

One contributor to this lack of appreciation and trust may be the growing political polarization in society and the ways that can be tied to the press.

- *"Therefore, the watchdog function is challenging for people because they always associate journalists with politics, which doesn't have a good reputation, so to speak." (from Spanish)*

Local outreach on behalf of local and regional papers was seen as a critical first step towards making connections with the public. Participants discussed the need for the public to trust journalists and view them as an important resource for staying informed about current events.

One participant shared:

- *"I think that's where we should pay more attention to reporting growth. It's there, in the small local newspapers. It's the beginning of the relationship with the community..." (from Spanish)*

Said another:

- *"It's not that people lack access to information; rather, they often choose to disconnect from it because they also perceive it as unhelpful." (from Spanish)*

Another individual shared the importance of developing relationships with audiences to understand what they need from journalism. This recommendation will require news organizations and journalists to form closer relationships with their audiences — a complex topic outlined in CNTI's latest issue primer.

- *"So, I believe we must better understand who our audiences are, how they consume information, because, ultimately, all journalism is local. All journalism is consumed locally. So, how do we better know these audiences, understand them better, how do we bring them closer and strengthen that bond?" (from Spanish)*

Attract Young Talent

Attendees also considered how to better develop new journalists. The current situation in Mexico has led many younger individuals to avoid the profession. Several factors contribute to the trend — mostly related to the lack of safety and low financial compensation.

● *"It's not academia's fault that there aren't young people wanting to study journalism. It's the fault of the media [owners], which have impoverished the profession. Because really, who wants to be a journalist today with these risks, with a salary of 3, 5, 8 thousand pesos a month, without social security for most of them, and abandoned by their own media when they are victims of attacks? It's very difficult for communication schools to attract young people who want to be journalists under these conditions." (from Spanish)*

There is also a concern that the training journalists receive in education programs fail to prepare them for the current requirements of journalism in Mexico.

● *"I think the connection between academia and the journalism industry, at least from what I see in Mexico, is getting weaker. My perception is that within academia, the academics who give us so much advice in the journalism industry don't know what to do with the students. They don't know how to train a very changing, very diverse character, in a complex process facing a job market with enormous challenges ahead." (from Spanish)*

Conclusion

This convening, in collaboration with the Organización Editorial Mexicana, discussed many of the online and offline security challenges currently faced by journalists in Mexico. This builds on other CNTI work in this area including issue primers about [cyber threats](#) and [online abuse](#) facing journalists, panel discussions at the [Abraji World Congress](#), [columns](#) and more. CNTI is also addressing the security concerns of journalists with its "Defining News" initiative. This initiative will feature a global survey of journalists to better understand, in part, the online challenges they encounter. More information about this initiative is forthcoming.

Convenings like this are just one of many initiatives within the larger work CNTI, an independent global policy research center, does to encourage independent, sustainable media, maintain an open internet and foster informed public policy conversations. Please visit our website: www.innovating.news to see more of CNTI's work and sign up to receive updates, and, as always, please contact us with questions and ideas.

Finally, please see the Appendix below for a list of participants at this event as well as other acknowledgements and information.

Appendix

List of Participants

- **Gerardo Albarrán de Alba**, Audience Advocate, Canal 44 Universidad de Guadalajara (UDG); News Ombudsman, Ibero 90.9
- **Sarah Barrett**, Head of Mexico Podcast Content, Wondery
- **Brian Cute**, COO, Global Cyber Alliance
- **Richard Gingras**, Global VP of News, Google *(CNTI Board)*
- **Manuel Alejandro Guerrero**, Professor, Universidad Iberoamericana
- **Rodrigo Bonilla Hastings**, News Partner Lead, Google
- **Nashieli Ramírez Hernández**, President, International Ombudsman Institute; President, Human Rights Commission of Mexico City
- **Blanca Lilia Ibarra**, Commissioner, Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales (INAI)
- **Alejandra Sánchez Inzunza**, General Director, Dromómanos
- **Alejandro Jiménez**, Opinion Coordinator, Organización Editorial Mexicana *(moderator)*
- **Sandra Ley**, Security Program Coordinator, México Evalúa
- **Rubén Arnoldo González Macías**, Professor, Autonomous University of Puebla
- **Leopoldo Maldonado**, Regional Director of Mexico and Central America, Article 19
- **Paula Miraglia**, Former Nexo Jornal & Gama Revista; Founder, Journalism & Tech Task Force *(CNTI Board)*
- **Amy Mitchell**, Executive Director, CNTI
- **Mariana Nolasco**, Product Manager, Dromómanos
- **Martha Ramos**, Editorial Director, Organización Editorial Mexicana
- **Roberto Rock**, Director, La Silla Rota
- **Hiroshi Takahashi**, Editorial Director, El Sol de México
- **Armando Talamantes**, Director, Quinto Elemento Lab
- **Francisco Torres Vázquez**, Executive Vice President, Organización Editorial Mexicana *(CNTI Advisory Committee)*
- **Omar Rabago Vital**, Deputy Chief of Party, Internews

About the Convening

CNTI's cross-industry convenings espouse evidence-based, thoughtful and challenging conversations about the issue at hand, with the goal of building trust and ongoing relationships along with some agreed-upon approaches to policy. To that end, this convening adhered to a slightly amended Chatham House Rule:

1. Individuals are invited as leading thinkers from important parts of our digital news environment and as critical voices to finding feasible solutions. For the

purposes of transparency, CNTI **publicly lists all attendees and affiliations present**. Any reporting on the event, including CNTI's reports summarizing key takeaways and next steps, can share information (including *unattributed* quotes) but cannot explicitly or implicitly identify who said what without prior approval from the individual.

2. CNTI does request the use of photo and video at convenings. Videography is intended to help with the summary report. Any public use of video clips with dialogue by CNTI or its co-hosts requires the explicit, advance consent of the subject.

3. To maintain focus on the discussion at hand, we ask that there be no external posting during the event itself.

To prepare, we asked that participants review CNTI's Issue Primers on online abuse and cyber threats.

About CNTI

The Center for News, Technology & Innovation (CNTI), an independent global policy research center, seeks to encourage independent, sustainable media, maintain an open internet and foster informed public policy conversations. CNTI's cross-industry convenings espouse evidence-based, thoughtful but challenging conversations about the issue at hand, with an eye toward feasible steps forward.

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