

Mexican Media

THE ORAL TRADITION

Prepared for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation

By Peter Laufer

With reporting and assistance
by Pedro Armendares
Veronica Melgoza
Deborah Mendelsohn
Terry Phillips
Victor Reyes
Robert Simmons

30 July 2002



INTERNEWS

About the Author

Author and journalist Peter Laufer traversed Mexico in 2001 and 2002 to research changes in media under the Vicente Fox administration. Long interested in Mexican and Latin American affairs and immigration issues, Laufer covered the region for NBC News during the civil wars of the 1980s. His documentary and book *Nightmare Abroad*, winner of a George Polk and other awards, investigates conditions in Mexican prisons. His book for children *Made in Mexico/Hecho en Mexico*, published by the National Geographic Society last year in Spanish and English versions, is a look at the economic disparity between the First and Third Worlds.

Contributing writers/researchers

Pedro Enrique Armendares is Executive Director of the Centro de Periodistas de Investigación, A.C., an independent organization affiliated with Investigative Reporters and Editors which works closely with journalists in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Formerly an investigative reporter for *La Jornada*, Pedro contributes to other media Mexican and international media, including radio and television. A frequent lecturer and panelist in journalism workshops and seminars, he teaches Electronic Journalism at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. He was a full-time researcher and professor in the International Studies Division of the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), and Academic Coordinator at the Mexico City Study Center of the University of California, where he also taught the Contemporary Mexico course.

Veronica Melgoza is a Mexican communications expert who has spent the last five years creating and implementing innovative news and information sources for indigenous peoples in Chiapas. Working under the internationally acclaimed Catholic bishop Samuel Ruíz, she created Radio Diócesis “La Voz de mi Pueblo,” that brought local and regional news on audio cassettes to remote Mayan villages.

Deborah Mendelsohn is a former television producer who heads program development for Internews Network. Having lived and studied in Mexico in the 1970s, she has long followed political and cultural events south of the border.

Journalist Terry Phillips is a veteran war correspondent. From the melting of the Iron Curtain to the implosion of the Soviet Union, he reported major international stories for CBS News and National Public Radio. His overseas datelines have included Moscow, Baghdad, Kabul, Bucharest, Mogadishu, Sarajevo and Prague.

Victor Reyes is founder and publisher of the bilingual periodical *Visión Latina*, and has translated numerous journalistic and literary works, including a series on the Sea of Cortez by Pulitzer prize-winning reporter Tom Knudsen.

Robert Simmons is a longtime radio hand: announcer, program director, and station owner. A resident of the Texas-Mexican Borderlands, his interest in Mexican media goes back to his days as sports editor of the *Mexico City News*. Currently Simmons is at work on a documentary film study of Cuban dance.

<i>Summary</i>	1
<i>The Mexican Oral Tradition</i>	3
<i>The Borderlands</i>	3
The porous moving frontier.....	3
Murder at Zeta.....	8
Access to media stories from Baja.....	9
Tijuana radio failures.....	12
Narcocorridos report some news	13
Border blasters	14
Trying to silence Zeta	17
The Fresno connection.....	19
Licenciado Estrada Torres pleads the Fifth	20
Women at risk in Juarez.....	23
<i>At the Bogotá Conference: Dangers Facing Journalists</i>	25
Colombia: Mexico’s anti-future?.....	25
Vicente Fox as disappointment	26
Carlos Monsiváis weighs in.....	27
We’re here to help	28
<i>Mexico’s First Freedom of Information Law</i>	29
Hope and expectations	29
The Oaxaca beginnings	29
Notimex reform as an early Fox casualty.....	30
Repressive broadcasting laws and regulations	32
Government repression meets government transparency.....	34
<i>Deep in the Copper Canyon</i>	35
Food via radio.....	35
A media void.....	36
XETAR is off the air.....	37
XEPUR: an antique on the air.....	38
<i>Further Problems Reporting the So-Called War on Drugs</i>	40
One man’s obsession at www.narconews.com	40
A meeting in a secure and undisclosed locale	44

<i>The Internet and Computer Assisted Reporting</i>	45
<i>CAR, the IRE México report</i>	47
Fox's e-Gov initiative	50
The wired diaspora	50
<i>The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same</i>	51
<i>The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same</i>	52
One woman's story of disappointment and motivation.....	52
<i>The Mordida Lives: Cash in the Unmarked Envelope</i>	54
Take this bribe and shove it.....	54
Who paid how much to whom in Michoacán.....	55
<i>The Media Relations Experience of the Two DF NGOS</i>	58
Patricia Mercado: NGOs are unprepared for the media	58
Marta Lamas: The media are scandal driven.....	58
<i>Two More Gringo Periodistas Cringe and Complain</i>	61
Sam Quinones reports on culture	61
John Ross takes on politics	63
<i>Seductive Veracruz Radio Models</i>	66
Radio Teocelo: A community supported anomaly	66
<i>Two hundred radical women on the radio with eighty stations and growing</i>	68
<i>Back to Chiapas</i>	69
The Zapatistas' lawyer.....	69
The revisionist new Bishop.....	70
The ex-priest.....	70
Chiapas is no longer the flavor of the month	71
An INI radio station success story	73
Live in-person news reporting in the Chiapas outback	76
The Acteal massacre monthly live in-person news updates.....	78
Local commercial radio	81
Unlicensed, but not illegal	81
<i>Interviewees</i>	83
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	85

Mexican Media: The Oral Tradition

Media reform in Mexico: the Internews study

The reforms of the Zedillo presidency that led to the election of Vicente Fox also marked the beginning of a difficult process of reform in the Mexican news media. As is true in much of Latin America, the news media in Mexico has largely become a corrupt tool of the ruling elite. For several months, Internews has been in the field, examining the status of reforms to date, and seeking to find out what, if any, help Mexicans might want and or need to accelerate the reform process.

The Internews study concentrated on the northern and southern borders. Unique problems in those two regions filter across the entire Mexican nation and up across the frontier into the Mexican diaspora living in the US.

Along the northern border, the crippling impact of the illegal narcotics trade on communities extends into the news media. Reporters, editors, and media outlet owners are compromised by the virtually limitless funds of the narco-traffickers. Honest reporters and publishers are threatened, assaulted, and killed. This appalling environment is compounded by the widespread illegal migration of labor across the border into the US, or to the US- and European-owned factories south of the border. These conditions have created a stressed and transient community, difficult for radio, TV, newspapers, and magazines to serve.

Along the southern border, the problems are as severe, yet quite different. Illiteracy is rampant, and half the population is not proficient in Spanish. The tortuous terrain makes communication difficult; even radio waves cannot easily penetrate the mountains of Chiapas. Chiapas is also the site of the continuing insurgency against the central government, an insurgency that is spreading to Oaxaca, Guerrero, and other southern tier states. This bellicose atmosphere adds considerably to the self-preservation worries of media reporters, editors, and owners.

The importance of radio

Mexico is a society with strong oral traditions, so it is not surprising that radio and other audio-based media provide the best and most popular access to information for Mexicans with limited news resources. Illiteracy and high costs put the printed media out of reach for the majority. Television is reserved for those with the means to buy a set and the time to watch it. However, radio crosses linguistic borders and is cheaply available, even during working hours (equivalent to waking hours for much of the population).

As elsewhere, most of Mexico's commercial radio stations are owned by conglomerates whose main interest is in selling advertising rather than developing a vibrant, free and independent press. News programming on the larger stations is often quite irrelevant to the economic or

social needs of listeners.

Making radio more relevant

To help make radio a source of useful information for poor Mexicans, Internews believes there is a need to develop the skills and facilities of independent producers of audio news products. The sort of help that is required includes:

- Support of low power, locally organized community radio, which is a cost-effective way to help develop a free and independent media. Support should include staff training in both journalistic skills and the business knowledge needed to keep community radio stations self-sufficient.
- Replacement of antiquated equipment in public radio stations.
- Support and training for new means of audio communication, such as "loudspeaker radio" in marketplaces, and the circulation of news programs on tape cassettes and CDs.
- Support for the production and presentation of in-person news speeches by informed circuit-riding news presenters, as an alternative to radio broadcasting in remote regions where radio is not accessible.
- Provision of equipment to support radio and other audio news producers, including the installation of digital audio studios and high-speed cassette and CD duplication equipment.

Using IT for better news reporting

Mexican journalists are far behind their peers in richer countries in the use of the Internet for news gathering and research, and in the use of available software for computer assisted reporting. Few Mexicans now get their news from the Internet, but this number is growing; there is an increasing group of computer-literate young people in urban areas who are hungry for reliable news of relevance to their interests. Internews believes there are many ways to help media professionals and others take advantage of new technologies. These include:

- Holding Internet newsgathering clinics in provincial cities, at Internet cafés, e-Mexico sites, or local newspaper offices. Computer-assisted reporting might also be taught at such clinics.
- Inviting superior students identified at such clinics to Mexico City and regional capitals for master classes. Training would be offered on the condition that graduates agree to contribute to the training of peers in more marginalized and isolated regions of the country.
- Developing a support organization for non-traditional journalists, such as web site creators and program

producers whose work is distributed via the Internet and other alternative delivery systems.

- Funding and training journalists to establish web sites with journalistic content.
- Developing a project to provide computer-based consulting and advisory services to support Mexican journalists working in isolated regions with few training resources and limited interaction with colleagues.
- Supporting the efforts of journalists to form teams to catalogue and make audience-friendly use of the recent release of millions of previously secret government files.
- Tackling the bribing of journalists and other problems.

The institutionalized government and private sector bribery of journalists creates special problems. Many, if not most Mexican journalists—especially in the provinces—rely on bribes to augment less than living wage salaries. Many lack an understanding of internationally accepted professional ethics. Internews believes that one-way that *chayo*—Mexican slang for journalism bribery—can be addressed is by promoting cross-border interaction with US-based colleagues. Such interaction might take the form of:

- Support for programs to teach journalism ethics and the social responsibilities of being a journalist.
- Development of cross border partnerships in news gathering projects, creating safety against official and gangster influence with bi-national numbers and collaboration.
- Creation of bi-national, bi-lingual journals and other outlets to publish research, criticism, and news reporting dealing with cross-border issues.
- In addition to *chayo*, journalists who seek to report matters that anger the rich and powerful are often subject to muzzling through the imposition of excessive fines. Internews believes one way to address this problem is by providing direct financial aid to journalists who face bankruptcy due to unfair, adverse slander rulings.

One critical problem for Mexican journalists interested in making use of the Internet and globalization for newsgathering purposes is the universality of the English language. Many Mexican journalists do not have English language skills, and Internews believes this needs to be overcome by provision of appropriate training.

The influence of the Catholic Church in civil affairs is an ongoing issue for journalists, civil society activists, and the NGO community. Journalists need to fully understand how the church exerts control over public discourse on population, ethnic, and other issues. Internews will

recommend specific training in scrutinizing the church and its powers in Mexican society.

As part of its media reform efforts, the government is drafting access-to-information legislation and is rethinking its archaic broadcasting and print media laws. Professional organizations are monitoring the new legislation and lobbying on behalf of media organizations. This kind of advocacy is a new to Mexico. Practitioners need help and reinforcement from peers in other countries that have recently loosened restrictions on media. In this context, Internews will recommend organized professional exchanges between Mexican media advocacy groups and counterparts from other countries.

Taken together, Internews believes that the measures it recommends can substantially strengthen Mexico's media; at this critical time in its history, Mexico and all its citizen have urgent need of access to free and independent news, provided by strong and vibrant media. Properly functioning, the news media can further contribute to the development of all aspects of Mexico's civil society.

A Note on Methodology

The author of the report worked with colleagues in Mexico and the United States, the books listed in the bibliography, extensive field interviews and field visits to media outlets and those who use the media to prepare this report. He crisscrossed Mexico, traveling extensively throughout the northern and southern border states, along with visits to germane other locales, especially for critical meetings in Mexico City, mandated by Mexico's centralized society.

The report was created using journalistic techniques. The story sought is the status of the Mexican news media during this time of historic transition. In addition, the desire was to learn what can and what ought to be done to help fuel the nascent independent press. Finally, a critical component of the report was trying to learn if Mexicans want help from the *gringos* regarding their developing news media.

The result of contacting a wide variety of primary sources throughout Mexico is the development of a network of colleagues, many of whom are potential partners in any future work deemed appropriate to undertake in the country. Finally, it must be said that the field research only reinforced the author's love for and intrigue with Mexico, along with reaffirming his conviction that the country is ripe for extensive media reform and anxious for help from experienced players.

The Mexican Oral Tradition

Ladies and gentlemen,” announced the purser on the United flight from San Francisco to Mexico City, “our Mexican speaking flight attendants on this flight are...” Of course, those bi-lingual stewards and stewardesses speak Spanish. But the purser was not completely wrong. Mexican Spanish is unique, and Mexico’s oral traditions must be taken into account whenever the Mexican media is studied.

In the markets, hawkers sing out to describe and sell their wares. Signage is limited to announcing pesos per kilogram.

In the *zócalos*, stacks of newspapers weather, unread while townfolk gossip and music fills the squares.

In the cities, the radio dial is jammed, offering endless noise received in cafés and taxis, shops and sidewalk stalls, the car radios of a growing automobile-based commuter culture.

At the “Palabras de la Ciudad” exhibit at the Museo de Bellas Artes, museum goers are not left to their contemplation in silence; *romántica* music fills the gallery room showing graphic art.

The importance of television, newspapers, and magazines in Mexico pales in comparison with oral reportage—whether it is speech, music, or the endless background cacophony of urban Mexico. Sound is the preferred medium of mass communication in Mexico.

The Borderlands

“It is truly curious this idea that one has liberty in the United States. [For Mexicans] this often-praised liberty is imaginary.” —editor Francisco P. Ramírez in his weekly California newspaper El Clamor Público, in 1857.

The porous moving frontier

I was cruising south on Interstate 5 in San Diego, keeping up with the traffic at an easy 70 miles per hour in the silver Chevy Malibu I rented from Avis at the airport. My immediate destination was Tijuana, just south of the border, across the busiest frontier in the world.

Tijuana brags about itself as “The World’s Most Visited City.”

The US-Mexico border is the only place in the world where the First World meets the Third World face to face across an artificial landline. This man-made delineation remains so porous that, even after the events of September 11, 2001, most clever and determined Mexicans (or other non-US citizens) can make their way illegally over the line and into the US.

The result of this continuing migration is a border that manifests itself in a variety of forms—especially regarding

media—far north of the actual international boundary.

The car renting experience is one example. Few US companies allow their cars south of the border. Avis allows such travel, for an extra twenty-four dollars a day in insurance charges. The insurance comes with a booklet titled, *How to Handle an Accident in Mexico*.¹ The trouble is, as is the case with many media outlets on both sides of the border, this brochure fails to report some critical news. “If there are injuries in any vehicle involved [in an accident],” it instructs, “you and the adjuster may be asked to accompany the police to the precinct house.”

As a matter of fact, if there are injuries, all drivers involved in the accident likely will be arrested and kept locked in jail until the cause of the accident is determined.

The booklet continues, “The adjuster will handle all details with the police.” Well, he or she may well do that. But note that the booklet does not suggest how long it may take to handle those details. Meanwhile, the drivers languish in jail.

Avis also provides renters with a handy bi-lingual booklet called *Tourist Guide Tijuana*, published by the Tijuana Tourism Board.² On a page headlined “Recommendations for Visitors,” it advises: “No police officer is authorized to receive money.” Of course not. That could be considered a bribe and would be against the law. However, most motorists with experience traveling in Mexico would probably agree that it is naive to consider—even since the reforms of the Fox Administration—that a deftly placed *peso* note no longer works to alleviate problems with the law.

A better source is getting the news from Carl Franz’s classic, *The People’s Guide to Mexico*.³ Franz offers this advice:

Even though Mexicans claim that the *mordida* (the bite) no longer exists or that it is unnecessary, we have found it alive and working quite well in all parts of the country. I have given ‘considerations’ to everyone from post office workers who couldn’t seem to remember my name to border officials who didn’t like my looks.

Franz offers a practical guide to the *mordida*.

You don’t bribe someone by stuffing a wad of bills in his pocket and saying, “Here ya go baby, a little something for the wife and kids!” There are more subtle and respectable techniques used to feel out the other person on their attitude and price. The

¹*How to Handle an Accident in Mexico* is printed and distributed by the insurance company Seguros Comercial América.

²*Tourist Guide Tijuana*, published by the Fondo Mixto de Promoción Turística de Tijuana, 2001.

³*The People’s Guide to Mexico*, John Muir Publications, 1990.

easiest of these for the inexperienced person to adopt is the, “Gee whiz, I sure wish you’d tell me what to do” angle. Other effective openers to the pay-off are: “Is there any way this can be worked out?” “Will there be an extra charge?”, and the national favorite, “Is there any other way of arranging the matter?”

News you can use, despite the posters in Mexico City featuring an apple and the legend: “Por un México integro, ya no más mordidas.”

I bring up these examples in a study of Mexican media because the border is not only porous; it’s in constant motion. This movement is especially apparent regarding media. Tijuana radio and television stations can be heard and seen on the US side, as can San Diego stations in Mexico. Mexican newspapers are for sale in street boxes north of the border, the *Los Angeles Times* is an easy find in Tjuana. The same is the case in forms of news reporting other than traditional news periodicals and broadcast newscasts, such as the insurance booklet. The movement of vast numbers of people back and forth across the US-Mexico border—legally and illegally, for work and for recreation—means that the problems facing news consumers who seek valid and valuable information must be studied taking into account a broad range of news sources and delivery systems. The news media reporting critical information about Mexico and for Mexicans are more than just radio and TV, newspapers and magazines. Similarly, those individuals and groups seeking access to the media to publicize their own concerns and activities ought to keep the porous, moving border, and a wide variety of alternative media outlets, in mind.

Carlos Fuentes deals with the fluidity of the border and cross border media in his novel, *The Crystal Frontier*. A character named José Francisco brings Chicano manuscripts from Texas to Mexico and returns to Texas with Mexican manuscripts. He carries the written word rapidly back and forth across the border on his motorcycle. The manuscripts are José Francisco’s contraband, literature from both sides so that everyone would get to know one another better, he said, so that everyone would love one another a little more, so there would be a “we” on both sides of the border.

José Francisco is stopped at the border on his motorcycle.

“What are you carrying in your saddlebags?”

“Writing.”

“Political stuff?”

“All writing is political.”

“So it’s subversive.”

“All writing is subversive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“About the fact that lack of communication is a bitch.

That anyone who can’t communicate feels inferior. That keeping silent will screw you up.”⁴

Other examples of alternative Mexican media at work far north of the border are as varied as word-of-mouth reports on how to cross the border illegally, the lyrics in popular music songs, and a Spanish-language traffic school instructor explaining how to avoid police profiling.

At the traffic school,⁵ hundreds of miles up into California from the border, I was the only gringo in attendance. The instructor overtly announced it as a survival school for Latinos facing an often-offensive dominant culture. He made it clear he was going to provide important news during the day. Gringolandia is like baseball, he explained, “If you don’t understand the system, you’re out.”

Gringolandia is like baseball, he explained, “If you don’t understand the system, you’re out.”

He was specific with his news, calling Republicans hypocrites for advocating state’s rights but trying to use state and local governments to enforce immigration laws. He explained how corruption in the US takes a different form than the Mexican mordida, using special-interest donations to the Bush campaign as an example. “Corrupción republicana,” he called it.

“Who makes the laws?” he asked the class, answering, “Special interests who get the ear of politicians with soft money.”

This was much more of a live news performance to the diaspora than the type of traffic school the courts undoubtedly expected.

“Whoever has the money gets to sit on the burro,” he taught us.

The lessons came one after another.

“If you don’t have medical insurance they will treat you like a dog in this country. ¡Hasta la vista, chica!”

“But there is a law requiring emergency medical attention be provided,” protested one student.

“Ha,” he responded. “They won’t give it to you. Try it out!”

More advice: “Watch out in Oakland and L.A. where the cops will go after young men and pretty women for little things.”

He explained how the police obtain DMV records when they swipe the computer strip on a driver’s license, “So don’t lie.”

The students, all in the class for the opportunity to remove a violation from their records, paid rapt attention.

“Watch out,” insisted the lecturer about the propensity

⁴*The Crystal Frontier*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. This citation is from the chapter titled, “Río Grande, Río Bravo.”

⁵Operated by the Academia de Tráfico en Español, (707) 544 3789.

of the police to stop Latinos, “they’re after you.”

More news you can use. And an example of how news is and can be transmitted in unexpected locales and in nontraditional forms. This sort of nontraditional news reporting directed at Mexicans far north of the nation’s political boundary is at least as important to consider as the status of traditional news media.

The traffic school instructor was not out of touch with reality, feeding paranoia. His classroom was in Novato, California. There, at about the same time, Novato High School senior Andrew Smith was busy on the final draft of an editorial for the school newspaper, an anti-immigrant rant targeting Mexicans.

“The American culture is being disintegrated through this multicultural atmosphere that everyone’s trying to push,” is Smith’s point of view:⁶

If you don’t have a country that’s strongly based on one type of culture, then there’s no glue that will hold it together in a crisis. There are [sic] a whole bunch of illegal Mexi-cans coming over. People come across the border pregnant, have a kid, and now the kid is a burden to the United States because their parents are not able to take care of them. We’re just allowing people to take advantage of us. It’s going to end up destroying everything that’s good here.

Where does Smith learn this dangerous and ignorant tripe?

He studies at the speakers of his radio, listening to the pantheon of right-wing talk show hosts. One of his favorites is the hate-mongering immigrant basher Michael Savage.⁷ “It’s a good way to get information,” Smith says of the Michael Savage show, a barrage of misinformation, opinion, and vitriol. “You don’t have to search for it, it’s presented to you.” Asked if he ever checks on the veracity of what he hears, his response is sad. “I would if I felt the need to. Usually I just listen to what’s been said and think it over and discern what I think is true and what I think is false. It helps me form opinions on topics I wouldn’t normally have heard about.”

In the symbiotic world of the Borderlands, the problems of Mexican media ought not be considered in a void of their gringo corollaries.

The border itself, of course, is artificial and those who attempt to enforce it often fail to take into account the war against Mexico that created it by forcing

about half of Mexico into US territory.

In his Memorial Day speech in 2000, President Clinton insisted, “Americans never fought for empire, for territory, for dominance.”⁸ In fact, that’s exactly what Americans fought for when they invaded Mexico in 1846. In his book, *The Annexation of Mexico*, John Ross suggests Walt Whitman’s commentary in the *Brooklyn Eagle* summed up public opinion: “Miserable, inefficient Mexico. What has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours to achieve this mission!”

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, forced on Mexico in 1848, recognized the artificiality of the border. Article VIII states: “Mexicans now in territories previously belonging to Mexico...shall be free to continue where they now reside, or to remove at any time to the Mexican Republic.” Those Mexicans living north of today’s border were given a year to decide if they wished to retain their Mexican citizenship or become gringos.

That the border today is porous, that Mexicans and their culture range far north, should surprise no one. The gringos arrived after the Mexicans, and Mexicans never left.

Nonetheless, activists such as Barbara McCarthy continue to try to draw and enforce a cultural line and separate themselves from Mexicans. I met McCarthy in her

San Diego home while on assignment for the newspaper *SF Weekly*. She is an activist with the group Stamp Out Crime Council, one of several

grass roots groups blaming undocumented immigrants for problems ranging from high crime rates to deteriorating schools to the spread of AIDS.

“We’ve got to keep that border closed,” McCarthy insisted.⁹ An elegant-looking woman with time on her hands (“The kids are gone, and what am I going to do? Play bridge?”), she sat in her opulent living room, chain-smoking Parliaments and occasionally glancing out her picture windows at the sweeping California-perfect view of Mission Bay, just north of the border.

“If we were honest with ourselves,” she readily admitted, “and we were in the position of those Mexicans, we’d do the same thing.” But in the next breath she referred to those crossing the border illegally as “Mexico’s problems. When people say we should open the borders, I ask, “How many are you going to take home with you?”

My friend Manuel is one of those undocumented commuters. He lives on both sides of the border, a border

In the symbiotic world of the Borderlands, the problems of Mexican media ought not be considered in a void of their gringo corollaries.

⁶Quoted in the *Pacific Sun* newspaper, May 29-June 4, 2002 issue, in an article by Jill Kramer.

⁷Michael Savage broadcasts nationwide, based at the Disney-owned KSFO (560 AM), in San Francisco.

⁸May 29, 2000 at the Memorial Day service at Arlington National Cemetery.

⁹My report ran in the 12 August 1992 *SF Weekly*.

that is no barrier for him, just an irritation, and a frustration, and an expense.

Manuel lives in Marin County, California, where he works, and on a farm in Sinaloa where his wife and children live. His last trip north was after September 11, 2001. The border was much more of a problem than in trips past. He was caught and deported twice before successfully crossing. The coyote's fee was \$1500, a steep increase from past trips. Tighter security at urban border crossings forced him far east of Tijuana, into the desert, for his crossing point. He told stories of heat and thirst, heat and thirst that continue to kill less fortunate border crossers.

Manuel is a round-looking man, still boyish with an open, ready grin under a moustache that looks stereotypically Mexican. We sat and talked in the kitchen of one of his employers. He works as a day laborer and we talk as he eats lunch (tortillas), about his life and his travels between his adopted, work home in California and his family home in Mexico.

I've only been in Tijuana a few minutes and I've already received some basic news about drugs and sex: both easily available.

This day he's cleaning out a backyard, loading old fence poles into a truck, preparing a garden. His yellow t-shirt is dirty, as are his running shoes and his jeans. He's earning ten dollars an hour for the work, more than most of the laboring jobs he finds.

Back home in Mexico, Manuel earned his money performing stoop labor on local farms. The most he could manage to make was about five dollars a long, hot, backbreaking day. The simple economics of the job market drove him north.

I ask him why he returns to California and the answer comes quickly and simply, "There was no work at home." And home it continues to be for Manuel, even though he's spent most of the last several years in California. "I am a Mexican, but I am in the north. I don't feel like a *pocho*. A *pocho*," he explains, "is a Mexican who has lost his sense of being a Mexican."

Workers such as Manuel do not need news reports to connect with a coyote for the trip north. Word of mouth informs anyone interested where the coyotes gather their human cargo. In Morelia, Michoacán, my guide pointed out a hotel near the old downtown bus station, identifying it as a point where \$5,000 would buy a trip to any city in the US (the same trip for a worker with a visa could be arranged for \$500, he told me). Our taxi driver nodded in agreement.

But news reporting techniques are used to try to inform Mexicans of the dangers facing them on the migration north. The Mexican government, for example, finances a TV and bus board advertising campaign, warning of the dangers ahead for those traveling north illegally. Less formal news reports take the form of crosses on the Mexican side of the border fence in Tijuana identifying

migrants who died trying to cross. Official government signs on the fence warn of the dangers to those trying to sneak across.

The US government tries to propagandize Mexican news reporters regarding the borderline. The US Embassy in Mexico City organizes tours for Mexican journalists, in an effort to demystify US policies and expose the Mexican media to the horrors of illegal border crossings in the hope of placing stories in the Mexican media that will discourage such crossings.

"It's very difficult for them," Josie Shumake tells me from her office in the fortress Embassy building on The Reforma in Mexico City.¹⁰ She is the Embassy press attaché, and the journalists' tours are her responsibility. "We see it as illegal," Shumake says about undocumented border crossings, "Mexicans see it as a right of passage

for young men to go north to earn money."

Regarding news coverage of the phenomenon, she says, "We get from a hysterical to more or

less balanced coverage about what goes on at the border."

Press Attaché Shumake is a no-nonsense woman, candid with a ready sense of humor. She says most Mexican journalists who do not live and work on the border have never been along the frontier. "We show the Border Patrol not as monsters. We show what the Detention Centers are."

As an example of the economic difficulties faced by reporters, Cynthia Llanos Rivas,¹¹ at the California trade mission in Mexico, tells the story of a woman reporter from Oaxaca who was invited to join one of the periodic media tours of the border organized by the US Embassy.

The Oaxaca journalist was asked to send the Embassy \$45US for her visa fee, money that was to be reimbursed at the time of the trip as part of the grant from the US. She informed the Embassy that she would be forced to skip the trip because she simply did not have a spare \$45 that she could tie up during the visa application period.

Despite the word of mouth news reports, despite the official government warnings, many observers of the Borderlands believe the desperate migrants are inadequately informed regarding current.

Mayor Carlos Orozco of Sasabe, just across the border from Tucson, sums up the problem of news dissemination for the migrants. "The *indocumentados* don't know what

¹⁰ Available at the Embassy via phone: + 52 55 5080 2000, ext. 2909 or email jssbera@pd.state.gov

¹¹ Cynthia Llanos Rivas is Public Affairs Officer, California Office of Trade and Investment, Reforma 265, piso 14, Col. Cuauhtemo c, 06500, Mexico, D.F. Phone: + 52 2233 1111. E-mail: press@california.org.mx

lies ahead. They think they're going to have an easy passage. The desert is beyond their understanding. These people are on the road to death."¹²

One of the first border radio stations a motorist heading south might tune in is 1700 AM, playing pre-recorded bilingual border information advising travelers regarding Mexico's rules on importing automobiles and its prohibitions on guns and ammunition. What it doesn't bother reporting is that Mexican border guards watch the motor and foot traffic with relaxed detachment. The freeway ends, and most cars lumber past the sign suggesting drivers stop if they're carrying something they

northbound impossible. The foot traffic continues past the Mexican customs office and the sign indicating a required stop for those traveling with taxable goods. Ha! A lone customs officer sits out front sipping a soda, watching without expression the constant flow of people past customs. Just before the business district, a couple of border guards with machine guns strapped over their shoulders chat with each other. The sun is setting through the golden smog.

The first sign I see is huge: "CIPRO," it yells, offering what the drug store claims is a generic version of the anti-anthrax drug at cut rate prices.

A sign just north of the border at Tijuana.

wish to declare to customs. Northbound, the line of cars waiting to be inspected by the US is backed up to the horizon.

I pull off Interstate 5 and park the rented Chevy on the US side. I want to experience the walk into Tijuana again. There is no apparent immigration control for those of us heading south on foot at the world's busiest international border crossing, just the incessant click, click, clatter of the one-way turnstile rattling against the mechanical device that makes walking through it

I walk on toward Avenida de la Revolución, Tijuana's main street, past Club Fetish.

"Hey, amigo," calls out the barker. "Hey, profesor!" It must be my beard. "Check it out. Nice looking girls. Naked."

I've only been in Tijuana a few minutes and I've already received some basic news about drugs and sex: both are easily available. It reminds me of the popular Manu Chao song lyrics: "Welcome to Tijuana: tequila, sexo, marijuana." It's a catchy tune that ends with a blast of machine gun fire and the sound of an eerie empty wind.

In response to this image problem, the Tijuana establishment is trying to influence the media with a positive propaganda campaign. The *Comité de Imagen*,

¹²Orozco was quoted in a 15 August 2001 USA Today article by Elliot Blair Smith.

the Image Committee, was organized to clean up the dirty streets, install public art, and influence news reporting by urging police authorities to stop referring to narcotics traffickers headquartered in Tijuana as the Tijuana Cartel.

Another clean-up-Tijuana campaign is a fascinating experiment in Web-based direct and unedited news available to the public (and an intriguing resource for reporters). The city government announced in mid-2002 that it has installed a closed circuit TV system in police stations with cameras trained on the station house and jail cells. The system is designed to reassure the public that cops are not taking bribes or torturing suspects and prisoners. Images from the cameras are scheduled to be broadcast 24/7 on a public Web site. Such a system is already in place in Mexicali. Plans are in the works to add a link on the Web sites to allow complaining Mexicans to register their problems with the police over the 'Net.

"The objective is to be accountable for everything we do," announced Antonio Martinez, Baja California's attorney general. Cynics may suggest that a clever cop could bribe and torture out of camera range. Nonetheless, if past experience with video surveillance is a guide, at least some crooked cops may well forget the cameras, providing news reporters and human rights workers unprecedented proof of the official corruption so famous in Mexico.

I walk on, up the pedestrian bridge over the Tijuana River—now a concrete culvert as wide and as flat as I-5, with a foamy trickle down the middle—where a dirty little girl sits with a plastic cup in front of her, squeezing randomly pumping on a toy accordion and singing out with great gusto an atonal, "Ahhhahhh! Oooh!" She manages to collect a few coins.

Football stadium-type lights shine from the US side on the Berlin Wall-like barrier that's been forcing illegal crossings eastward to the deadly heat of the desert. The lights are a visible landmark at dusk from Avenida de la Revolución, a strip already throbbing with blaring techno music.

Murder at Zeta

My first Tijuana appointment this trip is scheduled with the co-founder and co-director of the crusading weekly *Zeta* (slogan: "Free like the wind."), J. Jesús Blancornelas. I'm crisscrossing Mexico, talking with editors

and publishers, radio station owners and TV reporters, studying the status of the Mexican media during the immediate post-PRI period.

Back in 1997, Blancornelas was the victim of a vicious assassination attempt that left him permanently injured, and killed his bodyguard. As he tells the story, his car was cut off in the Tijuana traffic by a gunman who pumped over 100 rounds into it. Seeking cover as soon as the shooting started, Blancornelas managed to avoid all but four of the shots, one of which just missed his spine. He spent a month hospitalized, more time recovering at his home, and finally returned to work.

But the attack on Jesús Blancornelas was not the first attempt to silence *Zeta*. His partner, the paper's co-founder Hector Feliz Miranda, was murdered in 1988.

Neither shooting slowed down the crusading reporting *Zeta* is now famous for, on the contrary. Instead the paper and Blancornelas became examples of a new type of Mexican journalism: investigative and courageous. He and the paper continue to win international press freedom awards.

Zeta's offices are south of the Tijuana tourist strip, in a residential neighborhood. The building is easy to spot, despite the tiny sign that identifies it: a long Mexican military Chevrolet SUV, with smoked windows and a telltale communications antenna on the roof, is parked out front. Across the street sit two old Ford sedans, plainclothes guards waiting and watching inside.

I walk into the compact courtyard of the house that's been converted in *Zeta*'s headquarters. Two plainclothes "greeters" confront me with a casual, "Buenas días," one of them making what's obviously a practiced parting of his jacket front to clearly display the automatic pistol stuffed into the waistband of his trousers.

"You here to see Blancornelas?" one asks.

They seem to know of my appointment, and let me pass.

In the small waiting room I sat by a photograph labeled "Luis L. Valero E. 1959-1997," the bodyguard murdered. I'm told Blancornelas is delayed.

While we wait, my colleague Pedro Enrique Armendares,¹³ the executive director of Mexico Periodistas de Investigación, outlines a specific phenomenon in Mexican newspapers, a device he calls "planted stories" in English, *gacetillas* in Spanish. The dictionary definition of *gacetilla* is short news item. But in reality, says Armendares, *gacetillas* are press releases that are printed verbatim in newspapers—as if they were news—for a fee.

As an example, he cites the policy at *La Jornada*, when he worked at the prestigious newspaper—a policy he says is replicated at most Mexican newspapers. *Gacetillas* are standard fare, offered at four times the price of a standard advertisement. There is no attempt to hide this offering; it is not considered corrupt. In fact, at *La Jornada*, *gacetillas* are set in a different typeface than news generated by the newspaper's reporters and editors. Consequently, *Jornada* insists that its *gacetillas* policy makes the paper superior to others, which simply set the paid-for news in the same style as the rest of the paper's editorial content. Nonetheless, there is no announcement—such as "paid advertisement"—in *Jornada* or other papers identifying the nature of the paid copy.

Zeta was founded in 1980 and quickly gained a

reputation for disclosing Mexican government corruption and reporting on the activities of drug traffickers. Such investigative stories were a surprise for Tijuana readers, accustomed to government corruption and drug trafficking being glossed over in most papers. Cash payoffs to publishers and their reporters—in the form of so-called government subsidies or outright bribes—long kept most Mexican papers filled with celebrity gossip, violent street crime news, and bland political coverage that was little more than the official ruling party line.

The sprawl of Tijuana—from the tourist traps downtown to the *maquiladoras* luring factory workers up from the interior to the squalor of its slums—makes for a vibrant news town. And *Zeta* made its pages come alive with the details inside that sprawl, providing a tribune for politicians working to overthrow the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and covering the real dope of the illegal drug scene infesting the Borderlands.

After a long wait, I'm told my meeting with Blancornelas must be postponed. He's still behind closed doors and won't be available as scheduled. I find out why a few days later when the next issue of *Zeta* hits the streets. Blancornelas' byline is trumpeted throughout the paper over articles about the presumed shooting death of one of Tijuana's most feared drug smugglers, Ramón Arellano Félix. Blancornelas had been working the story in meetings with Mexican and US authorities, and other sources, while I was waiting for our delayed interview to take place. The photographs in the paper of a cadaver reputed to be Ramon are gory, reminiscent of the New York tabloids in the thirties and forties, a drool of blood flowing from his open mouth. This is big news along the border, where prominently placed wanted posters on both sides offer a \$2 million reward from the US government for each of the notorious Arellano brothers. At about the same time Ramón was killed, the other brother, Benjamín, finally was arrested. Blancornelas believes it was the Arellano brothers who hired the gunmen who attacked him back in 1997.

Access to media stories from Baja

The drive down to Ensenada on the new four-lane Highway One is spectacular and fast, about an hour, not including a leisurely stop at Puerto Nuevo for a lunch of its famous lobster. In a quiet residential Ensenada neighborhood is the office of Pro-Esteros, one of several NGOs we're meeting with as we study the successes and failures they have gaining access to Mexican media. Laura Martínez Ríos del Río¹⁴ is the director of the

¹³Pedro Enrique Armendares, Executive Director of IRE México, Gamma #1, desp. 1, Col. Romero de Terreros, Coyoacán, México, D.F. 04310. Internet: <http://investigacion.org.mx>. Telephone: 5659 5958.

¹⁴Martínez Ríos del Río, Pro-Esteros, Av. Ruíz 1692, Centro, Ensenada, B.C. Telephone: (646) 178 6050 and 178 0162. Mobile: (646) 189 9599.

environmental protection organization. She analyzes the media landscape from her perspective.

The most popular newspapers in Baja California Norte are *Mexicana*, *Cambio*, and *Frontera*. She dismisses the three immediately, saying Pro-Esteros has had “no successful contact” with them, and has been unable to get their points of view into print in any of them.

On the national scene, she identifies *La Jornada* as “always responsive,” and calls the work of their Baja reporter, Javier Cruz, “balanced and well researched.” However, most of the general public, she laments, read *Mexicana*¹⁵, which is pro-PRI (the former ruling political party). *Mexicana*, she says, “is always attacking the new government. It’s not informing, just giving their own opinions.”

Mexicana is a broadsheet, with screaming headlines, full color photographs, and a colorful graphic presentation that shows signs of *USA Today* influences.

Laura Martínez Ríos experiences little resistance when she sends *Mexicana* routine press releases. “In most cases when we give them a note it is published.” But when Pro-Esteros engages in a controversial campaign, the newspaper is inaccessible. As an example, she tells the story of a housing development proposed for Cañon de Doña Petra in Ensenada. The canyon is a protected green space. Pro-Esteros began fighting the project in August 2000, a project of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM), the powerful Mexican union syndicate, which is a key element of the PRI organization. The general director of *Mexicana* is a principal player in the Ensenada CTM. Laura Martínez Ríos called *Mexicana* reporters and urged them to cover the Pro-Esteros fight against the housing project. “They told me, ‘I can’t cover it. My boss doesn’t want me to cover the story from that point of view.’ There was only one story about our work.” She says community organizations tried to buy advertising in *Mexicana* to promote their opposition to the project. “They refused to sell.”

Despite the lack of attention in the dominant local paper, Pro-Esteros and its allies prevailed. The project was stopped. Laura Martínez Ríos gives credit to radio and TV reporters who did get word of the opposition out to their listeners and viewers.

Yet most of the radio in the state is music radio, broadcasting little news. One exception is the University of Baja California station. The station broadcasts a one-hour environment show once a week “without censorship,” says Laura Martínez Ríos. She points to a small commercial station, Radio Variedades, as valuable because it broadcasts an “objective” talk show daily, a show that is accessible to groups such as Pro-Esteros. A couple of hours drive south from Ensenada is a small public station that broadcasts in indigenous languages,

along with Spanish. The station, part of the INI (the government’s National Indigenous Institute) group, is designed to served the community of some 50,000 itinerant farm workers who travel from Oaxaca, and other interior states, for employment.

Laura Martínez Ríos ranks radio as the most important medium in Baja “because people listen all day long. Everywhere you go you can find a radio working.”

Television is second on her list, although the two main networks, Televisa and Azteca, offer very little news from Ensenada during their local news programs broadcast from Tijuana. An all-cable Ensenada station makes its signal available to Pro-Esteros during a Friday variety show. This show invites viewers to call and query guests, and Laura Martínez Ríos says the phone lines are full when she and her colleagues present their points of view on the show.

The Internet is third on her list because it enables Pro-Esteros to reach people throughout Mexico and the world. Pro-Esteros uses the Internet to rally supporters, “not the common people in the market, but the educated.” Since many people in Mexico do not own a computer, Pro-Esteros has produced a CD explaining its work, which can be presented in schools and other places where a common computer is available.

Newspapers come last for Laura Martínez Ríos because “the people do not have confidence in them.”

But Ensenada, she says, is an anomaly “because it is rich, with phones, fax, and computers. In other places in Mexico communication is very difficult.” She talks about villages in Baja where there is only one telephone.

Down the street from Pro-Esteros, in a shopping mall a few blocks away from the tourist strip, are the Ensenada offices of ProNatura, proud to claim the title of largest and oldest conservation organization in Mexico (it was founded in 1981). Gustavo Danemann is the director.¹⁶

Danemann divides the Mexican media that he tries to make use of to spread his group’s message into two categories: national and regional.

“All the state and regional media are absolutely open to us,” says Danemann. “If I write a press release and fax it to newspapers, it will be in the newspapers tomorrow exactly as I wrote it.”

While this is good news to a media manipulator, it hardly speaks to an aggressive press establishment.

But Danemann explains his easy access. “The media is hungry for information, especially from a credible source, as we at ProNatura try to be.

“It’s the same if I pick up the phone and call a reporter from the TV. They will be here in a half hour. You can get ten minutes in prime time for an interview.

¹⁵Mexicana de Ensenada, Av. Ruíz 40. Telephone: (646) 178 15 01. Internet: www.el-mexicano.com.mx.

¹⁶Gustavo Danemann, ProNatura. Riveroll 727, Zona Centro, Ensenada, B.C. 22830. Telephone: (646) 175 7159.

“The same for radio. It’s very accessible.”

Danemann says the only limitation he feels regarding making use of state and regional media is personnel. “It’s difficult to find someone who can write and represent us in public.”

Asked to rank the media in terms of its importance to his work, Danemann calls the statewide newspapers most important. As an example he holds up a recent *Mexicano* front page and points to the headline: “Jorge Escobar es corrupto...” Jorge Escobar is corrupt. Escobar is the director of the state government ecology department.

“This is terrible!” laments Danemann, calling it sensationalism designed to sell papers, a story without credibility, with unreliable sources of information. Such stories are common, he says, complete with no fact checking, often without an attempt to even check in with those being accused in the paper.

Danemann calls the regional newspaper *Frontera* more serious than *Mexicano*; he likens it to the respected national paper *Reforma*. He considers TV and radio more responsible than the scandal sheets because reporters are identified on the air and worry about their reputations. In addition, he believes that those broadcast outlets that are branches of national companies are more careful and must follow corporate rules for news coverage.

He considers *El Sur de California*, a paper in Baja California Sur with a style similar to *Mexicano*, as a particularly serious offender. He says the paper tenaciously accuses well-known newsmakers of corruption, and then tries to protect itself by misspelling names.

“It would as if they wrote a story about you and instead of identifying you as Laufer, they wrote Laufor.”

ProNatura ignores radio because it’s very local, figuring it’s not worth in-vesting in something that’s only heard in Ensenada. Since TV is statewide, it is more interesting to the group. ProNatura’s media goals are to: explain the work of the organization, position ProNatura’s work in the context of the community, encourage donor support, and encourage political support.

National media is much more important for achieving these goals than local media, Danemann thinks, “but reporters for big newspapers are like divas. You try to reach them on the phone and they are busy unless you are well known, have a personal contact, or have a hot issue.” Some are more accessible than others, he says, usually at the center-left papers, which are more likely to cover environmental issues.

Danemann’s local ProNatura Sea of Cortés office has never managed to place a story in a national paper. “We haven’t put the effort into it. I’m not sure of its value. I think the impact is better in a regional newspaper.” The reason for this attitude relates directly to the lobbying methodology of ProNatura. “My concern would be that if

it [a story about ongoing ProNatura work] were in a national paper, I fear people in government who must evaluate my proposals might feel pressure. It’s better to lobby without publicity first. ProNatura is not activist. We like to work lobbying and negotiating. When you are an activist in a conflict, there will always be actors you are against. ProNatura tries to keep communication open. The two styles are complementary. I think our style inhibits our access to media.”

Danemann likes the idea of writing a press release after his work is complete and successful. But without conflict, he thinks, his local work then is of little interest to national newspapers.

Consequently, one of Danemann’s goals for ProNatura—to build brand awareness in an effort to build the power of the organization—is impeded.

ProNatura makes use of the Internet to send specific news to a specific group of people via email. Email is also used to share information with colleagues, but is of “no consequence for reaching the masses.” Two stories below us in the shopping mall, an Internet café was jammed already this morning, music blasting, the snack bar open for business. But games, not news, were on most of the screens. “When we promote our work in the United States, the Internet is valuable promoting our work via our web site.”

International media are interested in environmental issues in Mexico, and ProNatura works with them. An example is in the February/March issue of *National Wildlife*, the periodical of the National Wildlife

Federation. ProNatura organizes press tours of the Colorado River delta, an ecosystem devastated because water is diverted for farm and city use.

Washington Post writer Joby Warrick joined a recent tour. The trip led to a passionate ode to the losses he witnessed. “Where the water went is no secret,” he writes in the article. “The river flows that once allowed the delta to blossom are now making other deserts green, from Southern California’s Imperial Valley, to the wheat and onion fields of northern Mexico.”

But Danemann considers access to the Mexican media critical to his work. “I prefer not to ventilate problems we Mexicans have in the Internet. In the decision-making processes, we need to evolve and create stronger institutions. When an environmental problem reaches international activists, it’s difficult for Mexico to deal with it alone. Sometimes there’s no alternative,” he acknowledges. But then quickly adds, “We’re often chauvinistic. We do not like other people to tell us what we’re doing wrong.”

Access to Mexican media is also important to combat rumors. As high-profile environmental causes in Mexico attract international attention, gossip has been increasing suggesting that worldwide groups are using these

As we said good-bye, Danemann reiterated one of his greatest needs: “If I could find one person to handle the media, I would hire him or her.”

Mexican issues to raise money, much of which is shipped out of the country to their international headquarters for use elsewhere.

As we said good-bye, Danemann reiterated one of his greatest needs: "If I could find one person to handle the media, I would hire him or her." Danemann sees real need for the training of public relations experts for the Mexican NGO sector.

Sharing the shopping center with ProNatura is an Internet cafe. The computer terminals are jammed with clients. Don't bother checking to see if they're studying the latest communiqué on the ProNatura site or reading the op-ed pages of *Reforma* or *La Jornada*. As is the case across the Mexico, these public Internet access points are being used primarily for playing games.

On the US side of the border, the San Diego office of the American Friends Service Committee is another example of an organization that seeks to use the media to publicize its findings. The AFSC keeps track of conflicts between the US Border Patrol and immigrants heading north without documentation.

During a telephone interview, Cristian Jiménez and Leticia Ramírez of the AFSC said they get decent coverage of their critical positions regarding border issues in the Mexican press, but they are not as well covered in the US English-language press.

"Whales get the coverage in the US," said a caustic Ramírez.

Spanish-language media in the US, such as the newspaper *La Opinion* in Los Angeles, small community newspapers, and the Univisión television network pay attention to their news releases. When the AFSC holds news conferences, reporters from English-language papers may show up, said Ramírez, but their interest is often fleeting, "If a siren goes by, the room empties."

The national papers in Mexico are responsive to the AFSC and regularly call them for interviews. These papers tend to favor AFSC positions on immigration issues, positions often contrary to US government policy. According to Jiménez and Ramírez, since September 11, "homeland security" is making it possible for the Border Patrol to be more brazen in its harassment of Mexican nationals. For example, they say, the Border Patrol is raiding public transportation in the US, engaging in undisguised racial profiling. When the AFSC makes such findings public, many in the US media are skeptical, while their colleagues in the Mexican media are sympathetic.

Tijuana radio failures

Back up in Tijuana, I met with Hugo Fernández, entertainment section editor at *Frontera*¹⁷, the

newspaper that calls itself "The newspaper of the Tijuans." He was a political reporter at *Zeta* before being hired away by the group that owns *Frontera*. The same group owns *El Imparcial*, a well-respected paper in Hermosillo, which was one of the first papers in Mexico to begin aggressive and independent reporting during the waning days of the long-ruling PRI, and *La Crónica* in Mexicali. Fernández was a founding employee, joining the paper before its July 1999 launch.

We talked about the cross border influences of various media outlets.

According to Fernández, people living along the border historically had very little contact with media from Mexico's capital. A Tijuana native, Fernández grew up with a steady diet of San Diego and Los Angeles media, a practice he and other Tijuans continue. "Radio [here in Tijuana] is not like in central Mexico where there is a strong radio culture," he says of the border scene. Some five AM stations directly serve the Tijuana market.

XEC at 1030 AM calls itself Radio Enciso. It is owned by the Enciso family and broadcasts from the Enciso shopping center. Fernández calls these types of station "public tribunes." It's filled with commentary from announcers and listeners who call in with very local problems, like "people saying a light pole with an electric cable is down and no one is fixing it."

Ownership and licenses cross the border along with media consumers. An example is the small radio group owned by the Guadalajara husband and wife team Victor and Marta Díaz. Their company, Califormula, is headquartered on the US side in Chula Vista. Hip-hop station Z90 broadcasts in English from the US. Their country-and-western outlet recently changed its format from Mexican *ranchero* music. The station is also on the US side. Radio Latina broadcasts from Tijuana with its Hispanic Top 40 format. A couple of news presenters broadcast short news bursts every half hour through the day.

Another cross border cultural example is the station that broadcasts at 1040 AM. The format is telephone-based talk, in Spanish. The station broadcasts the play-by-play action of the San Diego Padres baseball team, also in Spanish.

An intriguing oddity regarding these small stations is the availability of airtime, which is sometimes sold to private individuals who wish to air their own radio work. They buy use of the time from the radio stations, create their own programs, and sell time to sponsors for advertisements broadcast during their programs. This practice is also at play in the US, usually at smaller and struggling radio stations.

"At some of these stations you can hear the pages of the newspaper rattling as they read the news directly out of the paper," Fernández says with disgust. "Owners do not want to spend money on news. My God! I think we're

¹⁷*Frontera*, Via Rápida Poniente #13483, Col. Anexa 20 de Noviembre, Z.R., Tijuana B.C. 22439. Internet:

www.frontera.info. Telephone: 622 9900.

twenty years behind in Tijuana in TV and radio. That's my opinion. But what is odd is that radio is the most used medium in Tijuana."

FM radio in Tijuana is dominated by music, especially techno and *norteña*. Some of the programming is bilingual. News is inconsequential.

This dearth of substantive information programming on Tijuana radio puzzles Fernández. "We know people listen to radio driving," he says, wondering about the lack of news.

So what do you listen to for news? I ask him.

"KFMB in San Diego," is his quick response. KFMB is an English-language station.

And where do most people in Tijuana get news?

"I think people are not bothering to get news."

Cross border radio is as old as broadcasting. The Mexican broadcasting industry developed after commercial radio was established in the US, and Mexicans along the border were exposed to gringo signals. The book *Border Radio*¹⁸ suggests radio was late to arrive in Mexico because receivers were too expensive for the masses. Nonetheless, an early station was established in Mexico City by a tobacco company, which created a brand of cigarettes, called El Radio, to draw attention to the project. Both the government and business quickly heard the power of radio, and began distributing radio sets free at public gathering places, such as schools and restaurants. By the late Thirties, radio was thriving throughout Mexico.

Today, a variety of Spanish-language radio is broadcast on the US side of the line. Some copy popular US formats, others sound like their counterparts to the south, with Mexican-style programming featuring Ranchero music and announcers bellowing through reverberation equipment to create an echo effect for their voices. What these Southwest stations share in common is a huge audience; their ratings often eclipse English-language stations in their markets. The appetite for Spanish-language radio in the US is growing with the Spanish-speaking population.

Frontera editor Hugo Fernández believes these examples of success to the north, along with experiences radio companies can witness in central Mexico, will mean that Tijuana and other border radio will mature over the next few years into a more viable communications niche, both as sources for news and as profit-making businesses.

¹⁸*Border Radio*, by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford (Lime-light, 1990) is a detailed and amusing history of the snake oil salesmen, radio preachers, and rollicking disc jockeys who worked south of the border on powerful AM stations, beaming their English-language signals north with programming illegal in the US. Most of these stations now broadcast in Spanish, aiming their messages at the growing Spanish-speaking population north of Mexico.

But for now, Fernández says, "I feel the battle is won by TV and newspapers."

Most polls show television news is very important to people in Tijuana as a source of information. Televisa programming is the most watched, but these same polls suggest viewers have greater trust in competitor TV Azteca. US television signals are not strong enough for US Spanish-language TV to influence the border audience in Tijuana, and no US Spanish-language stations are carried via Tijuana cable systems.

Televisa's programming on Channel 12, with its local newscast from Tijuana, is carried on cable in the US "It's a pretty good news department," according to Fernández. Throughout Mexico, the work of Televisa, TV Azteca, and CNN en español is on a par with worldwide mainstream TV news products.

Another form of news dissemination, I suggested to him, especially in the border region, are the *corridos*, the ballads that tell stories of daily life and often romanticize outlaws. He considered the definition and then agreed. "Corridos are in a way news commentary." He likened them to reggae storytelling in the West Indies, or the narrative murals popular in Mexico and heavily Mexican-influenced parts of the US, as "a distorted way of telling what happened."

Narcocorridos report some news

Corridos are a kind of news reporting that cannot be ignored. Writer Elijah Wald calls them a newspaper of the people in his book *Narcocorrido*.¹⁹ In the book, Wald cites "Quién Tiene la Culpa" (Who Bears the Guilt), as an example of a corrido reporting and commenting on a major news event, the killing of the archbishop of Guadalajara in 1993. "The official story is that this killing was accidental, that the cardinal simply had the misfortune to be caught in crossfire between the rival gunman of Chapo Guzmán and the Arellano Félix brothers (sometime leaders, respectively, of the so-called Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels). As with most such events, though," Wald continues, "there are numerous rumors and complex theories involving a vanished briefcase, hints that the cardinal or his entourage were involved in trafficking, and questions of how the shooters managed to escape such a well-policed area."

Teodoro Bello wrote the corrido, which details the crime. His chorus provides the news commentary:

Who bears the guilt, the buyer or the seller?
 Drugs are a never-ending tale.
 Policemen die, traffickers die,
 Who knows in this war, who will win?
 Some carry it by kilos and by tons,
 And I haven't been able to manage even a puff.

¹⁹*Narcocorrido*, HarperCollins, 2001.

Frontera editor Hugo Fernández is concerned because the corridos glorify the outlaw life even as they report the news from its perspective. “Do people understand the difference between fantasy and reality?” he worries. “People ought to be educated,” he says, so that they realize the corridos are only one version of the news. He understands why some Mexican radio stations ban the so-called *narcocorridos*.

Another example of a corrido reporting news is the late-70s border analysis by Vicente Fernandez, “Los Mandados.” “I call it the Illegal Alien Anthem,” writes columnist

**“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” he told the paper.
“Maybe Mexican watts are different.”**

Agustin Gurza in *The Los Angeles*.²⁰ “In the *norteño* tune, Fernandez brags about hopping back and forth across the border despite repeated deportation. In one attempt, he even dyes his hair blond to disguise himself as a *gabacho*, slang for white American. But the ruse fails because he can’t speak English.” Gurza calls the song “a defiant challenge to the US Border Patrol,” that tells the story of “an immigrant who takes revenge on Americans for abuse suffered at the hands of *La Migra*.”

La Migra caught me 300 times, let’s say,
But it never tamed me.
The beatings they gave me,
I took out on their countrymen.²¹

Typical of a lack of Mexican and Borderlands media literacy on the gringo side of the line is the fact that the Republican Party invited Vicente Fernandez to sing at the convention in Philadelphia where they nominated George W. Bush as their presidential candidate, not knowing, according to columnist Gurza, that he is “Mexico’s working class hero.”

Border blasters

In some markets along the 2,000-mile US-Mexican border, US-based border radio is a consequential factor in the Mexican market. More and more border stations in the US are looking at their market as a combined one, since their broadcast signals recognize no fence and the Borderlands community often relates to similar cultural offerings. Stations are both creating programming and selling advertising with a borderless mentality—and getting premium prices for this philosophy.

At least one group of television stations, Entravision

Communications Corporation of Santa Monica, California, bases its company business strategy on servicing the Borderlands. From the San Diego-Tijuana market to the Brownsville-Matamoros market, Entravision operates in six cross border communities. The Entravision business plan is intriguing; the company has been buying TV stations in relatively small US cities such as Yuma, Arizona. Because these US border cities are small advertising markets, the costs of buying the licenses are minimal. But the broadcast signal of the Yuma station, for example, does not recognize the political border and blasts into Mexicali, a sprawling Mexican city of over a million. Although the US-based Nielsen Media Research ratings firm only surveys their north-of-the-border viewers, Entravision’s chairman Walter Ulloa is not complaining.

“We don’t get credit in the rankings for our Mexican viewers,” he told *The Wall Street Journal*,²² “but we do get dollars from Mexican advertisers who want US viewers, and we get the big US brands looking for viewers in Mexico.”

The Wall Street Journal article makes clear the value of the Spanish-speaking market on the Mexican side of the border to US-based firms. The Mexican border population has doubled in the last decade to 16.5 million in the six border states. One of the Entravision stations, KINT in El Paso, sells 15% of its airtime to Mexican advertisers, according to the *Journal*. In 2001, station manager David Candelaria generated advertising income selling time to candidates in the Ciudad Juarez mayoral election, the first time ever a US station sold advertising in a Mexican election campaign.

Further details regarding the status of cross-border broadcasting were developed by my colleague Deborah Mendelsohn during a conversation with Don Mussell, Group Chief Engineer for Pacifica Radio.²³ He has built small community radio stations all over the US²⁴

She learned that in the year 2000 Los Angeles Pacifica station KPFK started getting reports of interference—classical music playing on top of their signal. Mussell went to L.A. to investigate and followed the interference south. What he told her he eventually found was the XHLNC tower in Tijuana, licensed for 1000 watts, was

²²“How to Build an Empire of the Airwaves,” 14 August 2001.

²³Donald E. Mussell Jr. is available via phone (831) 420-1571, fax (831) 457-8099, and email: dmsml@well.com.

²⁴Details of Mussell’s work can be found on his website: www.well.com/~dmsml/, the particulars of his Mexican border radio studies are at www.well.com/user/dmsml/xlnc/index.html.

²⁰Available at austin.gurza@latimes.com.

²¹“Los Mandados” was written by Jorge Lerma and can be found on the Fernandez compilation CD, *Los 15 Grandes Éxitos*, released in 1990 on CBS Discos.

broadcasting between 40K and 50K watts from a 500-foot tower. He hired engineers to measure signals of that and ultimately several other radio stations across the border, accumulating a raft of data and information that he forwarded to the FCC which considered it enough of an international problem to ship it over to the State Department.

Mussell says all the FM stations in Tijuana are outrageously overpowered, flaunting their lack of compliance with both their licenses and the US-Mexico broadcasting agreement established in a treaty in 1992. He says he also determined that the AM signal at 690, broadcasting from Rosarita Beach, just south of Tijuana and owned by the US radio giant Clear Channel, is broadcasting at about 150,000 watts instead of the 50,000 for which they are licensed.

The Guadalajara husband and wife radio team Victor and Marta Díaz own the station Mussell originally found interfering with KPFK. They told the *Los Angeles Times*²⁵ that they are in compliance with their license and that KPFK is simply jealous that the new Mexican station is filling in the dial (legally) in a place that Pacifica's signal formerly drifted. Told by the *Times* of Mussell's claim that his studies prove the Díaz station is broadcasting at greater power than allowed, Victor Díaz denied the charges.

"That's the first I've heard of it," he told the paper. "Maybe Mexican watts are different," Díaz told *Times* reporter Susan Carpenter, who wrote that he then laughed while insisting he is in compliance with Mexico's Ministry of Communications and Transportation.

One of the living experts on both the history and the contemporary role of border broadcasting is Bill Crawford. Harvard-educated Crawford is co-author, with Gene Fowler, of *Border Radio*, the definitive book on the so-called border blasters: stations beaming signals north from Mexico into the US. For this report, my colleague Bob Simmons, himself a Texan and longtime broadcaster, met with the Harvard-educated Crawford and discussed the status of border broadcasting.



Simmons: Border blasters are not just history; they're still on the air.

Crawford: They are, and they're still licensed at very, very high power. XERF in Ciudad Acuña is licensed to operate at 500,000 watts. Of course it doesn't operate at that level now. The government entity that's running it runs it at low power, because it's so expensive [to run it at high power]. But, it's a wonderful vestige of international broadcasting negotiations, that these stations are still licensed at these super

high power levels. The early founders of these border radio stations—a lot of them—were broadcasters who were thrown off the air in the US by the Federal Radio Commission, which was the forerunner of the Federal Communications Commission. They were thrown off the air in the US. They went down and set up broadcasting operations in Mexico, and broadcast back into the US.

Simmons: Today we have this huge economic boom going on in Mexico, particularly along the southern side of the Rio Grande, along the border between the United States. What is the status of contemporary border radio? How important is it to Mexicans? How important is it to North Americans, whether they speak Spanish or English?

Crawford: There's a great phrase: "Radio waves pay no attention to lines on a map," and that's absolutely true. In the 1930s, what was interesting was that the broadcasters who set up in Mexico were interested in reaching the American audience. They broadcast in English to the American audience. Nowadays there's been such a huge boom and growth along the US-Mexico border—something like 6 million Mexican nationals live just south of the border—that the language has changed and people are making more money with Spanish language broadcasting along the border. Spanish language broadcasting based in the US, is beaming back across the border into Mexico. Today broadcasters based in the US can be a little bit freer with their formats than those based in Mexico. They can be a little bit freer with their news programming. They're getting audience share in Mexico, and that's where the money is now: broadcasting in Spanish to this huge population along the border. It's interesting; the main entrepreneurs now doing this are outside of the mainstream world of the American media colossus, because the border region was really ignored up until very recently. Now this north to south broadcasting is happening in radio, and even in television.

Simmons: It seems as though in Mexico radio is much more important to the listening audience than it is in the United States, where radio is often reduced to being a jukebox.

Crawford: In Mexico radio still has much more power than it has in the US. I think that's in large part because most people in Mexico don't have the huge number of media options that we have here. There is not as high a penetration of cable and other media alternatives to radio. In Mexico radio really,

²⁵In an August 25, 2000 article by staff writer Susan Carpenter.

really provides a great and powerful medium for discussing political issues, as well as for entertainment. As you listen to the Mexican radio nowadays, you'll hear talk shows that are outspoken, really lively, really racy stuff. I think that radio is much more vibrant in Mexico than in the US. One of the stations that I really like is XEUM in Piedras Negras. For many years one of the services that they've provided is basically a messenger service between home folks back in Mexico and Mexican nationals working in their south Texas listening area. They have whole programs, which are dedicated to reading messages back and forth, finding people, providing a real public service. The management of that station is very much dedicated to this sort of social service ideal, which is completely lost in American radio.



Since September 11, the northbound border crossings at Tijuana are jammed. More thorough questioning of travelers, along with more thorough inspections of cars, means delays sometimes lasting hours. About thirty miles

east is Tecate, home of the Tecate brewery and well off the usual tourist route. There the wait at the border is an easy three blocks and ten minutes.

Driving along Mexico Highway 2, I tuned in La Súper Estación 1390 AM, after seeing it advertising on a huge and fading billboard at the edge of town. It is another example of the hyper-local broadcasting tradition still thriving in Mexico. The station acts as a crossroads for the community. Casual announcers keep up a running commentary of local life, taking phone calls live on the air from listeners, and peppering the programming with service announcements.

"There's a big fire," I heard as I headed into town. "Firefighters are on their way. It may be a *maquiladora* [a factory along the border that is allowed to import raw materials and parts tax free for assembly by low-cost Mexican labor]." That report was followed by a hearty, "Happy birthday, Joséfina!" The chatter is punctuated with *ranchero* music.

After a leisurely lunch at a *cantina* on the *zócalo*, I wandered over to the Liberia España to buy the latest edition of *Zeta*. Splashed across the front page were comparative photographs of a recently shooting victim and file pictures of the Tijuana narcotics trafficker Ramón Arellano Félix. The question: was the body Arellano Félix? Inside the tabloid were starker cadaver photographs,

reminiscent of New York tabloid illustrations from the thirties and forties.

“Do you believe it’s him?” I asked the clerk as I bought *Zeta*, pointing to the superimposed pictures on the front page.

“No,” she said, rejecting the idea that this legendary figure was dead.

In front of a monument to President Cárdenas on the zócalo, a reader looked intent, reading his copy of *Zeta*.

Trying to silence Zeta

A few weeks later, I return to Tijuana and am warmly received at *Zeta*²⁶ by Jesús Blancornelas. Dressed in a black leather jacket, white slacks and a sports shirt, he is relaxed and pleased to take some time to philosophize about his career and Mexican journalism. His closely trimmed grey beard and grey hair, and his black frame glasses, add a professorial touch to his appearance. I start our conversation with a question about safety and security: does the practice of journalism continue to be dangerous in Mexico? His answer is disarmingly simply. The real danger comes from taking bribes or from self-censorship, he says.

“Those who work for the press here, if we don’t tell the truth, that’s a dangerous thing,” he tells me. Blancornelas says that much of what is reported about narcotics trafficking in the Mexican press remains fantasy, yellow journalism. “The only case that I know of a journalist being attacked by narcotics traffickers is our case,” he says about himself, “after we published three articles which we know made Ramón Arellano really mad. But journalists are not in as much danger of being attacked as people claim as long as we tell the truth. When a journalist crosses the line and starts taking money from narcotraffickers, that’s when danger starts. Because after that, if the day comes when something is written that they don’t like, the journalist could be killed.”

Blancornelas says his paper’s troubles with the Arellanos began when *Zeta* published a letter from the mother of a trafficker allegedly killed by Ramón Arellano. In the letter, the mother called Ramón Arellano a coward. “We published the whole letter, publicly telling him he was a coward. He got mad and came against us.”

I ask Blancornelas how the guards that always surround him and his paper affect his work as a journalist. *Zeta* is essentially an armed camp. He says his notoriety works to his paper’s benefit because it attracts important sources. “The protection came after the attack. But many people were informing me about narcotrafficking. The fact that I am in this office without the freedom to go out in the field results in more people coming to me with information. Therefore, under these circumstances, with more

information, it is important for the Mexican government to protect me. I make the information public.”

Does that make *Zeta* and him a one-story paper and reporter?

“No, not at all,” he says. “Now we are writing a lot about it because of Ramón Arellano’s recent death and the capture of Benjamin. We do not have plans to write about narcotrafficking on our front page this week.” At that point he quickly says, “There is one important thing I want to clarify about information on narcotrafficking. As a consequence of the yellow journalism regarding narcotrafficking, readers stopped believing stories. When we at *Zeta* write true stories, we get the readers’ attention. That does not mean we are becoming a newspaper solely about narcotrafficking. We simply are giving the readers the information they need.

“For example, today [5 April 2002]. There was a recent shooting that the Arenas had nothing to do with. All the other papers assume that the Arenas did have something to do with it. But a week ago we said, ‘No, they had nothing to do with it.’ Today the police confirmed that they had nothing to do with it.” Most other papers buried their corrections, he tells me.

I mention to him that I bought *Zeta* the week it was filled with the bloody pictures of Ramón’s corpse, and the newspaper vendor told me she no longer believes what is written in Mexican newspapers. Under such circumstances, I ask him, how does he assess the value of his work, his profession, for whom does he write? “The work that we do is based not in assumptions, but in fact,” he says. “We establish reasonable hypotheses. We are not doing yellow journalism, but journalism of credibility. The experience we have means we know that we do not have to play games with narcotraffickers. We don’t want the readers to say what the vendor said to you. We want to tell the people, ‘You have to believe us because this is the truth.’ I don’t mean the absolute truth, but it is the maximum truth that we can find.”

Since so few people in Mexico read newspapers—most surveys suggest only about seven percent of the population—I ask Blancornelas what he thinks the best forum is for getting information to the public.

“The problem we have in Mexico,” he acknowledges, “is that we carry the baggage of the media lacking credibility. You have to add to this the special interests of the owners of the media.” By that he means the close ties of most newspaper, magazine, TV, and radio owners to politicians and other businesses.

Then Jesús Blancornelas makes a critical statement, so obvious in its simplicity, so difficult to put into practice. “The only thing that the Mexican media needs in order to gain credibility is to tell the truth. Nothing else.”

I ask him to identify some of the worst violators of that concept in the business and explain their motives. He refuses. “I already had enough fights with my colleagues. The one who really has the ultimate word is the reader.”

So what can be done to improve credibility in the

²⁶*Zeta*, Avenida Las Américas 4633, Tijuana. Internet: www.zetatijuana.com. Telephone: 681 69 13.

Mexican media? “We just go back to the same thing: tell the truth.”

Blancornelas is conscious of the business value of his notoriety, and the commercial value of the fact that his paper is different from most others. He shows off the front pages of several Baja California newspapers from the day we meet. All display screaming headlines and pictures featuring a tunnel from Tecate to California that was used by drug smugglers and that police were blocking with fill. But *Zeta* buried the story in its inside pages. The tunnel had been discovered weeks before and Blancornelas considered the fact that the police were finally closing it off a follow up story of minimal importance.

“Part of telling the truth is not ignoring news,” he explains. “Most of the newspapers splashed the narco tunnel, but buried the information that the Arellanos were not involved in the recent shooting I told you about.” Omission, he says, is another device for avoiding the truth.

“I want to point out a traditional example. The news is not that the dog bites a man, but that a man bites a dog. The narco tunnel is not news. It was discovered about a month ago. About a week ago they said that on April 4 the tunnel is going to be destroyed. Everybody knew about it. That is not news. What we are saying here today [he points to his paper] is not being covered by the other papers. That’s the news. We explain how that shooting took place—that the birth certificate shows that they are not related to the Arellano bothers. Everything. Since the other media originally said they were the Arellanos, they cannot admit that they are wrong. So they use the narco tunnel as news to cover their mistake.

“We are into investigative journalism. We have to verify things.” He again uses the narco tunnel as an example. “Now we are investigating who owns the land, how the tunnel was built, what company was hired, who paid the company to build the tunnel. That’s valuable, not just saying the tunnel was destroyed.”

I ask Jesús Blancornelas how such investigative

journalism can be stimulated in Mexico. “If others want to do good work and they want us to help them, perfect. The problem in Mexico is that the journalism schools provide an excellent theoretical education, but they lack practical applications. We have a terrible problem in Mexican journalism today. Mexican journalism students read newspapers written by people in their thirties or forties who use the same clichés over and over again. So the young journalists use the exact same phrases.” And he lists some of them: “an accurate bullet to the heart, a wide and detailed study.” He calls them ready-made phrases. “Our language is so rich,” he laments, urging that journalists make better use of the dictionary. “We need to lure the reader to be interested in reading us, instead of

luring him with yellow journalism.”

Zeta does some teaching, offering internships for first year students. “Then we select the good ones. Some just want to use their news credentials to go to the movies and get into sports events.” The paper matches the good ones with a professional colleague who acts as a mentor.

I suggest that this process could be taken one step further in the Borderlands, and such internships could be cross border relationships with US and Mexican journalists learning from each other. “That would be great but unfortunately by nature, we the journalists think we are supermen. When we gather together we always have the attitude that I am better than you. Actually, we ought to share our knowledge. I probably believe so now because of my age. But when I was younger, I was just thinking: I, I, I. What age teaches you, I think, is time. I have been in the business 45 years, but out of those 45 years, the last ten years are the only ones I have been able to be more.” In general, Blancornelas believes training programs could benefit journalists.

Jesús Blancornelas says there is another problem with young journalists: they tend to work in a pack. “They all ask the same questions. They talk to the same people. They take pictures from the same angle. That’s not good.”

Regarding self-censorship, Blancornelas—again saying he does not want to sound immodest—tells the story of his paper finding documents regarding a flood in Tijuana that was caused by land developers. *Zeta* published a story blaming the developers despite the fact that the developers were advertising in the paper. After the story appeared, the developers complained and asked him why he published the story. Blancornelas asked if the story was true. The developers said yes, but asked why, since they were advertisers, would he publish a negative story. “I told them, ‘Why do you advertise in this paper? Because we tell the truth!’ They cancelled their ads.”

Blancornelas says he also rejects *gacetillas*, those press releases disguised as news stories that are so common in Mexican papers, press releases not identified as the paid for advertisements they are, often placed by government agencies. The income from *gacetillas* historically forces newspapers into a compromised position of dependency on the government, since the government can yank these pricey ads from any paper that fails to fill its news pages with content acceptable to government media manipulators. This policy of rejecting *gacetillas*, says Blancornelas, costs *Zeta* a great deal of lost revenue.

The Fox Administration is not pressuring *Zeta* in any manner, Blancornelas says, but it is much more difficult for his reporters to get information from the Fox government than was the case during the Zedillo Administration, despite the reputation of Fox for creating a more open

As we were saying our good-byes, I ask J. Jesús Blancornelas if he is a role model. “No, no, no, no,” he insists. “There are no role models except the truth. The truth is the role model.”

regime than past PRI administrations.

I point to the hills around the *Zeta* office, crowded with four million Tijuana residents, and ask Blancornelas if the populace is served by the media. Are they well informed? “No,” he complains, “We,” and here he is speaking collectively of Mexican media in general, “lack credibility because we lied too often. We’ll pay for that until new generations change it. Luckily the Internet now helps disseminate information.”

Blancornelas complains that the press is not playing a productive enough role in Mexico’s transition to democracy. “Quite often the press is putting itself in the role of trying to tell the government what to do and how to do it.” The press has not been balanced, he says.

When his partner was killed, Blancornelas tells me, he decided he could not leave the newspaper business, as he had planned. He needed to investigate the murder. “We gave names, and the police did nothing about it. Some of the criminals are now living in the United States.” International observers agree that the police work has been inadequate in the Hector Félix Miranda murder investigation, along with the investigations of the murders of several other Mexican journalists in recent years. Blancornelas keeps Felix’s name on the paper’s masthead as co-director and runs a full page each week drawing attention to the crime.

As we were saying our good-byes, I ask J. Jesús Blancornelas if he is a role model. “No, no, no, no,” he insists. “There are no role models except the truth. The truth is the role model.”

I pulled out my camera and snapped a few portraits of Blancornelas. His studied expression is one of reflection, head resting on hands clasped together, leaning toward his questioner, eyes wide and receptive. As I prepared to leave he cautioned, “No pictures out front,” no need to share specifics of the security procedures with the bad guys.

The Fresno connection

Other radio defying the international border is produced by Radio Bilingüe, Inc. from its Fresno headquarters in California.²⁷ My colleague Terry Phillips visited their offices and sent on the following report:

On the corner of East Belmont and North Willow Avenue, in a business section near Fresno’s formerly upscale Sunnyside neighborhood, is an inconspicuous, white stucco office building. It’s not exactly a stealth operation. The parking lot behind this building is surrounded by a large security fence with an automatic gate and contains huge satellite dishes.

Walk through a discrete but sturdy metal security door

and you are in the headquarters of Radio Bilingüe. At first, the modest front lobby feels more like a dentist’s office than a broadcast facility—a few magazines on the coffee table, a few women sitting with their children, a few songs playing in the background. But look past the reception desk and you’ll catch a glimpse of a state-of-the-art broadcast studio through its wide, double-pane window. Peek around the corner and you see a few offices and a common meet-ing area with stacks of boxes, papers, CDs and tapes covering every square centimeter.

The mood is friendly, relaxed in this nerve center of the National Latino Public Radio Network. The receptionist is on the phone, trying to help someone solve a housing problem. Finally, I meet news producer Maria Eraña. Born in the US, raised in Mexico and having developed her professional skills in Tijuana, she typifies the network’s cross-border character. She graciously tells me their story.

Of the original group of local activists who founded this enterprise 22 years ago, only its executive director, Hugo Morales, remains involved on a daily basis. Much of the programming is still done by farm workers. This is also the home of Radio Bilingüe’s Fresno flagship station, KSJV, which was launched in 1980.

Radio Bilingüe is proud of its efforts to train staff. Their Fresno and Salinas stations have very active programs to prepare young people for careers in broadcasting.

As with any public broadcaster, Radio Bilingüe’s biggest challenge is fundraising. They’ve had some phenomenal success. In addition to local contributions, operating funds come from foundations, government agencies and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But they have scruples: the network accepts no money from tobacco, alcohol or gaming businesses, nor from any companies on the AFL-CIO boycott list. They play no music promoting violence or drug abuse (e.g., no “narcocorrido”). The network’s goal is to promote peace and understanding.

Not all affiliates carry all Radio Bilingüe programs. Among the 59 stations on their affiliate list, some use only the network’s news reports; some use news and music. In addition to the Fresno flagship station, there are four other stations owned and operated by the network (KHDC, KMPO, KTQX and KUBO). Some of these broadcast most of the network’s main programs. All have their own local programs, too.

Although Radio Bilingüe serves several border stations in the United States as well as five stations in Mexico and two in Puerto Rico, none of the programming specifically targets listeners outside the US. Nevertheless, many of the topics they cover (such as international money transfer problems or migrant health issues) are of cross-border interest.

Radio Bilingüe maintains about 20 correspondents, three of whom usually work in Mexico. They do not appeal to the lowest common denominator with typical

²⁷For detailed Radio Bilingüe program information, check their website at www.radiobilingue.org.

“commercial” news (violent crimes, sports or entertainment stories). They do cover big events including major crimes of general interest to the Latino community, but not simply notorious events. As to news style, their North American journalistic standards and practices undoubtedly have some influence on their reportorial interactions and on their listeners abroad.

Among the promotional material Terry Phillips brought back from Fresno are details about their two main programs. *Noticiero Latino* is their newscast, described as emphasizing “issues important to Latinos in the United States.” *Linea Abierta* is called “the only Spanish-language talk public radio [in the United States] that provides a daily opportunity for callers to interact on a national level.” The fact that both programs air in both nations makes the inclusion of *Radio Bilingüe* germane to this report.

Licenciado Estrada Torres pleads the Fifth

L*icenciado*²⁸ Gonzalo Estrada Torres is one of the owners of the Voice of the Citrus Region chain of radio stations headquartered in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon.

My colleague Bob Simmons visited him in his offices and discussed the state of Mexican border region radio from his commercial perspective.

How do you think the majority of Mexicans received their information? Simmons asked him, and the answer was no surprise.

“Most people get their information from the radio because with radio you can do something else while you listen to it,” explained Estrada Torres. “You can be driving, you can be working, while listening to the news.”

When asked if Mexican trust the news media, Estrada Torres took advantage of the opportunity to describe his network and the changing Mexican political landscape without directly answering the question.

“Let’s talk about my stations. We have eleven radio stations covering three states and the South Valley of Texas. We have an international station that covers all the way to Panama. Now there is more openness from the government, the government is not so closed. You can approach the government and it is easier to get them to talk with us. I think there is more freedom. People voted for a change, we had enough with the way it was before. But I think the Fox government is having a hard time complying with all its promises. Making changes is not an easy task; you have to do it little by little. There are so

²⁸Literally this word means someone with a license to exercise his profession, mainly used for lawyers, and also attached by some people to their names as a title just because they earned a bachelors degree and want a device to try to establish prestige.

many things, different situations in the north and the south and Mexico City. So it’s difficult, the changes are happening little by little. These changes are going to take about fifteen years,” he finished with an optimistic flourish.

What obstacles face the media as they attempt to gain some credibility? he was asked, and he answered from a businessman’s perspective.

“In the past the presidents usually gave broadcasting licenses just to their friends. Many of the radio station owners are *prestanombres*²⁹ and the actual owners are so powerful they can drive local competition out of the business. When I was the president of *Cámara de la Industria de la Radio y la Televisión* [the Radio and Television Association] we noticed that there were politicians who really wanted to take over the media. They saw that they could succeed as politicians thanks to radio and TV. So they really wanted to become owners of the media. I don’t think that’s good. It would take us back to the past under different names. Recently the renewal of one of our licenses was due, and we’re going to get a ten-year renewal. Our motto is: We are here to serve our community, not to serve ourselves. As media, we have to change. We have to change ourselves. We have to really be free and inform people about everything, whether it is good or bad, so people can create their own opinions.”

Estrada Torres similarly dodged a question regarding the influence of narcotics trafficking on the news media.

“Thank God, here in Nuevo León, we are in wonderful harmony with the government,” he said, absolving his border state of the problems facing his neighbors. “But we belong to an association of 80 newspapers. We get together often and we can see in many states where the governor of that state doesn’t like a particular newspaper so they order audits to the newspapers or they intimidate the reporters or the owners. So you can tell that there are different pressures from different sources, many from the PRI. My only party is my community. I cannot be the judge and jury. My place is with the people.

“I know that in Matamoros [in the adjacent state Tamaulipas] and in Nuevo Laredo some reporters have been killed, but that’s because they have been involved in narcotics trafficking or that sort of thing. They want easy money. It is their own fault that they are killed. It’s not

²⁹*Prestanombres* literally means name lenders. In Mexico it refers to people who allow themselves to be the legal owner of something as a front for someone else who wants to avoid making his or her ownership public. *Prestanombres* are typically used by politicians to separate themselves official from property that they wish to keep secret from voters or the tax office. *Prestanombres* are also used by foreigners who wish to defeat Mexico’s law against foreign ownership of real estate. These are the “straw men” Bill Crawford identified as serving early border radio.

because they are exercising free speech. They just are protecting special interests.”

Although there seems to be some truth to Estrada Torres’s statements that some members of the media who have been victims of narco violence were so-called *narco-periodistas*, to ignore the brave and legitimate victims such as Jesús Blancornelas and his dead partner is a travesty.

Estrada Torres also rejected the idea that there could be advertiser pressure amounting to censorship in his media empire. “We do not like bias. We know there are politicians who like to have influence over announcers or reporters. But we detect that easily. We even have fired people for that.”

So your people must be fair? Simmons asked.

“Yes, we are *el justo medio!*”³⁰

Estrada Torres says his company is looking to the Internet as a distribution tool, and one of his radio stations is streaming its audio.

“Just one, XERK. But we have a problem now because the La Asociación de Autores y Compositores de la Música wants royalties for their music. So those radio stations who want to be on the Internet must make an arrangement with the association. We play them royalties for our AM and FM stations. Because the Internet is so new, that arrangement did not cover it. Internet is very important, but it is not a business. I want people in France to listen, but commercially it’s not a business because there are just a few advertisers like Coca-Cola or Corona who want customers in France. The local advertisers, they don’t care.

And as do the major broadcasters in the United States, Estrada Torres dismisses the importance and validity of low power radio stations in Mexico.

“No, I don’t think there is a future for it. Many years ago when TV started, they said it was going to put newspapers out of business. When FM came out, we were told that it would put AM out of business. But in many places AM is still more important than FM because they have ten, 20, or 30,000 watts and they reach the country. The coming future is the satellite radio. The technology is already there.

“I want to give you an example of how important radio is to people who are not otherwise informed. I was just on an *ejido*,³¹ I was driving my four by four, and people were hiding from me. I learned that they were doing that because they knew about the terrorist attack in New York, and the people thought that I was one of the terrorists [because of his truck? it isn’t clear, but the point of his story follows]. People knew what happened in New York because of the radio. They don’t get newspapers there

even though there are seventy families there. In the rural areas people take their radios with them wherever they go. They can work with their radios on.”

Again, he evades the question’s intent. Perhaps he, as is the case with National Public Radio in the United States, along with the US National Association of Broadcasters, fears the audience drain relevant low-power radio stations may have for his moneymaking radio stations. But he’s happy to acknowledge the power of one of his signals north of the border.

“Yes. We have a station with no music—news and talk shows and sports, which is widely listened to in Texas.

“Radio has no borders.”

Evidence that radio has no borders was clear during May 2002 following the mayoral election in Juarez. Both the National Action Party (PAN) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidates claimed victory. The battle was fought not just in ballot boxes, but with sticks and clubs at the city hall and over a live talk radio show on which Chihuahua governor Patricio Martínez accused the former governor Francisco Barrio of “meddling” in the city’s election. Among the charges made by Martínez was that Barrio accused Martínez of paying publishers to print stories that tied Barrio to drug traffickers.

“Fifteen days later, I got a bullet in the head,” Martínez said on the radio.³² Nothing is coincidental in politics, and there is nothing coincidental about the growth of drug trafficking during Barrio’s administration.” Martínez was the victim of an assassination attempt. The talk radio exchange was so intriguing that competing stations on both sides of the border broke into their own shows and broadcast the Governor’s remarks live.

In Chiapas I met a Columban³³ Father from Boston en route to his next posting, on the border at Juarez.

Vince McCarthy³⁴ and I got together for breakfast in El Paso just after he arrived at the border. His work will take him to the shanty towns in Juarez, the squalor and degradation found there is well described in the book written about Tijuana’s shanties, *Across the Wire*.³⁵

Vince, as he prefers to be called, already was involved in the planning of a pilgrimage scheduled by a coalition of religious groups for the autumn of 2003. Groups leaving from the two edges of the border, San Diego and

³⁰Justo medio is an idiom meaning just in the middle, the “fair half” literally. It is more often used to describe judges than radio stations.

³¹A peasant, communal farm.

³²Quoted in the 16 May 2002 *El Paso Times* “Borderland” section in an article by Diana Washington Valdez.

³³A Catholic order doing missionary work worldwide.

³⁴Available through the Columban Fathers, 341 Nonap Rd., El Paso, Texas 79928. Phone: 915 852 0998, Juarez house phone: + 52 656 627 3473.

³⁵*Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*, Luis Alberto Urrea.

Brownsville, expect to meet in El Paso to draw attention to border problems. Vince McCarthy looks forward to founding a community radio station in the Juarez slums as one of the Columban projects he organizes during his stay on the border.

Women at risk in Juarez

In Juarez, the *El Paso Times* makes an attempt to cover the Mexican side for its English language readers with one reporter: Diana Washington Valdez.³⁶ A dual national fully bilingual, Valdez has been working for the *Times* for two years, often covering the murders of Juarez women, crimes ongoing for the last decade, the violent deaths of hundreds of women unsolved. At the time of our meeting she was just finishing a special series for the *Times* on the murders.

We met a few blocks north of the border in the dining room of the historic Camino Real Hotel. I asked her if she felt the women of Juarez—potential victims of the ongoing crime spree—were adequately served by Juarez and El Paso media.

“Some of the women who come from the interior of Mexico,” she told me, “have heard about this peripherally. It’s kind of a topic everyone has heard about all over the world. But they don’t know enough details to know that there are still risks for women, that even though there are people in jail accused of some of the serial-type murders, others believe that the real killers have not been caught.”

Media penetration to this at-risk community has been inadequate, she tells me.

“Women who fill a general profile of victims are still at risk. There’s no systematic way to inform these women, to let them know to be aware of their surroundings, to understand that this is a real danger.” This lack of communication, failure of news dissemination is a public health issue for some officials, she says. “I’m not satisfied that they [women] really know what they need to know.”

Where do these susceptible women get the information that they do find about the crimes, I ask, newspapers, radio, word of mouth?

All three, she says, adding her voice to the chorus affirming the importance of radio. “In Mexico, radio news still is the way most people get their information.” But she says TV and “often sensational stories in newspapers with big headlines—not a lot of details—and no follow up” spread the word of the dangers to women in Juarez. “Radio has the most penetration. How much each radio station devotes to this issue is another matter.”

At least half a dozen Juarez stations broadcast detailed news reports, especially in the mornings. Juarez enjoys all-news stations, talk stations, and music stations with a consequential news commitment. Nonetheless, Valdez is convinced alternative resources are needed to pass critical information on to at-risk women. “Basically stations will report the police reports. Police will provide what happened the night before. Victims, alleged suspects, whatever information they have, and that’s basically what information is put out.”

But Valdez tells me these radio bulletins reporting the

sparse details of the murders as they happen do not provide the kind of detailed information needed by Juarez women in jeopardy, many of whom are not listening to the radio news anyway.

“I think that women who need to be up on these developments are not. Their interests are in something else. It’s in getting through the day, getting the job done, figuring out what they’re going to do at the end of the day, child care issues, that sort of thing. They don’t have the time to devote themselves to the news.”

At the same time, Valdez says that there are several NGOs working in Juarez to keep track of the crime spree against women. Many of those NGOs also try to inform women regarding risk and security. In effect, they are acting as alternative news sources for the community, often embracing the oral tradition to spread their messages. “These NGOs,” Valdez tells me, “try to get into the maquiladoras, they’ll try to provide workshops for some of these women to try and give them information that’s more empowering: this is what’s going on, you need to be careful, and this is why.”³⁷ Nonetheless, some of the maquiladoras refuse to allow the NGOs onto their premises. “Yet,” protests Valdez, “the maquiladoras are probably the most important sector of the community to become a conduit for information to these women. They’re the ones who employ them when they come here, [and ought] to provide the kind of information that will increase their safety or their level of awareness of what’s going on or what they could encounter in Juarez.”

In addition to the workshops at the factories—essentially live radio-type news and information presentations—the NGOs stage news conferences, put detailed information out over the Internet, help families of victims, lobby police and government on both sides of the border, provide help to rape victims, and compile information about the Juarez crimes against women on a computer data base to aid in the overall investigation and awareness of the crisis. These NGOs called a summit to coordinate their activities for the summer of 2002.

One problem facing the NGOs as they try to educate the female workforce in Juarez is the turnover at the maquiladoras. “There are constant new arrivals. It’s something you have to repeat constantly, in order to make sure you’re reaching everyone, or at least most of them.”

Valdez says these NGOs are very clever and media savvy and manage to keep the story on the air and in the papers. Nonetheless, Juarez media is exhibiting exhaustion regarding airing and printing the overall story of extreme danger to certain segments of the female population in Juarez, and tend instead to limit their reporting to the

³⁶Available at dvaldez@elpasotimes.com.

³⁷Among the NGOs providing such news to Juarez women are: Mujeres por Juarez (Vicky Caraveo, director), Ocho del Marzo and Casa Amiga (Esther Chavez, director of both), Nuestras Hijitas en Regresa a Casa (Maricella Ortiz and Rosario Acosta, co-directors), and Voces Sin Echo.

breaking updates of each new murder. “It’s important to keep in mind that most news outlets focus on news, something that is just happening. They are not so much devoted to providing information. There is news and there is information. Sometimes the two are the same thing. But as an ongoing matter of providing information to these women, no, there’s not a real channel for that.”

Despite the availability of important information regarding the crimes and safety tips on the various websites, Valdez points to the minimal Internet use by the target group as proof that such efforts are of questionable value. “Most of these women don’t have a computer, don’t know how to get on the Internet, it’s a tool that’s not available to them. Some of them are just making five dollars each day. Getting on an Internet cafe system is expensive for them.³⁸ They’ve got other priorities to spend money on, such as food and shelter.”

From the perspective of Marie Washington Valdez, even with all the attention on Juarez, too many women are still not reached by the various forms for news and information intended for them. “We’ll still run into women who have some information but still feel confident that they won’t be a victim. They’ll be in high-risk situations—frankly, sometimes they just can’t avoid them—where they’ll have to walk from their houses in poorly lit areas, or places where there is no street lighting at all, to the bus stop, and wait for the bus at dawn or a night. That is the path of danger for a lot of these women. We know for a fact that many of these women have been missing either on their way back from the bus or their way to a bus, going somewhere. They were either going to work or to school or to the store and along the way they were abducted. They were grabbed. Or they went with someone they knew. And they weren’t seen again until the body was found.” In fact, just a few days after we talked, the newspapers of Chihuahua were red with huge headlines reporting another murdered Juarez girl.

Marie Washington Valdez is writing a book about the murders. “My commitment is to find out who is killing these women.”

So if the traditional forms of media are not reaching these women, and the valuable work of the various NGOs trying to keep them informed also is not adequate, what else can be done, I ask her. “It’s probably as good as it’s going to get,” she laments, “given the infrastructure that exists.”

However as we continue to talk over coffee, Valdez suggests an alternative medium that is beginning to provide both information and a sense of security for

Juarez women in danger. “Cell phones are becoming an important medium of communication and information.” Use of them is on the increase even among the poor population in Juarez. The wait for a land telephone line in Mexico historically is extreme, in Juarez it could take a year or even two to get connected.

People are resorting to using the ever-cheaper cell phones and finding fringe benefits to the mobile connection. “That’s given them access they’ve never had before,” she says, “including people who are not very affluent. People in the maquiladoras will invest in a cell phone because they’ve got to stay in touch. I see this as an opportunity to make it possible for women who are in high-risk situations to have a cell phone at their disposal. If they see a situation that’s dangerous they can immediately call somebody.”

The cell phone network could also be used as a nontraditional newsgathering and dissemination tool. Subscribers could join a list that would be called when updated information of importance to them is available from the police or those NGOs working on women’s safety and security issues. In this manner the subscribers could be sure of being in touch with that news they need even if they are not listening to the radio, watching TV, or reading the newspapers—or if such information is available and the traditional media decides not to bother using it.

This use of cellular telephone technology for news reporting, news consumption, and community building is the subject of a new study by author Howard Rheingold. In an upcoming book³⁹ he points to the overthrow of Philippine President Estrada and the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle as early examples of the use of cell phones, and particularly text messages sent via cell phones, as news reporting devices of consequence that bypass traditional news gathering organizations.

Marie Washington Valdez is concerned that post-September 11 restrictions at the US-Mexican border

impede the practice of critical cross border journalism. Closer scrutiny of travelers means longer lines at the border. “Last week I was unfortunate enough to wait two hours and 45 minutes at the border,” she told me, “and that was at midnight! You have to be really motivated. That has created a barrier.”

The Juarez Spanish-language newspaper *Diario* recognizes the importance of the Borderlands marketplace. It has bought a building on the El Paso side and is planning an English-language edition for launch at the beginning of 2003. In addition to market share, such a US presence for a Mexican newspaper will generate great

She looks through the restaurant window south. “It’s an emerging democracy with a Third World mentality. It’s a different world over there.”

³⁸Internet access at an Internet cafe in Mexico typically costs as little as five to ten pesos an hour, fifty cents to a dollar.

³⁹The book is titled *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, to be published by Perseus Publishing, fall 2002.

prestige for the holding company. The *El Paso Times* sees that Mexican market, too. It publishes *Vecinos*, a Spanish-language weekly supplement designed as a vehicle for *El Paso* advertisers to reach Juárez customers. Narco dollars are involved in the *Diario* enterprise says Marie Washington Valdez, “based on what we know.” This, she worries, creates further and future problems regarding narcotics traffickers’ influence on law enforcement, media, and other businesses.

Valdez points out other conflicts of influence at work compromising Mexican media, such as the fact that the Chihuahua correspondent for the prestigious newspaper *Financiero* is also an official spokesman for the Chihuahua state government. Why would he take both jobs? Valdez shrugs, and says economic necessity. “Like police who sell out because salaries are so meager, journalists do the same thing.” She looks through the restaurant window south. “It’s an emerging democracy with a Third World mentality. It’s a different world over there.”

At the Bogotá Conference: Dangers Facing Journalists

“We won’t avoid the mistakes we so regret today if the press—especially television—neither informs nor criticizes nor stands apart from the presidential perspective; if newspapers cannot obtain timely information; if editors are threatened, beaten, even murdered.” —Carlos Fuentes, in the mid-nineties, noting the critical role of media for change in Mexico in his analysis of Mexico’s emerging democracy in his book, A New Time for Mexico.

Colombia: Mexico’s anti-future?

The ability of independent journalists to work without fear of intimidation is a reliable indicator of a democracy’s health. That is why the widespread curtailment of press freedoms throughout Latin America is worrisome. Nowhere in Latin America has democratization been accompanied by the full set of legal reforms needed to guarantee journalistic freedoms. Governments need to be reminded that the outside world judges them in part by how they treat their internal critics.” Those strong statements from a *New York Times* editorial⁴⁰ were written following the “Media in Danger” conference held in Bogotá late March 2001. Colombia was chosen as the venue to show international support for Colombian journalists. Thirty-one Colombian journalists have been murdered since 1997, ten in 2001. Those statistics make it the most dangerous country in the world for journalists.

Last year fifteen journalists were killed in Latin America, two in Mexico.

The conference was organized by the World Association of Newspapers⁴¹ and featured moving testimonials from journalists who were attacked, threatened, and forced into exile. Their presentations were followed by meetings designed to develop practical plans of action to protect journalists operating in Colombia and to prevent attackers from enjoying impunity despite their crimes.

Bogotá feels at times like a city under siege, at other times like a carefree Latin American capital. Various armed types are on every corner: police, MPs, soldiers, private guards—all armed with machine guns that are so much a part of everyday life that they hold them casually and the civilians passing the deadly barrels act uninterested in the guards and their guns. Houses are gated, taxi drivers warn visitors that the city is dangerous. Guards use East German-style mirrors on poles to check under cars heading into the garage at the hotel where the conference took place. Yet I wandered around, visiting museums, looking at goods in street markets, eating at a cantina in a university neighborhood—all with complete comfort—admittedly always in daylight and in sections of the city labeled acceptable. The city is alive at night too, as I saw from the security of a car hired by the conference when we went out to dinner at—of all names under the circumstances—The Gun Club, an exclusive social club. Fire-eaters compete with squeegee men for coins at stoplights. After a day, the ever-present machine guns begin to look routine. But during cocktails at the Gun Club a media buyer from Bogotá admitted that the city—and the country—is always on edge, that threats and danger infect daily life.

World Association of Newspapers president Roger Parkinson told the conferees that “a free and independent media are a necessary condition for democracy.” He talked of building systems to report on attacks against journalists so the world is aware of them, and of the need to continue training journalists in the concepts of free and open media to enhance the independence of the media. WAN is a trade organization. Many of its programs are designed to build a newspaper’s business side. But WAN policy is that financial independence allows a newspaper to gain political independence and creates strength that can be used against intimidation. “Freedom of expression and the right to be informed,” Parkinson said, “is a basic condition of any democratic society. A threat to these fundamental rights seriously damages that society and that democracy. There is no excuse for attacking freedom of expression.”

His remarks were followed by those of Robert Cox, the president of the Inter American Press Association.⁴² Cox

⁴⁰April 4, 2002.

⁴¹www.wan-press.org.

⁴²The long-established Inter American Press Association

told the group that the IAPA writes regular reports to insure violence against journalists is public knowledge. The group raises money to rebuild damaged and destroyed infrastructures of media organizations. IAPA has established what it calls Rapid Response Units that are dispatched to go immediately to events that threaten journalists and independent media, to file reports “so there is no impunity.”

Vicente Fox as disappointment

After his formal remarks, Cox and I met to speak about conditions in Mexico. He called President Fox a disappointment. “We expected a great deal, and the things we expected haven’t happened.” Cox and the IAPA are particularly disappointed in the lack of movement from the Fox government regarding investigations into the murders of Mexican journalists. “The True case is an appalling case. They seem to have established a fairly good case against the people who are responsible for the murder of Phillip True,⁴³ and they’re all out of jail. And this is happening in several cases in Mexico.”⁴⁴

Cox blames the Mexican judicial bureaucracy for the lack of action on cases such as the True case. “The bureaucrat just blocks—it exists in every government—and in Mexico it’s not going to disappear overnight. But nevertheless we are disappointed. In our report on Mexico, we specifically state that.”

The reports are important, but I asked Cox about action. If Fox was such a reason for hope and he proves to be a disappointment, what type of action might be productive?

“What I sense is that the journalists there [in Mexico]—and this is an encouraging phenomenon and it is a worrying phenomenon because journalists are again

is actively involved in training journalists and working to protect journalists. The executive director is Julio Muñoz (jumoz@sipiapa.org, (305) 634 2465), Ricardo Trotti is in charge of training for the organization.

⁴³The *San Antonio Express-News* journalist murdered in Jalisco in 1998. A story summarizing the crime and the status of the investigation, by *Express-News* editor Roberth Rivard, can be seen at <http://www.mysa.com/mysanantonio/extras/true/truerr.shtml>.

⁴⁴At the end of May 2002, a Mexican appeals court overturned the acquittal of two men previously convicted of killing True. Juan Chivarra and Miguel Hernandez were sentenced to thirteen years in prison. They were arrested with True's backpack and camera, and initially confessed to the crime. Later they retracted their confessions claiming they had been tortured in custody.

putting themselves out front—is that journalists are taking the place of the judges. The truth is more important than the judicial sentence. In many cases we’re not even getting judicial sentences. What’s happening is that the press is taking the role. It’s exposing corruption. It’s denouncing drug trafficking. It’s doing in many ways what the police should be doing, or what investigating judges should be doing. But then what happens afterwards? There’s no judge who comes in and after a prosecution punishes murderers, drug traffickers, and corrupt politicians.”

The cities are getting safer for journalists in Mexico, says Cox. “Most of our problems are in rural areas.”

Corrupt journalists in Mexico are also a historic problem, agrees Cox. “The famous mordida!” he exclaims with disgust. “This is another thing that we’re going to have to get to sooner or later. There are many, many countries where, and Mexico is not by any means unique, once it was notorious for this, but it is no longer unique—journalists get paid monthly sums by the government to essentially support the government and suppress news.”

And without those monthly sums many of those journalists could not support their families on their income as reporters, I mentioned.

“They have to do it,” he acknowledged. “I think some things have changed. I think things are better. I think some people going into journalism now are highly educated.”

Because of that, he says, they refuse bribes and seek to make their living with honest journalism. He brings up a term to define those journalists who refuse to be corrupted by payoffs from drug traffickers and instead expose the drug crimes: *narcoperiodistas*, a term others use to describe journalists on the take from drug traffickers.

Cox joins those who point to the audio tradition in Mexico as a key for communicating. “Radio in Mexico is good. When I have the chance to listen to it and deal with radio journalists—it is very, very good.” We talked about the low literacy level in Mexico and the minimal national penetration of newspapers and magazines. “Radio is tremendously important because that brings up readers, people who want to read. Reading is important, and the radio can do that. The radio gets the mind working, which television doesn’t. Television is the shot of the wreckage, the bodies—and then off you go. But radio isn’t like that. Radio sets people to thinking because radio has discussions. You’re talking and it gets into your mind. And you can listen to it wherever you go, which is another wonderful thing about it. It’s incredibly important where newspapers often don’t reach.”

The status of the Inter American Press Association investigations into attacks on Mexican journalists can be seen at their website, www.sipiapa.org.

He called President Fox a disappointment. “We expected a great deal, and the things we expected haven’t happened.”

Carlos Monsiváis weighs in

Carlos Monsiváis spoke about the sad routine of murdered journalists in Latin America during his prepared remarks to the conference. "In Latin America," he said, "it is usual to surround the body with promises. There is a special commission. The first anniversary is commemorated. Then everything disappears, and we have to go to another funeral. The editors office now bears the name of the martyr."

That is what we saw in Tijuana at *Zeta*, the somber framed photograph of both the writer and the bodyguard.

"Journalists die and those who survive have to make false promises," said Monsiváis, referring the routine of promising to respond to the murders. "This is true across Latin America. I wonder what it is that has to be said to journalists in Colombia from someone who comes from Mexico. Obviously a statement of solidarity. We have to understand what is happening."

In the introduction to the Monsiváis book *Mexican Postcards*,⁴⁵ his translator John Kraniauskas calls him "probably Mexico's most influential and prolific writer. He writes about and documents cultural and political change, and he does so constantly, refocusing his attention to suit his object and public in newspapers, magazines, and journals, inside the academy and, most importantly, outside."

Monsiváis spoke about the long history of corrupt journalism in Latin America. "Readers got used to reading between the lines and trusting rumors and gossip, which has been the fourth power for a long time." Democratization throughout the region is resulting in journalists realizing "that they are an important power." He said publications now have increasing credibility, a credibility that many political leaders no longer enjoy. He pointed to the 2000 Mexican election as an example of the new political influence of journalism in Mexico, an influence for which political leaders were not prepared. With that background, Monsiváis made this optimistic statement: "Now that public opinion has regained its position, rumors disappear and become ridiculous. Reading between the lines, which used to be the most conspicuous method of getting information, is replaced by critiques from both readers and journalists." He feels that technological developments will make it all but impossible to re-impose censorship. "Today, who is going to prevent the free flow of news? Leaders think that when they're not in the media, their wrong doings do not exist. But with information technology, everything is on the media."

Certainly the sophisticated use of the Internet by the Zapatistas from 1994 is an example of his confidence in technology preventing government censorship of news developments.

Monsiváis joined other observers in suggesting

caution when looking at the statistics in Mexico regarding murdered journalists. "In Mexico there is a very high quota of assassinated journalists. But this involves many suspected of being associated with drug traffickers." Nonetheless, he does not minimize the dangers of the profession. "The life of a journalist is 24 hours a day, and fear is ever present." He sees heroism in the profession. "Latin American journalists do not feel as if they are victims because their work does not end with their deaths. They are succeeded by their colleagues." And Monsiváis sees more hope in the next generation filling some 200 Mexican journalism schools. "The demographic explosion fuels good journalism."

Carlos Monsiváis told the assembled editors and reporters that borders cannot prevent what he calls the Colombianization of Mexico. He cited positive influences such as the popularity of Colombian music in Mexico, the link between Mexican and Colombian literature. He was less pleased with film influences, saying both cultures fall victim to films that romanticize drugs and guns. Many police and politicians, he noted, are corrupt in both countries. Money laundering is big business in both. "Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and North America," he said, "is the kingdom of hypocrisy."

Nonetheless, when he and I talked privately later he called today the golden age of freedom of expression in Mexico. "I don't believe that we have really destroyed censorship and are living really in the golden age of freedom of expression, but considering what we have had most of the 20th century, we are really now in a very good position. We have the possibility to criticize the president of the republic. We criticize in the media also any of the great powers. There is criticism of the army, before an untouchable. There is criticism of the clergy, that's new also. So we are not exactly in the hypocrisy trip. But the government certainly retains this cultural hypocrisy."

I pointed out that his work is mostly confined to the printed press, a medium in Mexico with minimal penetration in the marketplace. And he agreed, citing only six percent of the population as newspaper readers. How does he figure the remainder get their news information?

"Mostly from TV," he stated initially, but then amended his figures, pointing out he was referring only to metropolitan Mexico City. Television, he complains, broadcasts, "information and not viewpoints. Viewpoints still are the realm of the press." Interpretation comes after the images, is how he put it in his speech. "The power of images determine unexpressed viewpoints," is how he assesses TV's importance, "the expressed viewpoints are in the realm of the press."

So where does that leave the remaining 94 percent of Mexicans regarding their news literacy?

"In the previous no-mans-land," he says, back where the rest of the country was stuck when the press was muzzled by the PRI. I suggested that sounds like a disaster for his country, and he agreed.

"That's a disaster." But he sees hope. "Before there

⁴⁵Verso, New York, 1997.

was a culture of disinformation, now it's beginning to be something to be proud of to be well-informed."

I asked him for a wish list, what is needed to bring that 94 percent who do not read the newspapers to the status of well informed?

"I think it is beginning to change. The TV is changing and rapidly," he says, providing more analysis. Now it is up to news consumers, he believes, to put pressure on broadcasters and their sponsors to improve the news product. "The sponsors are now the owners of censorship," he says, not the PRI. "The great sponsors are the great censors. With no pressure from viewers and readers, he says, the sponsors are going to determine what you can see and what you can hear—as always."

Otherwise it will just be superficial, I suggested. "Superficial in the best of cases," he reminded me.

Outside of the DF (Distrito Federal), Monsiváis agrees radio is very important in Mexico "to solidify common places. Radio is the great provider to common places, but not real viewpoints."

What about the growing talk radio culture? I asked.

"The talk shows on the radio are not important," the writer told me, "because there are two thousand radio stations. There is no centrality in radio."

Wow! That's an argument for exactly why radio is so important and valuable, especially in a culture such as Mexico, long plagued with the demon power of centrality.

"It can be a good thing," he acknowledged, and then in his soft-spoken biting analysis added, "and it can be the equivalent of nothing."

Carlos Monsiváis acknowledged that his interpretations come not just from the metropolitan viewpoint, but also as a member of the intellectual elite. I asked him if the 94 percent of Mexicans who do not read the papers are sophisticated enough to exert pressure on broadcasters to develop consequential programming.

"I doubt it," he said.

We're here to help

The final meeting of the conference was a workshop designed to move the meeting from talk to action.

Jesper Hojberg made a presentation from the newly established Danish organization International Media Support.⁴⁶ This is a public and privately funded group that seeks to provide emergency help to journalists in jeopardy and minimize paperwork required for funding projects designed to help journalists. It is looking for partnering opportunities with other groups. "We thought there is a need to establish a non-bureaucratic organization to offer funds in conflict zones," he said. IMS has trained journalists in Afghanistan in survival techniques. Immediate implementation is the IMS intent.

"We can identify a project today and support it tomorrow," Hojberg insisted. Another of his statements points to the groups potential for collaboration in Mexico: "Even in a society with some media progress, outside help can accelerate that progress and help transfer knowledge."

Ricardo Trotti explained the programs operated by the Inter American Press Association. He identified the three areas most dangerous in Latin America for journalists as Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico. He pointed out that IAPA offers Colombian journalists study seminars at Northwestern University and suggested that those Latin American journalists who take advantage of such training opportunities can then be exported to other Latin American countries to train colleagues.

Juan Antonio Prieto, from the International Federation of Journalists,⁴⁷ explained that his group is establishing so-called solidarity centers in conflict zones, designed to offer financial support, training, and security help to journalists, especially for freelancers and those who work for small media organizations with scant resources. Prieto says IFJ has saved lives and freed journalists from jail by organizing rapid response to draw attention to those threatened.

Morgens Schmidt spoke for the World Editors Forum, the editorial division of the World Association of Newspapers.⁴⁸ WAN engages in direct training and is open to partnership arrangements. In addition, it operates extensive web-based training and consultancies.

The conference was co-sponsored by UNESCO.

I asked him if the 94 percent of Mexicans who do not read the papers are sophisticated enough to exert pressure on broadcasters to develop consequential programming.

"I doubt it," he said.

⁴⁶Hojberg is executive director and can be reached at jh@i-m-s.dk.

⁴⁷Available at japrieto@ctv.es

⁴⁸Paris based, he can be reached at m Schmidt@wan.assoc.fr and via phone +33 1 47 42 85 00.

Mexico's First Freedom of Information Law

"If we do not speak of prisoners and the politically disappeared, they will then be erased from our present and from our past. But it is not so. With silence not only will our history vanish, but, most certainly, the nightmare will be repeated, and other mothers will be made of stone, and they will travel to all corners, above and below, saying, shouting, demanding justice." An excerpt from a communiqué/column dispatched by Subcommandante Marcos April 2000 titled "To the relatives of the politically disappeared."

Hope and expectations

Despite appropriate criticism of the process and the results, Mexico during the Fox presidency is changing and one of the most dramatic of those changes occurred when President Fox signed his country's first freedom of information law.⁴⁹ The law is a first step, heavily criticized by those who fear there are too many loopholes in it, which will allow the government to exempt important documents from disclosure or simply delay disclosing material for years.

"This will inhibit corruption," said Universidad Iberoamericana communications professor Juan Francisco Escovedo,⁵⁰ "but not necessarily root it out. The professor forecast problems with enforcement. "It only calls for penal action when officials are flagrantly destroying documents, but not when they cover up crimes by withholding information."

But in principal, the law requires the government to disclose public documents within 20 days of any citizen's request. President Fox pushed hard for the law as part of his stated attempt to reform Mexico's historically corrupt government. "The relationship between officials and society is going to be different with this law," he announced as he signed it, "because it creates a direct line between words and actions."

All federal agencies are required to post their so-called public information on the Internet within the year. But an example of the exceptions in the law is the fact that any information declared classified or confidential, according to the provisions of the law, must be made public after a waiting period of 12 years. A reverse reading of that seemingly positive provision, of course, is that by

declaring information classified or confidential, it can be kept from the public for at least 12 years.

The Mexican bureaucracy will expand to accommodate the new law. The Institute of Access to Public Information is being organized to investigate any individual or government agency that illegally fails to disclose requested information. Such refusal is a crime and officials who violate the new law are subject to fines, public reprimands, or job loss.

The Oaxaca beginnings

The access law was the work of a combined force of government personnel, academics, and journalism professionals who first met in Oaxaca in 2001⁵¹ and became known as the Oaxaca Group. I attended the meeting and some of the notes that I took help put the new law into perspective.

The Governor of Oaxaca, José Murat, made keynote remarks, an indication that politicians realize they must at least pay some attention to the changing media world in Mexico. "Nothing is more important to democratization than a free press and access to information rights," intoned Murat from the podium after being escorted into the hall by three of the chicas guapas in their identical pastel yellow suits and matching scarves who were hovering in the hall throughout the meeting filling water glasses, ferrying speeches to the copying machines, and providing decoration. His speech was well covered by radio, TV, and print reporters. "It's not possible to make democracy without transparency," he continued, "that truth is absolute." As I watched this middle-aged politician say these words of transition, it was hard not to imagine that he longed for the days not so distant past when he could have skipped such a speech and just assigned the girls in yellow to pass out the envelopes with cash to reporters and editors, and maybe some of that type of work still goes on in provincial Oaxaca. The governor concluded his remarks, held informal court near the podium for a crowd of reporters and hangers on, before leaving in a flurry of cheek kisses and a call to the room of, "Suerte!"

The meeting was called to order by Benjamín Fernández Pichardo,⁵² the president of the Asociación Mexicana de Editores de Periódicos (and later my mentor regarding the social use of mezcal, a treat I sampled without the mixture of powdered salt and grasshoppers he suggested made the drink more *auténtico*). He criticized years of anti-democratic government intervention regarding the attempted exercise of access to official information by

⁴⁹Called the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Government Information, Fox signed it June 10, 2002.

⁵⁰In the 25 April 2002 *The News*, the Mexico City English-language newspaper available at www.thenewsmexico.com. The professor is a member of Grupo Oaxaca.

⁵¹The convention was 24 May 2002, and was called the Oaxaca Right to Information meeting. I attended.

⁵²Available at Palenque 213, Col. Narvarte, México 03020 D.F., where the telephone is + 52 5 682 59 81 and the e-mail is ameO@hotmail.com or amep@prodigy.net.mx.

reporters.

The public relations chief for the AME is Luis Aquino Busquets. It was Luis who offered me the plate of fried grasshoppers at lunch. “No, gracias,” I said, adding my usual no-to-meat addendum, “I’m a vegetarian.” “Not a problem,” smiled Luis, raising his glass of mezcal in yet another *salúd*, “they’re not meat, they’re insects!”

Ernesto Villanueva⁵³ made the next speech. A law professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana, with a Ph.D. specifically in access to information issues, he is considered the national expert in press law reform in Mexico and led the academic effort to draft an alternative press law reform bill to that promoted by the President’s office. “This is an unprecedented time,” he said, “as academics, the private sector, and the government work together to guarantee access to information.” He called this conference a point of reflection regarding where this movement is going and to what end, and made it clear that much work is still to come. “What is the right of information?” he asked rhetorically, adding, “There is a problem in Mexico with the concept. It is a new form of public right which is different than the right to express or to use.”

Later, he and I spoke about the possible role of Internews in Mexico’s media law transitions. He was enthusiastic about the possibilities of working together (“Count on me!”), familiar with the work Internews has accomplished in Eastern Europe, and convinced that there would be no prejudice against Internews because of its *Yanquí* headquarters. “Of course Internews should come to Mexico,” he told me. “Help is needed developing the new media laws and for training journalists. The opportunity is now.”

Notimex reform as an early Fox casualty

The next speaker worth noting here was Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, the new Director General of Notimex, the state-owned news agency. Notimex was the propaganda arm of the PRI government and it is now trying to reinvent itself, with Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti (a former *Proceso* journalist) in charge of the makeover. As he spoke, it occurred to me that there may be some valuable opportunities for Internews to get involved in this attempt to recreate a propaganda machine into a legitimate news gathering organization—despite its state ownership. Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti said he believes that a state-owned news agency can operate independently of the government in power and he says there is value maintaining a public-owned news agency charged with the task of informing the populace. “But it must be

credible, independent of politics.”

Notimex provides news in three languages, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. It operates bureaus worldwide, and its clients include media outlets, academics, and business. “Notimex is full of possibilities at this historic time,” said Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, “to change into a real informative news agency, critical and vigilant regarding Mexico. Objective.” He said President Fox has given him the mandate to change it into a news agency without ideology, without censorship, and with a real view of Mexico, “a professional institution.” He said his goal is a five to six year plan to turn it into the leading news agency of the Hispanic world. In the first six months of the Fox administration he was beginning this transition.

During the question and answer session following his speech he candidly discussed what he called the “internal challenges” of his “major responsibility” to reorient Notimex because “some reporters are not qualified for this new corporate culture.” One tactic was the Notimex pilot programs in Guadalajara and Hermosillo to decentralize their operations. Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti is, I thought, a thoughtful, productive pragmatist, open to new ideas and help from others. “Autonomy alone is not a sufficient factor to fix Notimex, there must be a reorientation of roles and goals.”

Before he was able to make the changes he wanted for Notimex, and well before the freedom of information law was finally signed by President Fox, Fox had him fired.

“The firing smacks of crude, old-style Mexican censorship that Fox’s victory was supposed to have ended,” wrote journalist Sam Quinones at the time. “Notimex, once a hopeful sign,” he says, “has become simply a lesson in the difficulties of Mexico’s transition to modern government.”

Sam Quinones wrote this detailed and critical analysis soon after the Ortiz Pinchetti firing⁵⁴:

Notimex is Latin America’s largest news agency. It has some 800 clients and 740 employees, including more than 100 correspondents in Mexico and another 100 abroad.

Far from a serious news agency, however, Notimex was the propaganda vehicle of the government—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the president in turn. It was forbidden from running news embarrassing to the president, or his clique within the PRI.

When Fox was elected, he promised to begin the transformation of Mexico’s government from a perverse, inefficient and corrupt entity into something open and modern.

Notimex was poised to be a case study in how to do that, and Ortiz Pinchetti seemed the perfect candidate for

⁵³Villanueva holds the Konrad Adenauer Chair in Media Law at the Universidad Iberoamericana. He can be reached there (address is in my previous report) at the telephone number + 52 52674364, e-mail: ernesto.villanueva@uia.mx.

⁵⁴The Quinones piece was provided by its author for this report.

the job.

In the mid-1970s, Ortiz Pinchetti was a reporter for *Excelsior*, then Mexico's best and most critical daily newspaper. President Luis Echeverría, upset at the paper's tone, orchestrated an ouster of its editor, Julio Scherer. The coup at *Excelsior* was a pivotal moment in the development of independent journalism in Mexico. Leaving with Scherer were 300 journalists and staff, including Ortiz Pinchetti. Together they formed *Proceso*, a left-wing newsweekly, which for years was the only voice critical of the government in the Mexican mass media.

At *Proceso* over the next 25 years, Ortiz Pinchetti covered some of the most important moments on Mexico's road to democracy. These included widespread vote fraud in the state elections in Chihuahua in 1986 and the similarly fraudulent presidential elections of 1988. He and his son, Francisco Ortiz Pardo, were the magazine's correspondents on the Fox campaign during 2000.

Their reporting began to reflect the groundswell of support for Fox that eventually led to his victory. *Proceso* had a distinctly anti-Fox line and Scherer's son was an advisor to the PRI's presidential candidate, Francisco Labastida. So less than a month before the election, both Ortizes were abruptly fired from *Proceso* and given a couple hours to clear out. Neither Scherer nor Rafael Rodríguez, the magazine's editor, has given a reason for the firing, despite repeated requests. However, the episode has stained the reputation of Julio Scherer, who up to then was considered Mexico's leading proponent of press freedom.

Ortiz Pinchetti and his son later published a book about the campaign and their firing: *The Fox Phenomenon: The Story Proceso Censored*.

Sworn in as president, Fox tapped Ortiz Pinchetti to run Notimex. Ortiz Pinchetti accepted on the condition of full autonomy and that he be able to shape Notimex into something like England's BBC or Agence France Presse—government-funded but independent.

For a while, it seemed possible. Ortiz Pinchetti had inherited a 32-million-peso debt (\$4.5 million). That debt was retired in December.

Above all, Notimex stories began appearing far more frequently in the Mexican press. This was because Notimex's stories began to reflect Mexico's new pluralism. Reporters quoted opinions and sources from across the political spectrum. Ortiz Pinchetti invited politicians from the various political parties to contribute opinion columns.

"We had no more censorship. There were no more taboos or issues that weren't touched," he said.

However, by the end of the summer [2001] pressure was coming from the Interior Ministry, which oversees Notimex and its budget.

Interior Undersecretary Jose Duran called to complain that the governors of Queretaro and Oaxaca

were objecting to news stories quoting critics of the two governors. Ortiz Pinchetti said Duran insisted he fire the reporters in question. Ortiz Pinchetti refused. Duran later called to object to an article critical of Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda. Ortiz Pinchetti said he explained that it was an opinion column, identified as such, and thus valid.

Midway through its first year, the Fox administration was by now receiving critical news coverage. Fox was also trying to cultivate support among governors. The administration may have come to see Notimex's coverage as harmful to its cause.

At a meeting in early November, Ortiz Pinchetti said Duran warned him that there were people in the administration who thought Notimex needed new management.

Finally, on Nov. 26, Duran called Ortiz Pinchetti in and fired him, giving him and 16 other top editors four days to leave Notimex.

A spokesman for Duran said the firing was not censorship but merely an attempt to restructure the Notimex administration. Duran did not return repeated phone calls requesting comment on the firing.

"They said it was a decision aimed at the administrative side, but they fired only journalists and left the administrator in place," Ortiz Pinchetti said.

In response, 25 other reporters and editors quit to protest the firing of Ortiz Pinchetti and the 16 top editors. Notimex is now headless, its editorial staff devastated. Administrator Pedro Tames, a former Duran assistant, is now interim director of the agency.

Javier Corral, a senator from Fox's own party, the center-right National Action Party, called the firing "political censorship."

"They thought twice about an agency producing real journalism," Corral said. "I think they began to get mad at the independent way it was reporting the news."

Ortiz Pinchetti believes his firing was to promote Notimex as an agency helpful to the career of Interior Minister Santiago Creel, who has presidential aspirations. He remembers that Martha Sahagun, Fox's former press secretary and now wife, urged Fox to hire him. But in July the couple married, and she left her media relations job. Ortiz Pinchetti remembers the pressures from Interior beginning shortly thereafter.

Whatever the reason for the firing, it's hard to see it as other than a politically motivated coup of the kind carried out at *Excelsior* years ago under PRI rule.

Corral said Congress may intervene to separate Notimex from the Interior Ministry. "We're still mindful of (Fox's) commitment: to make Notimex an independent news agency."

The Notimex episode shows that the tools of political control are like narcotics—a tempting balm to short-term pain. Politicians may rail against them on the campaign trail. Once in power, they often lack the discipline to go cold turkey, particularly when these

tools were so recently in common use as they were in Mexico.

Mexico needs to develop new, democratic traditions and habits. One of those is speaking truth to power. Notimex, left alone, could have aided in the formation of that.

The Fox administration should have been counted on to transform Notimex from propaganda purveyor to a modern news agency. But with the firing of Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, it has folded on that commitment, much to its shame.

With great formality, the Oaxaca conference announced the Declaración de Oaxaca, a long statement that committed those who decide to sign it to support the right to information and access to information. No matter the flaws in the initial freedom of information law signed just over a year later, this beginning of mandated government disclosure must be recognized as positive for Mexican media and civil society.

Still to come is the reform of the telecommunications laws that regulate radio and television, and The Act of Press, which dates to 1917. It identifies print journalists as so-called “special citizens.” This status subjects them to prosecution for such crimes as libel both as professionals and private individuals. For broadcasters, circumstances are no better. Licenses can be cancelled immediately and administratively if a radio or television station transmits material offensive to the government. There is no appeals process of consequence. The Fox Administration claims reform of these laws is also high on its list of priorities.

Repressive broadcasting laws and regulations

In the spring of 2001 I made my way through miles of miserable traffic, air so smoggy you can chew on it, and a cityscape that defies routine maintenance—unfinished, crumbling, paint peeling—to the oasis Colonia Coyoacán, where Cortez made his headquarters and ensconced his Aztec mistress. There I found Angelika Pineda Bojórquez, a radio journalist then working with Pedro Enrique Armendares and IRE Mexico.

“Ambiguity,” Bojórquez told me, “is the word for the relationship between the media and the government.” She calls the press law in force today, the law that dates from 1917 and the one that specifically isolates journalists as vulnerable both personally and professionally, “tragic,” with its provisions for fines and jail time for journalists convicted of violating its vague conditions. She is just as quick to indict the 1970s-era broadcast law. Apply for a license, she says, and if the government does not want to issue you one, your application is simply ignored. It’s a “trampa,” a trap. Licenses “are totally at the discretion of the government.” She is involved in work to reform the broadcast law and to create a transparent system evolved from the completely secret system in place today under which there is no explanation of why a license application

is denied. Nor is it currently public knowledge whose money is backing licensees.

There are two categories of licenses issued in Mexico. “Permissions” to broadcast are granted to universities, experimental projects, and schools for teaching radio. These types of licenses do not allow selling of airtime for commercials. “Concessions” to broadcast are provided to commercial stations, allowing them to sell time. Except for two Veracruz stations, Radio Huayacocotla and Radio Teocelo, both in crisis, Bojórquez says no civic groups have been able to secure a “permission” to broadcast. They apply for licenses and are ignored. These circumstances have led, she says, to the development of a pirate radio culture, broadcasting low power signals with as little as a one-kilometer reach.

Both Radio Huayacocotla and Radio Teocelo often are in jeopardy, struggling to survive. Radio Huayacocotla was shut down after reporting on the activities of guerrilla groups in Veracruz. The initial reason given for forcing it off the air was that it was originally licensed as a religious programmer and the political content of its news coverage violated that license. Once back on the air, the reasons for continued harassment apparently became more raw: wealthy local landowners did not want the station to radicalize their dirt-poor neighbors and workers. Radio Teocelo, suffers continuing economic trouble, the staff often scrambling for enough funds to pay the electric bill for its transmitter.

Another station that has reported continuing problems is Radio Bemba in Hermosillo, Sonora. The independently programmed station reports being threatened by inspectors from the federal office charged with regulating radio, inspectors who tell the operators their equipment will be impounded because the station is violating the terms of its license.

A rare example of a pirate radio station achieving some semblance of official acceptance occurred in Santa Maria, Jalisco according to Bojórquez. There, a parish priest named Alejo Macías broadcast without a license a radio service he calls Radio Santa María. The station was used to warn the populace about a local volcanic eruption and the police cooperated with the broadcasts. She says the station has been on the air for about two years.

Genaro Rojas Ramírez operates the only pirate community television station in Mexico that Bojórquez knows of, TV Tamix, located in Oaxaca. Also in Oaxaca is a well-respected pirate community radio station, Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional, operated by Xicohtécatl Luna Ruiz. Ruiz maintains a relationship with Radio Bilingüe in Fresno, California.

My colleague Bob Simmons traveled to the studios of TV Tamix, and sent back this report on the operation:

Tamazulapam, Mexico hangs on the side of a steep green mountain on the eastern side of the Sierra Madre

de Oaxaca. Pine trees carpet the peaks and clouds hang low to the ground making the air almost chilly at 9000 feet. The narrow back road to Tehuantepec curves through the middle of the small town. A half block from the Presidencia—or Mayor's office—is a two room concrete building containing a broadcasting experiment that has now been going on for almost 12 years. It is the community low power television station TV-Tamix.

Tamazulapam Mixe (mee-hay) de Espiritu Santo, Oaxaca, Mexico is a community of 5,000 to 6,000 people three hours to the northeast of the old colonial city of Oaxaca, and two hours from the ancient Mixtec ruins of Mitla. Tamazulapam is largely populated by one of Oaxaca's many indigenous peoples, the Mixe. Mixe speak an unadulterated dialect called Ayuuk that has little in common with the 17 other indigenous languages of the valley. The local legend has it that the Mixe came to the valley as much as 1000 to 1500 years ago and were descendents of the Inca tribes who abandoned Macchu Pichu in Peru in the same epoch.

The Mixe are notable in that they were a tribe never conquered by the Zapotecs, the Aztecs, or even the Spanish. To this day they keep their language and their customs, and much to themselves.

The isolation does not mean that residents of Tamazulapam are not interested in the outside world; this is most admirably demonstrated by TV-Tamix's coordinator and operations director Genaro Rojas Ramirez, who is of Mixe descent. Señor Rojas, about 35 years old, is a co-founder of the station and has devoted more than ten years to the operation and its broadcasts to the local community in both Spanish and the Mixe language, called Ayuuk. Programs are produced for both local community viewing and for export to other stations to promote awareness of local and indigenous issues. Programming consists of a patchwork of locally produced shows and programs from other public and information sources.

Sadly, when I was there, their only transmitter of less than 50 watts was down for repairs, so I was not able to watch the station in action, though he did play some programs for me. As for the Ayuuk, I have never heard a language even vaguely similar.

In spite of minimal funding from a variety of government, private, and community sources, when I spoke with Sr. Rojas, he was upbeat, saying that he believed the station had a place in the life of the community and that it helped people locally by promoting a sense of identity and place for the viewing area. He was sure that with the falling price of equipment and with its increased efficiency he would keep the station on the air.

Director Rojas said that he had two big problems to address. First is the fact that the commercial network TV Azteca had recently installed a repeater on a mountaintop nearby. This means the remote community can now receive regular Mexican commercial television.

TV Azteca is creating a serious competition problem for him. The other large concern is brain drain, whether he can continue to find local people who are interested in the concept of community television and who will be dedicated to the task of learning to produce programming and to put in the time to get the productions completed.

When I asked him about the future, again Rojas was enthusiastic. He thought that the government would continue to provide the station with a small amount of funding, and that he will be able to find other money from private and public sources to keep this unique indigenous television station alive.

TV Tamix hopes to expand, and launch a radio station. Sr. Rojas showed me where he hoped to locate the radio transmitter, and looked at me and asked if I knew where he might obtain a 10 to 50 watt transmitter at a low or no cost. I told him I would try to help him find one. It would give me great pleasure to do just that.

Helping train personnel at operations such as TV Tamix is one aspect of the work of IRE México.

Angelika Pineda Bojórquez is convinced the government does not bother with pirate stations that do not interfere with the frequencies of licensed broadcasters as long as they simply broadcast apolitical material. She considers *radio bolcina*—loudspeaker radio—important because these operations announce to a concentrated number of people. These are simple alternatives to over-the-air broadcast stations. Loudspeakers are set up in hamlets all across Mexico on market days, Saturdays and Sundays. The loudspeakers blast popular music interspersed with messages in indigenous languages regarding health and human rights issues. She considers such operations extremely valuable in providing critical information to people who are essentially a captive audience and would be unlikely otherwise exposed to the facts and opinions expressed over the loudspeakers. These loudspeakers become a principal means of communications to these captive audiences, especially regarding the critical themes of health, environment, and safe drinking water. Consequently they receive some government money from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud. But further financial help, Angelika Pineda Bojórquez says, is needed to support those loudspeaker operations up and running and to create new such operations to spread the product to a larger audience.

Back across the doomsday landscape of Mexico City to the hotel in a taxi, past hawkers working the cars stopped for the red lights, hawkers selling such an odd array of unneeded goods: Spiderman dolls, inflated plastic rackets equipped with balls tied to them with elastic, steak knives, fly swatters. Who impulsively buys their steak knives from a transient vendor at a red light?

Government repression meets government transparency

On that 2001 trip to Mexico City I met with Omar Raúl Martínez Sánchez at his office on the campus of the swank and private Universidad Iberoamericana where he is Journalism Coordinator in the Communications Department. He holds two other positions of interest for this report: He is Director of the *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación*, the oldest and a prestigious Mexican journal for journalists, and he is the President of the Fundación Manuel Buendía, a foundation dedicated to helping journalists in jeopardy and named after a prominent Mexican journalist killed on the job. The Fundación Manuel Buendía has published about 60 books on journalism issues. It is, he says, struggling financially.

More than 24 journalists in Mexico have been killed on duty since groups such as Fundación Manuel Buendía started keeping records. In 2000 journalists filed 101 official reports of personal abuse connected to their work, in 1999 135 reports. Impunity is a word heard often in Mexico regarding corruption and press problems, and free press activists such as Martínez point to impunity as a critical factor in the ongoing attacks on journalists. According to a report from the Mexican National Commission on Human Rights, only one case of reported violence against a journalist in 2000 resulted in any official involvement of consequence regarding investigation. According to Martínez, most recent attacks against journalists were related to election and drug stories. In an article in the May 4, 2001 *Mexico City News* he is quoted blaming police and the military for the ongoing problems, “Regrettably, all of the evidence shows that public authorities are the main forces behind pressuring, inhibiting, and muzzling the media.” He says Mexico is far from achieving a respectable level of press freedom.

I make my way in luxury back across the city to my hotel, in an air-conditioned hotel taxi. An alternative would be the subway, another example of media failure in Mexico. I used the subway on one trip back to my Reforma District hotel. At the Lagunilla station lobby there were no maps on the wall, no hint of which train went where. No maps were available at the ticket office. Out on the platform at the tracks there were no maps. I got on the Línea B train I figured went my direction. In the car the only map was specific for Línea B. Since I knew I needed to transfer, I was still uninformed since the map showed no connecting lines.

Private enterprise is at work on the subway offering media alternatives. On another ride I bought a bargain vegetarian cookbook from an itinerant hawker.

A week after President Fox signed the access to information law, he took out his pen again and made his mark on an executive order to open for public inspection 80 million previously secret government files. These include the files of the secret police for the period from 1952 through 1985, a time when the Federal Security

Directorate—now closed down—is believed by many Mexicans to have been responsible for the murder of hundreds and hundreds of Mexican and other Latin American political activists. Included in the files now being studied by journalists, scholars, government investigators, and family members are those pertaining to the massacre of protesters on Tlatelolco Plaza in 1968.

“The files of the political police will never, never, never again be hidden in a basement, their existence denied along with the terrible chapters of our recent past,” announced Santiago Creel, Mexico’s Interior Secretary, at the ceremony opening the archives. “This is a history that Mexicans need to know fully,” he said about them, “so that, above all, this never happens again.” Hundreds of Mexicans disappeared after the Tlatelolco demonstrations and shootings, believed killed by the secret police. Opening the files, said Creel, will help “clear up the murky past and, above all, to do justice.”⁵⁵

The sudden availability of such critical files in such huge quantity requires a free and independent, trained and funded press corps to insure that the material is quickly and properly interpreted and passed along to the public. When an inadequate press corps is inundated by such a massive amount of raw information, the result unfortunately can be that much of it remains hidden from public view simply because it is buried: undiscovered, uninterpreted, unpublished.

When an inadequate press corps is inundated by such a massive amount of raw information, the result unfortunately can be that much of it remains hidden from public view simply because it is buried: undiscovered, uninterpreted, unpublished.

⁵⁵Associated Press 19 June 2002 and *New York Times* Tim Weiner dispatch 23 June 2002.

Deep in the Copper Canyon

"I took peyote in the mountains of Mexico, and I had a dose of it that lasted me two or three days with the Tarahumara, and at the time those two or three days seemed like the happiest days of my life." —Antonin Artaud from his book, the Peyote Dance.

Food via radio

Drought, encroachment on their farmlands by marijuana and opium planters, and tourism all are contributing to increasingly difficult times for the Tarahumara indigenous people who lived in isolation for centuries in the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua. The experience of one team of grassroots aid workers is an ideal example of the crucial role of radio as a survival tool in remote Mexico.

Joe Navarro is a schoolteacher in Hollister, California. Along with fellow teacher Samuel Ramos and a handful of other volunteers, Navarro collects money for the Tarahumara, and then a few times a year makes the 40-hour drive from Hollister to the remote Copper Canyon delivering direct aid. Navarro and his colleagues use the money they collect to buy corn and beans in Mexico, food they deliver directly to hungry people deep in the canyonlands.

Before each trip south, Navarro and his group contact Jesús "Chunel" Palma, the man in charge of the Guachochi office of the Instituto de Coordinación Tarahumara, a Chihuahua state agency roughly equivalent to the US Bureau of Indian Affairs. Chunel is a volunteer disc jockey and technician at the only radio station that broadcasts to the Copper Canyon, XETAR. XETAR is part of the INI network; radio stations founded beginning in 1948 by the Federal government to serve the needs of indigenous Mexicans. XETAR was founded in 1982, and is known as La Voz de la Sierra Tarahumara.

XETAR broadcasts in four languages, Spanish and three indigenous languages. The Tarahumara speak Raramuri, and the Raramuri broadcasts on XETAR share airtime with native speakers of the smaller Copper Canyon region Pima and Pepehuan tribes.

When the Hollister team gets close to Guachochi, the radio station begins to report the news of their pending arrival. "They inform the Tarahumara we're coming down," says Navarro, "and when to expect us." Once they get to town, they meet Chunel at the radio station's studio. The Tarahumara are reserved and tend to shy from outsiders. The Californians use the local airwaves to bridge the gap between them and those locals who need the food. "He'll interview us at the radio station. He'll introduce us to the audience saying things like, 'Here are our old friends from California.' He'll ask us a few questions during a ten or twenty minute interview with

us."

Joe Navarro says this airtime is crucial for the purpose of informing people that the aid is available and exactly where it can be retrieved. "Communication is very slim down there," he says. "In Copper Canyon you can only receive one radio station. Information is not that accessible."⁵⁶

As an example, Navarro points to the events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington. "When we went in December [2001], people were asking us, 'What's going on in the US?' Some thought we were dead. They said, 'We thought the US was at war.' They thought that perhaps that meant all the US was destroyed. Many of them have never left the region and have a very narrow world view."

Navarro is convinced that without the publicity generated by XETAR many of the aid recipients would not be aware of the help available. But radio receivers are scarce among the Tarahumara. "Each year we take one or two radios down there with batteries because not all the communities have a radio. In some communities there is only one radio. If a person happens to be listening and they hear the message, then they know we're coming. Otherwise, they don't."

They bring radios to improve the odds that someone will be listening to important messages, but only one or two each because they fear a load of radios will not get past Mexican customs. During one recent trip the Mexican authorities refused to allow them to import a load of children's shoes donated to their project in California, insisting there was no guarantee that the shoes wouldn't be resold. Navarro offered to pay "duty," perhaps he did not offer enough. There is a sign at Mexican Customs at the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez border crossing now that reads, "No more mordida." Nonetheless, one of Navarro's colleagues, James Starkewolfe, told a reporter, "I usually slip in a five note. It's the only money they make."⁵⁷

Navarro did not argue about the shoes; they were donated to a charity on the Texas side of the border. "I didn't want to jeopardize the food project."

"The radio station has been most dependable," Navarro's colleague Samuel Ramos told me.⁵⁸ And he reiterated a most basic problem, "It doesn't always work because they don't have enough radios or they're not listening. The last three or four years we've been bringing them radio cassette players. It's funny. You see them going up the canyon with these boom boxes!" He laughs.

⁵⁶Telephone interview with Navarro, 15 March 2002. (831) 634-0263.

⁵⁷The mordida sign was noted by reporter Troy Bayless in an article in the January 18, 2002 edition of The Pinnacle newspaper from Hollister on the aid program. Internet: www.pinnaclenews.com. Telephone: (408) 842 5114.

⁵⁸Telephone interview with Ramos, 15 March 2002. (831) 637-3382.

Ramos wants to broaden the exchanges with XETAR. “I want to take Native American music to the radio station, like drumming,” he says.

XETAR serves some 80,000 Tarahumaras. “The radio station has been what works for us in the past.” But another medium is developing the infrastructure for communicating with the Tarahumara. “Now they have telephones in Batopilas,” says Ramos. “The guy who is like the vice president in Batopilas works with the Tarahumaras. He is very genuine. There is a lot of racism there. But he helps. Next trip I’ll call him and he can help get the word out for people to go wait for us by the river. That just happened, so now it’s a little better. We can call directly.”

Another group that makes use of XETAR is the Sierra Madre Program for Human Rights and the Environment.⁵⁹ Edwin Bustillos grew up among the Tarahumara, and works to protect their human rights along with promoting ecologically balanced farming and timber policies. He has hosted a weekly show on XETAR promoting these principles.⁶⁰

A media void

The sprint from the US border at Juarez to Chihuahua city is on a high-speed, four-lane toll road, a little more than three hours across the dry lakes and past the dunes and mesas of the Chihuahua Desert. Ciudad Chihuahua looks like L.A.—it takes another half hour of stop-and-go driving to get through the sprawl of car lots, strip malls, and traffic to downtown. Cars, trucks, and buses spew out their acrid smog—a choking mix of untreated exhaust and burning oil. Most streets, stores, and houses suffer from a combination of incomplete construction and poor maintenance. Paint peels, windows crack, concrete breaks, rebar waits to reinforce. The common denominators of the Third World: incomplete construction and poor maintenance—here in Mexico decorated with its distinctive clashing pastel colors and punctuated by blaring oomp pah pah music.

Close to downtown the modern fortresses housing *Heraldo* and *Diario* all but face each other across the main drag. The Chihuahua radio dial is alive with competing commercial noise. At the Holiday Inn the TV captures dozens of channels from both sides of the border. “To hear the good news about Mexico,” the desk clerk tells me, “you have to listen to CNN or some other

outside news. The Mexican news only reports the bad news.” He said for 74 years the media was pro-PRI and now those pro-PRI publishers are free to attack Fox. Pancho Villa’s sprawling mansion is now a museum. On display is an old treadle platen press of the type used by the Mexican revolutionaries to report their news almost a hundred years ago.

From Chihuahua, the highway to the Tarahumara Sierra climbs up to the plains cultivated by transplanted Mennonites. Three hours of climbing brings the traveler to Creel, a market strip along the highway and railroad that prides itself as the jumping off point for tourists visiting the wilds of the Tarahumara Sierra—its canyons, its railroad ride through the Copper Canyon to the Pacific, the opportunity to meet the remote and indigenous Tarahumara people. The businesses along the main street crank out steak and burritos, dolls and baskets, beer and Coca-Cola. Weekend nights the local teenagers cruise for each other in cars, on horseback, some still strolling on the sidewalks—making eyes at each other and giggling.

Some Tarahumara women in Creel—dressed in their bizarre costumes (typical: turquoise and red, chartreuse and pink ruffled full skirt with puffed sleeves blouse, solid colored socks matching one of the colors of the skirt, all topped off with a scarf of some random, non-matching print of flowers or paisleys in more bright colors)—send their children up to tourists, peddling braided belts and other colorful trinkets. Further up the railroad line from Creel are the luxury resorts of the Copper Canyon, surrounded by the impoverished camps of the Tarahumara and the encroaching international lumber harvesters, along with marijuana and opium poppy cultivators who take advantage of the isolation to do their dirty business.

The Mexican Army is now on patrol throughout the region, charged with protecting cash-fat tourists and with chasing narco-farmers. Hints of the complications caused by the army presence are made evident by the posters dominating the foyer of the small Catholic church on the square in Creel, posters explaining to the Tarahumara their human rights guaranteed by the Mexican Constitution, posters advising the Tarahumara what to do if they are harassed by the Army. These posters are providing the most basic of needed news reports.

Stories of abuses perpetrated against the Tarahumara are few in Mexican media. And Mexican media is scarce in Creel and points beyond throughout the Tarahumara Sierra. I saw only one lonely newspaper vendor in Creel hawking *Heraldo* with no enthusiasm, no papers were for sale up at the luxury resort hotels. No one was selling newspapers in the zócalo. News is passed by word of mouth and with posters in the windows of the state government building on the square reporting a missing 35-year-old man, announcing the cassette and CD released by a local band, advising citizens to exercise their right to vote, “the key to democracy.”

⁵⁹POB 41416, Tucson, AR 85717. Telephone: (520) 326-2511.

⁶⁰Some details of Bustillos work can be found in the anthology, *The Late Great Mexican Border: Reports from a Disappearing Line* (Cinco Puntos Press, El Paso, 1996). The book includes an Alan Weisman article about Bustillos, “The Deadly Harvest of the Sierra Madre,” first published in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* January 4, 1994.

XETAR is off the air

Driving fast, fast, fast across the Sierra, it's almost three hours to Guachochi. It's a spectacular and exhausting trip through canyon wilderness, punctuated by overhanging sheer rock walls towering over the highway—some pieces of rock littering the two lane blacktop, adjacent to "Falling Rocks" warning signs. Maguey, piñon, and nopale line the road. The lonely road surprises periodically with its decorations of Tarahumara in their colorful costumes appearing seemingly out of nowhere side canyons. They're toting plastic bags, herding cows, or sitting by the side of the road.

Kilometer after kilometer click by with no services: no phones, no gas stations, no Starbucks, and nothing on the radio—not AM, nor FM.

Finally a Pemex station looms at the bottom of a hill, its familiar green sign welcoming me to a cold Coca-Cola. Ha! It's shuttered. Out of business. Whoever labeled US 50 across Nevada "the loneliest road in the world" never made the Creel to Guachochi run.

Guachochi is a windswept market town on the edge of the Tarahumara Sierra, dominated by a harsh-looking stone prison and ramshackle single story houses with rusting corrugated tin roofs. I stopped at the Los Piños restaurant and bought a Coke. When I got close to Guachochi I searched the radio dial for evidence of XETAR and heard only static at 870 AM, its frequency. I saw the telltale transmitter tower on the horizon on the outskirts of town and beat my old rented Chevy over the rutted dirt roads to the site. Passersby directed me to an anonymous-looking house. On the building were two signs: one advising that this was indeed XETAR, "La Voz de la Sierra Tarahumara," the other a simple, "Cerrado." I banged on the door. No answer. That's when I went over to Los Piños and ordered the Coke. I asked the proprietor what was wrong with the radio station. "Technical problems," he told me. I borrowed his phone and called the station. The fellow who answered said no one was available to talk because the station was off the air, and he hung up.

I looked frustrated, I'm sure, and that's when the proprietor suggested I visited his friend across town, Petronilo González. Gonzalez owns another restaurant in Guachochi, La Cabaña, and he works at XETAR⁶¹ as an announcer and engineer.

I found him, asleep in front of a TV in his empty restaurant. "¡Pase, pase!" he said when I woke him. I sat down and we talked.

The station was off the air, he told me, because a relay

had failed and there were no spare parts available in Guachochi. The station is plagued by its old equipment, he said. "We need new equipment, but it is not forthcoming from the government." How important to the community is the station, I asked him, how serious a problem is it that XETAR is off the air? "Es muy importante," he said. It provides many of the Tarahumara with their only source of communication with the outside world. It is, he said, the only radio station within 200 kilometers. I knew that to be true, I had been looking for a radio signal since I left Creel. "There is no other communication for the indigenous people who do not have money. No hay nada," he said, no newspapers, no TV, nothing but XETAR for people who live out in these wilds of Chihuahua, the largest Mexican state.

When it is broadcasting, XETAR transmits a mix of talk and music for the Tarahumara, along with an hour of local, national, and international news each day.

As we talked in La Cabaña, President Fox appeared on the TV, praising the pending access to information law in Mexico.

"God willing, we'll find the part in Chihuahua Monday and we'll be back on the air," Gonzalez said with confidence, and

then complained that the station operates without sufficient funding.

I'm reading the book *A Fortune-teller Told Me* on this trip, the account by journalist Tiziano Terzani of the year he spent without traveling by airplane. Terzani writes:

There is one aspect of a reporter's job that never ceases to fascinate and disturb me: facts that go unreported do not exist. How many massacres, how many earthquakes happen in the world, how many ships sink, how many volcanoes erupt, and how many people are persecuted, tortured, and killed? Yet if no one is there to see, to write, to take a photograph, it is as if these facts never occurred, this suffering has no importance, no place in history. Because history exists only if someone relates it. It is sad, but such is life; and perhaps it is precisely this idea—the idea that with every little description of a thing observed one can leave a seed in the soil of memory—that keeps me tied to my profession.⁶²

Although Terzani was musing about the critical importance of journalism from a reporting trip to Burma, he could just as well have been writing from the relative journalistic void of Creel and the Tarahumara Sierra. Of course there is a corollary to Terzani's correct remarks. When journalists draw attention to a remote locale such as Burma and Creel, one result often is increased, and not

⁶¹The local telephone number at XETAR is 30168.

⁶²Harmony Books, 1997

necessarily advantageous, tourism. Without attention and its following tourism, Creel would not attract Tarahumara from the hinterlands to beg and try to sell trinkets in the streets. What to make of the impact of the tourists with their short pants, loud voices, video cameras, and one package tour margarita at sunset? Probably overall the influx of tourist fuelled capital is a healthy thing, and when news reports highlight problems, it is more difficult for the villains to go unpunished, the crises to be ignored.

XEPUR: an antique on the air

Another INI station is located in the mountains of Michoacán, in the comunidad Cherán. I visited XEPUR “La Voz de los P’urhepecha”⁶³ and met with the news director, the program director, and one of the announcers. The announcer, Consuelo Ascencio Ascencio, was just concluding one of her live programs. I watched in the studio with her, looking at equipment absent from most US stations for years: reel-to-reel tape recorders, cartridge tape machines, turntables, and an archaic mixing board. The songs she had been playing were storytelling songs called *Pirekua*. She spoke a few words, and then punched the start button on the cart machine to play the station ID. Muddy, all but unintelligible sound came out of the old player. Maybe the heads were dirty. Maybe the tape itself was too old. But it sounded terrible.

Consuelo Ascencio Ascencio told me there are many indigenous people who do not watch the TV and cannot read, so they get information about what is going on in Mexico and the world in their own languages on XEPUR.

Then we talked about the creaky equipment. “We lack everything,” she said with a sad smile. “We lack personnel as well as equipment.”

Why, I asked? XEPUR is a government-funded station. Why such shortages? Ascencio replied, “With this new government [the Fox Administration], everybody was expecting a lot. But actually we are getting less financial support now than before.”

Her concerns were echoed by Jose Ramos Pascual, the news director. “You can see with your own eyes,” he said

when I asked him about the status of the station’s equipment. “We have old equipment in the studio, like old Ampex machines,” he said referring to the ancient reel-to-reel players. “The equipment is rapidly becoming obsolete. It is not adequate for our current needs. It’s old equipment.” The Ampex machines, for example, are from 1982 when the radio station was founded. Other equipment owned by XEPUR is broken and there are no longer parts available to repair them, even if there were a budget to buy the parts. The radio station does not program advertising so there is no opportunity to generate income from spot advertising sales.

“Everywhere else there is more sophisticated equipment,” says Pascual. “We cannot create good quality work because we do not have adequate

⁶³830 on the AM dial, 5,000 watts.

equipment.” The lack of a contemporary infrastructure is frustrating for him. “Talking about quality, we have people who have been working in radio for 17, 18 years. They have the technical training to operate digital equipment. The problem is that we do not have such equipment.”

A manual typewriter is sitting on the desk in front of him. Shelves are filled with vinyl LPs. “We do not have computers.”

Training alone cannot bring XEPUR up to modern standards. “Not that long ago we had a chance to attend a training in Montreal to use computers. But what happens? We got back here and we are in the same situation. We do not have the equipment to improve the quality of the messages that we are trying to deliver. We do not have the equipment to improve the product for the listeners.” Program director Jesús Morales Figueroa nodded in agreement.

Why is the budget inadequate?

“Because the radio station belongs to the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI),” Pascual explained. “In the last few years the INI has had budgetary problems. So the whole INI on a federal level has a really low budget. Since we are just a little branch, we get very little help. Barely enough to keep the station on the air: for basic operations, to pay the small staff, and for a few visits to different indigenous communities. Before these budget problems, the staff was 18 people, not we are eleven. The number of personnel has been reduced because the budget is reduced.”

So I asked them if they would want outside help.

“We need equipment,” said Pascual soberly. “We need equipment not only to benefit our personnel, but also to benefit the people who are in need of this media.” In addition, he said, more training—if they have the improved infrastructure—would be productive. “It is good to update techniques and methods and skills and tools. More training would be magnificent for the personnel. When we had a chance to go to Montreal⁶⁴ they gave us training. It is great when we get training or equipment because we never get money.” Salaries for the staff peak at 400 US dollars a month.

Finally, I checked with them about their attitudes to help coming from the US-based organizations. Is that a problem?

“No, not at all,” insisted Pascual. “Just recently there was a seminar sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and two of us were invited to attend, along with colleagues from other states like Chiapas and Oaxca, for an updating course.”

⁶⁴They were invited to train in Montreal by the World Association of Community Radio Stations.

Further Problems Reporting the So-Called War on Drugs

"It was just seeds. If I had killed somebody, I would be out already." —La Mesa, Tijuana penitentiary inmate Alex Hines, an American, commenting to me on his seven-year sentence for marijuana possession.

One man's obsession at www.narconews.com

An Internet search of media and Mexico and drugs will quickly result in hits for the Web-based news service narconews.com. Operated by expatriate US reporter Al Giordano, it is a focused compendium of reportage regarding all aspects of the drug story. I contacted Giordano and asked for an appointment to meet. He countered with a demand that first we engage in an email-based interview. I suppose it was both a device to accelerate the transfer of information and a tool for him to vet my orientation.

I posed several broad questions about problems faced by media covering the Mexican illegal drugs story and influences of the drug culture on the media business and the news reports reaching consumers.

First, I asked for biographical information to put Giordano's work in a professional context. He sent this detailed c.v:

Former Boston Phoenix political reporter Al Giordano reports on the "war on drugs" from Latin America. He is publisher of The Narco News Bulletin, at www.narconews.com, the online newspaper that won First Amendment rights for all Internet journalists in the New York Supreme Court case known as "Drug War on Trial." The Court's decision, hailed by press freedom and cyber-liberty advocates as the first of its kind, stated on December 5, 2001: "Narco News, its website, and the writers who post information, are entitled to all the First Amendment protections accorded a newspaper, magazine or journalist... Furthermore, the nature of the articles printed on the website and Mr. Giordano's statements at Columbia University constitute matters of public concern because the information disseminated relates to the drug trade and its affect on people living in this hemisphere..."

Giordano has published in scores of newspapers including The Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, American Journalism Review, the Utne Reader, the literary journal Evergreen Review, Mexico's third largest daily Por Esto!, the national Mexican newsweekly La Crisis, the Uruguay daily SurMedia, and regularly publishes in The Nation. His work has been praised publicly by many leading media critics including Howard Kurtz of The Washington Post, Mark Jurkowitz of The Boston Globe, Cynthia Cotts of The Village Voice,

Dan Kennedy of the Boston Phoenix, Mim Udovitch of Rolling Stone (which named Giordano "Hot Muckracker" for the year 2001), Ken Layne of Online Journalism Review, Sean O'Donnell of The Guardian of London, Alexandra Marks of The Christian Science Monitor, Pulitzer prize winning author Gary Webb and, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and is frequently linked to from Jim Romanesko's MediaNews.

Giordano has lectured in recent years at Columbia University Law School (NY), George Washington University (DC), Washington University (St. Louis), Boston University and this Spring will kick off a midwestern lecture tour at Loyola University in Chicago.

Giordano resides in Latin America and signs his reports "from somewhere in a country called América."

As I pushed Giordano for a meeting, he suggested he might entertain the possibility in an anonymous Mexican town, "if you agree that the location may not even be geographically described, and never even shared informally, I may be willing to meet you in that town on the 25th or after. But given what I've been through with the narco-bankers etc. I jealously protect my geographic anonymity."

My first email question to Al Giordano was, "What type of influences are at play to keep news about traffickers and trafficking out of the papers and off the air? Is it intimidation?" I asked, "or bribes, or do the traffickers outright own and manage some important Mexican media?"

What followed (and follows) was a passionate response of almost excruciating detail. I include only an excerpt here, important to leave in some detail I believe, because it is such a specific attack on Mexican media, its practices and ownership.

"I'm going to take these three in different order," he wrote back. "The most clear story of ownership of media outlets is that of TV Azteca, one of the two national television networks in Mexico."

Giordano then sent an excerpt from a story he wrote two years ago titled "Narco-Media."⁶⁵

Ten months later, one US media outlet finally touched upon the story behind the story: that TV Azteca itself is alleged to have been purchased from the government with \$30 million US in illicit drug money. On April 16th, 2000, The Washington Post reported on the Mexico City prosecutor's investigation into the Narco-Network: "City Prosecutor Del Villar also has alleged that one of the nation's two television networks, TV Azteca, was used by former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari's

⁶⁵The entire story is posted on his Website at www.mediachannel.org/originals/narcomedia.shtml. He said it also can be found in Spanish in the Mexican magazine La Crisis.

brother to launder illicit money. The network has denied the charges. The former president's brother, Raul is in prison on a murder conviction and corruption charges."

But this is not a story about how the Mexican media is corrupt and, by inference, one that implies that the US media is crystal clean. In fact, NBC TV just became a part owner of TV Azteca. And the station's yellow journalism has not changed at all. It continues backing the ruling regime and smearing its critics unfairly.

Televisa, the other national network, is now alleged to be owned in part by narco-money. Last spring, banker Roberto Hernández, who had earlier been accused by the Yucatán daily *Por Esto!* of trafficking tons of cocaine on his Caribbean beachfront properties, was brought into Televisa's ownership as a partner and director. This was after presidents Clinton and Zedillo laundered his image by holding their anti-drug summit on his ranch.

In his email, Giordano added more to the Televisa story, showing what he considers a prime example of intimidation against reporters covering the drug story:

"The third point, about Televisa and Hernandez, was one of the matters that Hernández's bank Banamex (now part of Citigroup) sued Narco News, Mexican journalist Mario Menéndez, and I [sic] over in New York Supreme Court," he wrote. "We won that case in December (in fact, this is another related issue that I'll get to under the "intimidation" category—the narco-banker lawsuits that have proliferated in recent years against journalists and alleged sources for journalists)." Giordano has posted over 90 links to his New York Supreme Court case, including the complaint, various motions, court exhibits, and the coverage the case received in the media at www.narconews.com/warroom.html.

Next he further dealt with the question of drug money buying into Mexican media outlets. "When it comes to narco-money ownership of media, or any major industry, it is so widespread and never spoken. If you'd like an overview, I've published a three-part series by Catherine Austin Fitts (former managing director of Dillon Read and former assistant US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development) titled "Narco Dollars for Dummies." The prohibition on drugs has created a \$500 billion dollar a year industry. Most of that money is laundered through US and European banks, and invested in the stock market. It's pervasive and encouraged. Law enforcement doesn't even scratch it, and the commercial media doesn't either."⁶⁶

Giordano correctly points out that Mexican media, as is the case around the world, are more and more part of global conglomerates. "The interlocking connections are mind-boggling," he wrote. "Take TV Azteca, which has on its board of directors one former Congressman James R.

Jones of Oklahoma, who was US Ambassador to Mexico, and now serves as consultant, employee or board member of various transportation and other companies including ones linked to the notorious Hank crime family in Mexico. Guys like Jones are the fixers. You can get a glimpse of Jones' role in one of the stories read by the New York Supreme Court in deciding our case for us." And Giordano offers another link to his service.⁶⁷ "That piece also tells the story of a \$300,000 dollar bribe offered to one reporter to discredit the original stories in *Por Esto!* upon which our now vindicated series was based."

Regarding intimidation, Giordano wrote, "Intimidation of journalists comes in many forms. The stereotypical one, that gets more attention than its actual percent of the net intimidation going on, is the classic story of drug 'cartels' that kill or threaten to kill journalists in order to silence them or their reports.

"This was a very common practice, particularly in Colombia, by the Medellín organization of Pablo Escobar. But since 1993 when Escobar was apprehended and killed in a shoot out with police forces, the 'traditional narco'—which is to say, the crime organizations that get all the media attention—has largely determined that the assassination of journalists is counter-productive to their goals.

"That is not to say that we *journos* still don't get popped from time to time, but the dynamics of who does the shooting, and who gets shot, and how often it happens, have changed radically.

"The 'cartels' (I use the term in quotations because the dictionary definition of a cartel defines OPEC, but not these crime organizations, accurately. Oxford American Dictionary defines cartel as 'a combination of business firms to control production, marketing, etc. and avoid competing with one another.')

The crime organizations named 'cartels' by the media (the Tijuana, Juarez and Gulf organizations in Mexico, their ancestors in Cali and Medellín, Colombia) are more akin to teamsters and longshoremen than to the kingpin roles the media often assigns them. They organize production, ship the product and bribe the retail level police officials. They do compete very fiercely with each other, and law enforcement plays a big role in that, for example, the recent apprehension of an Arellano Felix brother in Puebla only helps competitors like Chapo Guzman, based in Chihuahua these days, take over their 'plazas' or turf.

"Now, I report as forcefully on the narco as anyone," Al Giordano continued in his email response to me, "and more forcefully than most. I also review very carefully the facts each time a journalist is assassinated apparently by the narco. In many, not all but most, cases, there is evidence pointing to the journalist himself for either A, accepting bribes and then not coming through for his patrons, B, accepting bribes and getting clipped by a

⁶⁶The Catherine Austin Fitts series is posted at www.narconews.com/narcodollars1.html

⁶⁷www.narconews.com/newboss1.html

Al Giordano, narconews.com.

competing organization that perceives him as choosing sides, or C, some rare cases in which a really stupid journalist finds some information and tries to blackmail a narco trafficker.

“Because I painstakingly don’t choose sides or play footsie with any of these crime organizations, I don’t worry that they will off me. Like the mafia of alcohol prohibition days, they have grown to accept that there is a press, that stuff gets reported, and if the reporter doesn’t choose sides, they don’t really care anyway. In terms of the crime organizations, press coverage only tends to glorify them and make them look like the ‘kingpins’ they are not. (It’s like the narcocorridos you mention, which the crime orgs love! They are mythologized and immortalized by these songs). What teamster wouldn’t want to create the illusion that he ran the trucking company? Do you understand the dynamic I’m trying to explain here?” he asked.

I believe I do, and that the research of this study helps us understand it from a variety of sources. But Al Giordano clearly is one of the most involved journalists I’ve found in these aspects of this particularly story.

After the above disclaimer, suggesting covering the drug story is not as dangerous as it may seem, Giordano added the following caution.

“However, there are two groups I do worry about. One is the Colombian paramilitary organization, the AUC, of

Carlos Castaño and now Salvatore Mancuso. They are still assassinating journalists as often as they change socks. The brain drain on Colombian journalism is terrible: most of the best journalists are in exile in Spain, Mexico, and other places. And the paramilitaries are exclusively to blame for that, as are the Colombian and US governments that shout against the ‘paras’⁶⁸ in public but back them and protect them behind the scenes. Organized crime, from the Sicilian model to the Colombian model, only exists with the complicity of government officials.

“The other group are the bankers and money launderers: the ones who, after all, make 80% of the illicit drug profits, wear suits and ties, are ‘respectable’ citizens (and advertisers), donate generously to the Democratic and Republican parties, belong to the best clubs and are considered untouchables by the US media. And when reporters do touch them, the bankers have been the biggest threat. Not just in Banamex-Citigroup’s harassment suit against us, but also the Laredo National Bank and Hank family litigations, subpoenas and threats against a slew of journalists or sources.”

Giordano then directed me to Julie Reynolds of the California based *El Andar* magazine, which covered the story in depth. “She was threatened with a \$10 million

⁶⁸ Paramilitaries.

dollar lawsuit by the Hank Bank. She was very courageous and kept on with the story, and has scrupulously documented the current round of subpoenas against reporters for *The Washington Post*, *El Financiero* of Mexico and *The Washington Times Insight* magazine. This is the new wave of threat, and it comes, truly, from the real kingpins and bosses of narco-trafficking; the ones that hold the purse strings.⁶⁹ The CEOs and board members, literally.”⁷⁰

Al Giordano says intimidation takes another, perhaps unexpected, form. He calls it the “dirtiest little secret of all: the intimidation by media against media. I lived this story in 1999 when Sam Dillon of *The New York Times* called me up, unsolicited, and threatened me that he would use *The NY Times* to discredit me if I published the Banamex story.

“The frequency with which members of the media attempt to intimidate other members of the media from reporting on the big shots is shameful. It can be anything from Jose de Cordoba of *The Wall Street Journal*’s Mexico City bureau actively lobbying to kill a story by another *Wall Street Journal* reporter about our lawsuit, or the corrupt Jorge Fernández Menéndez’s false claims in *El Milenio* against my co-defendant that were refuted solidly by another *El Milenio* columnist, Juan Pablo Becerra-Acosta, which, after that, Fernandez backed off his false claims.

“In these cases, some journalists serve as hitmen for government or industry spin doctors against other journalists.”

Giordano filled the email with these (and other) specific charges, examples, allegations, and citations. As he suggested, “As you can see, the subject is deep and wide.”

From his point of view, the manipulation of Mexican (and other) media is much more sophisticated than the stereotype expectations of “the reporter approached by narcos with a suitcase of one million dollars in one hand and a gun in the other being told, ‘silver or lead.’”

“In my experience, it doesn’t really work that way. That’s a Hollywood version of [the film] “Traffic”. I live a real life version of a reporter covering narco-trafficking and, again, am much more concerned with and threatened by the government-backed paramilitary forces and the ‘respectable’ narco-bankers, whose influence and harm is much greater.”

In regard to my request for specific examples of intimidation and manipulation, he responded, “I’ve mentioned a number of specific examples above: letters

from lawyers, lawsuits, subpoenas in clear violation of shield laws meant only to harass and intimidate, and the Colombian paramilitaries. This is where you will find your meat.

“The problem is that news organizations do get intimidated by nasty calls from lawyers. A great example was in June 1999, when the *Dallas Morning News* was about to break the story, in English, of the US government reports on the Hank family and narco-trafficking. Then the lawyers called. And the in-house lawyers stalled the story, out of mere fear of litigation. *The Washington Post* then scooped the story on June 2, 1999 (which is why Doug Farah is off in a foreign land avoiding service of process! I’m not criticizing him—I think it’s a brilliant strategy to avoid harassing litigation).”

Next I asked if traffickers also use the media to plant positive stories in an attempt to launder their reputations.

“Oh yes,” was the response, and I asked for examples.

“The Clinton-Zedillo ‘anti drug’ summit held in 1999 on Roberto Hernandez’ properties was a clear example of image laundering,” wrote Giordano. “The guy was known throughout the peninsula, for three years prior, as its most famous narco. But when presidents meet at your hacienda, the word goes out not only to the media, but also to law enforcement authorities, that ‘this guy is untouchable, stay away!’”

Al Giordano insists that drug smugglers do not object to legend-building stories (or the corollaries in song, the narcocorridos). “They like it!” And he uses that point to reinforce his insistence that the real story about drugs must be sought in government and business. “You have to look beyond the stereotypes, too often pushed by Committee to Protect Journalists and other press freedom organizations who either don’t get it or don’t want to.” As an example, he offered the story of a killing that resulted in responses from press freedom organizations because the murdered man carried press credentials.⁷¹ The problem was the “journalist” who was killed was running drugs himself. “There’s a clear example of how the myth often triumphs over the facts. A corrupt journalist got killed and the press freedom orgs screamed ‘persecution!’ And then these same orgs are AWOL in all the narco-banker threats against journalists even when documented in courts of law. Again, to really defend press freedom right now, they have to go after the biggest shots on earth: the bankers and the US government. They don’t.”

I asked if he feels this manipulation reduces the credibility of the media in Mexico. I pointed to the example I heard in Tecate when I bought the edition of *Zeta* with the headline about Ramón Arellano Félix being killed and the newsstand lady insisted to me that she did not believe the paper.

“The public has long lost faith with the media regarding

⁶⁹Julie Reynolds work on this issue is posted at the El Andar website: www.elandar.com.

⁷⁰*The Washington Times Insight* magazine summary of this story was written by Paul M. Rodriguez, the managing editor of Insight, and can be found at <http://insightmag.com/main.cfm/include/detail/storyid/189906.html>.

⁷¹The story is detailed on Giordano's website at www.narconews.com/jcop.html.

the narco and every other major industry,” wrote Giordano. “The narco is just another form of Enron, with its CEOs and campaign contributions.”

Giordano wrote that he respects *Zeta* and Jose Blancornelas. “*Zeta*, of course, had one of its journalists assassinated by the Hank family and the Tijuana crime organization. Jose Blancornelas has showed great persistence on that story. I respect him for it. But he also accepts government police and military protection. (I, for one, would be terrified to put my safety in official hands! Those are the guys who WILL whack you and then have the power to cover it up!) And I think the perception caused by his acceptance of bodyguards from a government every citizen knows is knee deep in with the narco has not helped his very sincere effort to get the truth out about his colleague’s assassination. Jose has also spent far more time covering the ‘traditional narco’ crime organizations than the real kingpins of banking and finance. The Mexican public, in particular, knows who the real bosses are: they’re in government and banking! I’m not criticizing Blancornelas or *Zeta*. I think in general they do a good job. But those two factors—the acceptance of government bodyguards, and the relative silence on the white-collar narco—probably have not helped them with the readership. There’s a lot of common sense wisdom by the Mexi-can public that is far more advanced on these issues than in, say, the US public.”

What types of alternative outlets to traditional media are at play, was my next question. I wanted to get Giordano’s read on things such as the material in corridos; did he believe the ballads are a form of de facto news reporting? And I wondered if he thought there are corrido listeners who believe the narratives of events in them are correct renditions of news?

“The corridos, in my opinion,” he wrote, “are not de facto reporting. But neither is what passes as reporting de facto reporting. Both are involved with myth making. Period.”

As an addendum to my list of questions, Al Giordano added an indictment of his colleagues. “We, as journalists, in the end, are the biggest threats to our own press freedom, for our unwillingness to speak truth to power if we consider it a bad career move. I think a little collective introspection would also be helpful in examining this theme.”

A meeting in a secure and undisclosed locale

After reading through his not-so-subtle email messages, I looked forward to the opportunity to meet this ex-pat. He gave me directions to the village

where he enjoys his expatriate lifestyle. I found Al Giordano half asleep in his [blank] covered cottage. (I asked him the name of the delightful-looking flowers covering the wall. He told me and then admonished, “Don’t write that, it could help someone identify where I am located.”)

He pulled out a nasty-looking unfiltered Faros cigarette, and told me he survives as a freelancer with the help of grant money.⁷² He has been covering the Mexican scene since 1997.

“People vote with their browsers,” he told me when I asked about the popularity of narconews.com. “We will have more than one million hits in March [2002].”

We talk about the problematic history of journalism in Mexico, the beginnings of reform that we’re enjoying, and he shows an encyclopedic knowledge of the crimes and criminals he believes have corrupted the Mexican news media, speaking with

the same sort of detail he exhibited in his email responses to my queries about the influence of narcotics traffickers on the media.

As we discuss the factors that can lead to skewed news reporting—political pressures, careerism, the power of advertisers, physical threats—Al Giordano suddenly becomes riled regarding self-censorship. His voice rises as I suggest it’s understandable if a journalist is worried about threats made against his family.

“Then he has no business being a journalist,” he barks. “A journalist who is not willing to take it to the ultimate consequences is not a real journalist. I’m sorry!”

That’s pretty strong stuff, I suggest.

“Yes! But somebody has to hold out a torch of perspective here.”

But the question is not so black and white, is it? I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “if we’re going to cover wars and war zones. We dishonor all the innocent victims of those wars, every soldier on all sides in those wars if we’re not willing to take the same risks. If we think that we should be in a different category than the civilian population during violent times, then we’re just elitists. That’s not authentic journalism.”

I ask Al Giordano if he fears for his safety and there is no hesitation when he answers, “All the time. They could come and get me tomorrow,” he hesitates, pauses, his voice drops before continuing, “but at least they’ll be killing a man.”

Al Giordano is quick to make clear that he does not feel alone, that there are many brave Mexican journalists

⁷²From the Angelika Foundation in Santa Fe, the John Gilmore electronic Frontier Foundation, and Live Art First.

“We, as journalists, in the end, are the biggest threats to our own press freedom, for our unwillingness to speak truth to power if we consider it a bad career move. I think a little collective introspection would also be helpful in examining this theme.”

giving their all to the story and risking their lives practicing their profession. “Many of them are already asserting themselves. I’m not urging anybody to do anything different. I’m just saying get behind the ones that are.”

One of those he puts on the list of brave Mexican journalists is Subcommandante Marcos. “The person who is most responsible for the great opening in Mexico over the last eight years wears a ski mask and files his reports from the jungle and had to pick up arms in order to gain the space. I do refer to

Subcommandante Marcos as a better journalist than most because he’s in the field and he’s reporting based on lived experience on what’s happening in the indigenous *campesino* community with great talent. But he would have never succeeded in getting his communiqués, what I call his columns, published uncensored in national dailies if he hadn’t picked up arms to gain that space.”

I don’t argue the point. Marcos and the Zapatista website certainly offer an alternative news source. And Al Giordano considers web-based news media the future for independent projects. “This is the cutting edge, where you have a combination of talented reporters and photographers and videographers hosting their work directly without having to go through the middleman to the public and inviting members of the public to be their own media and host their own. Now, you get some very high quality stuff, and you get some very low quality stuff,” dramatic pause, “just like in *The New York Times!*”

The Internet and Computer Assisted Reporting

*“You went to the market for the pound of dough and my paper. You didn’t understand why I must have another paper every day. “Haven’t you yesterday’s?” you asked. And then I explained that the news is created fresh every day; and after that, with lofty understanding, you asked every morning as you gave me the paper: “And what is the news today?” —Gertrude Diamant, her book, *The Days of Ofelia, writing about her ten-year-old maid.**

Virtual pueblos

The use of the Internet by newsgathering professionals as well as news consumers is a growing reality in Mexico, but growing at a much slower pace than in the US

One at least temporary setback in business development of Internet-based news services occurred in

January 2002 when Univisión all but shut down the separate online news service it had inaugurated in Mexico.⁷³ Seventy-five of 80 employees in the Mexico City offices were let go and the newsroom in Mexico City ceased to function as a news gathering operation distinct from the company’s Miami headquarters television newsroom. The combination of loss of revenue post September 11 and less than expected online hits were blamed.

I ask Al Giordano if he fears for his safety and there is no hesitation when he answers, “All the time. They could come and get me tomorrow.”

But while Univisión is an example of a corporate struggle to make the Internet work for the transmission of news, Mexico is alive

with grassroots Internet successes for exchanging information. US reporter Sam Quinones, who has been operating as a freelance reporter out of Mexico for some eight years now, documented a growing Internet sector serving the needs of specific groups of Mexicans hungry for hometown news: immigrants who are working in el Norte.

Quinones discovered what he called a literal virtual community, websites keeping the immigrants to the US connected to their hometown news.

One example was created by Jose Herrera, a computer science student at the Illinois Institute of Technology. It can be found via a search at the school’s main site www.iit.edu. Initially Herrera built the site to post information for his friends and family, but discovered other site visitors looking for information about Durango state. It now contains photographs and updated information exchanges for over fifty Durango towns. Mexican ex-pats in the US use it to find each other and keep in touch with their hometown. “Seems like a lot of people like the idea,” Herrera told Quinones.

In the last few years, Quinones has documented the development of dozens of similar sites based throughout Mexico, and others based in the US because the villages they serve in Mexico do not yet support Internet facilities. The sites are used to exchange basic family gossip and very local news. Some sell advertising to firms in both the US and Mexico. For a sampling of these sites, try:

- 1) www.jerez.com.mx for Jerezs, Zacatecas
- 2) www.eltianguis.com/huandacareo for Huandacareo, Michoacán
- 3) www.atolinga.com for Atolinga, Zacatecas
- 4) www.jalpazac.com.mx for Jalpa, Zacatecas
- 5) www.lapiedad.com.mx for La Piedad, Michoacán

An intriguing convergence occurred on the site of the daily newspaper *Imagen* in Zacatecas. The paper chooses

⁷³www.univision.com.

entertaining or newsworthy messages from the web site and prints them in the newspaper. Editor Francisco Barradas told Sam Quinones, "The site functions as a kind of plaza on Sunday afternoon. The response has been incredible."

CAR, the IRE México report

The following study was researched and written by my colleague Pedro Enrique Armendares for a study he conducted for the Poynter Institute in 1999. When he shared it with me in early 2002, he called it “current. The same trends, same problems, same potential, same chosen few who decide to try to work in a different way,” still all exist.

Periodistas de Investigación (PI) began its activities in 1996, as a project of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) made possible by a grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation. The idea presented by a group of IRE members, from both Mexico and the United States, was to establish a training program in Mexico similar to the one that IRE has developed in the US and elsewhere for over twenty years, including the workshops on computer assisted journalism (CAR).

In September of that year Lise Olsen and I opened the new office in the country’s capital. Lise came with many years of experience in investigative journalism and PAC for various media in the United States, and with a history of activism as an IRE member and a teacher for its PAC workshops and conferences. I began my work in radio and television, and then went on to cover special assignments for seven years at the Mexico City daily, La Jornada.

The timing couldn’t have been better. In the last decade, Mexico had undergone immense changes and the country is still going through a yet uncertain political transition. The economic reforms undertaken by the last three administrations has been accompanied by constant electoral dispute, the rise of left- and right-leaning opposition that threatens the dominance of the governing Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), political assassinations and the appearance of peasant guerrilla movements in the southern part of the country. This process has been closely followed by an increasingly conscious and participatory society that, above all, was much more ready to demand accountability from politicians.

The media’s situation is also very different from that of a few years ago. Mexico has always had a large number of dailies—in the capital alone there are over twenty—but quality journalism has always faced an uphill battle against the twin devils of payoffs and censorship. The same government that could be more than generous to friendly media could also become a mortal enemy to a newspaper that ran “uncomfortable” stories.

Although the government continues to exercise inappropriate influence on the media, many of the latter are progressively more dependent on public preference and advertisers instead of official subsidies. Government censorship, meanwhile, has been reduced to a level that

surprises the most skeptical of Mexicans.

All this is beneficial to investigative journalism, which although not new in Mexico, has not developed to the level required by an increasingly sophisticated and demanding public opinion. Even more so in the case of CAR, which very few Mexican reporters use.

When we first offered our workshops on investigative journalism and CAR the response was quite good, and we encountered a first surprise: in spite of the marked centralism that besets Mexico, the interest in our project was much greater in cities other than the capital. Moreover, we also started to field queries and requests for workshops from media in other countries in the region, including Colombia, Argentina, Brazil and Peru. Perhaps this was not the initial plan, but the PI project soon went continental and we have done workshops or taken part in conferences and seminars throughout Latin America.

Our initial CAR workshops in newsrooms in Mexico and other Latin American generally provoked a peculiar mixture of skepticism and interest. Although our colleagues recognized the importance of investigative journalism and many practiced it with impressive results, relatively few had used CAR tools such as the internet, spreadsheets and database managers.

Moreover, when we showed examples of computer assisted stories done in the United States, our new friends reacted with a sort of computer envy. That is, they thought the stories were excellent reporting but they also brought up all sorts of reasons to explain why this type of journalism couldn’t be done in Latin America. Some thought that in our countries electronic information was not available or that official statistics were not reliable, while others argued that few reporters have modern computers and access to the internet.

What all agreed upon—and it is indeed a major problem—is that in the traditional political culture that persists in Latin American countries bureaucrats and politicians tend to consider public information as a personal resource and assume the right to share it or not with the press and society in general. This problem is particularly serious in countries such as Mexico, where the freedom of information legislation is ambiguous and toothless, and in countries with a recent authoritarian past in which journalistic investigation is still stifled by “national security” constraints.

In the past few years, however, we have confirmed that CAR is not only possible in Latin America but that, in fact, its use contributes to weaken the official monopoly on information. For example, reporters can use the internet to search alternative sources and find the information that bureaucrats and politicians try to hide, and later analyze this information using spreadsheets or database managers and then compare it to official press releases. Once the reporting is published, those politicians are forced to respond, and on occasion this results in the releasing of information that was

previously controlled. This, of course, is not an automatic or even a frequent process, but it does happen.

Latin American reporters are also finding that some types of official information is actually available, including socio-demographic data from census, health statistics and electoral data, and that such information is not only trustworthy but holds a vast potential that until now has not been exploited.

It has also been interesting to note how many Latin American governmental offices, perhaps because their directors want to feel so very modern, have extensive web sites. Ironically, much information can be quickly found at these sites that would take days or weeks to find in a traditional press office given the poor organization or intentional procrastination of the bureaucrats involved.

Last but not least, Latin American reporters also make ever more frequent use of information from the private sector, including financial and economic data. In this area it is common for information managers to be more willing to share documents, which in addition are often available in electronic form and ready for analysis.

Another advantage for Latin American CAR is that many governmental offices and private firms skipped the era of mainframe computers and work mostly with PCs. Therefore, Latin American reporters can usually obtain information in a more accessible and easier to use format, as compared to the difficulties still faced by their colleagues from the US who struggle with the older and clumsier machines.

Our CAR workshops are usually quite interactive and many colleagues who take them immediately began to apply the techniques learned. For example, during an Access workshop in Brazil we used an INS database of legal immigrants to the US; a few days later one of the reporters ran a front page story on the "brain drain" of Brazilian executives to the US, lured by attractive professional offers. It's true that he was no newcomer to CAR, but we have seen many colleagues with no former training who start working on story ideas or at least dig out those boxes of clippings from under their desk to build a personal data base even before the workshop is over.

(This type of enthusiasm can get out of hand, as in the case of a dear friend, who shall remain nameless, that has submitted to his spreadsheet analysis everything from how many times his country's lawmakers play hooky to the hobbies, body measures and hair color of the contestants in a beauty pageant.)

Some Latin American colleagues are doing very interesting things with their own data bases, built from information from paper documents. For example, reporters from the daily *Publico*, in Guadalajara, and *El Universal*, in Caracas, have done interesting articles on the profile and background of felons convicted for drug related offenses. In both cases they got the information from judicial sources—in Venezuela it was relatively easy while in Mexico it was like pulling teeth-- to later

design their database, enter the data and analyze it using Access.

Publico's series was particularly interesting, for it showed that only 5% of the arrests had been the result of police investigations. The rest resulted after random inspections, tip-offs or even accidents in which vehicles carrying drugs were involved. These stories also detected glaring inconsistencies in sentencing patterns. For example, how a kid caught at home with two dope plants is doing the same jail time as a recurrent smuggler who was captured while transporting dozens of pounds of cocaine.

Latin American reports are also taking advantage of those fields where access to information is improving, including official information in digital format. CAR has allowed Jose Roberto Toledo, of *Folha de Sao Paulo*, to use statistical information produced by government offices to portray the darker sides of his society. Last year, for example, he used data from the Ministry of Health to inform readers in Sao Paulo that in their city homicide is the first cause of death among children between 10 and 14 years of age, and that in many cases the killers are their own parents.

Another fertile area is electoral coverage. In all the countries we have visited we have found a treasure trove of electoral data, compiled by the government or private organizations, and which can often be accessed on the internet. Mexico provides a dramatic example: in the controversial 1988 elections, when according to many Salinas stole the Presidency, the results from some polling stations had not arrived in Mexico City one week after the election. In 1994 the now independent electoral authorities began to deliver the results in the afternoon of election day to several internet sites, and by dawn Mexican and foreign reporters were analyzing, charting and mapping the final (albeit unofficial) tally.

There is a rich vein of information which Latin American reporters have not yet fully explored, perhaps because related laws are new in many countries: campaign finances and the relationship between elected officials and private interests. Information is not as abundant as in the United States, but once again some papers like *El Universal* in Caracas offer in their web sites extensive data in databases created by the paper's staff.

Latin American reporters are also finding new ways to bypass the hurdles to access to information they encounter in their own countries by using foreign sources. Here the internet is particularly useful, since it can be used to identify and reach international sources—scholars, journalists, NGOs and even government sites—that have relevant information for Latin American countries.

Gerardo Reyes, internet enthusiast, friend and Miami Herald reporter, provides a telling anecdote. He was teaching an internet workshop to a group of Central American journalists, and while he was using the

General Accounting Office's site as an example a Honduran editor literally jumped out of his chair. Reyes had run into extensive data on US military aid to the Honduras military and the editor ran to the phone to convey this information to his colleagues; information which in his country, he explained, is "classified for national security reasons."

The end of the Cold War has also played a role. In Mexico, Claudia Fernandez discovered that the United States government was declassifying a large number of documents from the KGB. One should recall that during the Cold War Mexico City was an important espionage center, a sort of Latin America Vienna. Claudia used the National Security Archives web page to obtain information sent to Moscow by the Soviet embassy in the forties and fifties. She used this information to do a four part series on Soviet espionage in Mexico, and she described the activities, code names and even identities of Mexican spies, including artists, writers and ordinary citizens.

In the business and economic beat, Francisco Vidal navigates for hours each week to find ideas, tips and hard data to support his reporting. For example, when researching the numerous mergers between large Mexican and multinational firms, he was stonewalled by most executives. On the internet, however, he has been able to find much of the necessary information, either at the sites of the financial firms which deal with this type of transactions or, ironically, at the pages of some of the very firms who wouldn't provide information through more traditional channels. If his information allows it, Francisco uses Excel or Access to analyze and complete his reporting.

A real problem that we have found is that in many newsrooms, when owners or managers make an effort to acquire modern equipment, reporters often resist the necessary training either due to fear of technology or because they think their time is too "valuable" to squander in computing lessons.

We have seen too many newsrooms in which modern computers are reduced to glorified word processors, while the reporter doesn't suspect the hidden resources that might be found in that unopened Office folder. They find it easier to get help at their paper's library or information center, if it has one, or to base their stories solely readily available documents such as official press releases.

At the same time, most media show little interest in investing to train their reporters in CAR techniques. Their leitmotif is the recurring economic crisis, while in reality many of the owners and publishers in the region are still not convinced of the profitability of CAR and other modern journalistic resources.

There are, however, some impressive cases, such as Folha de Sao Paulo, which sponsors an extraordinary training program both for its staff and for young men and women fresh out of journalism school and even other

fields.

There are also absurd situations, as when a daily from northern Mexico hired us to give an Internet workshop for their newsroom. After two days of demonstrating search methods, useful sites and reporting techniques we asked the class to talk about how they used the web. "We don't," they answered. "Our management decided that it's a waste of time and money and suspended all our accounts."

We have encountered other pitfalls. For example, some colleagues have shown such enthusiasm about information obtained on the Internet or the hard data they run through spreadsheets or database managers that they seem to forego traditional reporting, that is, the need to turn that information into an interesting story. We often read stories which are nothing more than a few dry paragraphs surrounded by tables and graphics, or failed stories that run out of steam three lines after the lead.

This, we are sure, is something that will progressively disappear as the novelty of these techniques wear off among reporters and the public, and especially when data-dazzled editors pick up their pencils and start doing their job again.

Another related problem, which might be more troublesome in that it can misinform readers, is that some colleagues who discover CAR don't have a proper knowledge of the field they cover or even basic statistical training. The increasing "friendliness" of Excel and Access, for example, can lead them to manipulate data incorrectly and reach unwarranted or even wrong conclusions that might then be printed as news.

Again, we've seen it happen but we trust that these and other problems will become the exception as Latin American journalism develops more savvy reporters and, of course, readers. Also helpful in this process will be the expanding network of CAR pioneers who, as they refine their methodologies and broaden their knowledge, can also share them with colleagues who have just arrived on the scene. Precisely what has happened in countries such as the United States with the collaboration of IRE and NICAR.

Lastly, it is common in this part of the world, as elsewhere, for many newly graduated journalists to dream of becoming the latest stars of investigative journalism. And, as elsewhere, vacancies are scarce. But if more young journalists acquire and apply CAR skills to their daily reporting, the quality of Latin American journalism in general will improve and perhaps we'll finally overcome that old debate on whether investigative journalism is a specialty in itself or if, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez insists, it is a redundant expression.

Fox's e-Gov initiative

The Mexican government launched what it called an “e-Gov revolution” in 2001, with the announced hope of offering email accounts to all citizens and a wide variety of on line information services. The plan, according to Julia Scheeres at *Wired* magazine, is to use computers connected via high speed broadband to the Internet at libraries, schools, and offices to enable 85 percent of the country’s population Internet access by 2006. *Wired* estimates the potential Internet access for 2002 in Mexico at only six percent of the population and suggests the e-Gov plan is under-funded, with only \$73 million (US) in its budget for 2002.

Help developing a wired Mexico came to the Fox Administration in April 2002 from Microsoft. Fox met Bill Gates the year before and enlisted Gates’ support to develop what they called the “e-Mexico” initiative. From the Microsoft side is promised the contribution of software, consulting, and training for Internet centers. These rural Internet access points are to offer free access at some 10,000 kiosks nationwide. Microsoft estimates its investment at \$58 million worth of software and training; it expects to train 4,000 computer technicians to operate the centers. Jonathan Murray, a Microsoft vice president told reporters, “This is one of the largest initiatives we’ve announced.” For the Mexican government, Abraham Sotelo, coordinator of the e-Gov program in Fox’s office, responded, “This is part of a very ambitious plan to prepare our country for the information age.”

Another example of the Fox attempt at wiring Mexico is known as e-Health. e-Health is designed to provide news and information service for the health care community and its clients. Other aspects of the e-Gov plan are e-Education and e-Trade. All are coordinated through the Communications Secretariat (SCT).

An example of the e-Mexico initiative at work can be seen in Santa Ana de Allende in Hidalgo state. Associated Press reporter Lisa Adams visited the village of 1400 to survey how the town—which until 2000 communicated with the rest of the world via only one telephone—is using the 18 computers installed in the high school, and connected to the rest of the world with a 64K satellite link.⁷⁴ She found local residents using the Internet connections to read news headlines and sports reports. She found developing use of email for correspondence with relatives and pen pals. She found books not in the library read over the Internet. She found business people merchandising over the Internet. And

⁷⁴The Adams report filled a page in the San Francisco Chronicle 11 June 2002.

she encountered the students matriculating at the distant Tec de Monterrey’s Virtual University while living in Santa Ana de Allende.

Each e-Mexico site, such as the one in Hidalgo, costs about \$150,000US. The Fox plan is for 10,000 of the centers by 2006, enough the Administration figures, to guarantee Internet access to all Mexicans.

The wired diaspora

Francis Pisani is technology correspondent for *Reforma*, along with *El País* in Spain and *Le Monde* in France. He works from a gracious brown shingle house in north Berkeley, filled with Mexican art and artifacts. The day we met⁷⁵ he was recovering from shoulder surgery, coping with pain, gracious about sharing his experience regarding the use of the Internet in Mexico for traditional and nontraditional newsgathering and news dissemination. Pisani says he has been interacting with the Internet since 1987, using it for news reporting before choosing to specialize in reporting on technology in 1994 after spending a year as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. Once he made the decision to follow the technology beat, he figured he ought to headquarter himself in California.

Tropical birds chirped in the background as we talked.

Francis Pisani is acutely aware of the borderless Mexico, the critical importance of the Mexican diaspora in the United States, to any discussion of Mexican news, especially as it relates to the Internet.

“Most people in Mexico at the media companies do not understand that a lot of the Mexicans who live outside of Mexico have easier access to the Internet than they think.” Pisani told me that just a few weeks prior to our

“The people make very sophisticated use of technology without having a lot of access. What is interesting is trying to understand how they mix technology to get information.”

conversation he had a meeting with journalists from *Reforma* regarding the possibilities of creating a website

specifically for Mexicans living outside Mexico. He said until their meeting it had never occurred to the *Reforma* journalists that such a site could be viable. “They think that the people who migrate to the US and the poorer people have no idea what the Internet is.” In addition to the fact that the Internet is available to people with little money in the US [for example at free libraries], says Pisani, since it is no longer true that only poorer Mexicans migrate to the US there are many Mexican newspaper readers who would use a newspaper site to keep track of events in Mexico while living in the US “The poor migrant uses the technology for his or her own personal needs.”

The main use of the Internet by Mexicans on the north

⁷⁵1 April 2002. Pisani can be reached at francis@francispisani.net or 510 524 0287

side of the border, in Pisani's opinion, continues to be for email. "Very few know how to use the Internet as a tool" for other purposes.

Within Mexico, Pisani believes one of the most important developments needed to further the use of electronic newsgathering is for government and business institutions to disseminate information via electronic means. As an example, he cites the continued use of printed handouts for news releases. When he asks for diskettes instead, he is told they are not available. "One of the major issues is forcing the authorities, both private and public, to release information in an electronic format. I would put this very high on any agenda related to the use of technology.

"People use the Internet more to communicate between themselves," believes Pisani, "than to get information. That doesn't mean people don't check the news, but that's not the main use." But he agrees that the definition of news, and a consideration of what news is important and valuable to Internet users, must be taken into account when analyzing the importance of the Internet as a news medium. As an example, he points out a news story he reported regarding European and North American men seeking Latin American women. "The market changed because of the Internet. Before they were sending letters that took fifteen days one way and then fifteen days the other way. Now you can get an agreement on a marriage" much more quickly because both parties are using email. He sees much more use of the Internet among Mexicans for such personal affairs than the dissemination of traditional news reporting.

Another example of the nontraditional exchange of information over the Internet by Mexicans is the transfer of money from the First World to the Third World. "It's quite obvious to me that at some point the money will go through the Internet."

Although the penetration of personal computers is still minimal in Mexico, Pisani suggests that does not necessarily correlate to minimal use of the Internet. He cites an example he encountered that occurred in Guatemala. A woman in the US sent an email to a correspondent in Guatemala. She sent it to the address of an NGO operating in Guatemala. The NGO then informed a radio station of the message and the radio station broadcast word of the message. A listener heard the broadcast and informed the ultimate recipient that a

message was waiting. "The people make very sophisticated use of technology without having a lot of access. What is interesting is trying to understand how they mix technology to get information."

Pisani cites another nontraditional and sophisticated use of the Internet for newsgathering that he encountered in Guatemala. Small cooperatives growing specialized vegetables for the gourmet market check over the Internet for the going wholesale prices north of the border before they make deals with buyers on location in Central America.

Also noted by Pisani is the California Mexican Health Initiative, a project funded by the University of California Office of the President that is designed to improve the health of farm workers on both sides of the border. One device being considered for transfer of critical health information is websites accessible to farm workers at public Internet kiosks in proximity to their work sites.

An unexpected development of NAFTA is that US companies with offices in Mexico need sophisticated modes of communications to keep in touch with the US offices. "They are contributing to some kind of implementation of communication technology," says Pisani. "How this trickles down is another issue. You have companies with very high bandwidth connections with the US in several places. The *maquilla* system is not limited to the border, but is in the whole of Mexico."

Prior to the advent of the Internet, schools in Mexico were connected by satellite links. Pisani says that there is an effort underway to mix technologies and use the satellite system that is already in place to install Internet service to the connected schools in order to provide students with web access. "That could be an inventive use of technology to have access to information." Another innovation Pisani expects would be valuable in the Mexican media marketplace is web-based radio.

Rubbing his hurt shoulder, Francis Pisani mused about the leading role individuals are taking making use of technology to exchange information. "Like in many places, the news media companies may be very late. They are not the fastest adapters. They are very late, always for good economic reasons or because they have actors fifty years old who do not want to change their habits."

"Like in many places, the news media companies may be very late. They are not the fastest adapters. They are very late, always for good economic reasons or because they have actors fifty years old who do not want to change their habits."

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

"We have to laugh. Because laughter, we already know, is the first evidence of freedom." —Chiapas poet Rosario Castellanos from If Not Poetry, Then What?

One woman's story of disappointment and motivation

Leonarda Reyes worked at two of the most important media outlets in Mexico. She was managing editor at TV Azteca, and she was both national and international editor at the newspaper *Reforma*. She left both jobs, expressing frustration at how decisions were made regarding what news stories were to be covered each day. We met over coffee in Mexico City as she was making plans with her Canadian journalist husband to move to San Miguel de Allende and set up shop on the Internet. She expects to operate two Internet-based services. One a discussion group for Mexican journalists,⁷⁶ the other a web page where Mexican journalists can post their biographies as they seek work and also post stories that they want distributed to an interested (if nonpaying) audience.

Reyes says that at most media outlets in Mexico [and, one could make the case, in the US, too] decisions are reached on what to cover based on press releases and invitations to staged events received by the news room, augmented by the assignment editor's own agenda. "Each night you decide what to cover the next day, you know what is going to happen the next day" she says, "but there is no quality control. The government and other groups know that calling a press conference is how to get coverage" because news organizations feel obligated to cover the government and major private organizations when they announce a meeting. "There is no active analysis on what to cover."

This lack of analysis is not just because the media fear missing an important story that may be developed at a news conference. It is a matter of how resources are used by the newsrooms. Too few reporters are expected to cover too many stories each day to generate material to fill the airwaves and the pages [just as in the US]. The result, says Reyes: "At the end, the quality of information is worthless. At the end of the day, you can compare the newspapers and they look the same."

In addition to the lack of variety in the papers, she

points to their lack of importance for the national agenda. She cites a comment by President Fox suggesting that the only media important to him are Televisa, TV Azteca (the national networks), and the newspaper *Reforma*. "Why is that?" she asks, and answers her own question. "Because who reads the papers? And four or five million people watch the TV news. The government keeps very tight control over TV news and TV owners." She says she is convinced that if the press office of the president wanted to keep specific material off the screen, the decision would not be up to an assignment editor or even a vice president of the news division. Such a decision would be made, she says, by the owners of the networks. And she cited personal experience during the Zedillo Administration of such a request/demand from Los Piños (the Mexican White House). The president's press office was afraid that a specific image of Zedillo drooling had been shot by one of her videographers and that she was going to air it. They called to keep it from being broadcast. In fact, that crisis was averted because she could not find the offending frames. Although that incident dates from the Zedillo presidency, she says such problems continue under Fox.

Reyes cites another story from the pages of the news magazine *Milenio*. Reporter Raymondo Riva Palacio, she says, wrote a story the magazine ran about Fox acquiring \$400US worth of towels for the Los Piños bathrooms. Riva

Palacio says he was fired after Fox's wife pressured the magazine. The magazine says his research was sloppy.

"We ask easy questions, or we don't even ask questions. We just put the tape recorder there and transcribe."

"The problem is," says Leonarda Reyes, "there is not active looking for the story. Reporters and editors are overworked. They end up covering whatever is there: news conferences."

So what is a first step toward productive change? I ask her.

"News organizations need training for reporters and editors," she says. "But it is not enough to train reporters. They don't have enough time and resources. The structure must be changed. But the companies do not want to spend a cent."

Leonarda Reyes, as is the case with most journalists, is trying to figure out what has changed and how to foment change now that the PRI era is ended. "We are just out of a 71 year dictatorship. It was very easy to be a journalist in this country." She recounts common tales of journalistic scams and corruption from the PRI days. "We ask easy questions, or we don't even ask questions. We just put the tape recorder there and transcribe." It's not reporter laziness, she says, "the reporter is at the end of the chain."

Since the end of the PRI federal regime, there has been less money coming from the government to news organizations, whether as direct bribes or via advertising.

⁷⁶Called Reportedit, it is identified as a place for "ideas, discusiones e intercambio entre periodistas, proyecto por un mejor periodismo." It can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/reportedit>

During the PRI days, the government bought advertising space in newspapers to announce various government works. “This was a device to get money to news organizations. The journalists got money directly.” She is referring to the cash payments in unmarked envelopes. “The owners got money via advertising and government-backed, low interest loans.”

An example, she says, is the newspaper *Crónica*, established with a government loan during the Salinas presidency. The paper remains heavily in debt to a government institution. Does the fact that the government could call the loan and probably put the paper out of business influence its coverage, she asks rhetorically.

Another creative method used to augment a reporter’s meager salary was the commission of about ten percent that beat reporters received for any advertising that came in from their beat sources. For example, if the attorney general’s office ran help wanted ads for personnel, the reporters assigned to the A.G.’s office received the commission. These reporters were not required to sell the advertising nor deal with any of the logistical maintenance of the account. They simply received this income bonus, and of course thus knew that the interests of the Justice Department were the interests of the reporter’s income.

“Fox says he’s not doing that any more and that’s why he’s attacked in the media,” Leonarda Reyes told me.

But does it still go on?

“We don’t know,” she acknowledged, regarding the federal government policies and practices.

Later in this report is a fresh and recent first person account of direct bribery.

“We all accommodated power,” Reyes says about the PRI days. “Except for Buendia, we don’t have journalism martyrs.” That is a harsh and inaccurate statement. *Fundación Manuel Buendía* is a foundation dedicated to helping Mexican journalists in jeopardy and is named after the prominent Mexican journalist killed while working. At

least 24 journalists in Mexico have been killed on duty since groups such as *Fundación Manuel Buendía* started keeping records. In 2000 journalists filed 101 official reports of personal abuse connected to their work, in 1999 135 reports. J. Jesús Blancornelas at *Zeta* in Tijuana and his murdered colleague there are just two specific examples.

“Our celebrity journalists,” Reyes continues, “made their names covering wars abroad. We had no domestic investigative reporting. We are just beginning.” She stops her criticism for a moment, realizing it is too sweeping. “I must make this exception: *Proceso* [the news magazine]. There were other examples,” she acknowledges, “here and there.

“We are journalists in transition. We don’t know how to do it. We are learning how. There is a huge need here. The owners go from home to office in helicopters and they have bodyguards, but not enough money to train reporters.

“Right now owners are trying to figure out the future. Before they had the formula. Now they need reporters who ask questions, if they are going to compete. They wonder how to get advertising and report cheap. I don’t think they have figured it out. The rules changed. But it’s not going to take long for them to figure out the new rules and please those in power. Everything is about who gets power and who gets money. In this country there has been a fight against political censorship. We never talk about commercial censorship. It’s huge, quiet, efficient. There are few headlines about business corruption. Those words together on a headline, you hardly see them.”

But Leonarda Reyes smiles; despite her cynicism she sees opportunity for journalism during this period of transition. “It is an exciting time.” Competition, she says, may fuel quality. And then, she reiterates, journalists “have to be better. To be better, we must be trained.”

The Mordida Lives: Cash in the Unmarked Envelope

*"I wasn't sure of the etiquette in a situation like this. If twenty pesos was not enough he might be insulted. If it was too much I wanted change. Every Mexican official I have ever seen take a mordida uses a graceful and smooth motion for grasping and pocketing money. I flicked a twenty-peso bill toward the Juárez cop. In one sweeping motion the bill disappeared in his right hand while his left hand returned my driver's license." —Tom Miller in his book, *On the Border*.*

Take this bribe and shove it

Atzimba Romero rushes over between assignments from the TV Azteca studios on the south side of Mexico City to meet me in a glitzy bookstore and coffee shop in the posh southern California-style shopping center Perisur. She's young, intense, and anxious to tell her story—alternating expressions of serious disgust with jokes and mouthfuls of the rich-looking plate of cake and ice cream she's assaulting.

It was the 78th anniversary of the founding of the Mexican railroad union, an important event on the Mexico City news calendar. The labor minister was there, the railroad owners, officials from the Mexican labor union CTM. "Lots of reporters were there," Atzimba Romero told me, "I don't know why. Perhaps because they knew it was payoff day."

This is not a memoir of those scandal-ridden days of Mexico's past, but a report from early 2002. This is not a report from the impoverished and marginalized provinces, but from Mexico City.

After a formal ceremony was an opportunity for reporters to obtain comments from union leaders. The reporters then were invited into a pressroom at the union headquarters. "The cameramen and the cameras were ordered out," Romero said, "and the door was closed. Another door opened. I was nervous. What was going on? I understood nothing about what was going on."

The railroad union was not Romero's beat. The regular railroad union beat reporter was ill that day, and the assignment desk sent her to fill in for the celebration story.

After the second door opened, the reporters lined up.

"I kept asking, 'What the fuck is going on?'"

"A man, a Televisa reporter, said, 'Little girl, stop asking. We're going to get our payoffs. It's embarrassing, but we're going to get our *chayo* [a Mexican fruit and the

slang word for bribe commonly used in journalism].'"

"Then it was my turn," Atzimba Romero continued, "and I came up to a short man who was handing out envelopes. He gave me the stapled envelope and I said, 'What is this?'"

"He was very surprised and upset and insisted I should take it and leave. I said, 'Don't mess with me!' I threw it in his face."

She left the pressroom.

"I left really upset and a reporter for *Reforma* came up to me and said, 'We are the only two who did not take the money.'⁷⁷ He told me he was going to run a story about the bribing the next day, but he needed to know how much was in the envelopes."

Romero said she found the Televisa reporter who had suggested she just take the money and approached him with a microphone but no camera.

"I asked, 'Señor, how much did you receive in that envelope?'"

"The only reason he did not beat the crap out of me is because there were so many people there."

"He asked me, 'Why didn't you take it? You could have given it to your crew.'"

"I asked, 'Did you take it?'"

"He said with an shrug to suggest the answer was obvious, '¡Sí!'"

"I said, 'You make me sad. I'm embarrassed for you.' And I left."

Reporter Romero got into her company car with her crew and they left the union building site. About twenty minutes later, she says, while they were all still in the car en route back to TV Azteca's studios, the dispatcher for TV Azteca's crews called on the mobile phone and told her that the reporter who usually covered the railroad

union beat wanted to talk with her cameraman. The dispatcher told her to put the cameraman on the line and that she would patch

through the call from the beat reporter. The cameraman talked for over twenty minutes, she told me.

"When we arrived back at the station, the cameraman asked, 'What are you going to do?' He told me it wasn't really the beat reporter who was on the phone, but someone who told him, 'You don't know me, but I am the person in charge so that everything goes smoothly at the

"I asked, 'Señor, how much did you receive in that envelope?'"

"The only reason he did not beat the crap out of me is because there were so many people there."

⁷⁷*Reforma* was founded with a policy that bans all bribes. Reporters are forbidden from taking anything from sources on penalty of being fired. They are required to pay for everything associated with their news gathering work, even a cheap coffee and sandwich during a lunch meeting.

union.'

Atzimba Romero told me she thinks the cameraman does know who he was talking with at the union and that he was threatened or pressured. The cameraman warned her. "If you say anything," he told her, "all the reporters who took the money will be against you and say it's not true." He told her to think it over before she told anyone because it happens every day in Mexico and there is nothing she can do about it.

"The cameraman was so insistent that I realized he was scared."

She said she kept asking him where the money came from. Did it come from the labor minister, from the union, or from the CTM? "He told me, 'Please do it for me because I have a labor related problem and they're helping me at the Labor Department.'

"I told my cameraman, 'Ahah! This is coming from the Labor Minister!' He said, '¡No sé, no sé, no sé!'

Romero decided to bring the matter up with her bosses. She identified the incident as a direct threat and asked what action the company intended to take. She announced that she wished to do a story on the payoffs.

"He congratulated me and told me the network would back me."

But no story was broadcast because she did not actually receive any money. For reasons she is not aware of *Reforma* did not run the story either.

I asked her why she did not take the money. Her eyes flashed with an-oyance at the suggestion. "Why should I?"

She did acknowledge a mistake in hurling the envelope and an epithet at the fellow passing out the cash. "My boss said next time just say no thank you and hand it back."

And she feels the effects of her actions on the job. "When I go to news stories now and run into reporters who took the money, I am shunned."

Atzimba Romero is convinced that poor pay is no excuse for taking bribes. "It's not a matter of having money or not. It's values. It's something you have inside. It was so routine, so natural, so part of the day's work for everyone in that line. It can't be a problem of poor people, you can't justify it as poverty in the D.F."

I paid for her expensive desert and we left the exclusive shopping center, walking past the armed guards protecting the upper class in their southern California-like oasis.

Who paid how much to whom in Michoacán

A few weeks later I made my way at dawn to the Observatorio bus station on the north side of

Mexico City early enough for my first class bus ride to Morelia to grab a bite to eat. A cheese sandwich on a fresh roll with onions, avocado, and refried beans looked good. And a coffee. The clerk handed me the sandwich and a cup of hot water. "No, no. Café con leche," I protested. She said, yeah, yeah, and pointed me to the adjacent table where the jar of Nescafe sat with a spoon. "Make it yourself," she instructed. Welcome to the bus station. Where is a NAFTA encouraged Starbucks when it's needed? Four hours and two Hollywood B English-language subtitled movies on the shrieking video monitors in the bus later, we had climbed out of Mexico City's smog, up and over conifer-covered mountains into Michoacán, and down into its capital, colonial Morelia.

"Call me from Café El Centro just after eleven," reporter Francisco Castellanos told me via phone when I called from Mexico City. I called. No answer. I bought his magazine, *Proceso*, ordered a coffee and orange juice, waited and called again. No answer.

I decided I better sit back and relax. I looked at the cathedral. I ordered breakfast. There was nothing else to do yet. Finally the waitress told me I had a phone call. "Sorry I'm late," he said, I'll be right there." At a quarter to one, he showed up, all smiles, sat down and said hello to me, and then proceeded to chat up the guy at the next table until finally our appointment started some two hours late.

We hailed a cab and started talking.

As the taxi barreled along the mountain roads, Francisco Castellanos regaled me with details of the bribes

As the taxi barreled along the mountain roads, Francisco Castellanos regaled me with details of the bribes and payoffs enjoyed by Michoacán reporters, editors, and publishers.

and payoffs enjoyed by Michoacán reporters, editors, and publishers. He said the *Voz de Michoacán* took in

some 75,000 US dollars a month during the previous PRI regime, money directly paid by the government. He told me the publisher of the *Sol de Morelia* received about 50,000 dollars a month, and the smaller *Cambio de Michoacán* about 35,000 dollars. These payments were called "convenio" in Spanish, a so-called agreement to pay the newspaper for institutional notices from the government as a device to funnel money to the papers.

The money came from both the federal and state governments during the PRI days, according to Francisco Castellanos, to all types of media: newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. He obtained a list of all the reporters and media outlet owners who were "paid off," and he told me it was the official list of the Michoacán government. "Do you want to see it?" he asked with a smile.

"I received the list from anonymous sources I cannot reveal," he said, which contains all the payments made by the previous PRI government in Michoacán of Governor Victor Manuel Tinoco Rubi. "I have the list that shows how much money they were paid each month. There was

also a special amount (*partidas especiales*) that was paid every six months to each newspaper in Michoacán, and to the radio and TV stations. The idea was that the newspapers got the money simply in return for not hitting the government.” Castellanos used the verb “golpear,” literally “to punch.” He speaks fast, mixing his serious charges with laughs about the incongruity of life as a Mexican reporter. Periodically he directs his remarks about corruption at the *taxista*, with a quick, “Isn’t that so?” And the taxi driver smiles and nods yes.

“The *Voz of Michoacán* got the most,” Castellanos says about the “partidas especiales,” 75,000 US dollars a month, “which in Mexico is an amazing amount of money. There were even individual reporters who got up to 5,000 dollars a month. They got half of that amount in ‘embutes’ [illegal transactions]—in cash.” In addition, he told me, these reporters received some 2000 dollars in so-called “consultant fees” for the government. “But they do nothing. That is why the reporters here have nice houses, nice cars. In contrast, those of us who are not corrupt because we did not take anything, we live in a much more humble manner.”

Francisco Castellanos punctuates his sordid tales of corruption with specific ideas of what can be done to work to change the endemic problem of tainted news reporters. “What we need here is to have a conscience, because most of my mates are ‘empíricos’—that is they are self taught. They are not professionals; they did not study at the university. The vast majority did not study at the university. They just got a press card and automatically they were journalists.”

These “journalists” receive very low salaries and hence are susceptible to corruption. “One of the reasons for the corruption is the really low salaries. Lets make a comparison. A correspondent for a big newspaper in Mexico City, like *El Universal*, who is working in Michoacán, receives about 200 US dollars a month. But when you add all the money he gets underground, it totals about 800 dollars.” Again he smiles, “I have the list.” Besides all these payments from the government, he told me, the reporters could get payments directly from the political party that controlled the government, from the PRI. “The new PRD government says it will end all these ‘convenios,’ “ according to Castellanos, “they say there will be no more corruption. So you can understand why all the journalists are really mad now, because it was their source of income.”

Not that every reporter in Michoacán was corrupted by the PRI, says Francisco Castellanos. “Only three or four of us who are correspondents here in Michoacán did not take the money, out of more than three hundred journalists in Michoacán who did take the money.”

I asked him if he believes the corruption is really over, just because the PRI government has been replaced by the left of center PRD.

“They are stopping it little by little. The new government has only been in power a little over a

month.⁷⁸ It’s not enough time to tell. But the ‘embutes’ were cancelled. They didn’t get the money this time. No one got the money. The ‘convenios’ are being renegotiated because they claim they are legal advertising. But it still is too much. How can you justify 70,000 dollars a month for ‘convenios?’”

I ask him the reaction of the PRI leaders to his reports.

“Not much, since they created the system. This was like a regular salary for the reporters. The problem is that this not just happening in Morelia, but in other towns and cities in Michoacán. This situation was in all of Michoacán and unfortunately almost all of Mexico.” In fact, says Castellanos, Michoacán is not so bad in comparison with the rest of the country. “In Tabasco it was much bigger. For examples when Madrazo was governor [also PRI] the correspondent who received the least was getting 450 dollars a month, plus three month paid vacations to Europe, just to speak well about the PRI.”

Francisco Castellanos said he has been offered bribes and payoffs. “But I haven’t accepted it. I have been offered bags full of money, I do not know how much.” The blatant and insidious nature of the corrupted relationship between government and media in Mexico is made clear in one of his examples. “The PRI government of Ausencio Chavez Hernandez, on the holiday ‘El Día de la Libertad de Expresión’ [Free Speech Day!], one official of the government approached us with a big brown bag, like a bag for bread, full of packs of 500 peso bills.

“He told me, ‘Here. This is a present from the governor.’

“I said, ‘No thank you, I don’t want to have anything.’

“He said, ‘You don’t want the governor to be angry with you. If you don’t keep the money, the governor is going to be mad.’

“I told the guy, ‘I don’t care.’ I said I was sorry he was going to be mad but I couldn’t accept money from the government because I was an independent journalist and I had to write whatever I wanted. If I accepted the money, I would be obligated to say and not say certain things. I was with a *compadre* who is a publisher of two newspapers, one in Apatzingan and one in Uruapan, so they broke the advertising agreements [the *convenios*] with him in order to try to pressure me to accept the money. My friend called me later and said, ‘Compadre, if you don’t take the money they’ll take the ‘convenios’ out of my newspapers.’”

Francisco Castenso told me he was forced to tell his friend there was nothing he could do to help, that he simply was not going to take the bribe money.

So how does he survive financially? He says he has the advantage of working for *Proceso*, “a magazine that is the equivalent of Time and Newsweek,” not a small paper. “Most of the guys working for important newspapers and magazines are professionals. We studied. I am a graduate

⁷⁸Our conversation took place March 26, 2002.

with a degree in communication science.” And Castellanos continues to take classes and courses. “Thanks to my continuing education. I can earn my money legally. The saddest part is that even correspondents for major newspapers, most of them simply copy other people’s news. They pirate other people’s news. They read the local newspaper, they take the story and replace the reporter’s name and they say, ‘This is my report.’”

Of course this may seem rational if the reporters both are all in the pay of the government and the story in question is just parroting the official government line.

As an example of enterprise reporting, Francisco Castellanos points to his own work among the guerrillas of Michoacán. He says he has written about them and published his photographs of them in *Proceso*. The government then denied the existence of the guerrillas. “The other reporters printed what the government said, writing, ‘No, the guerrillas don’t exist.’” “And then, says Castellanos, correspondents for the Mexico City papers reiterate what the local papers print and publish denials in the capital newspapers “despite the photos, and communiqués and the reports from the scene.”

Another example is the story of the so-called mafia in Michoacán. Francisco Castellanos says there are at least seven different drug cartels operating in Michoacán. “Just last year we had more than 110 executed people. The previous year 120. And in 1999 there were almost 200. But there were no reports in the media because of the government. The government simply denies it. Their spokesman says, ‘That didn’t happen.’ And the newspapers simply repeat that. I’m talking about the PRI government. This new government is too young; it’s too early to tell what they will do. But we’ve already had three murders. The guys who did it were captured really fast. In the PRI government days no killers were captured. The drug trafficking is very strong here in Michoacán.” He said the PRI government looked the other way and provided cover for the drug pushers in return for massive contributions to the PRI.

We ended the evening in a swank Morelia restaurant. “It’s not too expensive,” insisted Castellanos as he ordered another beer and the prawns cooked in lemon and tequila.

Our conversation continued regarding what can be done to improve conditions for Mexican journalists. Castellanos pointed out his own positive experience, working with a reporter at the *Arizona Star* on a joint project dealing with illegal immigration. They shared information via telephone and Internet. Creating more such cross border opportunities for working liaisons can influence Mexican (and US journalists). There are many regional stories without borders that can benefit media outlets in both countries. Francisco Castellanos knows this market well. He writes for many Spanish-language papers in the US, and reports the news on Spanish-language radio stations in the US With his mischievous

grin he reaches into his wallet and pulls out press card after press card from US-based magazines, newspapers, and radio stations.

Some further Castellanos quotes and notes from our talks include:

“Without social balance it is not possible to have journalism without corruption.”

Our taxi sped past fields being plowed with horses. The farm workers make about two dollars a day.

“In the US you have irrigation and do not have to wait for rain.”

The majority of documents available for journalists to cross check information they develop are in the US and in English.

“With the Fox government there is a lessening of corruption, but it will be many years...”

Finally, I asked Francisco Castellanos if he believes corridos are a form of news reporting.

“Exactly. Sometimes they’re the only news report about a local event.”

The Media Relations Experience of the Two DF NGOs

“Whenever I asked her to make a dish she didn’t know she would crash right down on her knees and ask God to send her the recipe. Usually He did and very good recipes too, though He is fonder of lard than I am.” — Elizabeth Borton de Treviño writing about her cook in her memoir, My Heart Lies South.

Patricia Mercado: NGOs are unprepared for the media

Patricia Mercado is the director of Diversa, a feminist organization that supports a wide variety of women’s needs. In the world of Mexican politics, Diversa is not technically an NGO. For years it was a “political association” with the potential of becoming an officially recognized political party. My colleague Pedro Enrique Armendares caught up with her in Mexico City to query her about her successes and failures working with the Mexican media. A few months after his interview with her, Diversa was recognized as an official political party, making it eligible for millions of pesos of public support. Patricia Mercado has been involved with NGO work since 1984, specifically regarding laws and public policy concerning women, from what she calls “a feminist perspective.”

She says that in general the media is becoming more open to reporting about the work of Diversa since the Mexican media began to liberalize during the Zedillo presidency. “However,” she says, “I believe the media pays attention only if a celebrity or political figure is involved. Also when governments in some manner are involved in the news. If it is not presented in this manner, I don’t believe that there is more opportunity for NGOs than before.”

Asked to rank the media in terms of which types are likely to cover her work, Mercado says, “The written press is the most attentive, after that is radio, and television is rare. It is very difficult to attract their attention.” Despite this ranking, Mercado says she would prefer the reverse, “simply because television has the largest audience.”⁷⁹ “After that radio, and finally the written press.” The equation continues to mock her needs regarding access. When asked which medium is the most open to information from her NGO, she identifies the written press, “and the most closed is television.”

Patricia Mercado was asked to identify the obstacles NGOs face when trying to obtain access to media. In short order she made a specific list. “First,” she says, “are the NGOs themselves. They do not know what to do because media access is not a primary function for them. They

don’t have the financial resources to pay the extraordinary sums needed to buy access to the media. In general, NGO campaigns do not necessarily relate to the themes in the news.” She says NGOs are concerned about much smaller themes, which she quickly identifies as *pequeños-grandes temas*, which do not interest the media. “Without question,” she says drawing attention to herself and her colleagues as contributing to their own access problems, “there is little training of NGOs in adding to the clamor to make the news.”

We asked her if there were some issues that interest NGOs that are simply vetoed by the media as possible content—either due to direct censorship or self-censorship. “I do not see censorship,” she says. “Yes, there is self censorship created by special interests, because of advertising. That is to say, by fear of losing the advertising. That is very clear on television. It depends on the theme, then, if there are vetoes.” This is censorship by restricting access. “When the media takes on the themes of NGOs I believe, in general, they are objective enough and generous.”

And again we hear about the importance of radio when we ask Patricia Mercado in what form the public tends to obtain information NGOs wish to distribute and produce. “Without doubt, radio has much influence and seems the most intimate.” But Mercado does not feel the media has seized the opportunities available during the post-PRI period in Mexico. “No, I believe that they have made things much more difficult. They feed the fire, often only manipulating information.” Yet she sees positive change in the infrastructure, believing that the days of bribes and subsidies of the media from the federal government are almost completely finished. However, “if we are speaking about local media, the answer to this question is surely that they haven’t changed much. The pressure of the local governments over the media is still of a great magnitude. The corruption and the pressures are the orders of the day.”

Marta Lamas: The media are scandal driven

Martha Lamas is the director general of GIRE, a pro-choice, feminist NGO that works for sexual and reproductive rights, well known and well respected in Mexico.⁸⁰ Pedro Enrique Armendares spoke with her, asking if she is finding the media more open to GIRE’s needs, especially regarding stories about abortion rights.

“It depends on the media. There’s no question that there has been a change in the press,” she said, regarding the post-PRI period. “Perhaps the written press is the one that’s most open. Nonetheless, I still feel that the owners of the media create filters regarding things that they’re not interested in. There also is control that perhaps is not obvious that comes from advertisements. One difficulty is

⁷⁹ That is not necessarily so.

⁸⁰ www.gire.org.mx.

that there is no public interest media in Mexico, no public television. Canal 22 [a government station] is cultural, but it does not deal with politics. So there are certain issues and debates that are not covered the way they are supposed to be covered.”

Scandal, she said, provides the exceptions.

“Certainly there are examples of exceptions such as the case of the Legionarios [de Cristo, a religious organization whose founder was alleged to have abused children]. In 1997 Canal 40 [the independent commercial cable station that was known for its quality news and experimental programming] reported the news of the accusation and for that advertisers boycotted them.”

The Mexican media today cannot ignore the worldwide Catholic church scandal regarding sexual abuse.

“Now, five years later,” said Lamas, “the same subject is discussed on Televisa and probably there is not going to be a boycott.”

But that does not change her frustration with Mexican reporting. “I feel in the last years that the subject of abortion is not being clearly debated. At the time we started, when Nino Canún was on TV [a credible and high quality discussion show on TV Azteca] all these issues were discussed [his show was discontinued] and he moved to radio and these kinds of debates were not aired unless there was a big scandal. Then suddenly there was a scandal like Paulina [a teenager who was raped and tried to get an abortion, legal in Mexico but disallowed for her in her home state Baja California] and there was a public debate. But it wasn’t in the way other societies debate abortion. I do believe that for the Catholic Church hierarchy the abortion issue is not a public debate. When debate goes on, people transform their narrow and sectarian position. When people are informed that in places like Italy, even with the Vatican right there, abortion is legal, they start questioning. I really feel, even though I am biased, that respecting abortion there have been some radio stations and some TV programs clearly having an agreement that they don’t have to talk about this. When there is such a program about abortion, right after it the hierarchy of the Catholic Church complains. The thing is that they talk about it only when they have no other choice.”

When the media do feel compelled to air debate regarding abortion, even if it is only due to a scandal, they realize GIRE and Marta Lamas are excellent sources.

“They look to us. We have a media department and they call us all the time because they need the name of an expert in violence or masculinity, or whatever. Besides as a civil association we have a policy to have a presence in the media, to be consciously a counter weight to the fundamentalist Catholic opinion.

“When the bishopric speaks publicly about something, the media looks to us immediately so that they have the other side of the story. We already have become a point a reference. I don’t know if all the civil associations have the same treatment that they give to us. What I know is

that when we started our job, we were the only group, which had a department of media where we do the work of writing newsletters, a web page, a whole policy of information. We consider ourselves an informational group. Reporters know that if they need information they can come over here.”

We asked Marta Lamas which medium she considers the most advantageous.

“I prefer television because it reaches way more people. The people in Mexico don’t read much. Obviously, the written press pays more attention to us than the television, but if the idea is to provide objective balanced information it would be very important to have time to do that on public television. But that doesn’t exist. You always wish the impossible.”

Consequently, Lamas said, she gets more attention from radio and written press than television.

“And then when there is a scandal,” she complains, “they [TV] come. But that idea of public debate still is not strong in this society.”

What barriers keep other NGOs from gaining the access to the media they desire? we asked.

“I’d say that on one hand there is the internal barrier. I don’t know if other NGOs have developed their media access policies, to figure out that media need news. If you want them to pay attention to you, have to have something to give them, something different. Therefore there is homework to do. You have to present information to them. You have to make events that get media attention. I think there is not that much consciousness about that in the group of NGOs that I know, which are the ones of the feminist movement linked to reproductive health, they don’t know that much about it. They have few relationships with reporters; they have practically no relationship with the media.

“On the other hand there are problems of maturity and professionalism among the reporters and the radio stations and the TV channels. They are pretty much into yellow journalism and they don’t prepare themselves.”

But she says that the reporting of the Legionarios de Cristo affair was sophisticated enough to suggest that there may be a change underway toward more investigative journalism, “which is the thing I feel we have too little of.”

How does she rate the media regarding information important to her, are they biased or objective? With this answer she devastates her countrymen and women.

“Certainly some interviewers are smarter than others. Sometimes they have personal issues, sometimes they are people who are very well prepared to conduct an interview, but also there are people who come who ask questions in a way you can tell that they just got the information about what to ask you three minutes ago, they have no idea who you are or what organization you are working with. But at the same time I don’t feel that there is that much manipulation. I don’t get the impression of manipulation. The impression that I get is that someone is

better prepared or badly prepared; that there are more professional people than others. It is very impressive when you are interviewed by a foreign correspondent, because you can tell this person—who comes up to you speaking totally limited Spanish—knows more about you than Mexican reporters. That is a very strong contrast, when people from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* conduct an interview with you they really have done their homework. That hardly ever happens with Mexican reporters, with a few exceptions. I never watch the interviews that they do with me. I don't watch TV. I don't listen to myself on radio either, because usually that's live."

She's frustrated with the written press, too.

"For example, you read *La Jornada* and the reporters mostly tell their opinion, they don't tell you what happened. They don't describe. But you read *Reforma* and there you can read a description of what happened. Generally speaking *La Jornada* is an ideological newspaper where you hardly find any descriptive information about what is going on. You can see half of the page with the reporter saying what he or she thinks and at the end there is a little tiny thing about what we said."

Aside from her organization and its agenda, we asked Marta Lamas if she feels the media are responding to the needs of Mexico today.

"The subjects on which I'm working don't have much

novelty. You can't talk all the time about abortion. With respect to my issue, I think it is necessary that the media commit—as has already happened in other countries—to open a public debate for one or two years. This could reach the whole country so that people would have the chance to get informed to ask questions in a steady way for two or three years. At the same time it is not a subject that provides news. What you have to do is give the debate from different points of view: the medical, the legal, the religious. And put the people with different positions in public debate. We haven't done that, it is a shame we haven't done that. There must be the political will to get such a debate that requires that media commit because we have an objective. That could be a referendum on abortion. So the media could say we are going to work one or two years to inform the people about the positions so that when the people finally get to vote, they can cast an informed vote. That doesn't exist."

Consequently, laments Marta Lamas, she is unable to make use of the media in a deliberate fashion.

"When a scandal comes out, that's when they look for us. Then you hear nothing for six months or a year. Then another yellow issue comes up, so they look for you again. During vacations they apparently don't have much news. That's when they talk about abortion. Just to fill. I think it's because they're not selling that many newspapers during vacations so they have to create something to sell them."

Two More Gringo Periodistas Cringe and Complain

“The kids on the line tonight in Tijuana, if you ask them why they are coming to the United States of America, will not say anything about Thomas Jefferson or notions of democracy. They have not heard about Thomas Paine or the Federalist Papers. They have only heard that there is a job in Glendale, California, at a dry cleaners.” —Richard Rodriguez, from his speech “Pocho Pioneer” delivered at a White House conference.

Sam Quinones reports on culture

I remember well making an illegal left turn in Ensenada, Mexico and quickly settling the problem with the cop who pulled me over by paying him a few pesos in cash. Mexican police are notorious for the bribes they extort out of citizens.

Periodically attempts are made to clean up the corrupt police forces of Mexico. Late in 1999 the new police chief in Mexico City, Alejandro Gertz Manero, decided that one route toward reducing graft was swapping his force of male traffic cops for a new corps made up of supposedly untainted women.

In a set-up that seems crafted to fail—especially in macho Mexico—the chief de-signed new teams of traffic enforcers made up of two men and four women. Only the women are authorized to write tickets; the men are their bodyguards.

Police chief Gertz explained his philosophy to *The New York Times*: “You very seldom have any corruption problems with women in Mexico. We are trying to regain the confidence of the people. I think it will be easier for women to get closer to the people. In Mexico we see women as more gentle, more polite. If a group of men has been perceived for so many years as being corrupt, and you don’t have that perception of corruption among women in the police force, why not give them a chance? I trust them.”

Another flight down to Mexico City from San Francisco: I fill out my customs form and advance in the line toward the customs agent and the lottery system for searches. The system is a red and green light. If you declare nothing, you hand your form to the agent who slides it into the machine. Most times the light turns green, but periodically—and supposedly at random—it lights up red and you must submit to a search.

The guard smiles at me. It’s impossible not to notice her uniform: bare midriff, tight bodice, jeans, and a smile fueled with dark mascara’ed eyes. There is no sign of her official capacity and authority except for her position in front of the machine. The machine flashes the green “entre

libre” as always, and she flashes another smile and says, “¡Bienvenidos a México!”

I sought out three US correspondents working in Mexico to provide their points of view for this report. Al Giordano, the aforementioned publisher of *narconews.com*; Sam Quinones, a freelancer and author of a recently published book on Mexico; and John Ross, a longtime Mexico hand, called the John Reed of contemporary expatriate reporters by *La Jornada*, and—as it turns out—an old colleague of mine: we both labored in the KSAN newsroom in the early 1970s in San Francisco.

In a working class Mexico City neighborhood not far from the *Zona Rosa* (“Meet me in front of the Sears store!”), I found Sam Quinones and we adjourned to a loud café in his neighborhood, where I debriefed the Mexico City-based US freelancer about the status of Mexican media. Quinones is the author of the recently published book, *True Tales From Another Mexico*. He acknowledges a love/hate relationship with his adopted country. For the purposes of this report, he is full of information and opinion, honed by eight years of gritty street reporting across Mexico. His responses are rapid-fire, cuss-word filled. He provides an intense and thoughtful interpretation in loud English bellowing

The guard smiles at me. It’s impossible not to notice her uniform: bare midriff, tight bodice, jeans, and a smile fueled with dark mascara’ed eyes.

across the café. This is a self-confident fellow, unconcerned about drawing attention to himself as he starts by assaulting Mexican print media with a booming, “It’s horrible. It suffers from the same problems as controlled media because there is no context to stories. You can’t figure out why something is important. It’s written for the elite. Sometimes the papers don’t even bother to spell out acronyms. The PRI did not want context, comparison to what had gone on before. It did not want speeches made three months before echoed and compared.”

Quinones sees that the press is unshackled from forced censorship. “What there is now is a full court press on Fox. That’s a good thing.” But this assault is too often over the superficial, such as protocol mistakes. Quinones cites as an example Fox’s frequent overseas trips. “You never see an accounting of the costs versus the benefits. Instead what they do is take a gaffe and blow it up. The press hasn’t gotten to the point of explaining to Mexicans the bigger issues. This drives Fox up the wall. You cannot rely on the press corps to do serious stories.” Quinones is reflecting primarily on the national print press based in Mexico City.

“Mexican journalists do not understand putting together something you heard three weeks ago with something you heard yesterday with some statistics for a story.” Just like Leonarda Reyes, he complains that they succumb to reporting mostly staged events such as press

conferences. “They’re used to following blindly, and that still exists.”

Gulping his coffee, gesticulating so wildly that the waitress must dodge his flying arms as she serves others in the crowded café, Quinones says the status of Mexican journalism still “replicates the top down society that has existed in Mexico since the Aztecs.” The Aztecs, the Catholics, the Spanish are “all a top down hierarchical tradition with an obedience to authority.” And the media, he says, obeys that tradition. “What they cover are people with money, power, good looks, athletic ability. You see nothing coherent, no stories about the lower 80 percent of Mexican society. The Mexican media still has not figured out the incredible gold mine of stories out there. No one writes in a coherent way about the vast Mexico. It’s like walking alone in a vast apple orchard picking apples.”

Indeed, Quinones book is filled with fascinating stories about the “vast Mexico,” material he sells not only to US outlets, but also in Mexico in competition with his Mexican colleagues.

Sam Quinones agrees that the print press is not as important as broadcast regarding communicating to and with that “vast Mexico.” He picks the tabloid *La Prensa* as the most influential paper for the masses because of its *New York Post*-like perpetual reminder to working class readers that “The deck is stacked against them.” He estimates *La Prensa*’s circulation at some 200,000, the widest of the nation’s dailies. “The papers are expensive. Five pesos. A huge section of Mexico cannot afford that.

“This is a country based on visuals,” he says, reminding me of the mural tradition. “People don’t read because the newspapers don’t write for them. It is a tedious task going through the newspapers.”

As a contrast, Quinones picks speech radio, information programming without listener input. “Radio has become more important because of talk radio. People on talk radio talk simple Spanish and they understand and explain issues. It’s not talk radio where people call up. It’s great stuff. You can listen to it and learn something.”⁸¹ He dates the development of talk radio to 1994 when President Zedillo changed long-standing PRI policy and announced that there would be no overt censorship of broadcast or print content. “It’s one of the bright spots of Mexican media.”

Mexican television disgusts him. “TV news is atrocious.

⁸¹There is listener call in radio all over Mexico. An example of they type of talk programming that appeals to Sam Quinones is one of the shows he listens to in Mexico City hosted by Jose Gutierrez-Vivo on 1110 AM.

Competition has not meant better. There’s nothing you can learn. Mexico has never had a great journalism tradition on TV. They don’t have a Frontline or a McNeil Lehrer or an Edward R. Murrow. It’s as if it were wall-to-wall Fox News. You just learn what happened that day on TV news. Nothing more.”

So enough complaining, Sam. What would you do if you were in a position to work to improve Mexican media?

“I think I might start by giving seminars on content,” says Quinones. He thinks seminars helping journalists learn how to talk to the reader who does not know everything about the background of a breaking story would be helpful, as would seminars teaching how to look for enterprise stories that deal with issues beyond the concerns of the elites of society. “I would not want to be a journalist in Mexico. It’s tedious, boring, and you’re poorly paid.” Until Mexico develops further economically, he doesn’t anticipate much change for the better in its journalism. Maybe he’s getting tired, but his comments become more caustic and cynical. “I don’t understand why people go into journalism in Mexico. They just go from one press conference to another.”

Mexico needs a freedom of information law, agrees Quinones. “Mexicans need to be able to go to the mayor and say, ‘I want to know how you spent the public works budget.’ That kind of transparency is needed. Instead, the campesino hangs his head and says, ‘Poor me. Who am I to go to the licenciado I voted for and ask for my street to be paved.’

“The Mexican media,” says Sam Quinones, “is not consumable.”

Of course that depends on who is holding the channel clicker. A few days later I was walking through the international concourse at Mexico City’s airport, past one of the restaurants. There Televisa was blasting its program *El Manañero*. In Mexican slang *manañero* refers to sex in the morning. On Televisa, *El Manañero* is one of its popular morning news programs. The anchorman is a clown named Brozo. When I say “clown” that’s not a pejorative editorial comment. Brozo really is a clown. He is on camera in a clown suit, with clown hair, and a big round plastic clown nose. With a gravely voice he reads the news and offers his own commentary. When Televisa advised its viewers of its schedule leading up to the Monterrey summit of world leaders recently, Brozo was on the list of news reporters providing the latest from the meetings. *El Manañero* was on the air in an Internet café I frequented on one of my trips south.

“You like him?” I asked the clerk.

“Sí,” he smiled.

“But he’s a comedian!”

“Sí,” was the reply again.

I asked if the clerk thought El Manañero's version of the news was credible.

"Ah, sí," he smiled.

In spring 2002, during a typical El Manañero show, Brozo listened as his news reporters briefed him on the status of the Palestinian uprising.

"It's like a *telenovela* [intense soap opera]," was Brozo's response, "ending up with *mole* [blood]." The use of the soap opera metaphor and the slang word *mole* are examples of the linguistic devices Brozo uses to relate to his audience and interpret serious, difficult themes with images from everyday life. "And it could be the end of the world!" He gesticulates wildly and looks down at his laptop and reads a critical email from a viewer named Fabián de la Gega.

"Oh, it's too bad you don't like the show," he says, "it's too bad you consider me repulsive. But I send you a big hug!"

He reads another, and looks at his sidekicks and the camera saying, "I can't believe that even men get into this." He begins to read the next email, "Oh," he quotes the writer, "you never answer my emails. *Ni modo* [What can I do, too bad, nothing to do about it], I guess I will continue to watch your show, but I am deeply disappointed. I thought you were different," Brozo feigns tears as he reads, "but you are like the others within the media."

All the players on the set laugh. Brozo looks with shock at the camera and says, "And he's a man! He's acting like a jealous woman."

Laughter again and Brozo says, "Bro! I send you greetings!"

After a commercial break, the program mocks presidential pensions, the botched delivery of license plates in Mexico City, conflicts within Fox's political party, and the Spanish king. Between each headline Brozo and the others sing *La Marcha Zacatecas*, a typical Mexican march used for parades across Mexico.

Brozo is Victor Trujillo, a comedian who started some 20 years ago playing in situation comedies. One of the characters was named Brozo, a play on Mexican slang. *Brosa* means the underclass masses. Bozo is, of course, the famous clown, popular in Mexico. Trujillo combined the two to make the full name, Brozo, *el Payaso Tenebroso*—Brozo, the Scary Clown. Originally he used the character to portray a vulgar underclass person who told fairy tales, but added social and political criticism.

In the mid-nineties he developed the character as a news anchor, and created a show for Canal 40, an independent cable television channel in Mexico City, which began to experiment with unorthodox news presentations during the Zedillo presidency. The unexpected popularity of Brozo and the El Manañero show made politicians, show business personalities, and other celebrities feel compelled to appear on his show. And it made the mainstream Televisa offer him a contract to jump to one of their channels where he reaches a wider

audience across Mexico.

Not all critics appreciate Brozo. Journalist John Ross says he "is so irritating, so loud, so stupid. It is stupidity at its lowest common denominator. It's so bad, it's embarrassing."

John Ross takes on politics

John Ross is a journalist who has been covering Mexico from Mexico for the last seventeen years. His client publications include *The Nation* and *Sierra* magazines, the *Los Angeles Weekly* and *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* newspapers, and he reports regularly on line through his own electronic journal, *México Bárbaro*.⁸² We did not remember meeting each other before the interview that follows,⁸³ but discovered after a few minutes that we both worked for the same radio station in San Francisco in the early 1970s, KSAN. The common past made for a comfortable evening, as we talked over dinner at the bright fluorescent-tube lit Cafe La Blanca, a working class eatery in Mexico City's old quarter, where Ross lives.

John Ross is well appreciated in Mexico. *La Jornada's* Blanche Petrich calls him, "the new John Reed covering a new Mexican revolution."

Laufer: From a distance, a lot of people look at a Mexico post Fox and consider that it's a society in positive transition, an emerging democracy, with a free press that is vibrant. You say otherwise, right?

Ross: I think it's probably the other way around. There was a developing free press in this country, and that's why Vicente Fox became the President, one of the reasons. I think it's really the other way around. Vicente Fox turned out to be a great disappointment. This guy's a marketer. He marketed his way into the presidency. He sold Coca Cola for sixteen years, and he's still selling Coca Cola, and few people believe him. There hasn't been really any major change in the press post-Fox. There is more accessibility to the Administration.

Laufer: But the corruption of the past, with the press on the payroll of the government, and the payroll of business, and those who might try not to be on those payrolls being under threat, or actual victims. What's the status of that?

Ross: I think in the provinces things are pretty much the same. Provincial reporters are not making any more money than they were making before, and that was always the cause of

⁸²nicadlw@earthlink.net.

⁸³The interview was conducted 25 April 2002.

- corruption. They have to sell advertising. That system of buying the press is still there.
- Laufer:* Don't you notice any improvement?
- Ross:* When Cárdenas [Cuautémoc Cárdenas] was elected mayor [of Mexico City], one of the things he did on the first day was to declare there would be no more envelopes. No one was getting their payoffs. And the press went to town on him. They ran him out of office. But I think it began to change during his administration.
- Laufer:* Change seems to be occurring at a different pace in the provinces.
- Ross:* I think you have to really make a distinction between what happens here in the capital and what happens in other parts of the country. Things may have changed here in the capital, but they haven't changed very much out in the countryside. People are still very much on the payroll. The press is still very much a tool of local politics. When I came here we were losing six and seven journalists a year some years. As late as '96 or '97 in Oaxaca, journalists were being kidnapped for attending press conferences of the EPR. Journalists were being threatened. It's still in the air, you know.
- Laufer:* It's still in the air, or it's still happening?
- Ross:* It's still in the air. I don't see it happening as much.
- Laufer:* What about pressure from the narcotics traffickers along the border, is that not resulting in danger and self-censorship?
- Ross:* It's pretty clear that's why Blancornelas [Jesús Blancornelas, co-director of the Tijuana newspaper *Zeta* who lost his partner and bodyguard to assassins and was shot himself] gets nailed. One thing I want to say about all these killings is that it's really important to understand that those figures weren't inflated. Yes, journalists died. But they didn't often die for their journalism. They often died because they were in some crooked thing. Or, I remember a guy from *La Monde Diplomatique*, who got killed over an apartment. You have to look at it case by case, you know. You look at fifty journalists, there's probably ten of them that were killed for political reasons.
- Laufer:* Ten is still too many, obviously.
- Ross:* Yeah, obviously.
- Laufer:* Despite all the crowded newsstands in this country, print is not reaching the bulk of the population.
- Ross:* The best selling paper in the country, *La Prensa*—that yellow rag—claims they sell 400,000 copies daily. I doubt that they sell 400,000, but that's 400,000 in a nation of a hundred million people.
- Laufer:* So where are those hundred million people getting their news?
- Ross:* Electronic media, obviously. Although, you know, the ten o'clock news programs are highly rated, what isn't looked at as much is radio.
- Laufer:* From everything that I've learned, if one ranks the media here, radio comes out way on top.
- Ross:* Yeah, people are listening to it all the time. Everywhere you go, they're listening to it. You hear it in the street. I have my radio pegged to Radio Red all the time. I use it like a police radio, to find out what's happening in Mexico City. I think radio is really important. And the electronic media will do anything for ratings. What you get is an incessant blast of yellow journalism.
- Laufer:* That sounds familiar, doesn't it?
- Ross:* Yeah, but the US is not yellow. It's just bland, dull, neutralized, and absolutely the most prejudiced and isolationist news in the world. But this stuff in Mexico is outright yellow journalism. On crime shows you're watching film that's slow mo'ed with spooky soundtracks. That's the way it works here, every single night.
- Laufer:* So if most of the people are getting their news from the radio, and it's sensationalized, then that would suggest that there ought to be some alternatives out there. For example, do you consider corridos a news source?
- Ross:* Here's a story. An old friend of mine in San Antonio, Texas—Salomé Gutierrez—has written 10,000 corridos. Salomé was in the studio recording a corrido band. I think it was '72, maybe '74, and a famous border *narco*, Fred Carasco, breaks out of jail downtown. There's a gunfight, three people are killed, Carasco was killed, and one of Salomé's neighbor's sees this, comes running out to the studio. Salomé's got the band. He sits down and he writes a corrido. They cut the corrido. In San Antonio, there are three stations that play corridos from dawn to dusk. They ran it over to one of these stations—and for most of the people in San Antonio, Salomé's corrido brought them the news of Fred Carasco's escape from prison.
- Laufer:* That the same day?
- Ross:* Yeah, oh yeah, in a matter of hours.
- Laufer:* An example of a corrido reporting breaking news.
- Ross:* Yeah, he's a quick study. The news of the

demise of Ramon [Arellano Félix],⁸⁴ I'm sure it's a corrido now, somewhere. Of course, it's illegal to play narcocorridos on the radio in Mexico.

Laufer: But that does not matter much, because then they're just blasted in the markets.

Ross: Yeah, people just sell the recordings; that's what's going on. The corridos are more of a traditional than an innovative way of getting the news out, I think.

Laufer: But continuing?

Ross: But continuing. The thing about Mexico is these things continue. I mean, no matter what you do, you can't obliterate tradition. That's the story of the country, you know.

Laufer: What other alternative news do you witness, that's either is traditional or innovative?

Ross: I think the whole NGO phenomenon is getting news out. It used to be Marcos [Subcommandante Marcos, the Zapatista leader] would write a communiqué and it might take a week for it to get published. He isn't writing communiqués any longer. But there's no way getting around it, that the Internet put the Zapatistas on the map, and in a real sense, has saved them time and time again. The Internet continues to provide a network of defense for their communities. If something happens on a Friday, by Saturday—even if the papers are not carrying it—you're going to see that show up on your screen, if you're part of that network. I think that's been a real product of the involvement of international NGOs in Chiapas. There's been a real small pirate radio movement. It comes and goes. During the PRI era, you took your life in your hand to do that. And you lost your transmitter all the time. Steve Dunnifer⁸⁵ was sending them down here by the dozens.

less demanded, by a wider public. Those who control the US-Mexico sector of the global media are not interested in my message. Resistance does not lure investment. Indians are poor consumers. Rebellion is bad for business.”

In his book *The Annexation of Mexico*,⁸⁶ John Ross assaults the corrupt Mexican media repeatedly, along with the Yankee influences that further manipulate it. “I have grown old chasing revolution in Mexico,” he writes, “but I haven't been bored. Although I usually get my story, most of what I write appears in alternative publications and special interest journals and not much is seen, much

⁸⁴The infamous Tijuana narcotics trafficker was killed by police the month before Ross and I spoke.

⁸⁵Low power pirate radio advocate Steven Dunnifer founded an unlicensed station in Berkeley, California, and was an early supporter of the Zapatistas' efforts to establish unlicensed radio stations in Chiapas.

⁸⁶Published in 1998 by Common Courage Press in Monroe, Maine.

Seductive Veracruz Radio Models

Radio Teocelo: A community supported anomaly

Imagine an idyllic Mexican village: quiet, bougainvillea-covered walls, a lazy church with dogs sleeping in the foyer, of course a perfect little plaza highlighted by a gazebo and dozing vendors peddling sweets. Birds singing in the lush trees and bushes. Welcome to Teocelo, Veracruz, home to Radio Teocelo, the only licensed, community-supported radio station in Mexico.

looking women announcers with machine gun-like intensive deliveries introduce one short disaster story after another, culled from around the world. Siamese twins in El Salvador. A gas station inferno in Sacramento. Prostitutes whipped by out of control Oklahoma police. All were illustrated with lurid and graphic video and complemented with the closing story about calendar pinups, again with video leaving little to the imagination. “¡Con poquísimas ropa!” promised one of the announcers in the tease. But surprise! The pinups are transgender. All this was followed by a tedious public affairs show on the same channel—Megacable Xalapa—endless talking heads pontificating.

Radio Teocelo⁸⁷ is up on a hill at the edge of the

Radio XEYT, Teocelo, Veracruz.

But before we get to Radio Teocelo, a few media notes from the road trip to Veracruz from Mexico City.

On the *autopista* through Puebla state, travelers are welcomed by giant billboards along the side of the road, adorned with pictures of serious-looking cops announcing the end of the mordida in Puebla.

The government of Veracruz is running TV spots attesting to its new transparency. These are clever ads, using images of a store window being washed clean.

In the hotel room, the TV flickers with the show *Rojo Vivo*, a service of Telemundo Internacional. Two swell-

village, at the transmitter and antenna site. This is coffee country, and when I arrived, the station’s director for the last 18 years, Elfego Riveros Hernández, was about to go on the air with his regular coffee public affairs show. The show is scheduled to start at 10:30 in the morning. It was 10:20 when we started talking. He was relaxed, intense,

⁸⁷Radio Teocelo is easily available via email at radio-teo@prodigy.net.mx. Don't expect a speedy answer. They only have one line and one computer that can handle their email traffic.

focused on our conversation.

“The radio station was founded 38 years ago in order to offer a medium of communications to the coffee community here in the central zone of Veracruz state,” he told me in his crowded little office, “in order to provide information and education and culture.” He smiled. “The experience has been successful, despite that the radio and communication law seems to be against this kind of effort. The law favors the commercial electronic media, which accounts for 95 percent out of 2500 stations operating in Mexico. Only five percent are public, operated by the state, universities, or the INI.”

Thirty-eight years ago the founders of the station discovered a loophole in the telecommunications law and obtained their license. The government responded by changing the law, preventing other community groups from establishing independent non-commercial stations from obtaining licenses. Only stations associated with a university, INI, or a religious organization are allowed non-commercial licenses under current rules. Radio Teocelo is the only exception.

“It is the only one operated by an independent civil society group and recognized by the government with a license,” Elfego Riveros Hernández says with satisfaction. “It is supported by volunteer workers and donations by the listeners. That is the key [to its success].”

Without any commercials? I ask.

“Without commercials, without government subsidies, and without foundation support.”

Where does the money come from? I ask.

“The resources we get come from the listeners who send in donations because they are convinced of the value of our project. They support it economically. There are groups, organizations, and municipalities, and Catholic parishes that have time on the station and they collaborate financially with the station. The rest is voluntary work.”

The station is on the air 14 hours a day, 365 days a year. And by this time in our conversation, my radio mentality won’t allow me to keep my eyes off the clock. It’s 10:29:30, thirty seconds to airtime. I can’t keep quiet about it, and I say, “We can talk more later, after your program,” and I point to the clock.

Elfego Riveros Hernández waves his hand, dismissing the time, and keeps explaining his station.

“Obviously there are material needs, and equipment we cannot afford with our small budget. That’s why we have to ask for help from foundations for such projects as obtaining a new transmitter. We look for donations from universities to get new equipment for the studio. We knock on all these doors. Our media labor never stops.”

But it is enough? I ask.

“More or less sufficient, not quite. We would like more money in order to solve needs that you can immediately notice here, just walking through the radio station.” He’s right. Everything looks like the Mick Jagger song about that girl in Bakersfield: a little weary, and a little worse for

the wear and tear. “But the most important thing is that we have a captive audience which is paying attention to the station. They cooperate with the station according to their possibilities. There is a group of volunteers who are always here working.”

By now he’s a couple of minutes late for his show and completely unconcerned. So I ask him the station’s reach.

“Thirty-five kilometers in twelve municipalities. We are talking about 350,000 people.”

And what percent listens?

“About 85 percent, because it is a captive audience. All the information and music is linked to their everyday life, which national media lack. They broadcast music our listeners don’t like or release information, which has nothing to do with their daily life. That’s what this station does here. That’s why people of this area are stuck to their radio.”

It’s more or less ideal, I offer.

“Of course!”

So why is it the only radio station of this type in the country?

“Because the Federal radio and television law does not include a model like this. Therefore we, during these 38 years, have developed this model. We want this model to be included when the new law is passed. We are participating in the dialogue debating the details of the reform of the electronic media. We are proposing to have a third type of radio license in Mexico which is different to what is considered private and public: radio operated by the third sector, the nonprofit one, by civil society organizations for community development.”

There have been no problems in these 38 years?

“Of course there have been. They closed us down for eight months in 1998.”

Why?

“Allegedly for problems with our official paperwork. But the listeners responded in such an elegant way—with signatures, mail, ads in the newspapers, demonstrations—that the government had no other choice but to allow us to reopen. Since then we have had no problems. Our license is valid. The new government has allowed us to remain on the air. But besides for us to be alive, we want the law to include a new model, just like us, so that in any part of the republic it would be possible to set up and operate a radio station like this. Such a station is good for development, democracy, environmental preservation, sexual equality, all these positive things.”

By now it’s 10:34 and Elfego Riveros Hernández finally gets up from his chair and invites me to join him in the studio. Music is filling the time. He pushes open the homemade double glass soundproof door that doesn’t close completely without a noisy shove. A colleague offers me a cup of local coffee to sip as I watch and listen to the program. It’s a serious discussion of international coffee issues, ad-libbed and professional, with a local expert and activist as a guest.

The studio is filled with stacks and stacks of reel-to-reel

tapes. I check out the engineer's booth on the other side of the glass window: LPs, cart machines, reel-to-reel tape recorders, an ancient mixing board. Radio Teocelo probably could find a collector on EBay to buy these museums pieces and use the income to pay for a digital replacement. Just a few miles down the road, in the Veracruz capital Xalapa at the well-financed University radio station, the courtyard is filled with antique radio equipment displayed in glass cases as novelties.

The engineer plays the show's theme song, "Crisis de Café," for an interlude. The guest explains how import the media—especially a sympathetic outlet such as Radio Teocelo—are to spreading the word about problems in the coffee growing region.

The show is scheduled to end at 11 a.m. Eleven comes and goes, the discussion continues, with no concern for "straight up." Finally, at 11:07, Elfego Riveros Hernández says, "Hasta la proxima." ¡Ah, *tiempo mexicano!*

After his show, Elfego Riveros Hernández tells me, "We want to modernize. We want to improve. We need to get training." And he emphasizes, "We want to reproduce this model nationwide."

As I drive back to Xalapa, I listen to the station as the show following Elfego Riveros Hernández's alternates very personal messages from listeners to each other with music: John Lennon, The Grateful Dead, and a schmaltzy rendition of "Only You"—but in Spanish. "Solo tu..." blasts out of my car radio as I pass through the tropical countryside, past waterfalls down roadside cliffs, roads lined by trees ripe with bananas.

Two hundred radical women on the radio with eighty stations and growing

Back in 1997, Mayela García Ramírez left her regular work at Radio Teocelo ("I love that station!") and founded CIDEM, Colectivo de Investigación, Desarrollo y Educación entre Mujeres.⁸⁸ The organization's goal from the start was to produce radio programs dealing with women's issues. The programs are tailor made for the distinct types of radio stations on the air in Mexico: indigenous, university, government, and commercial. Most of the programs run about half an hour. They are carried on some 80 different stations. About two hundred women across Mexico work on the project.

CIDEM is headquartered in Xalapa. I met with Mayela García Ramírez in a graceful downtown restaurant; we ate lunch overlooking a tropical paradise city park.

The programs produced by the group fall into four basic categories: citizenship issues, health and sexual rights, environmental issues, and violence and human rights.

CIDEM uses its national reach to negotiate for station clearances of its programs. Currently the tightly produced programs are heard in 24 of the Mexican states, with efforts underway to expand to all states. Mayela García Ramírez says the group hopes to expand to about 600 producing members nationwide. In addition to the programs produced, the group offers training in radio production techniques and organizes periodic conventions to promote networking amongst Mexican women.

"We use radio to promote social goals," explains Mayela García Ramírez. "In places where it is difficult for people to receive radio signals, or where many people cannot afford radios, we use public meetings." Meetings are organized for people who wish to gather together in a public place and listen to the CIDEM radio programs played over a tape machine.

No surprise this: Mayela García Ramírez believes radio is the most important medium in Mexico. I asked her why and she quickly ticked off reasons quickly:

- Few people in the country read.
- Radio is much less expensive to produce than newspapers or TV.
- There are many regions in the country with no newspaper circulation.
- There are very few high quality regional newspapers.
- Television sets are expensive.

As is usually the case with such a do-gooder organization, CIDEM suffers perpetual financial crises. Currently operating on an annual budget of \$50,000US, the group figures it needs twice that to develop appropriate efficiency. "That's not much money," Mayela García Ramírez correctly points out, considering the footprint of the products produced. Although there are no official audience survey figures to cite, she figures her work enjoys an audience of some 10,000 weekly at the 80 stations.

After our meeting, I sent an email to Carmen Landa at the US Embassy, thanking her for the introduction to this motivated colleague. "She is one of my favorites in the world," Landa wrote back. "I think she has a lot of potential, only needs some \$\$\$ and more contacts."

⁸⁸cidem@infosel.net.mx

Back to Chiapas

The Zapatistas' lawyer

San Cristóbal de Las Casas is a slow two-hour propeller plane ride over the mountains south from Mexico City. As the plane descends toward the new airport (until a few years ago all San Cristóbal-bound traffic was routed through the Chiapas political capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal is the cultural capital and headquarters for most NGOs and news gatherers), the Mayan Highlands are close enough to view the poverty of the villages: ramshackle housing, humans as cargo bearers.

San Cristóbal is idyllic Mexico. The town square features a two-story gazebo. The evening I first arrived it was filled with the final fiesta of a week of Easter partying, this one dedicated to peace, as hope continued that Fox and Marcos would become the “amigos” Fox called them, and that the indigenous rights bill pending in the Congress would be passed and prove satisfactory to the Zapatistas (it was passed, it was not satisfactory). But that first night was reminiscent of the Ambrose Bierce line, “Ah, to be a gringo in Mexico, that is euthanasia.” A marimba band filled the zócalo with a mood suggesting the Buena Vista Social Club, couples were hugging and kissing, kids were playing, the swell smell of foods that I probably shouldn't eat filled the square.

This is the city Marcos and the Zapatistas took from the Mexican military in the surprise attack in 1994 that started the current incarnation of a conflict that goes back to the Conquest. The second part of San Cristóbal's name honors Las Casas, the first bishop of San Cristóbal and an early activist for indigenous rights who wrote and spoke actively against the oppression of the Spanish conquerors.

A year after my initial studies of Mexican media in Chiapas, I returned to this southernmost Mexican state to inspect its status. As I expected, although the shooting war did not resume during my absence, the problems that instigated the Zapatista rebellion remain: endemic poverty, prejudice against the indigenous population, ludicrous wealth distribution, land rights disputes—problems that date back to the Spanish conquest.

I start with a visit to Amado Avendaño, at his modest house on the fringes of the old colonial capital. Lawyer Avendaño was spokesman for Subcommandante Marcos when the Zapatistas first emerged from the jungle and briefly occupied San Cristóbal. He ran for governor of Chiapas as the Zapatista candidate and insists he won, that the election was stolen from him. Prominent in his study is his photograph, wearing the governor's sash of office, he was seated in office in an alternative inauguration by his Zapatista supporters.

Avendaño is still publishing *La Fota*, his left-leaning

one-sheet daily newspaper, distributing about 800 copies around the state each day, most of them in San Cristóbal. Another large picture of him, this one in conversation with Marcos, hangs over the fireplace. Books are everywhere. His younger face stares out from a framed diploma celebrating his long ago earned law degree. A globe and a Mexican flag accent the decor. He's a charismatic character, telling jokes, laughing. The year before, he had dismissed the importance of the printed press in Chiapas. “Culture advances very slowly,” he said, “and campesinos are at the bottom of society. Radio currently is only a little help. Radio needs electricity and even new batteries are difficult to come by. Very few people read papers. The majority listen to the radio—in cars, while they work.”

I asked about the quality of radio and he laughed. “It is a conspiracy of the government and the radio broadcasters.” He quoted an article of the Constitution that allows anyone to establish a newspaper, “but radio requires permission. The government gives permission. If you behave properly you get permission. If you misbehave, no.”

The law, he said, gives existing radio station owners veto power over new license applications if they fear the competition will injure their businesses. It is a replacement of that law that is being debated in the Mexican Congress at this writing in 2002. Applicants for new licenses in San Cristóbal have been told no, because radio already exists in the city (one government station, and an AM and an FM private station both owned by the same concern). “Monopolists,” he said with disgust about the radio business, calling the law that allows for a veto of applications from existing owners “idiotic law.” There is an appetite and a need for new radio in Chiapas, he asserted. He has drafted law changes for “after the triumph of the revolution” that mandate establishment of local radio stations in all municipalities. “They are a dream,” he told me smiling.

One year later he is still smiling and dreaming. “The people don't know how to read,” he underscored at our second meeting, pointing out that the problems of the year before remain. They understand the symbols,” he points to letters on a printed page, “but they are not cultured enough to understand the meaning. They don't understand and know anything about the world.”

He quotes his analysis of circulation figures, saying *La Jornada* sells about 80 papers a day in San Cristóbal, and only 20 in Tuxtla. The immediate answer, he reiterates, for transferring information to most people in Chiapas is the spoken word. “It's much easier to watch TV or listen to the radio than to read newspapers.” But he acknowledges that just because the radio is tuned in doesn't mean that people are listening to anything more than pop music. “People listen to radio, and they can get news. But they don't listen to the news.”

That is a sad commentary of affairs, I suggest.

“But it is reality,” he snaps back, dismissing most of the

news on the commercial radio as “nota roja”—crime news.

Carlos Monsiváis writes that “red news” are “conversation pieces which become joyous proof that the reader...is still alive, free, and more or less intact.”⁸⁹ It is similar to the formula that I heard in Lantana, Florida when I applied for work at the *National Enquirer* many years ago. There they told me every story in the paper was supposed to make the reader wish he were the person profiled or glad he wasn’t. Monsiváis sums up the value of “nota roja” for the reader with this imagined line of a reader retelling a crime story: “I’ll give you the details of what didn’t happen to me.”

A group of writers and artists, including Carlos Monsiváis, created the *Colectivo de Artistas y Intelectuales* during the period shortly after the armed Zapatista conflict with the Mexican Army. The artists and intellectuals made the trek to Chiapas to help write the San Andres Accords, the initial paperwork designed to bring peace and justice to the state. Monsiváis was involved in those negotiations.

On government owned and operated Chiapas stations, says Amado Avendaño, the problem is not “nota roja,” but a dearth of local news. Because of budget cuts the stations are producing little of their own news programming, instead buying inexpensive material from foreign broadcasters. “We get the news from and about France,” he says, “but not from and about Chiapas.”

The revisionist new Bishop

One of the independent sources of news and information I encountered on my first trip to Chiapas is no longer operating. Veronica Melgoza, a Chiapas media expert that Deborah Mendelsohn met at Harvard during a Women Waging Peace meeting in 2000, had been employed at the Catholic Diocese, producing Radio Diócesis “La Voz de mi Pueblo,” a radio-style program that contained news and features. It was duplicated onto cassettes, an edition produced every two months, running 40 minutes. About 300 copies were created of each edition. A team she called “Promotores y Promotoras” carried the cassettes out to the local community churches. These vendors were not really promoters in the American English sense of the word as it relates to the radio business. They were instructed to sell the cassettes for five to ten pesos (fifty cents to a dollar), just to insure that there was a perceived value to the work. But their job was also to generate discussions about the issues raised on the programs in the small groups that sat around tape players listening to these news programs, and to cull information from the villages for the next edition of the show. Melgoza had been in Chiapas for five years and summed up the media problems with these three words:

disinformation, misinformation, manipulation. For radio, she added the mountains for creating transmission obstacles.

“La Voz de mi Pueblo” has been cancelled by the new bishop assigned to San Cristóbal, Veronica Melgoza no longer works for the Diocese (in fact she was hired by Internews to help with this report), and in the intervening year she married former priest Felipe Toussaint.⁹⁰ Toussaint had been number two in the Diocese, right hand man to the former bishop Samuel Ruíz. Forty years, until his retirement two years ago, Ruíz had been Bishop in Chiapas, practicing liberation theology, trying to use the church to help solve some of the 500-year-old problems of the region.

The ex-priest

Over breakfast at the elegant Casavieja Hotel, headquarters for many of the NGOs working in Chiapas, Toussaint talked about the changes in the diocese since he left the priesthood. He worked as a priest all over Chiapas for fifteen years, specializing in ministering to the indigenous population. Our conversation was interrupted as he greeted acquaintances from Oxfam, and friends from another human rights organization. One of the biggest changes in the last two years, he says, is the diocese position on birth control. “People have a right to make a choice, that is Catholic doctrine,” says Toussaint. “The current bishop follows the Pope. Whatever the Pope says, he agrees. He takes the Pope’s words and repeats them. He says, ‘You want to know how I think? Just read the Pope’s words.’ This new bishop does not respect the people’s choices.”

According to Felipe Toussaint, the birth control issue is especially a crisis in the indigenous communities where the high birth rate creates a doubling of the population every ten years. These indigenous communities are predisposed to rejecting birth control, not only for religious reasons. They see social value in growing their populations because they believe—perhaps correctly—that greater numbers empower their communities within the overall Chiapas and Mexican population. They see economic value in making babies, because they can use the extra children for work. Throughout the Chiapas mountains the child as a beast of burden is iconic: little boys and girls who ought to be in grade school classrooms instead walking alongside the roads, hauling extreme loads of firewood on their backs, secured by sashes across their foreheads.

The new bishop is traditional, says Toussaint, basing his work on the Pope’s words and Catholic theory. “On birth control he has one position and he won’t change. I

⁸⁹From his book *Mexican Postcards*, published in English by Verso in 2000.

⁹⁰The diocese communications office she worked for under Bishop Ruíz has been reduced to a secretarial job, all the media professionals employed by Bishop Ruíz left.

do not understand how people—especially young people in the cities—listen to this bishop.” In fact, he says, “I don’t think young people listen. I think they have a double morality.” By that he means they pretend to accept the bishop’s rule in public while acting in opposition to it in private.

The government provides sex education regarding condom use in high schools. The church offers a simple contradiction. “The bishop says, ‘No! Never!’” reports Toussaint, listing the conflicting messages of state, church, and media. “The popular media shows you should enjoy your sexuality. Sex is open on TV and influences people.”

Although “La Voz de mi Pueblo” is no longer produced by the diocese, the new bishop does make some use of the secular media. His weekly sermon is published in *Cuadro Poder, Expresso*, and *Diario de Chiapas*, three of the mainstream daily newspapers, and it is excerpted in others. The church-owned monthly, *El Caminante*, is used to circulate his messages.⁹¹ The bishop makes no regular appearances on radio or TV in Chiapas—except for traditional words on holidays such as Christmas and Easter—but there is an informal opportunity for reporters to try to draw a usable quote out of the bishop after noontime mass on Sundays, when he may agree to chat about pending issues and offer his reactions.

Individual interviews are more difficult to orchestrate, as I know from personal experience. I called the bishop and asked him for a few minutes of his time to discuss the status of affairs in his diocese. He hung up on me twice.

The local commercial radio station in San Cristóbal, XEWM Radio 640, is airing some of the controversy created by the new bishop. For example, a representative of the group called “Catholics for Free Choice,” Adela Bonilla, announced on XEWM that she and the group oppose the bishop’s position against birth control. The bishop responded on the station, “Those women are not Catholic.”

“I think the bishops are afraid of the media,” says Felipe Toussaint, “because it is very aggressive. I think they could have more influence, but they don’t know that so they don’t exert it.”

The bishops apparently could use some media training themselves. “In many cases the bishops do not know how to speak with the media. They lack training and experience.” As an example, Toussaint points to the current pedophilia scandal. In response to questioning, the president of the Mexican bishops conference tried to dismiss reporters,

As I wandered from one NGO to another in Chiapas, I heard a refrain of complaint that Chiapas is no longer a “flavor of the month” for world do-gooders. September 11 sent many of them packing.

Chiapas is no longer the flavor of the month

saying, “I have a right not to talk about it. Ask me about other things.”

The new bishop in San Cristóbal makes it difficult to ask about other things. I placed a call to him in an attempt to make an appointment to chat with him after his midday Sunday mass. That is the period of time he traditionally takes questions from news reporters and rather than surprise him and hope to catch him for a few questions, I called with the plan to make a specific appointment. I called Saturday evening at his home on a number commonly known by Chiapas journalists. When he answered the phone I suggested the Sunday appointment, mentioning that I was aware of his upcoming travel schedule to leave San Cristóbal Monday, so making the appointment for Sunday afternoon was our only mutual opportunity for a meeting during my trip. I used my most polite Spanish.

I was met with an annoyed, “Call me at my office number.” When I pointed out that the office was not open until Monday when he would be on the road, that his schedule called for a week of travel, he said, “¡Buenas noches!” and hung up the phone. I called back, started to repeat my pitch, and was interrupted with another curt, “Buenas noches,” and the line went dead.

It was first hand experience for me that the church is indeed avoiding journalists.

Anecdotal evidence continues to show that plenty of people in Chiapas avoid the work of journalists. Often I start my San Cristóbal day in the coffee house on the first floor of the zócalo’s historic gazebo. It’s an ideal place for a *café con leche* and a fresh orange juice, a vantage point to watch the city wake. Likely as not, despite the plethora of newsstands selling a wide variety of papers, no one joining me at the coffee house is reading a paper. Likely as not, despite the wide variety of morning news-oriented TV shows available in San Cristóbal, the annoying TV in the coffee house is blaring a B movie or TV show from Hollywood, dubbed into Spanish.

s I wandered from one NGO to another in Chiapas, I heard a refrain of complaint that Chiapas is no longer a “flavor of the month” for world do-gooders. September 11 sent many of them packing to Afghanistan and Pakistan, others are setting up camp between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Many of those concerned with Latin America see their priorities in Colombia. Immediately after the Zapatista shootout with the Mexican Army, Chiapas was inundated with help from around the world. In fact, the Mexican government was so disconcerted from the presence of so many Zapatista sympathizers, President Zedillo attempted to cleanse Chiapas of both foreign journalists and foreign

⁹¹The diocese also operates an Internet site at www.laneta.apc.org/curiasc and sends out announcements to an email list.

NGO help as part of his assault on the insurgency.

One of those now-cash-strapped local NGOs is the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas,⁹² created by the Catholic Diocese under Bishop Samuel Ruíz, and now operated as an independent organization. In a converted house several blocks from the historic San Cristóbal downtown, the center keeps track of human rights violations and tries to inform the populace about rights guaranteed to them by the Mexican Constitution. They produce videos, magazines, operate a Web site, and ship communiqués to an email list. One of their goals is to inform the international community about human rights violations. They try to use their Web site for rapid response to breaking news stories. The group communicates with local media via news releases and prints posters for distribution throughout Chiapas. Since September 11 the center has cut some six staff members due to lack of funds.

As we sit in the waiting room, Veronica Melgoza says one of the reasons foreign aid money is disappearing from Chiapas is because President Fox is telling the world that the state no longer needs outside help, that Mexican investors and government projects are fulfilling the local needs. "Not true," says Melgoza, adding "and we don't have peace here."

The director of the center agrees with her. "We see no change in the daily life regarding the human rights situation in Chiapas," says Marina Patricia Jiménez. "We're losing financing, but the problems are continuing." Meanwhile the dialogue between the government and the Zapatistas is on hiatus. "We believe the theme of human rights is basic and should not suffer because of the economic situation." She says the group is trying to adjust to this new reality. It is necessary to look for other funding sources and other methods of operating. It's a critical moment."

We moved from the director's office to the communication room: stacks of newspapers, computers, a wall map of Chiapas filled with colored pins marking the areas where the center works. There we met the center's assistant director, Michael Chamberlin, who was born in California, raised in Mexico. Despite the vast popularity of radio in Mexico, he tells us the center primarily targets the print media for its news releases. "We were documenting torture," he says providing an example of their work and their frustrations, "and the government said we were lying. That was published in *La Jornada*. We sent a reply and our reply was not published." He blames that failure on the close relationship between the governor in Chiapas and the owner of *La Jornada*. "We're trying to become a source of news for Chiapas, both for the people and the press. We need help getting our bulletins into the media."

Another Chiapas NGO is the women's organization Colectivo de Mujeres, Marisa Zepeda is one of the

directors. The group produces radio programs, which formerly were aired on Chiapas government radio stations. Of late these stations have refused to air the programs, citing the quality of production, the use of language, and the choice of themes as reasons for rejection. The Colectivo de Mujeres makes use of the new unlicensed frequency broadcasting in San Cristóbal as an alternative outlet for its weekly half hour pre-produced recorded program, which is followed by an hour and a half of live discussion with listeners who call in to the station. Colectivo de Mujeres programming still runs twice a week on the San Cristóbal commercial station XEWM, but the airtime available to them has been reduced since the station cut its overall news time in favor of more commercial programming.

The work done by the Colectivo de Mujeres deals explicitly with women's and sexual issues. "Our programs," says Marisa Zepeda, "are designed to counter words of the new bishop, such as, 'those using condoms are assassins.'"

Regarding audience, Marisa Zepeda hopes that in addition to women, men are listening, "because the point of our work is to transform relations between men and women." She is convinced that taxi drivers listen, if only because they use talk radio to fight boredom. There are no ratings to consult. The group considered keeping a record of those listeners who call the show but decided against the idea. "It would be an imposition on privacy," she says. In fact, if a listener does not want to go on the air, the producers will take their question off the air and the announcer will read it in order to preserve privacy.

Radio, TV, newspapers, the Internet...all the traditional media can be found in Chiapas. But there are alternative media players that perform critical services to the community. Mornings a man jogs the streets of San Cristóbal, for example, banging a cowbell as he runs. He is the advance warning of the coming garbage truck, advising residents to bring their trash to the street if they want it picked up that day. In a similar fashion, propane delivery trucks prowl the streets of San Cristóbal, trailing a chain on which metal discs are strung. These discs drag on the streets' paving stones, creating a clatter as the truck advances through the city, both warning of the potentially explosive truck and alerting neighbors that if they need gas they must flag down the delivery hombres. Along with the garbage and propane, the potable water trucks cruise. There are two competing water companies. Both advertise their approach and their wares with tape-recorded messages blasting out of loudspeakers mounted on the trucks. In addition to a persistent male voice yelling, "Aqua purísima," one of the companies is experimenting with a soothing female announcer. And a specific curiosity of San Cristóbal communications is the tradition of private homemakers creating tamales for sale to the general public on Saturdays. Those private houses with tamales available make their offer known by signaling with a red light at the front door. How many ill informed

⁹²Web site: www.laneta.apc.org/cdhbcasas/index.htm

tourists approached the red lights expecting other wares available than simple tamales is not recorded.

Another form of alternative audio media is present at street fairs, some organized by the government, others by religious and other private organizations. An example of such a media outlet was a health care fair staged in the village Bethania in Chiapas. Just a few miles outside of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Bethania is home to displaced Protestants from nearby Chamula. When these people converted from the hybrid Catholicism practiced in Chamula, they were ordered out of the village. As they rebuild their lives in their new quarters, they were attacked on the commercial strip along the main highway by loudspeakers blaring music and offering health care information in Spanish and Tslotlic. They were directed to information booths with more specific information. Colorful banners, food and drink, all added to the festive atmosphere and helped draw the audience for the main event: news about health care. It also provided for cross-pollination of causes. One of the announcers wore a t-shirt, decidedly not government-issued, advertising his favorite radio station: It screamed, “102.7 FM Glorificando a Dios!”

About an hour down the highway, in the last main city before the Guatemala border, Comitán, a local commercial radio station is blasting its programming—popular music—from loudspeakers in the zócalo. A small group of teenagers gather to listen; an ice cream vendor provides them with refreshment from his cart. At a video arcade, teenagers are sweating on the Dance Dance Revolution machine, working out to the latest hits from El Norte, the lyrics still another form of news consumption. In front of the arcades open doors, out on the sidewalk, little kids mimic the dance steps of their elders, learning the rituals of the global pop community.

An INI radio station success story

Up a slow winding road from Comitán is the village Las Margaritas, home to the INI radio station XEVFS, La Voz de la Frontera Sur. A burro chews scrub in the yard in front of the station, located at the tower site just out of town on a rutted dirt road. XEVFS broadcasts in four indigenous languages (Mam, Tojolabal, Tselal, and Tsozil), plus Spanish. Unlike the INI station studied in Michoacán,

XEVFS—founded in 1986—appears well funded: the infrastructure is up-to-date; the place is well maintained.

We're greeted by Náyade Rodriques,⁹³ the executive producer. A young, smiling woman, full of energy, she proudly tours us around the facilities. She is fast talking, always gesturing with her hands, her “Year of the dragon” t-shirt covered with an open sweatshirt, a Camel filter almost always lit in her hand. She points to the receptionist, hard at work over an ageing manual typewriter. “This is the most important place in the

An announcer from 102.7 FM (San Cristobal) at a health fair in rural Chiapas

⁹³Náyade Rodriques is available at nayader@yahoo.com.mx, the radio station's general email address is xuxepil@yahoo.com.mx.

station,” she says, “because listeners come in and dictate notices to family and friends.” These are then brought to the announcers who read them regularly throughout the day between music and news stories. The station is literally The Voice of the Southern Frontier.

Licensed to transmit with 5,000 watts of power, the management winks at the rules and regulations and tell us they regularly crank the transmitter up to 10,000 watts. The station employs one news reporter who goes out into the field with a tape recorder, gathering sound and information. The stories he reports are translated into the various idioms of the audience and native speakers read the copy over the air. XEVFS has organized and makes use of an informal and volunteer cadre of some 167 teachers, one in each of the schools of the region, as news informants. There is an agreement to use the teachers between INI and the Comisión Nacional de Fomento Educación, a unit of the education ministry, and to train the teachers as reporters.

Náyade Rodriques takes us to the station library, filled with shelves of reel-to-reel tapes. “This is our primary objective,” she says pointing to the hundreds and hundreds of boxes of tapes, “to go out into the field and record the indigenous music and the oral stories of the people.” Eighty percent of the station’s programming is music, most of that indigenous. Twenty percent is news and information.

Station Director
Leonardo

Martinez⁹⁴ confirms to us that his operation has been able to secure adequate funding from INI and that the equipment serves its needs. He is a self-assured young man, clearly enjoying his job, in button-down collegiate shirt, all but chain-smoking Camels. He and Náyade Rodriques are the only non-indigenous employees, and although I did not ask, I would guess from their body language (especially as they drove off later in his big red pickup truck) that they are personally involved after hours. He’s been at XEVFS for four years, she for three. He says each INI station lobbies for its budget and that XEVFS has been more successful at gaining funds than some of the other stations. In past, the stations operated completely independently, but he says that is changing as the directors realize the value of sharing with and learning from each other. “The directors now meet and confer,” he says. “There is an exchange of information, personnel, and training since 2000.”

INI, we learn, is in the process of transition—as is so much in Mexico. Whatever the Fox-era INI becomes will affect the INI radio stations. As part of the coming reorganization, the XEVFS staff is consulting the indigenous community, trying to learn what they want

from the station, and adding that information to the overall INI study. In the fall of 2001, Fox and state governors discussed the possibility of transferring INI stations to state government jurisdiction, an idea so far rejected in the current study. There is no consideration of turning the stations over to local indigenous ownership and operation, in part because the stations serve multiple tribal constituencies. Conflict over ownership and programming would be a likely concern if indigenous ownership were to be attempted. “What is important is the message, not who owns the equipment,” says Martinez. Most of the directors of INI stations are not indigenous Mexicans, but the overall director of all the INI stations is. There is no deadline for conclusion of the discussions of the future for INI and its stations.

Náyade Rodriques and Leonardo Martinez suggest that mestizo Mexicans such as themselves end up as directors and producers because they have radio experience and local indigenous people do not. “Perhaps, clearly, we should work to replace ourselves with indigenous managers,” says Martinez with an easy smile. But he says, “We are not doing the work in reality. As directors we take care of administration and liaison, not programming.” The on-air workers are locals. “I don’t make radio,” he says.

So far, the station has not suffered layoffs due to budget cuts such as the INI station in Michoacán complained about. Its original business plan called for a staff of 18, but the staff has stayed at ten for the last ten years due to budget restrictions.

One staff position they do not have the money to fill is for a trainer.

There are no official ratings of number of listeners or the audience demographic make up. But Leonardo Martinez is convinced that most of the indigenous population living within the sound of the station wake up to its music and news. He lists the reasons for his confidence:

- The station broadcasts in indigenous languages.
- It plays indigenous music.
- It airs no interrupting commercials.
- It airs participatory cultural programs.
- Its news is very local.

The station strives to interact with the community and hence it offers an opportunity for listeners to personally relate to the station as a part of their lives. Station personnel develop that bond by their personal contact with the audience. “It’s much more personal than other radio stations,” he says, pointing out the receptionist busy with another visiting listener, typing out a message that will be read in minutes over the air.

⁹⁴Leonardo Martinez is available at leonmart@msn.com.

She talks of houses made of plastic sheeting with no electric lights, homes that nonetheless include a battery operated radio because XEVFS is of such critical important to the natives.

Náyade Rodriques tells the story of indigenous people riding in little trucks across Chiapas for hours to deliver information for notices to be read over the air. She talks of houses made of plastic sheeting with no electric lights, homes that nonetheless include a battery operated radio because XEVFS is of such critical important to the natives.

“No other radio station has these characteristics,” says Leonardo Martinez proudly. “We don’t work for a radio institution, we work for an indigenous institution,” he says about his ultimate employer, INI. XEVFS must not only comply with the telecommunications laws, but also fulfill the goals of the INI.

and northern Guatemala, to join for music, food, dance, and various ceremonies. Leonardo Martinez was smiling as he suggested the party was an example of the good work of the radio station bringing people together. In the next breath he expressed frustration with the INI bureaucracy. Then he climbed into that red pickup with Náyade Rodriques and drove off to the highway—past scrawny cows with ribs showing, kids smashing tin cans for scrap metal in the middle of the dirt street—the two of them clearly content with their work and pleased to operate with so much autonomy, far from the INI central office.

For a 1987 report to the Rockefeller Foundation,

“La Voz de la Frontera Sur” Radio XEVFS Las Margaritas, Chiapas.

What is not allowed on the radio station? I ask. “Everything is allowed,” says Martinez. “We do not censor,” and he reports that the station transmitted the debate in Congress regarding the new Mexican indigenous rights law. Do you self-censor at all, I ask, to minimize your problems with INI and the local community? “Sure,” he answered freely, “a little.” And Náyade Rodriques held up her thumb and forefinger close together, “a little.”

We said goodbye in the field in front of the station, where a stage was being prepared for the fifteenth anniversary party of XEVFS that coming weekend. Listeners were expected from all over southern Chiapas

Alfonso Gumucio Dragon cited XEVFS. He quoted an audience sample conducted by Inés Cornejo Portugal and Silvia Luna. Villagers were asked, “What do you use the radio for?” One answer was, “We use the radio for not walking. Before we couldn’t find out what was going on in other villages, for example if there were problems or they were celebrating festivals, we didn’t find out because we had no radio.”⁹⁵

⁹⁵A study of the INI stations was conducted by Lucila Vargas for her 1995 book, Social Uses and Radio Practices: The Use of Participatory Radio by Ethnic Minorities in Mexico, published by Westview Press.

On our return trip to San Cristóbal, we stopped by the village Amatenango, known for its pottery makers. There we met with Petrona and her daughter-in-law Esperanza, who demonstrated their pre-Colombian firing techniques (building a mound of fire around the pot), and showed off the clay doves the village is famous for making. All the while they were demonstrating, they were talking. It was another example of the oral tradition in Mexico at work. They were—at the prompting of our guide to the village, Veronica Melgoza—reporting their news to us: the lack of tourist customers, the high cost of health care. Petrona demonstrated where she suffered from some sort of tumor the doctors could not cure, then told how she converted from Catholicism to one of the evangelical churches finding followers so successfully in Mexico and Central America. That church, she told us, performed a miracle for her, the tumor disappeared. Then we heard a news report from them about birth control.

The mother-in-law Petrona said, pointing to Esperanza, “She only has three children.”

Veronica Melgoza responded by engaging Esperanza in a litany of positive reinforcing statements regarding birth control. “These days three children is plenty,” they agreed. “There isn’t enough money for food to support more.” Esperanza acknowledged that those factors are why she, a Catholic, uses birth control.

Their conversation is a call and response. With this technique, Melgoza elicits the news.

“It’s hard to make money these days?” says/asks Melgoza.

“Yes, hard to make money,” comes the response from Esperanza.

“Three children are enough.”

“Yes, three are plenty.”

“There isn’t enough money for food to support more.”

“No, there isn’t enough money for food for more.”

Veronica Melgoza is almost singing the prompts. Later she says she has learned that this form of interaction seems to put the people in Amatenango at ease. She has found the technique makes it easier for her to gain their trust and hence, learn detailed news of their lives that they likely would not otherwise share with an outsider.

We looked at the little clay animals the women make, Esperanza’s little girl Reina now is part of the production line, and we agreed to buy some pieces. That’s when the newspapers came out. Not to read for the news. We already had the oral reports. The wads and scraps of newspapers, old and crumpled, were collected to wrap customers’ purchases.

Radio is everywhere in Chiapas. Typical is a mud hut by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere with hand spun, hand dyed wool drying on the sun out front— while a radio blared.

Live in-person news reporting in the Chiapas outbreak

Another field trip from San Cristóbal was back to the village San Andrés Larráinzar, site of the peace talks between the Zedillo government and the Zapatista insurgents. I had visited there the year before, it looked unchanged except the strident signs proclaiming a Zapatista-governed municipality were no longer covering the public buildings on the square. In my first report, I cited the grass roots audio news reporting that I witnessed in the village:

The next morning I was twisting up the mountains in Onésimo Hidalgo’s jeep, heading for San Andrés Larráinzar. Hidalgo is the Director of the Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria, known as CIEPAC. CIEPAC is an NGO that Hidalgo proudly labels as without government, religious, or political party connections. We were en route to a most basic and efficient news broadcast, with Hidalgo as newscaster and campesinos assembling from villages even further remote than San Andrés Larráinzar as the initial audience. As we worked our way toward San Andrés Larráinzar, a village now claimed by both the Zapatistas and the PRI as under their jurisdiction, Hidalgo explained his and CIEPAC’s chores.

“We work with the most poor,” he said, pointing out that the war had devastating effects on the poor indigenous population in the Chiapas highlands. CIEPAC, he told me, is working to rebuild the infrastructure of the isolated highlands and to try to repair society in newly polarized communities. In the process, they are attempting to create models for a society based on equal rights in a region where the indigenous people have been treated by the ruling classes as second-class citizens since the days of Las Casas.

Funding money for CIEPAC comes from a variety of sources, including the Catholic Church in England, Swiss Protestants, and the Swiss branch of Caritas. This foreign funding is used to support a basic office and phone service. CIEPAC worked with Cencos and Global Exchange on the book *Always Near, Always Far: The Armed Forces in Mexico*. Hidalgo wrote the chapter on paramilitarization in Chiapas. He is a sociologist and a graduate of the National Autonomous University of Chiapas, a Chiapas native. He titles himself an Investigator, Analyst, and Popular Educator with extensive experience in the campesino and indigenous movement. Much of his work is to assemble data from primary sources regarding the Mexican military’s presence in Chiapas and the activities of paramilitary groups. This, and other news, is posted weekly by CIEPAC on its Web site (www.ciepac.org) in both English and Spanish, material he says that is heavily used by Mexican and foreign journalists for their coverage of the Chiapas crisis. The weekly news summaries are photocopied and 30 to 40 copies are distributed each week in each Catholic district

(there are 20 such districts in Chiapas). From these district distribution points they are taken further afield and read and reread. Each is 5 to 6 pages, any more material, he believes, won't be read. He cites 15,000 hits on the Web site in March 2001, from 25 countries, acknowledging that the majority of those visits are non-Mexican. Some Mexican newspapers make use of material generated by CIEPAC and posted on the site without question and unedited. The site is also used to bolster the international CIEPAC fund raising efforts. Current needs include computers—especially a laptop for fieldwork, photocopy machines, and opportunities to broadcast on the radio.

Onésimo Hidalgo agrees that radio is the most important medium for news and information in Mexico, with television a distant second. In rural zones such as San Andrés Larrainzar, he cites figures of over 70 percent illiteracy. "There are not enough schools," he says, "children must work. They are too poor to go to school. They must work to live. There is no time for school." No time for school? I ask, and as we turn still another mountain curve, Hidalgo points to a group of little kids by the side of the road. "Look at these niños," he says, "they must carry water and wash clothes." They look about five years old. "How can they go to school?" And past the colorful costumes of these indigenous kids with roots back to the pre-Colombian Mayan the reality is shocking to watch as they struggle alongside the highway with heavy loads of firewood and other goods, slung from a support cloth pressed against their foreheads, leading a scattered little herd of goats.

But despite the penetration of radio into the Highlands, Hidalgo says the information on most stations is not credible because "the chiefs of radio are the people of power."

Much of Onésimo Hidalgo's work—his journalism—is to travel to remote enclaves such as San Andrés Larrainzar and meet with assembled campesinos, listen to them report to him what is going on in their villages and then present a day-long lecture on current events—specifically

Much of Onésimo Hidalgo's work—his journalism—is to travel to remote enclaves such as San Andrés Larrainzar and meet with assembled campesinos, listen to them report to him what is going on in their villages and then present a day-long lecture on current events.

current events that relate to their lives—to them. This grass roots reporting augments the little other audio media available: government and commercial radio stations, short wave broadcasts from abroad, and taped presentations of news and information presented to live audiences (more on that forum upcoming). In Chiapas there currently are no pirate stations. The government jammed them out of existence, beginning with Radio Zapatista back in 1994, which stayed on the air for about three months broadcasting news, Zapatista ideology, and music. Also in 1994 the Zapatistas occupied XEOC in the city of Ocosingo and programmed it for about fifteen days

before the facility was stormed and retaken by the Federal army. The Zapatistas continue to maintain a Web site with news and propaganda at www.ezln.org.

An open army truck passes us on the highway as we near San Andrés Larrainzar, the locale of the peace talks between the Zedillo government and the Zapatistas that resulted in a truce of the 1994 shooting war. The truck is filled with uniformed soldiers, guns at the ready. "Look," says Hidalgo, "the government says soldiers are no longer in this region, and there they are." He pulls the jeep into the churchyard and we move to a low classroom building with whitewashed brick walls under a corrugated metal roof adjacent to the church where we're greeted by a couple of dozen smiling campesinos, shaking our hands, pleased with his arrival. There are no women in attendance. The chatter of greeting from the crowd is in Tsotsil, less than half the Chiapas population speaks Spanish. The dress is straw cowboy hats, slacks, and *huarachis*. It has been a month since the last meeting. Through a Tsotsil translator they report the news to Hidalgo. He listens and takes notes, asking questions. These men, Catequistas, are chosen from volunteers in their villages to be the oral news gatherers and reporters under a program organized by the Catholic Church. Most take out their notebooks and write in detail as Hidalgo makes his day-long presentation. Once back in their local communities they will repeat the process, each of them taking the teacher/news reporter position before a group assembled from even more remote localities. This church-supported oral news medium has been ongoing in Chiapas for several years.

Onésimo Hidalgo makes his presentation in front of an old wooden-framed blackboard hanging on nails, using it to scribble detailed notes and charts. "We're going to speak about neoliberalism and Fox," he says, "and what this means to Chiapas and Mexico." Over the next several

hours Hidalgo details NAFTA, the connection between Mexico and the EU, explains the Plan Puebla Panamá, and the impact of these events on *campesino* life. The meeting is going on the week of the Western Hemisphere summit in Quebec City, and Hidalgo uses a newspaper he bought that morning in San Cristóbal as a teaching aid. He talks about the effects of globalization on family farms and explains "transgenicos," genetically modified food. He condemns Monsanto. But it is a remarkably detailed and balanced news report, and in this primitive-looking remote classroom, these *campesinos* are thoroughly analyzing world trade and its effect on local control. "All this," sums up Hidalgo, "includes the large companies and excludes the poor campesinos."

We break for lunch in the churchyard. Lucky for me, it

is a *campesino* meal: vegetarian, and I do not need to make up an excuse for rejecting the meat. We eat rice, eggs, cabbage, potatoes, beans, and tortillas—all well cooked, *gracia a Dios*. During lunch, José de Jesús Londin García, the parish priest at San Andrés Larráinzar, gives us a tour of the church, explaining the hybrid religious activities of the indigenous Catholics in his congregation. He too points to radio as the primary medium for news in his region. He suggests that the informed questioning during the lectures is in part the result of the exposure some *campesinos* have to foreign broadcasters such as the BBC. “*Campesinos* must work,” says the priest, “with TV you must sit and watch it and you cannot work.”

The audience/students indicate that they want to reconvene the meeting. They traveled for as long as four hours to get to San Andrés Larráinzar, and they want to take advantage of the day. After another hour of lecture, Hidalgo turns the session into the equivalent of a radio talk show, taking questions and stimulating discussion, finally asking this concluding question of the group: “Why is it important for us to talk?” And he gets these answers: “Because it is how information is transferred.” “Because it is important to know what is happening in our country in order to construct a better life.” “Because it is important to have information about what is happening in our country and the world.” Any US news radio station would be thrilled to enjoy such a motivated audience. If Internews develops a program in Mexico, Hidalgo and CIEPAC are most interested in interacting with Internews, and I would recommend that such a relationship be considered seriously.

The CIEPAC work continues, and the CIEPAC model continues to be an important one: reaching the disenfranchised with news they can use.

On the second trip to San Andrés, we met again with the parish priest, who spoke freely of the difficulties he experiences trying to continue his work under the jurisdiction of the new Chiapas bishop. José de Jesús Londin García (known locally by his nickname Chuy) is the priest, and he receives us in his modest office in jeans, t-shirt, and his warm engaging smile, prior to Sunday mass. He acknowledges violating the desires of the new bishop and making himself available for interviews with the foreign press. The bishop wants all information disseminated from the centralized control of the church authority. But Chuy says expressing his opinion regarding local conditions is an integral aspect of his work as a priest.

Chuy uses his pulpit and the bully pulpit of his position to report the news as he sees it: globalization is adding to the crisis for Chiapas *campesinos*, severe social and economic problems persist. The bishop wants him to go to Rome to study. Chuy is resisting such reassignment which he is convinced is designed to silence him. In his office are stacks of political literature.

In the churchyard the congregation gathers. Men in

their traditional garb: pointed straw hats adorned with multi-colored ribbons with colored pom-poms trailing over white head-cloths, grey serape-like suits tied with a red sash over white shirts with red sleeves. Women in dark blue cotton skirts with white blouses embroidered in wild colors with complementary sashes—often carrying one or two babies wrapped in white.

Inside the church is decorated with blue and white banners illustrated with images of doves. Elaborate assemblages of candles, flowers, peacock feathers, figures and paintings of saints are surrounded with pots filled with burning incense. Mirrors hang from the necks of the figures, perhaps to reflect any evil in the parishioner so that it doesn't go into the saint, but the origin and purpose of many such rituals are no longer known for sure, they're simply repeated. The sanctuary fills with the incense smoke. The women sit on the pine needles covering the floor and chat, breast feed, tend the incense while the prayers drone from the alter. The men stand.

“Peace is a gift of God, but it is also something we have a responsibility to build together,” says Chuy as part of the service.

On one wall, the Virgin of Guadalupe looks out from a tiled altar in a frame featuring flashing Christmas tree lights. Behind the main altar are glass-covered cases lit by fluorescent tubes and filled with figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ. Recorded popular music from the Sunday market outside drifts into the church, competing with the service.

The mainstream mass media in Chiapas, Mexico, and the world reports improvement in Chiapas since the peace talks, or report nothing at all. But Chuy says problems continue and must be addressed. A local radio station would be valuable, he says. “I want us to be able to broadcast what is happening here,” he says while acknowledging that such a resource would be a focal point for conflict.

Much radio comes north out of Guatemala on stations with high power that direct their signals to Chiapas, especially religious stations. Protestant evangelizers and at least one Catholic station operating out of San Marcos, Guatemala. Chuy and others say it easier to get radio broadcasting licenses south of the border, even in other adjacent Mexican states such as Tabasco. Radio Zapatista is periodically on the air as the clandestine transmitter is moved from place to place. “Communication is a problem here,” says Chuy.

As we leave San Andres, a drunken men lies across the road as if dead. Sunday is market day, church day, and drinking day—potent posh is a popular knockout.

The Acteal massacre monthly live in-person news updates

On the twenty-second day of every month there is a memorial service in Acteal commemorating the massacre perpetrated by paramilitaries in the Chiapas

village December 22, 1997. The memorial service is both a religious event and a news report, another example of the Mexican oral tradition for reporting news.

In a packed open-air chapel under an orange plastic tent roof, Father Pedro Arriaga—in a long speech—announces the news to the congregation: he reiterates the story of the massacre, reports that justice is unfinished regarding the perpetrators, connects the massacre to the problems caused Chiapas by globalization, identifies Plan Puebla

harp, violin. An elder chants a droning prayer while the congregation kneels on the pine needled-covered dirt floor. A picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe hangs below a bell on a pole. Incense burns, Calla lilies decorate from their plastic buckets, adding to the contradictions of the globalization debate: one of the buckets in red, sporting the Coca-Cola logo.

The chanter drones on. One of the visiting priests on the dais pulls a camera out of his robe and snaps a picture,

“Welcome to the Fourth Anniversary of the Massacre of our 45 Brothers and Sisters” Acteal, Chiapas.

Panamá [the Central America-Mexico economic cooperation plan that includes controversial infrastructure development such as the proposal to build a land bridge across Mexico to compete with the Panama Canal] an unjust sop to capitalists. This speech is intended as a news presentation. Father Pedro offers the handful of foreign visitors a hard copy of his remarks and tells the group, “These words are for the international press.” His words are translated into Tsotsil.

Simple wooden crosses decorated with colorful ribbons adorn the dais.

The news reporting continues about the problems in Colombia and their similarities to circumstances in Chiapas: narcotics trafficking, paramilitary atrocities, displaced *campesinos*, human rights violations by the army.

An indigenous music group plays: trumpet, drums,

reporting the news for his personal consumption. The droning continues and the chanter’s eyes glaze. Periodically the assembled priests prostrate themselves.

A local Chiapas parish priest, Father Marcello, the first Tsotsil priest, begins the homily. It too is news reporting. He says he has two goals with the mass. One is to come together as a community for a traditional religious meeting; the other a remembrance of the massacre and a concern for the future. He says a good pastor [reporter] makes clear what is needed in a community. And then he announces his lead story: “It is very dangerous when one’s enemies are quiet because you don’t know when or where an enemy will attack.” He is referring to the day’s news—or lack of news—in Chiapas. “Here attack is not theoretical,” he says. Then he warns, “There is more danger when you cannot hear the shooting. So it is imperative to be attentive.” In a void of news media, this is

the newscast. “Jesus is a good shepherd who can protect sheep from wolves,” preaches Father Marcello, adding as an explanation of his activist news-reporting role, “priests and nuns—like Jesus—must take care of the sheep God gave them.”

The mass continues as a newscast. Father Pedro returns to the podium to explain social problems in the Dominican Republic. He provides a positive review of a new book out about the former Chiapas bishop Samuel Ruíz. Ruíz championed this type of amalgam in the church: current events and religion, Catholicism and native beliefs. His successor rails against such use of the church and favors a strict, dogmatic Catholicism.

The names and ages of all the victims are recited: 15 children, 21 women, nine men.

An electrified music group alternates selections with the traditionalists. A couple dozen members of the congregation leave the tent and form a procession from a nearby house back into tent and in a clockwise circle around the altar for an offering: corn and beans in shallow baskets, flowers, a poster about human rights in the Dominican Republic, the new book about Don Samuel Ruíz.

Following the mass we are invited to a communal lunch of eggs and tortillas with coffee.

Back in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, I stop in at La Pared book store and chat with the American owner, an ex-pat from Florida, Dana Gay Burton, telling her I’m researching the status of media in Mexico.

“Most of them are so left the ink runs off the page,” she says with disgust.

For example, I ask?

“*La Jornada*,” she answers immediately.

It’s hardly a far left rag, but I tell her I’m looking at local Chiapas media.

“I don’t bother to read them,” she dismisses them.

And what do you read?

“*The New York Times*.”

There is a vibrant array of newspapers in Chiapas, sold from several newsstands in the *zócalo*. That the papers exist does not mean that information in them is getting to news consumers. First there is the problem of illiteracy, second the fact that the papers are in Spanish. Many of the fringe papers are simply written and printed, with few sales and readers. I wander the *zócalo* several times engaged in an unscientific survey. I watch some morning sales of the center-right leading paper *Cuerto Poder* and few others. There is no independent or trade organization in Chiapas ascertaining circulation claims.

My colleague Deborah Mendelsohn visited the offices of ProNatura, and met with the founder of the Chiapas ProNatura office. This is her report:

Rosa Maria Vidal Rodriguez came to Chiapas as a student in 1989 to watch birds in the Huitepec Sanctuary, a Chiapas reserve created by the ProNatura group in

Mexico City. She decided to stay and start a Chiapas office of the organization, which she presides over today with entrepreneurial zest.

Since its founding in 1989, ProNatura has worked with a range of modern and traditional communities in Chiapas, promoting conservation. They found that among their most difficult challenges is to face differences in cultures and decision-making conventions as they work to save the natural environment from encroaching development and misuse. Their tactics include an environmental education program and the adoption of the cultural values of indigenous groups to introduce pro-environment themes. One example is to incorporate the Mayan “Lord of the Earth”—a figure whose mythology calls for conservation—as a partner in modern conservation efforts. Many indigenous Chiapas peoples consider the ProNatura reserve at Huitepec a sacred site; the Mayans still perform ancient rites there. ProNatura enthusiastically encourages that.

Early on in their Chiapas work, Rosa and her team realized that they needed to reach beyond the two or three communities they were working with at the time. They were frustrated with the weak response of local media to their outreach efforts, and they needed various forms of mass media to expand their influence in the region, not just with indigenous groups but in the real of advocacy and policy. So Rosa found grant money and ProNatura started a communications center.

ProNatura’s studio is small but generates high-quality audio and video. The group sent one of its staff members to Bolivia for a special seminar, conducted by Johns Hopkins University, on communications methods for media manipulation. That person returned and trained the rest of the staff. Now they are trying to develop a long-term communications strategy.

ProNatura’s primary Chiapas media tactic is to work at the community level by contacting radio stations and arranging for the programming in local languages ProNatura produces to be broadcast. They work in Tsotsil, Chol, and Lacondón—different Mayan languages. They established what they call a “rural communicators” program in which they train local youth to do the on-the-air presenting, involving them in all phases of planning and production.

An example of the tough job ProNatura faces in attaching environmental concerns to the indigenous community can be seen in Chamula. There a ProNatura campaign is targeting the Chamula people because they pick a wildflower for use as a remedy. Because of the continued harvesting, plant is now endangered. ProNatura radio producers interview people about the problem and make long-form programs and short spots that air on local radio stations. But initial informal surveys conducted by the group suggest the Chamula people do not believe the reports that the plant is in jeopardy of becoming extinct.

All the commercial and public broadcasters they work with are cooperative, but do not necessarily provide valuable airtime for their work. Prime time slots are available for sale, so ProNatura is trying to raise money to buy radio time. The group has limited experience working with print journalists and expresses interest in learning techniques to gain access to newspapers and magazines.

Rosa considers the professional skills of journalists in Chiapas and neighboring Oaxaca to be very low. “The style of the media here is always to look for the controversy, always to make people fight. It is a big problem,” she says.

Rosa says she wants to figure out is how to have more impact and how to measure what impact she already has on the community with the work her office is conducting.

Local commercial radio

There are 33 commercial radio stations in Chiapas, 26 AM and 7 FM. Five companies own the 33 stations. Two of the five own one station each; the other three companies own the remaining 31 stations. Guatemalan stations can be heard in Chiapas. One of those commercial stations Rosa is trying to impact is in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Francisco J. Narváez Rincón is the owner and operator I spoke with during the initial Chiapas survey in 2001. Deborah Mendelsohn met with him. He told her the government prefers to give new licenses to big broadcast groups. The licenses are auctioned. But since the current conflict began in Chiapas few new licenses have been allowed.

Narváez Rincón says he hopes that it will be easier to get broadcast licenses under the new broadcast law being debated in the Congress. “We don’t exist,” Narváez Rincón says about small broadcasters in regard to the debate over the communication law reform. Concerning the expectation by some observers that the new law will replace the few individuals now making decisions regarding new licenses with boards of regulators, Narváez Rincon says, despite his own position of struggling to get a second license, “When you have many opinions, you can make more mistakes.” He pauses, and adds, “Maybe I think like an old man.” Then he starts philosophizing about his business and his country. “I think that radio requires responsibility and commitment, but shouldn’t create conflicts between people. I don’t believe we are really mature in Mexico. We have a brand new democracy. We don’t really understand democracy yet.”

Francisco J. Narváez Rincón concedes he isn’t doing anything to improve the skills of his journalists: no training, no opportunities offered for them to consider future education on company time and at company expense.

Unlicensed, but not illegal

An enterprising alternative to traditional commercial radio had been on the air only a month when we made our second survey trip to Chiapas. The group organizing and operating the station simply went on the air, taking advantage of the interim period while the new broadcasting regulations are being debated, hoping to be left alone by the authorities long enough to become established and apply for a license once a new law is passed, a law they hope which will be open to grass roots start-ups such as theirs. “Unlicensed, but not illegal,” they call their operation. They reject the term “pirate radio,” fearing it sounds as if they are stealing something and would alert the authorities to them as a threat instead of a creative development. Rather they use terms such as *radio comunitaria* and *radio ciudadana*.

We meet with the staff of the collective in a back room of their bunker-like quarters in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The room is the studio/conference room/hangout. In one corner are the barest essentials of a radio station: a microphone, bank of CD players, and tape players—all hooked up to the transmitter. A single unshaded light bulb makes the yellow concrete walls glow. Photographs of the station and its personnel at work are tacked on the walls, stacks of CDs are waiting for play. We trade stories with the staff, an amalgam of tattoos, shaved heads, pony tails and braids, t-shirts and jeans: Margarita, Daniel, Jasmine, Carla, Ricardo, Jose, Paco, Luis, David, and the chief engineer Victor.

The building is the shop⁹⁶ and home of Victor Vallinas, who started constructing the transmitter for the little station seven years ago. Programming finally started March 23, 2002. For a long time Victor was working alone,

attempting to both build the station and obtain a license. The government regulators wanted to impose technical requirements that he—as an experimenting amateur, building with scavenged parts—could not meet. He says just the engineering surveys and studies regarding his signal—required by the government—would have cost more than the equipment he was trying to build. As a result, he and his colleagues abandoned the idea of seeking an official permit.

This is a motivated group, passionate about radio. They clearly love their volunteer operation and its independence. What do you want to produce? we ask. Music, culture, health education, is the answer, and

“I don’t believe we are really mature in Mexico. We have a brand new democracy. We don’t really understand democracy yet.”

⁹⁶Servicio Electrónico Cobra, is Victor's shop name, the sign in front of the studios announces: Reparación de todo tipo de radios de comunicación.

Francisco pulls out a promotional CD, they all listen with pride as the long station ID plays, advertising: "Community radio. Independent radio. Diverse. Analytical and critical. Intelligent. Radio of the people, for the people. Autonomous radio. From the heart. For all the residents of San Cristóbal. Experimental. Educational. Frecuencia libre: 99.1 FM."⁹⁷

The station's antenna stands 12 meters above the office, which is located up on one of San Cristóbal's hills. The transmitter cranks out 50 watts.

"We want to produce what the community wants to hear," they tell us. This type of grassroots media effort, designed to communicate with neighbors about neighborhood concerns is very different from some of the media development in Chiapas supported by international aid. The Chiapas Media Project⁹⁸, for example, is designed "to develop alternative media [in Chiapas] so that their [marginalized indigenous communities] voices can be heard around the world." The Independent Media Center⁹⁹ focuses on similar goals. This is important work, but quite different from communicating within such communities. Tradition and practicality in Chiapas leads to more mundane forms of internal communication. Wall graffiti is common for political sloganeering. Want ads for basic needs such as housing are often as simplistic as notes on a house wall offering it for rent.

The new radio station can be heard throughout San Cristóbal.

How do you know what the community wants to hear?

"Because we are of the community," they tell us all but in chorus, "and we have diverse people in the community produce our programs. The public is diverse and we try to cover their interests."

The station uses on the air promotional announcements to detail what programs will be on the air when. They say they are optimistic that more people listen to them than to the commercial stations, drawing that heady conclusion from listener responses. So far, they say, the government is leaving them alone. They are airing two newscasts a day and look forward to an increased news schedule. Collective member Margarita [Plaza, a member of AMARC] produces the news and news commentary programs.

We ask them how they plan to pay their bills. Optimism turns to realism for a moment as they explain ideas for fund raising, ideas such as concerts and other activities designed for the audience that will carry an admission charge.

A dog wanders around the three rooms of the complex as we tour the facility: the studio, Victor's Spartan sleeping room, and his shop—cluttered with spare parts

and the home-built transmitter.¹⁰⁰

Later that evening I was wandering around San Cristóbal and I ran into Margarita Plaza on the street near the cathedral. She was on her way to listen to a friend play guitar at a club nearby and she invited me to join her.

We talked about the meeting at the radio station. The group was impressed, she said, "but we Latin Americans are always wary of gringo help and money. What strings are attached, we wonder?" She paused and smiled. "Your plan sounds good. We want to work with you."

I finished my glass of wine. We said good night, and I strolled toward my hotel. In the distance I began to hear the comforting sound of a marimba band. The melodies grew louder and I followed the music, straying from my path to the hotel.

There on Avenida Cristóbal Colón, a full marimba band—six marimbistas, a bass player, and a drummer—were set up in the street, playing Chiapas classics under the glowing street lights. The bassist cautiously moved aside when the periodic late-night taxi cruised by. The traffic lights seemed to flash in time with the music.

I leaned against a nearby shop wall listening: all older men, playing for themselves...and me. The magical rattle of the marimba reverberating against the pastel walls of the stucco buildings lining the narrow streets: The Mexico of my dreams.

All I needed was my girl to dance with me on the gleaming paving stones.

⁹⁷The station can be contacted at:

Fm991radio@yahoo.com.mx

⁹⁸4834 N. Springfield, Chicago, IL 60625, (773) 583 7728.

www.chiapasmediaproject.org.

⁹⁹Available via www.indymedia.org.

¹⁰⁰Soon after my visit I was informed that the station had moved from Victor's shop, worried about a raid from the authorities.

Interviewees

- Consuelo Ascencio Ascencio, announcer, Radio XEPUR
- Luis Aquino Busquets, Public Relations Chief, Asociación Mexicana de Editores de Periódicos
- Pedro Enrique Amendares, Executive Director, IRE México
- Amado Avendaño, Publisher, *La Fota*
- J. Jesús Blancornelas, Co-Founder and Co-Director, *Zeta*
- Dana Gay Burton, bookstore owner
- Francisco Castellanos, Reporter, *Proceso*
- Ceramicists in Chiapas
- Michael Chambrelin, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas
- Clerk, Internet café
- Robert Cox, President, Inter-American Press Association.
- Bill Crawford, Author, *Border Radio*,
- Gustavo Danemann, Director, ProNatura Ensenada
- Maria Eraña, Producer, Radio Bilingüe
- Juan Francisco Escovedo, communications professor, Universidad Iberoamericana
- Gonzalo Estrada Torres, Owner, *Voice of the Citrus Region*
- Benjamín Fernández Pichardo, President, Asociación Mexicana de Editores de Periódicos
- Hugo Fernández, Editor, *Frontera*
- Al Giordano, Publisher of The Narco News Bulletin, www.narconews.com
- Petronila González, Radio XETAR
- Onésimo Hidalgo, CIEPAC
- Hotel desk clerk
- Marina Patricia Jiménez, Director, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas
- Cristian Jiménez, American Friends Service Committee
- Martha Lamas, Director General, GIRE
- José de Jesús Londín García, parish priest
- Manuel, a Mexican worker in Marin County, California
- Father Marcello, parish priest
- Laura Martínez Ríos del Río, Director, Pro Esteros Ensenada
- Leonardo Martínez, Radio XEVFS
- Omar Raúl Martínez Sánchez, Journalism Coordinator, Communications Department, Universidad Iberoamericana, Director of the Revista Mexicana de Comunicación and President of the Fundación Manuel Buendía
- Barbara McCarthy, Stamp Out Crime Council
- Father Vince McCarthy, Catholic priest
- Veronica Melgoza, communications activist
- Patricia Mercado, Director, Diversa
- Carlos Monsiváis, author
- Donald E. Mussell, Jr., Group Chief Engineer, Pacifica Radio
- Joe Navarro, schoolteacher
- Jesús “Chunel” Palma, Director, The Instituto de Coordinación and Volunteer Disc Jockey, Radio XETAR
- Roger Parkinson, President, World Association of Newspapers
- Angelika Pineda Bojórquez, Director, Radio Bolcina
- Sam Quinones, a freelancer and author of a recently published book on Mexico
- Leticia Ramírez, American Friends Service Committee
- Jose Ramos Pascual, News Director, Radio XEPUR
- Leonarda Reyes, Former Managing Director at TV Azteca and National and International Editor, *Reforma*
- Cynthia Llanos Rivas, Public Affairs Officer, California Office of Trade and Investment,
- Elfego Riveros Hernández, Director, Radio Teocelo
- Náyade Rodriques, Radio XEVFS
- Rosa Maria Vidal Rodriguez, Director, ProNatura Chiapas

- Atzimba Romero, Reporter, TV Azteca
- John Ross, American journalist based in Mexico
- Luna Ruiz, Operator/Director, Frente Indigena Oaxaqueño Binacional
- Genaro Rojas Ramirez, Coordinator and Operations Director, TV Tamix
- Josie Shumake, Press Attache, US Embassy
- Storekeeper
- Felipe Toussaint, former Catholic priest
- Diana Washington Valdez, *The Times*
- Victor Vallinas, radio engineer
- Ernesto Villanueva, law professor, Universidad Iberoamericano
- Marisa Zepeda, Colectivo de Mujeres

Select Bibliography

- Mexican Postcards by Carlos Monsiváis, Verso 2000
- A Dictionary of New Mexican and South Colorado Spanish by Rubén Cobos, Museum of New Mexico Press 1987
- El Diccionario del Español Chicano, NTC Publishing Group 1992
- A Compact History of México, El Colegio de Mexico 1985
- NTC's Dictionary of Mexican Cultural Code Words by Boye Lafayette de Mente, NTC Publishing Group 1996
- Yesterday's Train: A Rail Odyssey through Mexican History by Terry Pindell, Owl Books 1997
- The Crystal Frontier by Carlos Fuentes, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1997
- The People's Guide to Mexico by Carl Franz, John Muir Publications 1990
- So Far From God: A Journey to Central America by Patrick Marnham, Penguin Books 1986
- Border Radio by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, Limelight Editions 1990
- True Tales from Another Mexico by Sam Quinones, University of New Mexico Press 2001
- Mexico's Copper Canyon by Richard D. Fisher, Sunracer Publications 2001
- On the Border by Tom Miller, Harper & Row 1981
- The Annexation of Mexico by John Ross, Common Courage Press 1998
- Narcocorrido by Elijah Wald, HarperCollins 2001
- The Late Great Mexican Border edited by Bobby Bird, Cinco Puntos Press 1998
- The Reader's Companion to Mexico edited by Alan Ryan, Harcourt Brace 1995
- Mezcal: Origin, Elaboration and Recipes by Jorge Quiroz Márquez, Codice Ediciones 1997
- The Labyrinth of Solitude by Octavio Paz, Grove Press 1985
- The Zapatista Reader edited by Tom Hayden, Thunder's Mouth Press 2002
- First World, Ha Ha Ha!: The Zapatista Challenge, City Lights 1995
- Mexico edited by Larry Habegger, Travelers' Tales 2001
- Latinos: A Biography of the People by Earl Shorris, Norton 1992
- A Rosario Castellanos Reader edited by Maureen Ahern, University of Texas Press 1988
- Questions & Swords as told by Subcomandante MaRcos, Cinco Puntos Press 2001