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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Recalcitrance: The foreclosure of news about violence in Mexico

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Abstract

Since President Felipe Calderón declared his so-called “war on organized crime” in December 2006, the dominant discourse about violence in Mexico has created the idea of a battle against or disputes between organized crime groups, and it has framed victims of murders and disappearances as themselves criminals. Recent scholarship highlights the role that journalists and news outlets have played in bolstering this narrative; however, ethnographic fieldwork with Mexican journalists complicates the notion that they and others unknowingly or uncritically reaffirm dominant interpretations about violence. This article introduces the concept of recalcitrance to elucidate how, even when reporters actively work to investigate beyond official statements, fear contributes to the reproduction of dominant discourses and forecloses the possibility of creating different kinds of news, truths, and narratives.

KEYWORDS

journalism, news, narrative, violence, fear

Resumen

Desde que el presidente Felipe Calderón declaró su supuesta “guerra contra la delincuencia” en diciembre del 2006, el discurso dominante sobre la violencia en México ha fomentado la idea de una batalla contra o disputas entre grupos de crimen organizado, y ha posicionado a las víctimas de asesinatos y desapariciones como criminales. Estudios recientes subrayan el papel que juegan los periodistas y los medios de comunicación en reforzar esta narrativa; sin embargo, el trabajo de campo etnográfico con periodistas mexicanos complica la noción de que ellos y otros reafirman de manera acrítica o irreflexiva las interpretaciones dominantes sobre la violencia. Este artículo presenta el concepto de *recalcitrance* para ilustrar cómo, incluso cuando los reporteros trabajan de manera activa para investigar más allá de las declaraciones oficiales, el miedo contribuye a la reproducción de los discursos dominantes e impide la posibilidad de crear otros tipos de noticias, verdades, y narrativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

periodismo, noticias, narrativa, violencia, miedo

Wasting no time, Rafael walked briskly up to the store counter, introduced himself to the employee who met him there and, without waiting for a response, launched into a question: “Hi, I’m a reporter working on a story about yesterday’s shootout. Were you here when it happened?” The store was busy, with half a dozen employees attending to customers at the counter. Caught off guard, the man looked around uncomfortably and then reluctantly responded that yes, he had been there. However, before Rafael

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could ask any follow-up questions, he quickly added in an even lower voice, “I can’t help you, because I didn’t see anything—I had to run and hide in the back when they started shooting.” He then brusquely turned his back to us and walked away, ending the conversation before it could start.

Unfazed by this first encounter, Rafael tried to interview three more employees. Each time, he got the same answer: Yes, they had been there when the shootout happened. No, they hadn’t seen or heard anything. With the third person, sensing that this might be his last chance, Rafael ventured to push back and inquire about the security cameras. Pointing to where they were mounted on the ceiling, he asked about the footage from the previous afternoon: “Even if none of you saw anything, the cameras must have captured something, right? Did the police take the recordings as evidence?” The young man didn’t respond, instead looking nervously down the counter toward another employee. “The security cameras are broken,” she called over to us matter-of-factly, shaking her head decisively. “They have been for weeks. There’s nothing recorded from yesterday.”

As we left the store, Rafael, feeling discouraged, grumbled about the improbability that no one had seen or heard anything significant in relation to the shootout. However, neither of us was really that surprised; in a climate of ongoing violence perpetrated by government forces, criminal groups, and individuals working for both, and where there was near-total impunity for violent crimes, people were often afraid to publicly discuss or even acknowledge acts of violence and crime. As I shadowed journalists in their reporting, I grew accustomed to observing a range of refusals—from nervous deferrals to emphatic denials to obstinate silences—from individuals who had potentially and sometimes almost certainly been witnesses to acts of violence, and who journalists hoped to use as sources for their news articles. While accompanying one journalist who was reporting on a murder in a city where she frequently covered five or six such events in a day, I listened as the murder victim’s neighbor firmly emphasized that she hadn’t noticed anything strange on the night of the murder. As we walked away, I asked the reporter if she thought that the woman had been telling the truth. “It’s hard to say,” she replied with a shrug, “but I just leave it at that if a person says that they know nothing. When things got so bad here, people quickly learned to keep their heads down—seeing nothing or saying nothing even if they did.” She understood and accepted these silences because they were part of the shared “practices of insecurity” (Rotker, 2002, 13) that city residents had adopted to navigate everyday life under unprecedented levels of violence. In 2016, the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) found that 74.3 percent of the population felt that the state that they lived in was *inseguro* (unsafe) but also that fewer than 10 percent of crime victims filed a police report (INEGI, 2017). While there are myriad reasons why Mexicans do not report crimes, one particularly significant factor in this context is fear, particularly of extortion or violent retaliation at the hands of state authorities and criminal organizations (Hayden, 2020).

My research elucidates how fear contributes to the foreclosure of news production and the reinforcement of hegemonic discourses about violence in Mexico. These narratives often frame violence as either the result of a “battle” between government forces and organized crime groups or a power struggle between rival groups and consequently position the victims of murders, disappearances, and shootouts as “presumed criminals” or “members of organized crime.” In recent years, scholars have presented valuable critiques of these narratives, locating their provenance in the Mexican government and highlighting the inaccurate, obfuscatory, and depoliticized nature of the explanations and imaginaries they produce (Escalante Gonzalbo, 2012; González-Blanco and Mastrogiovanni, 2018; Ovalle, 2010; Zavala, 2014, 2018). I am interested in these appraisals because they underscore the role that the news media and journalists (alongside novelists, filmmakers, academics, and others) have played in reproducing these discourses. And while I ultimately agree with these scholars about the troubling consequences of these ubiquitous narratives, my ethnographic research complicates notions that journalists—or ordinary Mexicans—simply or uncritically reinforce dominant narratives. Rather, I found that even when reporters sought to investigate beyond what official sources said, and even when a violent event itself contradicted the usual explanations about violence, fear often stood in the way of the kind of news reporting that might contribute to a different way of understanding and imagining violence and criminal activities.

I propose the concept *recalcitrance* to capture first, the refusals that journalists encountered and the fearful reluctance they themselves experienced during reporting, and second, the difficulty of producing news outside the dominant narratives about violence in Mexico. In the first sense, the concept borrows from the use of the word *recalcitrant* to describe a person who is unwilling or uncooperative. In particular, I am referring to the fearful hesitation and reluctance—and consequently the refusals, avoidances, deferrals, and silences—that both witnesses and journalists experience and enact in relation to acts of violent crime. I take the second meaning from the use of the term in biology to describe, for instance, organic matter that resists decomposition or a disease that does not respond to treatment. In this sense, recalcitrance refers to those narratives and imaginaries that have become so stubbornly rooted that it is extremely difficult to challenge or change them. By drawing on these dual meanings, recalcitrance as an analytical framework underscores how the fearful reluctance that journalists both encounter and experience during news reporting contributes to the reproduction of dominant discourses and thus to the foreclosure of different kinds of news and explanations about violence.

This article is based on a continuous period of ethnographic research in Mexico from 2015 to 2016, as well as preliminary research in the summers of 2012, 2013, and 2014. Over the course of my research, I met and interacted with perhaps 100 Mexican journalists but only worked closely with 20 reporters. At that time, these journalists were either employed at print and digital news outlets or they were freelancers, and they engaged in both daily reporting and long-term investigative journalism. My research consisted primarily of shadowing journalists as they worked in and outside the newsroom and on special assignments away from their home cities. I also spent time with journalists at workshops, trainings, conferences, and other events. Interactions with my key interlocutors often extended beyond the formal workday, and in many cases I spent time with their families and friends.

For the past 15 years or so, Mexico has been one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism. In addition to receiving verbal threats and enduring cyberattacks, Mexican reporters face the risk of being physically assaulted, tortured, kidnapped, killed, or disappeared because of their work. Given these serious dangers, I have taken the following precautions to maintain the anonymity of the journalists who participated in my research: 1) I use pseudonyms for everyone I mention, 2) I have changed some details about the events that journalists reported on, 3) I do not use direct quotes from news stories (since this would make it very easy to find the news articles and thus the journalists who wrote them), and 4) I do not provide specific descriptions of the cities and towns where my research took place. I am aware that this goes against the ethnographic standard of locating research in a specific place, and it also runs the risk of blurring important distinctions between the kinds of power dynamics and sorts of violence experienced in different parts of the country. However, I have ultimately decided on this approach out of respect for the significant risks that Mexican journalists take in their work.

In what follows, I first discuss the dominant discourse about violence in Mexico that has solidified over the past 15 years, drawing on theories about journalism, publics, narratives, and social imaginaries. I then return to the opening scene, showing how fear and what I call an ethics of discretion among witnesses to acts of violence limited journalists' ability to investigate beyond the official version of events. In the third section, I turn to a different story to demonstrate how the precautions that reporters themselves took to stay safe also constrained their ability to reach different explanations and truths. Both stories illustrate the dynamic of recalcitrance, showing how fear plays a key role in circumscribing everyday news reporting on violence and, consequently, in reinforcing pernicious discourses.

A STUBBORN NARRATIVE

When I had arrived at the newspaper offices earlier that day, Rafael was already standing outside the staff entrance, head down, tapping away on the screen of his cell phone. As I got close enough to break his intense concentration, he looked up from his phone, greeted me cheerfully, and without a pause launched into our agenda for the day. On a normal workday, Rafael's itinerary often included at least a few press conferences and other scheduled events. He worked for a local left-leaning print and digital newspaper that was the aspiring competitor for the most popular daily in the city. The newspaper had been recognized nationally for producing quality investigative journalism about politics, organized crime, and human rights in a context where this kind of reporting was difficult and dangerous. That in-depth, critical work was what drew Rafael to the paper and what he was most passionate about. However, on most days he had to complete some tasks where reporting mainly involved listening to prepared remarks, asking questions, and summarizing peoples' statements. So, when he got assignments that involved true street reporting and more investigative independence, he was psyched.

"Today we have a really interesting story to cover," he told me, talking quickly as I followed him to his car. "Did you see the news about the shootout yesterday?" I nodded and said that on my walk over I had seen at newsstands that all the newspapers were running the story on their front pages. "Yeah, everyone is all over it," he responded. The shootout was a big deal, Rafael said, because it broke with the typical narrative about violence, both locally and nationally. "The government always claims that the victims of violence are themselves criminals. In this case, we have two innocent victims." A man and his brother had been hit by stray bullets from the shootout: one had been killed, and the other was injured. "What will the government say now?"

Rafael was referring to what had become a central trope in government statements and the mainstream news in the decade since President Felipe Calderón had declared what is commonly known as the Mexican war on drugs: the criminalization of victims of violence. In the early years of his 2006–12 presidency, the Calderón administration regularly issued statements about his war on organized crime (see Bravo Regidor [2011] for key remarks). Captured criminal leaders and seized contraband were presented to the Mexican public as proof of the government's victories (EFE, 2009; El Universal, 2009; González and Mejía, 2010). As the homicide rate in the country skyrocketed, the government began to justify the growing number of homicides as the result of its war on criminals (Notimex, 2009). But then, amid intense criticism of his failed war, Calderón shifted gears. Instead of discussing the government's offensive *on* organized crime, he started talking about the war(s) *between* criminal groups (Bravo Regidor, 2011). Despite this change in rhetoric, though, the basic message remained the same: the young men who were being kidnapped, tortured, murdered, and disappeared in Mexico were themselves criminals.¹

By the end of his term, Calderón had become markedly quieter about violence and organized crime, a strategy that his successor Enrique Peña Nieto would take even further. When I was in Mexico in June 2013, six months after Peña Nieto took office, journalists told me that he had opted for near-complete silence. "It's like he decided to say as little as possible [about violence and organized crime]," one reporter told me, "hoping that people would just forget about it" (see also Schedler, 2015, 15). But even in the absence of Calderón's promotional and then exculpatory statements, government officials at all levels and much of the news media continued to reaffirm the criminal status of victims in quotidian reports about violence. On the evening news, local and national publics heard about armed confrontations between state forces and *sicarios* (armed individuals working for organized crime groups) (e.g., Vega, 2012). News headlines echoed statements by government officials who affirmed that *presuntos delinquentes* (presumed criminals) had been *abatidos* (taken down, i.e., killed) or captured by the police (Notimex, 2012; Sánchez,

2011). Many other articles contained news of *ejecuciones*—executions, a term that is used to refer to the murders of criminals by members of a rival criminal group—of young men (see Cervantes, 2019).

These recurrent phrases that mark victims of violence as presumed criminals have created a “dichotomy of the ‘good dead’ and the ‘bad dead’” (Reguillo, 2010) in Mexico—a distinction between those whose violent deaths are worthy of sympathy and investigation, and those whose aren’t (Piccato, 2017; Prieto Mora, 2018; Samet, 2019; Wright, 2011; see also Butler, 2009; Ticktin, 2017). By the time I began my research in 2015, this discourse had become so naturalized as *the* public narrative that it had become extremely difficult to offer a different explanation or evoke another imaginary (Briggs, 2007; Moodie, 2009). It is the obstinate quality of this kind of narrative that the concept of recalcitrance emphasizes. So, what role do journalists like Rafael play in reinforcing—or destabilizing—this stubborn narrative?

Journalism—and all public discourse—is a form of “worldmaking” (Gürsel, 2016b). As Michael Warner (2005, 114) has argued, all public discourse not only imagines the world that it will circulate in but also attempts to bring that world into being by addressing it. News stories, like government statements, are “attempts at constituting reality” (Samet, 2013, 535). In other words, they are “formative fictions” that shape our ways of seeing the world and the possibilities it contains (Gürsel, 2016a, 11). It is precisely because of the power of the news media to influence the public’s understanding that scholars have called attention to Mexican journalists’ unthinking repetition of dominant narratives about organized crime and violence. As Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco and Federico Mastrogiorganni put it, “the collective imaginary around violence is fueled by journalism and TV fictions based on journalistic texts” (2018, 100). Thus, when reporting is based solely on government statements, rather than independent investigations, or when journalists uncritically recur to certain explanations of violence and organized crime, they bolster problematic narratives that dehumanize victims of violence and that obscure the role of the government in criminal activities and extralegal violence (Robledo Silvestre, 2019; Schedler, 2016).

It is certainly true that a longstanding tendency in Mexican journalism, where reporters rely primarily on government sources and news stories are largely a verbatim replication of government statements (Márquez Ramírez, 2012), has meant that journalists often produce news that echoes and upholds official narratives. In addition, in response to the growing threat of violence toward journalists, many Mexican news outlets have developed formal or informal policies that instruct reporters to only use official government sources—often the police—when reporting on crime and violence (González de Bustamante and Relly, 2016), effectively curtailing journalistic investigations. However, Rafael and the other journalists I shadowed actively strove to engage in independent and critical journalism that investigated beyond the statements of government officials and other powerful individuals. During a time of widespread atrocities committed by government and criminal actors, these journalists embraced a sense of social responsibility around their profession as the pursuit of truth. As Rafael and I drove to the site where the shootout had taken place, he told me that he wanted to see what he could learn for himself about what had happened the previous afternoon by talking directly to the people who had been there, rather than taking the authorities’ account at face value.

Despite his efforts, though, the fearful reluctance of the witnesses closest to the shootout severely limited Rafael’s investigation. As I show in the next section, then, it is not simply uncritical reporting or the mindless assimilation of dominant narratives by journalists and others that aids in their reproduction. Rather, recalcitrance is about the way that pervasive fear and the everyday tactics for avoiding danger impede journalistic investigations and contribute to the reproduction of the very tropes that journalists seek to avoid. That is, even when reporters are cognizant and critical of the prevailing narratives, fear and its silencing effects may ultimately impinge on their ability to produce the kinds of news stories and truths that would challenge them.

RELUCTANT WITNESSES AND AN ETHICS OF DISCRETION

As the newsstands I had passed that morning, where all the local newspapers were running the story about the shootout on their front pages, had indicated, Rafael and his editor were not the only ones who thought that this was a newsworthy event. The city where Rafael lived and worked had a reputation for being violent and dangerous. However, the highly visible displays of violence mounted in some parts of Mexico, like corpses hung from bridges, were unusual there. Murders and kidnappings were common, but they were generally not made into highly visible spectacles. Most often, murder victims were dumped in empty lots, back roads, and peripheral neighborhoods. These murders were covered in the news, but they rarely made the front page and were usually relegated to the *policíaca* (crime news) section. Journalists and other residents told me that there were a few years when shootouts had become more common in the downtown area and neighborhoods in the center of the city; generally, though, these conflicts happened on the outskirts and in surrounding rural areas.

The eventfulness of this shootout was thus tied to a sense of unexpectedness—the perception that something had taken place that represented a break with the usual patterns and occurrences. This was what had resulted in Rafael being assigned to investigate the shootout, since normally it would have been covered by reporters working the crime beat. “The idea is to try to carefully reconstruct what happened by talking to the people who work in the surrounding stores about what they saw and heard yesterday,” he explained as we headed over.

Javier, one of the newspaper’s photographers, met us at the site of the shootout, a commercial area with stores and other businesses that was located along a busy thoroughfare a few miles from the city’s downtown. He got to work photographing the

remnants of the crime scene in the place where the two men had been struck by stray bullets, while Rafael and I went into half a dozen stores closest to that spot, interviewing the people who worked there. At all these businesses the employees had heard the gunfire and taken cover, and some had gone outside right after it ended, but they weren't close enough to have seen any of the people who participated in the shooting. Some were more interested in talking to us than others—one man even walked outside with us to show us where the men's car had stopped and describe how the EMTs had attended to the man who had survived—but no one seemed apprehensive about our presence or Rafael's questions.

Our reception by the employees in the store closest to where the shooting took place was a stark contrast with these open conversations. As we approached, Rafael, knowing that cameras often made people nervous, asked Javier to stay outside and take some shots of the bullet holes in the store's façade. When Rafael and I got inside, I followed his gaze upward to the ceiling, where the security cameras were located. "Let's see if the police actually took the recordings from yesterday," he mentioned under his breath. "If not, we can try to get them ourselves." However, the refusals—some firm, some hesitant and nervous—we received from all the store employees we spoke to negated that possibility. Silence effectively enacted a barrier around information about the shootout and the people who had participated in it, limiting Rafael's ability to produce a news story that might add nuance to or contrast with the official version circulated by government authorities.

The adoption of "laws" or "codes" of silence (Jusionyte, 2016; Taussig, 2003; Uribe, 2004) is a common feature of settings characterized by the participation of state actors in extralegal violence and criminal activities, the pervasive presence of organized crime, and the exercise of terror. Silence and secrecy can persist long after the threat of violence or retaliation has passed, thus demonstrating the penetrating power of fear to discipline and terrorize (González, 2011; Green, 1994; Kernaghan, 2009). In the Mexican context, scholars have drawn attention to the tactics and tacit agreements through which people have learned to navigate everyday life and cultivate a sense of safety or calm despite the ongoing threat of violence (Padilla Reyes and Arteaga Botello, 2019; Villarreal, 2021). Silence is a key strategy in this context. People might talk about violence and crime in whispered tones in the privacy of their homes and with people they trust (see Luna, 2018), but it is rare to speak openly in public about them, and even less to discuss them with journalists or report them to the police.

It is important to note, however, that the adamant silences we encountered as we attempted to interview the witnesses to the shootout should not be confused with mere complicity or indifference. Rather, as Salvador Maldonado Aranda has argued, silence "is a strategic way of interacting, discussing or not, listening to rumors or not, as a way to protect themselves" (2014, 168). This reticence about being an eyewitness source for Rafael's news story is, then, part of the "arts of survival" that Jon Horne Carter (2020, 122) also describes in his research in Honduras: the subtle avoidances of danger and careful forms of restraint that people use in a context where they understand that their safety—and that of those around them—is far from guaranteed. The store employees' proximity to the shootout, and the potential that they had seen the people who participated in it, heard them talking, and watched them interact, in addition to the fact that the employees had observed and interacted with the police officers who arrived at the scene, put them in danger. If they revealed anything to us about the perpetrators or the police, they and the people around them could end up being targets of violence. I have thus come to think of the store employees' deferrals and silences not as a form of straightforward complicity but rather as a kind of ethics of discretion, where they resisted putting not only themselves but also others in further danger by participating in the production of news about the shootout.

Their fearful refusal to share what they knew, however, ultimately stymied Rafael's efforts to produce a different kind of news story about the shootout for the public, and particularly one that would not uncritically replicate the government's statements about the people who were involved. Charles Briggs has emphasized that "Narratives enable us to grasp an object that, unless we witness or participate in the violence, we do not know directly" (2006, 331). That is to say, those who were not in the area when the shootout took place would only come to know about it from the narratives crafted through the circulation of news, social media posts, and conversations. In this case, the reluctance and hesitancy that Rafael encountered when talking to the store employees meant that he was limited in his ability to produce news about the people who participated in the shootout that did not depend entirely on government-produced information. As in the stories that I had seen at the newsstand that morning, news about the shootout would continue to reproduce the government's narrative. Though it was reported that some of the individuals involved in the shootout were themselves injured and perhaps even killed, it was the innocent victims who took front stage, while the injuries sustained by the presumed criminals were only mentioned in passing (see also Schedler, 2016). In this differentiation between innocent and guilty victims, the usual logic was applied to the injuries sustained by presumed criminals, which were framed as something expected, justified, and, perhaps most importantly, insignificant. As critical news production is limited by fear and reluctance, the presumed criminal as victim continues to be dismissed as unworthy of the public's sympathy or concern.

In this example, we see recalcitrance at work as fearful reluctance to step forward as an eyewitness created a division between what could be made into news and what could not (Jusionyte, 2015, 244), between what information could circulate among the broader public and what would remain secret. In places where terror and the threat of violence have produced or imposed silence and secrecy, information does not travel easily and the "spheres of reception" (Kernaghan, 2009, 193) of stories about certain incidents are extremely limited, often remaining isolated to the immediate place where they happen and to the people who experience or witness them directly. Importantly, it is the quotidian experience of fear—not a lack of critical awareness on the part of journalists and others—that emerges here as the central factor in circumscribing what the public came to know about this event and its victims.

Writing about the construction of crime stories in Argentina, Ieva Jusionyte has underscored “the multiplicity of voices involved in negotiating them” (2016, 453). Amahl Bishara (2012) makes a similar point about news production with the concept of “accumulated authorship,” which draws attention to the myriad layers of interpretation and authorial input that are hidden by the use of a single byline for a news article. My research affirmed these insights, except that multiple (fear-induced) silences were as important as voices in reaffirming particular discourses and contributing to the recalcitrance of certain social imaginaries around violence and crime. This is a reality that the journalists I shadowed were acutely aware of in their reporting. In fact, one of the news stories that Rafael wrote that day explicitly addressed the silences and gaps in his reporting, which were the result of the hesitant deferrals and firm denials he had encountered when attempting to find out more about the shootout and the people who were involved in it. The dramatic headline that Rafael chose for the article—“No One Saw Anything”—speaks to his own critical awareness of and frustration with the dynamic that I am calling recalcitrance: the way that pervasive fear contributes to the foreclosure of independent news reporting on violence and crime, thus bolstering the authority of the usual story.

TRUNCATED INVESTIGATIONS AND INTRACTABLE IMAGINARIES

Some months later, I tagged along again as Rafael set out to follow up on a shooting that had taken place the previous evening. This time, a man and his son had been killed and his daughter injured when gunmen had shot into their car while driving alongside them. In a similar approach, Rafael told me that we would start by interviewing witnesses where the shooting had taken place, and then attempt to learn more about the victims by talking with their family or neighbors. As with the shootout, the element of innocence—the fact that two of the victims were children—was clearly driving the news media’s interest in the story and its potential to increase newspaper sales, but Rafael’s goal was to put together a more complete narrative of what had happened and why.

At the site where the shooting had occurred, we struck up a conversation with a man who had been inside his house the night before when he heard the gunfire. When the shooting stopped, he told us, he looked outside and saw the car with the man and his children in it crash, and he immediately ran to help the victims. As we talked, he walked down the road with us, describing the trajectory that the car had taken after the man was shot and stopping to show us where it had crashed. A father himself, he had been deeply impacted by having found the two children in the car, and he spoke with us in detail about his encounter with the little girl who had survived.

After we finished our conversation, the man returned to his house and Rafael flagged down an elderly newspaper vendor who was passing through slowly on his bike: “Sir, do you live in this neighborhood? Do you happen to know where the house of the people who were shot last night is?” The old man told Rafael the name of the nearby neighborhood where he thought their house was and gave us rough directions. Back in the car, Rafael told me and Guillermo, the photographer who was with us, that he was hoping that we could learn more from their neighbors about the victims and what had happened. Since we didn’t have the family’s exact address, we spent some time going up and down the streets of the neighborhood, asking residents for further help in locating the family’s home. When we found it, what had been a lively conversation was quickly replaced by an uncomfortable silence. In a working-class neighborhood on the peripheries of the city, where the roads were dirt and the houses were small and run-down, the family’s home stood out dramatically. It was by no means a mansion, but in comparison to the simple homes surrounding it, the house had an elaborate construction and an expensive-looking façade. In this context, when a person’s home, car, or clothes stand out from their neighbors’, marked by a conspicuous difference in buying power, the assumption is often that the person must be working in organized crime. Breaking the awkward silence, Rafael quietly and reluctantly said, “Well, I guess we know what he did for a living . . .”

This discovery signaled the end of this part of the investigation. Not getting out of the car, Rafael called out to a woman standing across the street to ask if the man and children who were shot had indeed lived in the house we had located. Having received the neighbor’s confirmation, Rafael asked no further questions, and we left the neighborhood and drove back toward the center of the city. We made one more stop at the children’s hospital to inquire about the daughter’s condition, but otherwise Rafael did not attempt to gather any more information about the victims.

Recent scholarship about Mexico has underlined a widespread tendency where people discursively and cognitively create boundaries between the so-called good guys and bad guys, or citizens and criminals, as a means of separating themselves from the threat of violence. Andreas Schedler, for example, argues that the notion of “bounded violence . . . presupposes that the boundary line that separates combatants (criminals) from noncombatants (civilians) is crystal clear, while the boundary line that separates perpetrators from victims is fuzzy” (2006, 1054). Thus, labeling others as criminals, *malitos* (bad guys) (Villarreal, 2021), or *narcos* (Muehlmann, 2020) is a way of distancing yourself from the possibility that *you* might become a victim of violence—a tendency that also prevailed in Argentina during the Dirty War (Suárez-Orozco, 1990, 368). And indeed, I have found for myself during nearly 10 years living on and off in different parts of Mexico that it is very common for people to say that most victims of violence must themselves be criminals. “We don’t really have anything to fear,” an Uber driver commented to me as we discussed our perceptions of danger in the city where we both lived, “because they just fight and kill each other (*se matan entre sí*). If you’re not involved in that, you don’t have to worry.”

It might seem that Rafael's reluctant conclusion about the criminal status of the man who had been killed—based on the appearance of his home and the way that he had been murdered—is yet another example of this defensive tactic and thus of a tendency to unthinkingly accept dominant explanations about violence in Mexico. However, to fully evaluate the nature of Rafael's inferences, we must take into account the serious risks involved with practicing journalism in Mexico. While censorship and so-called self-censorship have long been built into Mexican journalism through the formal practice of allocating government advertising funds, as well as a range of informal bribing practices (Benavides, 2000; Merchant Ley, 2017), over the past 15 years, silence has increasingly been achieved through the explicit or implicit threat of violence. Mexico has regularly ranked alongside countries like Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq in the number of journalists killed because of their work and often exceeds all other countries in murders of journalists. During a writing workshop for journalists that I attended early in my fieldwork, the moderator lamented the way that crime news stories had come to resemble police reports. When we paused for a break, a few of the journalists in attendance made sure that I understood that this tendency wasn't simply the result of adopting the style of police reports: it was because most reporters were actually copying directly from them for their news stories. Though the people I spoke with saw this practice as bad journalism, they also acknowledged that many journalists had become afraid to report in person at crime scenes and instead relied on the information circulated by the authorities (see also Hughes and Márquez Ramírez, 2017; O'Connor, n.d.).

Most of the journalists I shadowed personally knew at least one colleague who had been murdered in relation to their work, which meant that they were keenly aware of the dangers they were up against. Because of these risks, decisions to not pursue investigations, report on particular issues, or publish certain news stories are common among Mexican journalists and news media. In situations like the one that Rafael found himself in when we located the victims' home, rather than simply following established policies or protocols, journalists often must rely on intuitions that are honed through their own experiences and those of fellow reporters to determine if it is safe to proceed with an investigation. For example, reporters told me that as much as you might be interested in a particular case—a murder, for instance—and want to find out more about the motive for the crime or the victims who had been killed, if you had even the slightest inkling that they might have been involved in organized crime, the smartest move would be not to pursue the story, lest you end up in danger. In general, in a context where journalists are extremely vulnerable to attacks from the government, organized crime, and individuals who work for both, and where there is near total impunity for violence against journalists, I have found that reporters often choose to fall on the side of exercising caution rather than risk putting themselves—and others—in danger.

With this in mind, we can understand Rafael's conjecture as part of a set of localized instincts and strategies for avoiding danger, rather than a callous judgment or hasty conclusion. He didn't know for sure that we would end up in danger if we kept following the story, but the mere possibility of risk was enough of a reason to turn back. As a result of his intuitions and precautions, though, Rafael was unable to learn anything more about the man who had been killed. As in other scenarios when either witnesses or journalists are unwilling or unable to gather information and create news about violence, information from the government would continue to dominate news production, with most news stories using police reports and government press releases as their sources. Even Rafael's article, which was based on the testimony he had gathered from the eyewitness, was like the others in that it focused on the innocent children's injury and death, while their father's murder appeared as a mere secondary detail. And though Rafael, not wanting to play into the standard government narrative, never signaled the man as a potential member of organized crime, the absence of information about him produced an implicit message about his presumed criminal status, thus underlining the insignificance of his death.

This example sheds light on the complex maneuverings involved in reporting on crime and violence in Mexico. As much as journalists might get frustrated with witnesses who don't want to share information, they know that the stakes of following the story and pursuing the truth can be very high. This means that their own improvised attempts at staying safe can have the same effect as the fearful reticence of witnesses, standing in the way of reporting on violence in a way that might destabilize the imagined divisions between good and bad Mexicans, decent people and criminals, and lawful society and criminal organizations. As was the case with the shootout, ultimately those dichotomies remained intact and self-evident in the contrast in Rafael's article between the spectacle of innocent victims and the invisibility and insignificance of those individuals marked as presumed criminals.

CONCLUSION

The situation for Mexican reporters has not improved since I carried out this research: the Committee to Protect Journalists (n.d.) has registered 13 journalists who were killed in Mexico in 2022.² Despite the tremendous risks they face, some Mexican reporters have persisted in their commitment to independent journalism, and—often working in local teams or collaborative networks spread across the country—they have produced excellent investigative work about topics like enforced disappearances and corruption. Everyday reporting on violence and crime, particularly for local journalists who live and work outside of Mexico City, continues to be fraught. The ambient threat of violence hampers news production, causing *vacíos informativos* (news blackouts) that lead to an uninformed public.

However, as the concept of recalcitrance underlines, what is at stake here is not simply a paucity of vital information. This is, of course, a key concern in Mexico and elsewhere, but what I have highlighted instead is that quotidian experiences of fear during news reporting effectively silence the kinds of counternarratives that emerge from critical journalistic work. Fear, which results in the reluctance of witnesses to speak publicly and of journalists to investigate further during reporting, plays a key role in ensuring the continued hegemony of existing narratives about violence and crime.

This article underscores the importance of attending to the lived experiences of journalists and witnesses to violence, and of tracking the on-the-ground workings of journalism, rather than simply analyzing the kinds of news stories that reporters produce. My long-term ethnographic research with journalists challenges assumptions that they and other Mexicans mindlessly replicate the dominant explanations about violence and crime. I use the framework of recalcitrance to show that even when journalists attempt to report beyond the official government narrative and produce different kinds of news about acts of violence, the fear and reluctance that they encounter and experience ultimately lead to the reinforcement of stubborn ideas, like the dichotomy between innocent victims and presumed criminals—and the insignificance of the latter. Importantly, this is not merely a matter of intention, since journalists like Rafael are openly critical of the criminalizing messages that have been so widely propagated by the government and large swaths of the news media. They do not purposely include these tropes in their news stories, and often they actively avoid them. However, fear is a powerful obstacle in a country where journalists have been increasingly targeted and attacked for their work and where many Mexicans feel vulnerable and unprotected. This fear often limits what journalists can investigate and what witnesses are willing to say publicly, or at all. As such, it contributes to reinforcing the self-evident nature of ways of thinking that have become deeply ingrained, and it forecloses ways of reporting and imagining otherwise.

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ENDNOTES

¹The Justice in Mexico project has established that most victims of homicides in Mexico have been men, but in their most recent reports they have also highlighted a rise in femicides and sex crimes (Calderón et al., 2020; 2021).

²The [Committee to Protect Journalists \(n.d.\)](https://www.cpi.org/data) has confirmed that three journalists were killed because of their work and is investigating the killings of 10 additional journalists.

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