

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

# JOURNALISM ACROSS THE BORDER

by DOLIA ESTÉVEZ









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Kate Brick, Program Associate for the WWC Mexico Institute, and Armando Segovia, journalism student at UTEP, contributed to this report.

## Introduction

OURNALISM is facing critical times. One merely needs to witness the free fall of circulation, massive lay-offs, editorial cutbacks and the closing of all but a few foreign media bureaus. Is traditional media—newspapers and television—fading away or transforming into a multimedia news and information platform? How is this process affecting bilateral coverage of the issues related to the U.S.-Mexico border, migration, trade and drug-trafficking? The Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP)'s Sam Donaldson Center for Communication Studies and Mexico's Consejo Ciudadano del Premio Nacional de Periodismo, organized a two-day conference to address the challenges journalism faces to stay relevant and credible in the information age. Attended by editors and senior reporters from print and broadcast media from the United States, Mexico and specifically the border region, the conference took place at UTEP on October 7 and 8, 2007.

In the opening session, UTEP President Diana Natalicio, Wilson Center Mexico Institute Board Member Javier Treviño, and Premio Nacional del Periodismo Vice President Rossana Fuentes-Berain welcomed the participants and invitees to UTEP, where 72 percent of the student body is Mexican-American and nine percent Mexican. Special guest Rep. Silvestre Reyes, whose Congressional district includes El Paso, described the border as a "third nation," with El Paso as her capital. In delivering the opening remarks, Mexican Ambassador to the United States Arturo Sarukhan addressed the role of the media in improving mutual understanding of the complexity of the relationship and the border region in particular.

### SAM DONALDSON, ABC News



### Journalism in Transition

ABC News Senior Correspondent Sam Donaldson and Televisa Vice President for International News Leonardo Kourchenko moderated the public panel, Journalism in Transition: The Challenge of Keeping U.S.-Mexico Relations in the News. The panelists—The Washington Post Managing Editor Philip Bennett, El Universal Managing Editor Rubén Alvarez, American Society of Newspaper Editors President and Al Día Editor Gilbert Bailón, The Dallas Morning News National and Foreign Editor Tim Connolly, and Grupo Reforma Editorial Processes Manager Sergio Miramontes—focused on the need to go back to the basics of journalism and produce quality reporting as the way to address the rise of the Internet and its negative impact on the number of "old media" audiences.

Donaldson reported that ABC, the network he has been associated with for 40 years, has an audience half the size of what it was a few years ago. He asked what can be done about it. Bennett answered that ultimately what will decide if newspapers survive is if they produce "original content of value." How or where it is presented or published is less important than "what" is being presented or published. "The content is everything," Connolly agreed.

The panel alluded to how traditional journalistic forms are changing. Reporting is now taking place across diverse platforms, which include printed newspapers and websites offering breaking news, blogs, interactive graphics, radio and video. Connolly said that in the world of "multimedia journalism" daily news meetings start with a "web scan" to find out what people are looking at on the web and what to do to feed their websites. Speakers agreed that multimedia journalism is here to stay and described the way their own institutions are "merging" traditional forms with the resources provided by the web. "The debate over whether journalism is being created through different formats—it's over," Bennett said. "It's already happening."

There were, however, strong words of caution about too many blogs being published out of newsrooms. Though blogs can fulfill certain communication needs and can be entertaining, not many can be considered true journalism. The danger, therefore, is to view blogs as part of the mission of journalism. A recent article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that **6** My job, as I see it as a local reporter, is to take advantage of the hype around the border to explain to non-borderites our way of life and what the policies made in Washington do to us."

LOUIE GILOT, El Paso Times

no part of the blogosphere should be considered on the level of a journalistic culture, rich enough to compete in a serious way with the "old media" or to function as a replacement rather than an addendum. Furthermore, the article revealed that about 85 percent of any story in a blog can be traced to newspapers. Newspapers break nearly all important stories.

Bennett referred to the "irony" that newspapers could become "extinct" during the height of the age of information and that papers are going local at the time when the world is going global. For financially stressed newspapers and television networks, "going local" means scaling down overseas operations and turning inward to cover "what we can cover best, our local communities," said Connolly. Editors are facing the challenge of explaining to readers what's going on globally and keeping them engaged in an era of localization.

A report published last fall by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University found that the number of U.S. newspapers' foreign correspondents declined from 188 in 2000 to 141 in 2006. The same is true for American TV networks: during the 1980s, each maintained 15 foreign bureaus; today they have six or fewer. The situation is no better in Mexico. Televisa, the number one Spanish televison network, trimmed its number of full-time international correspondents from 40 to 10, and the Mexican press corps in Washington, D.C., dropped from 12 to seven. Only three Mexican newspapers have correspondents in New York and Los Angeles, despite the fact that there are large Mexican communities in those cities and many more.



The discussion then turned to the border, with all agreeing that coverage should be improved. Alvarez said that for *El Universal*, a newspaper published and distributed primarily in Mexico City, the border is seen as being very far away. Even with reporters stationed in half a dozen Mexican border towns, coverage is limited to migration and drugs, he noted. Bailón proposed "humanizing" the border coverage, by reporting not about immigration and drugs, "which are not tangible things," but rather about how those issues affect people. There is a disconnect between what really happens at the border and who is interviewed for stories, who often are not the people who are actually involved.

The border in many respects exists wherever the issues of the border exist. "One does not need to be on the border to participate in the immigration debate because immigrants are everywhere, in every community, and strong feelings on either side of that debate exist there as well," said Bennett. While there is room for improving coverage outside migration, drugs and trade, they remain the "big issues," and cannot be neglected, especially by investigative journalists.



# Our Shared Border

The working sessions were on background (non-attribution), with the goal of promoting a more open dialogue. Moderated by *San Diego Union Tribune* border correspondent Sandra Dibble, the first panel, *Covering our Shared Border*, included *El Paso Times* border correspondent Louie Gilot, El Paso *EFE* correspondent Patricia Giovine, *El Norte de Juárez* News Editor Alfredo Quijano, and *El Diario de Juárez* correspondent Rocío Gallegos.

Panelists addressed the difficulties of covering the border after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the lack of interest by national media in both countries over what takes place on a daily basis in the border region. The tightening of security has disrupted border communities like El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, which historically have been intertwined culturally and economically. While no cohesive, homogenous border community exists along the border, border towns do share the same problems and frustrations generated by the virtual closing of the border. Delays in crossing affect commerce and people. Mexican students who live in Ciudad Juárez and attend college at UTEP have to get in line to cross as early as 4 am due to delays as long as four hours. Border journalists that write these stories function as a combination of foreign correspondent and local reporter. They must have local contacts but also must 6 6 As a national reporter, I feel I have a responsibility to bring forward in my coverage the fact that Mexican immigration is central to this story."

JULIA PRESTON (left), The New York Times

be able to cast developments in the larger context of U.S.-Mexican relations.

Panelists reported that the heated national debate in the United States on immigration has led to an increase in racism along the border. Stereotypes associated with Ciudad Juárez as a violent city where young women are not safe have taken hold as well. The most die-hard myth about the border is that it is out-of-control and lawless. They said that in many respects, the El Paso-Juárez area is safer than many similar places in the U.S. In 2005, according to press reports, Ciudad Juárez had 240 homicides; Houston, a city of comparable size, had over 300. There is very little coverage of this reality outside of the border town press. National papers miss reporting on how federal policies decided in Washington, D.C. and Mexico City affect entire border communities. Border reporters are beginning to cover how whole communities are coping with the post-9/11 security environment that dominates day-to-day reality. They look for stories that give a face and personality to the statistics that drive the development of U.S. policy in Washington, D.C. Louie Gilot recently wrote a four-part piece about the way border bottlenecks are affecting the community. National editors and reporters from both countries were called on by the speakers to pay closer attention to what happens in the border region.

### Economic News Coverage

The second panel, *Challenges of Economic News Coverage after 9/11*, was chaired by Raúl Rodríguez Barocio, chair of the North American Transborder Studies Center at Arizona State University. Panelists included *El Semanario* Editor-in-chief Samuel García, *McClatchy Newspapers* National Economics Correspondent Kevin G. Hall, and *Plan Juárez* director Lucinda Vargas.

The discussion focused on the need to improve economic news coverage, particularly after the negative impact the 9/11 events have had on bilateral economic relations through the daily flow of goods. There are two challenges to covering economic news in the print media: ensuring the survival of newspapers and achieving relevance with the stories. These challenges require a tradeoff that does not foster better coverage. There are numerous examples where coverage has been insufficient, including in coverage of trucking, a story that is important because of its effect on consumers; the relationship between sister cities along the border; the ways in which border communities cope with the reality of tradeoffs between security and growth; and how the synergies between two countries united by North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) can be activated.

In Mexico, economic stories continue to be seen by editors as unimportant or secondary to political news. Economic news is a phenomenon outside the reach of many editors and reporters who lack proper training and skills to understand them. Even the language can be unfamiliar. It is hard to convince editors that economic issues are relevant. Much of this is due to the way papers are structured and the influence of their financial backers. Mexican papers need to do more to go beyond the agendas of the political elite. They cannot continue to act merely as messengers in political debates. Issues such as competitiveness or monopolies, which might jeopardize sources of advertising, are either not covered at all or given insufficient attention. Independent journalism is problematic when papers depend on governments or business advertising.

Mexican reporters respond to daily events and practice "retail journalism." There is no in-depth reporting on issues. For example, there has not been a real piece of journalism on the impact that remittances have



### LEONARDO KOURCHENKO

on the Mexican economy or the reality of the two countries' economic interdependence. There is no time or space to reflect and there is no deeper analysis. Editors are not thinking about issues in advance, such as the U.S. economic downturn or the impact on the U.S. economy of shutting the door to immigrants.

### Violence Against Journalists

The third panel, Organized Crime and Violence against Journalists, moderated by The Houston Chronicle Mexico Bureau chief Dudley Althus, included the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Executive Director Joel Simon, El Mañana (Nuevo Laredo) Executive Director Ramón Cantú Deandar and La Crónica (Mexicali) and Frontera (Tijuana) Editor-in-Chief Jorge Morales Borbón.

In his luncheon remarks, prior to the panel, Joel Simon noted that Mexico is now the most dangerous country to report from in all of Latin America, with greater incidents of violence than even Colombia. He noted that eighteen reporters have been murdered since 2000, six of them in direct reprisal for their work. Meanwhile, five journalists have gone missing since 2005. Three of them were covering crime stories. Under the Mexican constitution, Simon said, the federal government has the responsibility to guarantee the freedom of the press, but thus far it has failed.

In a letter to the organizers, Mexico's Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora acknowledged that on both sides of the border some journalists have suffered violence at the hands of organized crime. "Covering the reality of the bilateral relation should not be hindered by worries of this kind, but the fact is that they exist, and in many occasions have been manifested against the physical integrity of journalists," his letter stated.

The discussion focused on how the incidence of violent attacks, particularly targeting border reporters, spiked during the last years of the Fox Administration, eventually leading to self-censorship. Many border papers have stopped publishing drug-related news or are doing it without printing bylines. Most reporters feel that the war on drugs is not for them to fight and that ultimately it is not worth putting their own lives at risk to investigate or report drug events. At the same time, giving up is not an option. Some papers are avoiding self-censorship by finding creative ways to publish sensitive information.

The seeming incompetence and lack of political will by Mexico's Office of the Special Prosecutor responsible for investigating crimes against journalists has led many editors and reporters not to report acts of harassment or death threats. They fear corruption or complicity. Some reporters believe that journalists have the responsibility to protect themselves because the  La prensa mexicana magnifica el tipo de declaraciones que exaltan el nacionalismo porque vende."

HOMERO CAMPA, Proceso

government cannot be counted on. They feel it is pointless to demand that the government do something about it. The CPJ strongly believes, however, that the federal government is the only institution that can bring justice and arrest the killers of journalists.

Murders of journalists should be seen as political assassinations when they are a direct result of the type of work they do. Panelists agreed that there is a need to create a strong freedom of the press structure in Mexico that can speak on behalf of the entire press and pressure the government to take action. They also agreed on fighting for a law that protects freedom of expression in Mexico.

## Migration and Immigration

Immigration, a topic with the potential to invoke as much passion and reader's interest as the Iraq war, was the subject of the final session, which was moderated by *The New York Times* national immigration correspondent Julia Preston. The panel included *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Sam Quinones, *Proceso* International News Editor Homero Campa, and *The Wall Street Journal* Latin American correspondent Joel Millman.

Because of its polarizing effect, Mexican immigration has become one of the most challenging topics to cover for American reporters. An increasingly hostile environment against immigrants makes it more difficult for reporters to keep a balanced approach. Should journalists be combating the politicization of the immigration issue by television personalities such as Lou Dobbs and others? How much is the "Dobbs effect" driving the issue, and what, if anything, should be done about it? How and how much should reporters write about the growing number of Americans who are angry about illegal immigration?

Panelists agreed that the question of how to handle the immigration story is one of the hardest issues that journalists must wrestle with today. Most journalists want to explain, enlighten, and marshal evidence compelling enough to impact readers' behavior and worldview. There was a consensus that immigration coverage is inadequate, lacks depth and substance, and is often not put into context. There is a tendency to mix immigration news with opinions. For example, the more anti-American a statement on immigration by a Mexican politician is ("We will destroy the border wall!"), the better chance it has of making the front page. These types of nationalist outbursts sell papers, regardless of whether they accurately reflect the facts.

The effects of closing the immigration "escape valve" on the Mexican economy, the conflictive arguments between American presidential candidates, and the degree to which the U.S. might be importing an "underclass" were some of the next big stories on immigration that were identified. The panel concluded that the immigration debate will continue to dominate the political and social scene. The way that Mexicans are incorporated into our society and the way that the U.S. and Mexico choose to deal with these issues will have a very profound impact on societies of both countries. Being able to communicate this message in a fair and balanced way will continue to challenge reporters on both side of the border.

# Interview with Phil Bennett

As the second-ranking editor at *The Washington Post*, Philip Bennett supervises more than 800 journalists in a newsroom that produces one of the country's leading daily newspapers. A Spanish version of this interview, conducted by Dolia Estévez, was published in *PODER y Negocios*.

# Can the "old media" navigate through this transition without sacrificing standards?

This is the single most important question that we are facing. Most news organizations have fewer resources with which to pursue the news. Gathering news is a very expensive business. A bureau in Baghdad, for example, for those papers that have overseas operations, is very expensive to maintain. Quality journalism is the strongest hold on reader's loyalty and attention. If you decrease the quality of journalism you are going to get into a cycle in which more and more people are going to leave. To solve that equation of fewer resources but improve quality is the hardest thing we are trying to do.

#### Why are newspapers losing readers?

One of the reasons that people are leaving newspapers is because they are searching for new sources of information. If there is something that they feel they already know, they are less likely to remain interested. I think we face a real challenge of producing more original stories of value for people. I think we have the capacity to do that. I am overall an optimist that good newspapers and good journalistic organizations are going to get through this period, but it's going to challenge our ability to change. The most read stories on our website are often the journalism that we are most proud of,



which is enterprise journalism, investigative journalism and real original stories that people can't find anywhere else.

#### Is the media being held more accountable?

The media itself is being held much more accountable than it has in the past. Internet has contributed to that. Because when you write a story you get immediate response to it from all over. Sometimes that response is questioning the accuracy or depth of your reporting.

#### Why do newspapers' survival matter?

Newspapers are still the principle sources of news and information for many communities. They contain the widest variety and depth of reporting. They create community and social cohesion. They are public trusts in that extent.

#### Are foreign correspondents needed?

The decline of the number of newspapers with large overseas operations is very concerning. One of its effects is concentration of sources for international news in just a few newspapers. It also means that even though wire services are available, less investment in foreign news decreases the amount of importance that news organizations give it. One of the myths of journalism is that audiences are not interested in international news. Not true. When you have a great story from overseas, people respond to it just as they respond to any great story. I do think that there is challenge here. Organizations that still have ambitions of international reporting, need to find ways to make those stories special to them, deeper and more original than it has been in the past. International reporting is absolutely essential to maintain the credibility and value of the newspaper.

# Can the lack of quality reporting on bilateral issues have a direct bearing on U.S.-Mexico relations?

All that one needs to do is to compare the importance of this relationship with the level of real understanding that exists between the two sides and you see an enormous gap between those two things. People in the U.S. still struggle to understand Mexico and people in Mexico still struggle to understand the U.S. These are two countries that have so much in common, they are join almost at a molecular level, and still there are big gaps in culture and history, in worldview and language. Just as important is to have Mexican correspondents in the U.S. as it is to have American correspondents in Mexico. Journalism is one of the things that can build a bridge across that gap. I think correspondents are absolutely essential to creating the kind of dialogue that help us understand issues on both sides.

# Conference Agenda

#### **ORGANIZERS:**

Woodrow Wilson Center Mexico Institute
Sam Donaldson Center for Communication Studies, University of Texas, El Paso
Consejo Ciudadano del Premio Nacional de Periodismo
With support from the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City

### SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2007

12:00 PM	Border Tour with Border Patrol (see enclosed agenda for details)
4:30 PM	Reception Hosted by Diana Natalicio, President of the University of Texas, El Paso
5:30 PM	Public Forum: Journalism in Transition, The Challenge of Keeping U.SMexico Relations in the News Special Remarks: Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D-TX) Chair, U.S. House Intelligence Committee, Introduction by Sam Donaldson, ABC Senior Correspondent

#### Welcome

Diana Natalicio, President of the University of Texas, El Paso
Javier Treviño, Board Member, Wilson Center Mexico Institute and Vice President, Cemex
Rossana Fuentes-Berain, Vice President, Consejo Ciudadano del Premio Nacional del Periodismo (CCNP) and Opinion Editor, El Universal
Master of Ceremonies: Sam Donaldson

### **Opening Remarks**

H.E. Arturo Sarukhan, Mexico's Ambassador to the United States Introduction by Diana Natalicio

#### **Roundtable Discussion**

Philip Bennett, Managing Editor, *The Washington Post*Rubén Alvarez, Managing Editor, *El Universal*Gilbert Bailón, President, American Society of Newspaper Editors
Sergio Miramontes, Editorial Processes Manager, *Reforma*Tim Connolly, National and Foreign Editor, *The Dallas Morning News*Facilitators: Sam Donaldson, ABC Senior Correspondent and Leonardo Kourchenko, Vice President, Televisa

#### 7:30 PM

#### Participant Dinner and Introductions

Welcome: Pat Witherspoon, Chair, Communication Department, UTEP Rossana Fuentes-Berain, Vice President, CCNP Andrew Selee, Director, Mexico Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center

### MONDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2007

9:00 AM	<ul> <li>Introduction</li> <li>Andrew Selee, Director, Wilson Center Mexico Institute</li> <li>Dolia Estévez, Conference Coordinator and Washington Correspondent, <i>PODER</i></li> <li>Zita Arocha, Associate Director, Sam Donaldson Center, University of Texas, El Paso</li> </ul>
9:15 AM	<ul> <li>PANEL I: Covering our Shared Border</li> <li>Louie Gilot, Border Correspondent, <i>El Paso Times</i></li> <li>Patricia Giovine, West Texas Correspondent, EFE</li> <li>Alfredo Quijano, News Editor, <i>El Norte de Juarez</i></li> <li>Rocio Gallegos, Correspondent, <i>El Diario de Juarez</i></li> <li><i>Moderator:</i> Sandra Dibble, Border Correspondent, <i>San Diego Union Tribune</i></li> </ul>
10:45 AM	Break
11:00 AM	<ul> <li>PANEL II: The Challenges of Economic News Coverage after 9/11</li> <li>Samuel Garcia, Editor-in-Chief, <i>El Semanario</i> Kevin G. Hall, National Economics Correspondent, McClatchy Newspapers</li> <li>Lucinda Vargas, Director, Plan Juarez</li> <li>Moderator: Raúl Rodríguez-Barocio, Chairman, North American Center, Arizona State University</li> </ul>

12:45 PM	Lunch Remarks: Joel Simon, Executive Director, Committee to Protect Journalists Introduction by Dolia Estévez
2:15 PM	<ul> <li>PANEL III: Organized Crime and Violence against Journalists</li> <li>Joel Simon, Committee to Protect Journalists</li> <li>Ramon Cantú Deandar, Executive Director, <i>El Mañana</i> (Nuevo Laredo)</li> <li>Jorge Morales Borbón, Editor in Chief, <i>La Crónica</i> (Mexicali), and <i>Frontera</i> (Tijuana), Periodicos Healy</li> <li><i>Moderator:</i> Dudley Althaus, Mexico Bureau Chief, <i>Houston Chronicle</i></li> </ul>
3:45 PM	Break
4:00 PM	<ul> <li>PANEL IV: Immigrants and Migration</li> <li>Sam Quinones, Correspondent, Los Angeles Times</li> <li>Homero Campa, International News Editor, Proceso</li> <li>Joel Millman, Latin American Correspondent, The Wall Street Journal</li> <li>Moderator: Julia Preston, National Correspondent The New York Times</li> </ul>
5:30 PM	Adiournment



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