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Writing Beyond Boundaries

Andrew Selee and Heidy Servin-Baez

Journalists play an essential role in interpreting the changes taking place both at home and abroad. They are, in very real ways, the “eyes and ears” of citizens, a role that is even more important in international affairs, since most people lack direct access to information about events occurring in other countries. Journalists provide a vital bridge to ideas across borders, they interpret events in other countries to home audiences, and, indirectly, they help set an agenda for what citizens know and think about other countries. Nonetheless, despite the important role that journalists play, they have been given insufficient attention in most studies of international relations.

If journalists are important actors in international affairs in general, they are even more so in the relationship between Mexico and the United States, two countries that have undergone a rapid process of integration over the past twenty-five years. The number of Mexicans living in the United States has almost quintupled, from 2.2 million in 1980 to around 10.6 million in 2004. It is almost impossible to find a municipality in Mexico or a county in the United States that has not been touched by migration. At the same time, there may be as many as a million Americans living in Mexico, the largest U.S. community abroad. In ten years, trade between the two countries tripled from \$83 billion a year in 1993 to \$244 billion in 2003. Millions of citizens in the two countries depend directly or indirectly on these economic interactions. In addition, the border region has grown to over

ten million people, who share common environmental, health, and economic challenges.

This rapidly evolving relationship requires a new kind of cross-border journalism, one that gives the audience a deeper understanding of the context of current events across the border; covers nontraditional stories about social, cultural, and political changes taking place within the other country; and tells the full story of Mexicans living in the United States, not just as heroes or victims, but as the subjects of complex transformations taking place in both countries. Fortunately, journalists in both countries have risen to the challenge. They have found ways to write more nuanced stories about each other and discovered new stories that need to be told with a different voice. They have learned to cover the border not only as a dividing line but also as a seam that ties together people on each side. This new coverage is driven by the emergence of a new brand of journalists who know the two countries well, by a changing audience that demands different kinds of coverage about the other country, by new alliances between media companies in the two countries, and by new technologies that allow for a rapid exchange of information.

However, the relationship is evolving even faster than the media can keep up with. Scarce resources and the pressures of publishing often impose limits on journalists' creativity. Few television companies, radio stations, newspapers, or magazines have resources assigned to long-term investigative reporting about the other country.

In July, the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and *Foreign Affairs en Español* will publish *Writing Beyond Borders*, an in-depth look at how news coverage between Mexico and the United States is changing. The volume, which contains chapters in both English and Spanish, is edited by Rossana Fuentes-Beraín, Andrew Selee, and Heidy Servin-Baez, with a prologue by Alejandro Junco. This bulletin presents excerpts from the introduction and from several of the chapters.



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“CONTANDO HISTORIAS”

Rossana Fuentes-Beraín

Managing Editor, *Foreign Affairs en Español*

Los periodistas y los editores son contadores de historias, “storytellers”, y en ese sentido, la historia que hemos estado contando en los últimos años sobre lo que pasa en cada uno de los dos países, México y Estados Unidos, y en su relación bilateral, es una historia incompleta. Incompleta pero no inexistente. De hecho hay mucha cobertura, mucho deseo de explicarnos el uno al otro. Podríamos escoger, el año de la salida del libro de Alan Riding, *Vecinos Distantes: Un Retrato de los Mexicanos*, como el punto de inicio de una historia mejor contada.

Contamos una historia, porque todos los días en los medios de Estados Unidos y en los de México hay materiales que dan cuenta de lo que esta sucediendo en nuestras sociedades, pero en ésta hora de crisis donde, ni el periodismo estadounidense ni el mexicano están pasando por su mejor hora esas historias no siempre reflejan las tonalidades de gris en las que se vive la cotidianidad, son en cambio historias en blanco o negro, muchas más veces en negro, que solo retratan los problemas que vive la sociedad.

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Yo creo que el parroquialismo, prevaleciente en nuestras sociedades, el pensar que nuestros respectivos países son el centro del universo y no poder

comprender la razón de ser de los otros, nos hace difícil reflejar en nuestro trabajo los matices de lo que acontece en cada uno de los países.

Este estado de las cosas no tiene que ser inamovible. Hoy es cierto que los medios en México están centrados en la cobertura de los escándalos políticos nacionales y los medios en Estados Unidos en cuanto a su cobertura internacional privilegian el Medio Oriente, pero pienso que entre estos dos extremos tiene que mantenerse una idea central en los dos países que corresponda al deber de la prensa de darle al público un registro de la historia básica de nuestros tiempos: la silenciosa pero creciente integración de nuestras sociedades.

Concluyo señalando que si buscamos entender un poco mejor el nivel del debate que estamos viviendo y evitar la trampa en la que caemos con los estereotipos, simple y sencillamente más allá de los buenos deseos de los académicos, para que los periodistas no se aburran de escribir la misma historia 50 veces, y seguir dando vueltas a la noria después de muchos años, creo que lo que sería deseable es, efectivamente pasar al principio de salir de la cobertura de lo que es importante para las elites de ambos países y extender una nueva definición. Yo no sé si estamos listos, ni en México ni en Estados Unidos, para vivir con esa nueva realidad que se está construyendo y que nos tiene a los dos, francamente, desconcertados.

Despite journalists’ interest in reporting nontraditional stories, they also know that breaking news is more likely to grab a headline (and an editor’s attention) than investigative reporting. Moreover, as government priorities change—and with it the attention politicians give to the bilateral relationship—so too does the importance given to press coverage of the other country. These are constraints that ultimately limit the full emergence of the new kind of cross-border journalism. But while these constraints impose limitations, they have been unable to stop the overall trend towards better, more frequent, and more nuanced press coverage between Mexico and the United States.

New Stories, New Approaches

Over the past twenty-five years, the number of Mexican and American reporters covering each

other’s country has increased dramatically. The number of news items carried by major news sources about each other’s country has also increased significantly, and these are more likely to find their way on to the front page of newspapers or become lead stories on the evening news than ever before. However, not only are there more reporters and more stories, but there are different stories being told, and reporters are finding different approaches to telling them.

Press coverage between the two countries used to be taken up primarily by a few major issues: trade, drugs, and immigration. While these continue to be important stories, the growing complexity of the bilateral agenda has generated a new range of stories being covered. These include the increasingly important bilateral issues of border security and environment. In addition, they

include stories about the economic, political, and social changes taking place in the other country. For example, The *Washington Post* has run a series of stories on Mexico's educational system and the rule of law; Copley News Service has commissioned stories on migrant lives between the two countries; and the *Wall Street Journal* covers internal economic developments in Mexico closely. Similarly, *Reforma* reproduces stories from the *New York Times*, and regional newspapers like *AM León* and *La Voz de Michoacán* give coverage to regional stories in U.S. states where many of their readers have family members. Almost all media in both countries give coverage to national election campaigns in the other country with a frequency and depth that would have been unimaginable fifteen years ago.

Journalists also give greater nuance to their stories today than fifteen years ago. In many cases, this means presenting the complex debates that go on within each country around political campaigns and policy decisions. Increasingly, journalists manage to capture policy debates in the other country that involve competing views among and within political parties and between the executive and legislative branch, rather than representing these as products of a monolithic national will. They also increasingly present the historical and political context of important but controversial issues, such as immigration and energy. It is particularly notewor-

thy that many journalists in both countries have made an effort to understand the real lives of both documented and undocumented migrants, as well as addressing the concerns that migration raises in both countries.

The Forces Transforming Cross-Border Journalism

Several forces are driving the change in journalistic coverage between Mexico and the United States. First, the intensity of the relationship between the two countries has created a need for citizens to understand those who live across the border, their issues, and their points of view. The volume of trade, the impact of migration, and the heightened attention to border issues have all raised the profile of bilateral issues for citizens in both countries. Even elections in either country get attention in the other country's media given the impact that electoral shifts in one country can have on the other. At a time when U.S. international press coverage is overwhelmingly given to Middle East concerns and Mexican press coverage has turned inward to focus on the upcoming elections, the two countries have still not fallen out of focus in each other's press. While there may be little of the headline grabbing news that existed in 2001, there is a durability to public attention on the main issues in the relationship that does not allow them to drop out of view.

“FOUR TRENDS”

Philip Bennett

Managing Editor, *The Washington Post*

...I would like to mention four trends that I see influencing our coverage of this relationship, listed here without order of importance. The first is that Mexico is going to continue to separate itself from the rest of Latin America as an area of press coverage. For example, no one is even talking about the U.S. coverage of Brazil. U.S. media do not cover Brazil. It is not a topic of conversation even, and I think in many ways Mexico is becoming increasingly a sort of special case. I am not sure what that means, but it is an interesting trend.

The second trend is that increasingly non-elites are going to set the agenda and that media is likely to be slow to pick this up. This returns to the idea of being

behind the curve, that there are experiences that people have of immigration and economic influences being exerted across the border that are not being felt in Washington or represented by Washington, but are the daily bread of many, many people who are not being consulted by the national media.

The third trend is that Latinos in the United States matter as readers, as voters, and as consumers, particularly as their political power increases and as the political divide hardens. Polls also show that most Latinos in the United States identify in some way with Mexico. They also tell pollsters that they care about what happens in Mexico.

The fourth trend is that the Web, although slowly, will matter more as a vehicle for carrying news freely across the border, for creating new forums, new audiences, new constituencies, and more critical demand for information.

The new journalism is also driven by the emergence of audiences who are directly touched by the other country. As trade and migration have increased, different people in both countries have a direct stake in the relationship and follow it for highly personal reasons tied to jobs, family, and friends. These audiences are not always interested in what happens in Washington and Mexico City, however. They include businesspeople, who focus on economic trends in the other country; Mexican migrants who are interested in hometown stories from their state of origin; families of migrants who often follow events where their relatives live in the United States; and Americans of Mexican descent, who are often interested in feature stories that give them a link to their country of heritage. Some newspapers, such as the *Dallas Morning News*, *La Voz de Michoacán*, and *The Orange Country Register* have identified key segments in their readership that fit into one or more of these categories and targeted news stories specifically to them.

For border media, the challenge is even more complex since their audience is often binational. Mexican television and radio stations at the border often broadcast to Spanish-speaking audiences on the U.S. side and get much of their advertising dollars from the United States as well. U.S. media at the border reach both Americans who live on the Mexican side and Mexican businesspeople and politicians who follow events across the border close-

ly. In addition, non-profit community radio stations in the two countries have tried to link Spanish-speaking listeners in the United States with listeners in Mexico through binational call-in programs.

Media companies in the two countries have also developed cross-border alliances that have helped shape strategies of journalistic coverage. The strategic partnership between Televisa and Univisión, though fraught with tension, has allowed for the sharing of news coverage. Mexican viewers often see U.S. footage done by U.S.-based Univisión, while Univisión's viewers in the United States receive images from Mexico from Mexico's Televisa. Mexico's TV Azteca has taken a different approach, starting its own channel, Azteca Americas, in the United States. Azteca America often borrows coverage from its Mexican parent company, but has also had to innovate in creating its own news sources relevant to an audience of Mexicans living in the United States.

Among print media, *Reforma* has developed an ambitious alliance with the *New York Times*, where they can reproduce each other's stories, while *El Universal* has done the same with the *Dallas Morning News*, a paper that has agreements with nineteen different newspapers in Mexico. Similarly, *La Voz de Michoacán* has an alliance with the *El Sol de Yakima* in eastern Washington state to exchange weekly stories. In the United States, several English-language newspapers have developed sister papers in Spanish,

“COVERING WASHINGTON”

Dolía Estevez

Correspondent, *El Semanario* and *Radio Monitor*

Washington is a tough nut to crack, especially for foreign reporters, who often have less access to government sources than the intern of the smallest newspaper of the tiniest state of the United States.

If before NAFTA Washington was an important foreign post for Mexican reporters, during the NAFTA negotiations it became the number one post. In 1989, there were three Mexican media organizations with correspondents in Washington. By 1994, the number jumped to eleven, where it remains now.

In the beginning of the 1990s, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to get U.S. officials to return calls (an exclusive interview with a top level official

was pretty much out of the question). In the 1990s there were two major developments that changed the role of media in the bilateral relation: the NAFTA negotiations and the technological information revolution.

As a result, now there is more access, and sources of information can actually be developed. There are two reasons for this: Mexican media is perceived as more professional, trustworthy, and independent than before, and, because news travels in real time, the U.S. government seems to be more concerned with what the foreign media publishes than ever before.

In this new era, we have become transmitters of messages, an arena for settling or starting new disputes, and a means to test political or negotiation positions. In the information age, the media does not make foreign policy—but foreign policy cannot be made without the media.

“TARGET AUDIENCES”**Alfredo Corchado**Correspondent, *Dallas Morning News*

For most of my career in journalism, ten of those years at the *The Dallas Morning News*, I have grappled with that very issue, understanding two societies. *The Dallas Morning News* has one of the largest, if not the largest, foreign bureau in Mexico City. We have five print reporters and one TV correspondent. Mexico, to us, is a very local story.

We have identified three separate core groups that generally represent the bulk of what we think are our Mexican readership. For the most part they hate elites, so they are not much into the elite coverage.

First, we have the regular Texan, who is more interested in economics, trends, and tourism stories. They like politics, but usually related to how it impacts their businesses. Second, we have a very large Mexican-American population. The readers are very interested in Mexico, but in a vicarious way. It is the land of their ancestors, and like the Texans they are also very interested in feature stories. Travel stories are very big because of the proximity to places like Cancún, San Miguel de Allende, etc.

Finally, there are the people that we call *el México de allá* or *el México de acá*—that is the Mexicans living abroad. We have an interesting mix in North Texas, a lot of *campesinos*, but also a lot of people that we call urban immigrants. These are people who are putting food on the table. They are trying to assimilate, but remain very nostalgic, and not just nostalgic, but also very involved in the politics of back home. They are interested in the everyday politics, the economy, but they are not interested in the theater of Mexico City or Washington, D.C. They want to know what’s happening in their states, whether it is Guanajuato, Durango, Chihuahua, San Luis Potosí or Michoacán. It is sort of like having a large American population living, for example, in France, except that this population keeps growing and growing and growing.

Recently, *The Dallas Morning News* launched two new products, *Al Día*, a Spanish-language daily that appears from Monday through Saturday, and *Quick*, a condensed version of the *Dallas Morning Newspaper*. It is kind of like the *Express* here in Washington. The target audience for both is vastly different, but they both agree on one thing, and that’s that they really do not care that much about policymakers in either Mexico City or Washington, D.C.

including the *Chicago Tribune* (with *Hoy*) and the *Dallas Morning News* (with *Al Día*).

Technology and the Internet are also playing a role in transforming journalism across the border. Journalists have access to information about the other country almost instantly and can consult several sources on a developing story. Particularly for smaller regional media outside of the capitals, this low-cost access to information has increased their ability to cover international affairs. The Internet has also allowed newspapers to engage in online chats with leading public figures across the border, something that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a new generation of reporters who know each other’s countries and are well-versed in its nuances and subtleties. Indeed, some reporters who cover binational issues, including a few in this volume, call both countries home or have roots in each. The training, promotion, and retention of journalists

who are sensitive to world issues—especially between Mexico and the United States—will remain fundamental to improving international reporting. Much of the change that has taken place over time owes itself to the editors and reporters who are familiar with the other country and sensitive to its complexity.

Living with Limitations and Tensions

To a large extent, journalists at leading news sources in Mexico and the United States have put aside old stereotypes that once dominated public perceptions of each other’s country. American media tended to echo Americans’ perception of Mexico as a land of crime and corruption, while the Mexican press reveled in stories that confirmed their public’s suspicion of the United States as a reckless and violent neighbor that had to be resisted at all turns. These views no longer dominate public opinion in the two countries, but they remain latent in important sectors of the intellectual elite and occasionally seep

into cross-border reporting as well. Similarly, reporting in both countries on Mexicans living in the United States often emphasizes undocumented migrants over legal migrants, despite the roughly equal numbers of both.

The most important limitations that journalists face, however, have nothing to do with stereotypes, but rather with the structure and incentives that cross-border journalism faces. Many Mexican media sources are limited to covering Washington, DC and, in rare cases, a few other major cities (notable exceptions are *Reforma*, with correspondents in three cities, and *La Jornada*, in two cities). Going beyond traditional coverage, therefore, requires journalists to invest extra time—and occasionally their own resources—in pursuing new stories outside of their usual beat. U.S.

media sources are generally based in Mexico City as well, although several have invested considerable resources in their Mexican coverage in recent years (*The Los Angeles Times* and *Dallas Morning News* each have five reporters in Mexico; the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* each have two.)

Moreover, journalists know that whatever their own interests and intentions, breaking stories that present traditional angles often grab headlines more easily than new stories that require investigative reporting. With the relationship between the two governments increasingly distant, what were once lead stories about the other country are often pushed further inside newspapers and magazines and given less time on television and radio broadcasts. It is often even harder to present fresh angles and new stories at

“THE STORIES THAT WHISPER”

Sandra Dibble

Correspondent, *San Diego Union-Tribune*

Covering Tijuana and Baja California means writing about a world that is both near and far for many of our readers. Some intensely dislike Mexico and would prefer to avoid the subject altogether; they complain bitterly when we dedicate news pages—especially local news pages—to our southern neighbor, and threaten to cancel their subscription when they are particularly displeased. Others have an intense interest in Mexico and the border, travel there regularly, and keep a close eye on what we say. And a growing number live in Mexico: Sunday sales of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* in Tijuana are above 3,400, and many of the readers are the city’s decision-makers.

The Metro Desk of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* is made up of teams. I work for the “Border Team,” which includes an immigration writer, a business writer, and two reporters assigned to the newspaper’s Tijuana bureau. We also have a one-person bureau in Mexico City, that reports to our parent company, Copley Newspapers. The newspaper also has a Spanish-language weekly, *Enlace*, that is primarily geared to U.S. Latinos, and delivered free at homes and in newsstands in San Diego; *Enlace* writers, based north of the border, are regularly translated for the English-language paper, usually for the feature sections. But for the most part,

when considering the daily life of Tijuana, there are really only the two of us in the Tijuana bureau, and we are often overwhelmed with the breaking news stories and big issues of the day.

Covering the border begs the question: is Mexico a foreign country, or is it part of our region? In San Diego, it is both. Witness the lines of northbound cars crawling toward the border each morning, filled with workers, students and shoppers. Or drive to a housing development in the farthest reaches of Tijuana and notice the preponderance California license plates. But for all the ties, there are also stark legal, economic and cultural differences. Reporting on the region means reflecting both the links and the dissonance.

Some topics come up with reliable regularity. One recurring theme is the mishaps that occur to Americans traveling in Baja California as they purchase medicine, drive cars, and have encounters with Mexican police... Another subject that doesn’t go away is the drug violence... These are stories that shout—subjects that easily make it to the front page of our newspaper, that foreign correspondents will rush to cover, only to rush out again. And they are essential to covering this region. But in the rush to cover those, something is forgotten: The stories that whisper. A professor in journalism school taught me the phrase, “The real news never makes the deadline.” Whispering stories rarely make the deadline. But they are no less important in telling the story of the border region.

“NORTH TO SOUTH, SOUTH TO NORTH”

Maria Martin

President, GraciasVida Productions

Founding Producer, *Latino USA*

If we do not understand the reality and the context of the Diaspora of Latinos from Mexico, from Guatemala, from Argentina, from Bolivia, from throughout the continent, then we are failing as a press. From the point of view of a U.S.-based reporter doing my job of trying to reflect the United States reality to my audience, understanding and reporting what is happening within our own borders is a compelling argument for improving our coverage of Mexico and indeed of Latin America.

We as journalists are, or should be, compelled to improve our coverage to reflect this complex reality. Also, to reflect the changing face of our audiences, and the need for understanding across national borders and cultural divides as our two societies transform with the demographics and the dynamics of immigrations. There is the audience in Mexico, there is the American audience in the U.S, the policy making audience in this country, which is becoming more and more diverse; there is the audience of Latinos in the United States—that growing and very complex audience with an appetite for media that reflects the reality that they know.

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This is what I was trying to do with *Latino USA*, a half-hour radio magazine of news and culture distributed by NPR, of which I was the founding producer when it went on the air in 1993, and which I executive produced for ten years. The idea was to have a forum that would create a bridge of cultural understanding, that would reflect the Latino reality in all of its aspects, that would give us a place in the public radio spectrum, and that would appeal to all audiences, especially that key decision making audience that listens to National Public Radio. The second stage of that vision was to increase our coverage of Mexico and Latin America, not in a parachute kind of way, but to hear more commentators and more reporters from Latin America. We would be hearing the voices of Latin American thinkers, artists, poets, and people on the streets. My idea was that we start this on *Latino USA*, and then this type of coverage would transcend to the major news programs on NPR. That someday on public radio we would hear a programming stream of public radio programming from Latin America and from this country, in English and Spanish, that would go beyond the *telenovelas*, the “*Sábado Gigantes*”—coverage that would be coming from the South to the North as well as from the North to the South—quality coverage creating greater understanding and affirming the best in us. That was a dream I had when I was at *Latino USA*.

a time when any cross-border coverage is less likely to generate the interest it once did.

Writing Beyond Boundaries

Despite these limitations, the new kinds of reporting emerging in Mexico and the United States about each other give testament to the persistence and creativity of journalists and editors who are interested in looking for new stories told in a different voice. The new stories—the ones told with nuance and fresh angles—are largely those that interpret the changes taking place in each country to audiences in the other and those that explore the integration going on between them. These are sto-

ries that give context to political debates and ideological arguments in the other country; see migrant communities as complex and varied; link the economic and political changes taking place within each country to its impact on the other; explore the border and its challenges as a whole rather than as two halves; and mine the cultural and social links that tie people in the two countries together.

The challenge of the new cross-border journalism is to write beyond boundaries, to break out of the constraints of international coverage that reports on “the other” to cover instead a “we” composed of two societies, two economies, and two peoples in a state of gradual, but significant integration.

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