Written evidence from Daniela Pastrana, founder, Pie de Página, Mexico (GMF0028)

Introduction

1. I am a Mexican journalist specialized in human rights and social movements. I am a founder and a general editor of Pie de Página, a digital media platform formed by local and international journalists specialized in social issues. For six years I also headed la Red de Periodistas de a Pie, an organization of journalists that seeks to improve the quality of journalism in Mexico through capacity building and exchanging investigation methods, narrative styles, strategies and experiences among media professionals.

2. La Red de Periodistas de a Pie received the Free Media Pioneer Award from the International Press Institute (IPI) in 2015 in recognition of the organization’s work to improve freedom of expression and facilitate access to information in Mexico.

Key threats to press freedom in Mexico

3. A key challenge to press freedom in Mexico are media owners, many of whom have not been able to adjust their practices to a changing media landscape. The Internet has triggered an economic crisis in media houses around the world. In Mexico, media owners do not understand the new media landscape and have left the responsibility of navigating this transition to journalists. Around 1,500 journalists have been fired over the last two years. Fewer journalists have fewer resources to cover important topics, creating a “centralization of information”.

4. In Mexico, there is a tendency by which independent media actors pave the way for the free flow of information but, when the way looks clear, big media houses buy them out. This is a big problem, as these big media houses are dependent on advertisement money and generally represent political and business interests. There are very fundamental topics that are only covered by independent media, such as migration, territorial conflicts in rural areas and the disappearances of people. There are 40,000 people missing in Mexico. What democracy can live like that? And this issue is covered only by local, independent media.

5. A related point is that journalists’ salaries are too low, which also threatens press freedom and journalist safety. In big national media houses, journalists earn the equivalent of around 20 US dollars per article. The situation is even worse for those working in independent media: many independent journalists work for free, without any kind of salary. For example, the journalists of the media platform Chiapas Paralelo have never received any economic compensation from their work. This is a fundamental problem that also relates to the violence journalists face in Mexico. Media workers do not have enough resources to take the necessary safety measures. For example, how can you call and report that someone is following you if you don’t have enough credit on your phone? Journalists cannot concentrate on their security when all their energy goes into making their daily living.

6. Another key threat are the local authorities. The main attacks suffered by journalists come from the local authorities. In Mexico City, journalists are in a very different position than in other areas and more able to practice independent journalism without a likelihood of danger. In general, the smaller the town, the more dangerous the situation is. The threat of death is highest in the smallest localities and districts. Journalists who work for local radio stations
are the most vulnerable. Six local radio reporters have been killed in the past five months alone.

7. Organized crime is obviously a severe threat to journalists working in Mexico. Organized crime—not only drug-related cartels but also other criminal groups—threaten journalists’ lives and are behind some of the killings.

8. The public discourse used by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador when he criticizes journalists has alarmed some people. I don’t think the president himself represents a real danger nor do I think that his intention is to threaten journalists. There is nothing new in his discourse: He already spoke in the same tone when in the opposition. But what can be worrying is how other people, even those inside the president’s own party, interpret his words. In Mexico, the media houses are quite distant from citizens. People who feel that they have been ignored by the media might take the president’s words as permission to attack journalists even if they are not meant to be taken that way.

Recommendations

9. There are several things countries like UK could do to promote press freedom in Mexico. First of all, concerns about press freedom should be highlighted in diplomatic discussions. It would help if diplomats follow the situation and keep track of press freedom violations that take place in Mexico. It is important to send to Mexican authorities the message that the international community is well-informed of what is occurring, and that the world is watching not only Venezuela, but also Mexico.

10. Secondly, capacity building, where investigative journalists from different countries exchange experiences, can be helpful. It must be noted that because contexts are very different there is no model that can be simply imported to Mexico. However, exchanging investigation methods and other knowledge among journalists working in independent media houses around the world can be useful.

11. There should be more international support for strengthening independent media in Mexico. Currently, international help is mostly inaccessible for independent media actors. For example, the EU has so many requirements to access support that independent media have no chance to meet them if they don’t join together with big media houses. It is very important to support independent media as that is the only way that many fundamental topics get covered.

12. Every news agency needs a platform for its publications. For independent media, finding these platforms has been sometimes hard due to the lack of economic recourses. Since the arrival of the internet, publishing has become infinitely cheaper. Digital platforms offer many ways to make journalism, but there is still a lack of knowledge in Mexico on how to engage audiences and take advantage of the possibilities created by the Internet. The international community could offer capacity building for independent media actors so as to help them create sustainable media platforms using the tools provided by the Internet.

13. The topic of journalists’ salaries is often the last thing to be considered but it is very central for press freedom. Poverty exposes journalists to physical danger. Journalists are not able to invest in their safety when a daily living is not guaranteed. Many times, international assistance is offered only when a journalist’s life has already been threatened. There are
reactive security programmes and measure to improve physical safety, but not enough effort is placed on prevention. Mexico’s problems are over-diagnosed, but there is no economic support for independent journalists. It is good to have workshops and capacity-building, but in the end, how can one produce quality journalism if one cannot make basic ends meet?

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