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Challenges and Dangers of Reporting in a Tumultuous Border Region: How Journalists at the *El Paso Times* Deal with the Violence in Neighboring Ciudad Juarez

Cathleen Carter and Kris Kodrich

This research topic immediately caught my attention through my personal experience of growing up in a border town in the Rio Grande Valley. I knew upon reading this article from *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* I would find a lot of similarities between El Paso and my hometown. However, my experiences are that of a civilian; this article would allow me to gain a deeper understanding of how journalists who are continually threatened personally cope with reporting extreme violence occurring just a few miles away across the United States/Mexico border and what should be done to lower the risk of psychological damage for these reporters.

The researchers first gathered background information on that particular region using border theory. They found that El Paso and Ciudad Juarez have an established sense of community because they are both affected by the violence of the drug cartels. As Carter and Kodrich stated, “The border area is really a blending of both countries.”

In order to learn about the psychological effects journalists are faced with when covering border violence, the researchers conducted the study using two methods: ethnography and in-depth interview. First, ethnography was used to gather the information needed to formulate questions for the in-depth interviews. Staff of the *El Paso Times* was observed daily – from news meetings, working in the newsroom, to following the reporters to their assignment. After becoming familiar with the staff via ethnography, the researchers then conducted the in-depth interviews.

Through the in-depth interviews, they found that the reporters covering border violence receive regular threats and are more concerned about the safety of their family and co-workers than themselves. One reporter mentions how there is now a lack of news coverage because of the overwhelming threats to reporters, especially for Mexican

newspaper reporters – many of whom have died for reporting the truth. This is something I have noticed in South Texas as well.

Given the delicate nature of the issue at hand, the reporters did not want to be recorded during their interviews. The researchers then compromised by handwriting the session and later transcribing the notes. At some points of the interview, the journalists asked to be unidentified and refrained from answering ultra sensitive questions. I wouldn't identify these as problems because based on the article it didn't appear to compromise the study.

Even after these small hiccups, many of the journalists felt a sense of relief having the opportunity to talk about their experiences. The researchers emphasized the importance of providing an outlet outside of research purposes for the reporters to share their stories and emotions, for they are at risk of suffering psychological damage like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This study is aware of the fact that journalists reporting away from border regions also deal with violence in their respective locations. They hope all reporters can benefit from the results of the study.

I found this research extremely engaging and it's been on my mind since reading it. This article really hit close to home and I appreciate the research that has been conducted in this topic. I personally haven't been to Mexico in years even though up until a month ago, it was a mere 10-mile drive. As it is mentioned in the article, I too experienced traveling to a border town (Matamoros, Mexico) seeing Mexican military swarming the city in full gear with large weapons – that was the last time I set foot in Mexico. The drug war has affected my family as well. My parents have stopped communicating by phone to our family in Monterrey and now hear from them via email once every several months just to let us know they are doing all right. The sad truth is we don't know if we will ever be able to see them again. It's just too dangerous to travel.

While I am not in the trenches as are the brave journalists of the *El Paso Times* and other border media outlets, I greatly empathize the risks they take to inform the public.