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# Brave Mexican journalists are heroes in drug wars

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By **Ruben Navarrette**  
San Diego Union-Tribune  
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Part of being a Latino columnist is getting unsolicited travel advice. Disgruntled readers will often tell me to "go back to Mexico," even though I was born in the United States, as were my parents, three grandparents, six great-grandparents, etc. I'm a Mexican-American Yankee Doodle Dandy.

But if it is all the same to my readers and the travel industry, I would just as soon stay away from some parts of Mexico. They say the pen is mightier than the sword. Yet, south of the border, it's not faring well against automatic weapons. It's open season on Mexican journalists who cover the drug trade and are being murdered while trying to report their stories.

In the United States, with declining circulation and falling ratings, the media worry that they're no longer relevant to people's lives.

In Mexico, you could say that the media remain so relevant that, if you anger the wrong people, it could end your life.

That's what happened to Jose Luis Romero, a 40-year-old radio journalist who filed his broadcasts from the state of Sinaloa - ground zero in the drug war, because so much of that illicit commodity is produced there. Romero, who was famous for his broadcasts on drug trafficking, was abducted from a restaurant at gunpoint a few weeks ago. His body was later found along a highway, discarded like a fast-food wrapper.

A similar fate met Valentin Valdes Espinosa, a 29-year-old reporter who was kidnapped and later found tortured and shot to death in Coahuila state. Espinosa's body was found with a note: "This is going to happen to those who don't understand. The message is for everyone."

The message: Mind your own business. Apparently, even though often depicted in movies and the pop culture as folk heroes and immortalized in song, drug traffickers would kill for some privacy.

And they have - often. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission estimates 59 journalists have been killed in that country since 2000. Last year alone, 11 were murdered.

And it is not just reporters who are in danger. Sometimes, management is also under attack.

Mexican law enforcement authorities believe drug cartels are responsible for the death of Jose Alberto Velazquez Lopez, owner of the Mexican newspaper Expresiones de Tulum in the state of Quintana Roo, who was gunned down in his car after leaving an office Christmas party.

Journalism has become a dangerous profession in Mexico, and everyone knows it. That's the whole point. These executions are done in the public eye to scare off others who might kick up dust by digging where they shouldn't. Sometimes, unfortunately, it works. A major newspaper in Coahuila - Zocalo de Saltillo - recently announced it would stop covering drug violence altogether rather than risk the lives of its reporters.

Luckily, other Mexican journalists refuse to run and hide. In fact, they've resolved to fight back - not with guns and bullets but with words and truth. Instead of feeling threatened by how they've rattled the drug kingpins, they actually seem emboldened by it. This message is also starting to get out.

In a commencement speech at the Columbia School of Journalism in May, Mexican newspaper publisher Alejandro Junco de la Vega described the situation this way:

"A nascent democracy next door is being crippled by evil criminals."

He sees journalism as one of the few institutions that can reverse this trend. And he credits journalists with fueling the resistance.

"The journalists who put this work together each day do so at great personal risk," Junco de la Vega told the graduates. "They are bearing the burden of fractured family lives and the ever-present threat of violence."

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That's not courage.

Real courage is punching in and doing your job when domestic terrorists are determined to silence you for good.

As journalists, it's one thing to write about heroes - and another to become one.

Contact San Diego Union-Tribune columnist Ruben Navarrette at [ruben.navarrette@uniontrib.com](mailto:ruben.navarrette@uniontrib.com).

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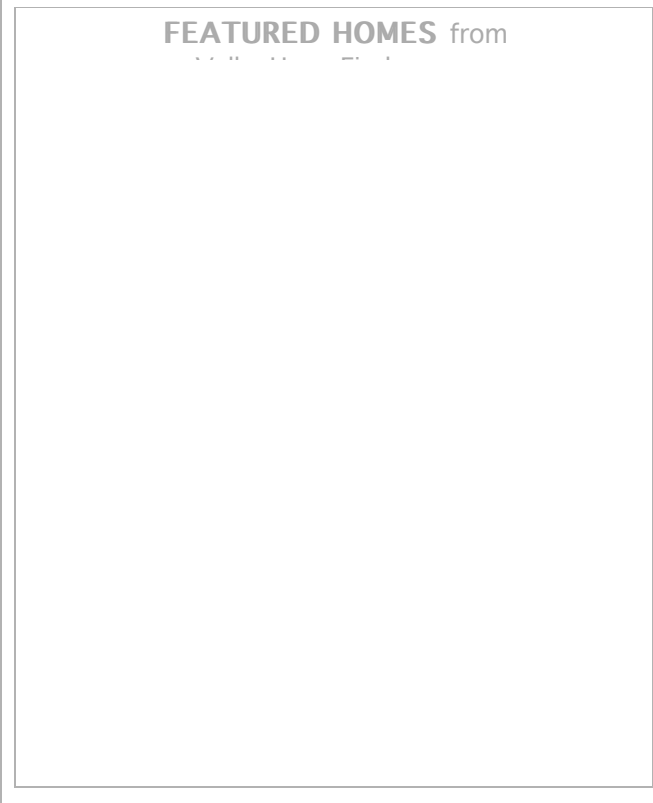
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