

## **In Mexico, Printing Truth Can/ Put The Journalist's Life At Risk**

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THE JOURNALISM OF J. Jesus Blancornelas hearkens to phrases etched in stone above the halls where American journalists earn degrees:

*The truth shall set you free. The pen is mightier than the sword.*

In Blancornelas' work day, the pen must be mightier than the machine gun.

Which is why Blancornelas says he is living on the Spanish-language equivalent of borrowed time. He talked about his life one recent November night in a marble-laden Tijuana hotel. Blancornelas, editor and co-founder of the Tijuana-based Zeta newspaper, spoke to reporters studying the U.S./Mexican border.

He arrived flanked by armed guards. The security detail, provided by the Mexican military, accompanies him around the clock.

"Five years, 11 months, four days and 12 hours," he repeated several times. That was the time passed since a gunman nearly assassinated the 67-year-old Blancornelas.

THE DAY READS like a Hollywood script: Nov. 27, 1997 -- Blancornelas is being driven to work. His driver notes a car of drug dealers. Not a surprising sight in Tijuana, or to Blancornelas -- who has made it his journalistic calling to write explicitly about who is selling drugs, accepting bribes, and which government official is turning his head.

The other car blocks the road. The window rolls down. A gun points out. Nearly 200 bullets later, his driver is dead and Blancornelas is dying.

A week passed before Blancornelas regained consciousness, after two surgeries and last rites from the Catholic Church. Four bullets hit him, one in the spine.

Blancornelas did not provide all the details that night in Tijuana. He simply referred to the day as "the accident."

The reason for the assassination attempt? Blancornelas printed a letter from the mother of two young drug dealers who had been executed by their cartel.

"It was a heartfelt letter," he said. "I put it on the front page."

THERE ARE MORE reasons, of course. His newspaper has long broken the journalism conventions of Mexico, where far too many reporters take bribes, or simply print government press releases verbatim.

Now, the mantra of Blancornelas is: "God did not let you die. You must continue where you are. And you must fight."

The obvious question is: Why does Blancornelas keep writing?

"If I had retired I would have put my colleagues at risk," he said. Meaning the drug traffickers would have proved it possible to scare journalists away from the truth.

From an American reporter's perspective, the Mexican press is a surreal world. Zeta has had issues confiscated and been shut down by government officials claiming union abuses.

"Repression hasn't altogether left, and freedom hasn't really arrived," Blancornelas said of Mexico.

BUT PERHAPS THE most surprising theme of the evening was that Blancornelas framed his talk as a plea to American journalists.

"We have a need to understand ethics better, freedom better," he said. "The only way is to look north. I believe the more Mexican journalism looks north, the better we may be."

Yes, that is true in some ways. But American journalists need to look south for heart, for soul. To fully appreciate the safety under which most of us do our work.

America, the country with the greatest press freedoms, often makes the least use of them.

Details that consume American journalists would never occur to Blancornelas.

Blancornelas does not gauge what he writes by consulting a focus group. He writes what people need to know. American reporters fret about copy hacked of flavor, ever-shrinking news holes, readers who complain our words are too liberal or too conservative.

REAL ISSUES ALL, but inconsequential in the broader view of the journalism of Blancornelas.

Even the very real clamping down on American press freedoms since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, is a trifle by comparison.

Having a freedom of information request denied, or being told "no access" by an immigration official? Try losing the ability to leave your home without an armed guard at your side, a bulletproof vest across your chest.

(Editor's note: Mary Sanchez is an opinion-page columnist for The Kansas City Star.)

**GRAPHIC:** Sanchez mug

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