



INQUIRY REPORT

ORGANIZED CRIME MUSCLING IN ON THE MEDIA

////// BENÔT HERVIEU, AMERICAS DESK, WITH REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS CORRESPONDENTS //////////////////////////////////

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR PRESS FREEDOM



A total of 141 journalists and media workers were killed during the decade of the 2000s in attacks and reprisals blamed on criminal groups. Mafias and cartels today pose the biggest threat to media freedom worldwide. A transnational phenomenon, organized crime is more than the occasional bloody shoot-out or colourful crime story in the local paper. It is a powerful parallel economy with enormous influence over the legal economy, one the media have a great deal of difficulty in covering. Its elusiveness and inaccessibility to the media make it an even greater threat, both to the safety of journalists and to the fourth estate's investigative ability.

« Organized crime” is the generic label that the post-Cold War world has given to these new predators of journalism. Mafias, cartels, warlords recycled as traffickers, paramilitaries running rackets, separatist groups that traffic and extort to fund themselves – they have replaced the world's remaining dictatorial regimes as the biggest source of physical danger to journalists.

From newspapers to TV news, from crime reports to yellow press, the media seem to be reduced to counting the number of dead, including the dead within their own ranks. While organized crime often overlaps with a violent criminality consisting of rackets, kidnapping and murder, it is the expression of an economic and geopolitical reality that the media usually do not reflect, a reality that does not admit analysis of the types of criminal organizations involved, the way they operate and their ramifications.

This dimension of organized crime, which is completely beyond the scope of the 24-hour news cycle, also includes its impact on the “legal world” and its various components, including the media. Far from wanting to overthrow the political, economic and media bases of societies, organized crime has every interest in participating in them and using them. This fundamental fact suggests that the media are vulnerable not just as victims

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but also as actors or cogs of a parallel system for which they can serve as information and public relations outlets. ➤

➤ A cable from the US embassy in Bulgaria in 2005 – leaked by WikiLeaks five years later – reported that the Russian-Israeli businessman Mikhail Chorny had a majority state in the newspaper *The Standard*. Convicted of money-laundering and wanted under an Interpol arrest wanted, he had maintained his holdings in Bulgaria using front-men. This is just one of many examples of the new obstacles to investigative journalism and media independence.

CRIMINAL HOT-HOUSE

The media can barely survive when they are directly targeted by criminal organizations. The emblematic example is Mexico, which has been enduring a federal offensive by 50,000 soldiers against the drug cartels since December 2006, as well as bloody turf wars among the cartels themselves. Around 35,000 people have been killed in this undeclared war, including more than 15,000 in 2010 alone. The Pacific cartel, Gulf cartel, Michoacán's Familia, Sinaloa cartel and Los Zetas are the leading players in this criminal hot-house which could not have prospered without a generalized decay in the Mexican state, the complicity of many officials and the lack of an adequate international response to the trafficking problem.

"The mere fact of being known to be journalists puts us in danger," we were told by a journalist in Ciudad Juárez, one of the epicentres of the federal offensive. "Either we are tortured and killed or we live under a permanent threat, not so much be-



CRIME FIGURES

(United Nations report on drug trafficking, 2010)

Estimated average annual turnover in US dollars of the main organized crime activities during the period 1998-2009:

- Arms trafficking: 1 billion
- Human trafficking (migrant smuggling and prostitution) : 32 billion
- Trafficking in opium and opiates : 65 billion
- Trafficking in cocaine : 88 billion

cause of what we report, since there is so much self-censorship, but because of what we know or what we are assumed to know."

Shootings, decapitations, sometimes a military counterattack, less often a significant seizure – such is the daily fare of the media in the provinces – when they are not being directly attacked themselves. Obligated to chase after the news and constantly exposed to danger, most journalists do not succeed in providing anything more than quick and superficial coverage that is often third-rate.

"In these conditions, it is impossible to do an analysis or in-depth treatment of crime and drug-trafficking," said Claudia Méndez of ➤

Terror industries

MAFIAS

The term "mafia" was originally used for a criminal secret society whose members have to be initiated. Now it is used for all criminal organizations with the ability to infiltrate society, sometimes even the very heart of the state. The Russian and Balkan mafias, which developed rapidly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, nowadays meet these criteria as much as the traditional Italian and Japanese mafias.

In Asia, the influence of mafia-style groups is particularly marked in the Philippines but it also affects such countries as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. Small-scale smugglers and traffickers are just as likely as the big mafias to resort to terror and intimidation. This was seen, for example, in the way Sushil Dhungana of the Nepalese weekly *Ghodaghodi Sandesh* was treated by the seven gunmen who kidnapped him in November 2010 after he wrote about smuggling. "You have become a great journalist and now you are going to feel what that means," they told him, slashing his fingers.

CARTELS

The distinguishing feature of Latin America's cartels is the way they operate as competitors of the state, sometimes directly confronting the authorities while all the time cultivating contacts within the state apparatus. Their claim to control a region is reflected in their names – the Cali cartel or the late Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel in Colombia, the Gulf cartel and Sinaloa cartel in Mexico. A similar organizational structure is to be found in the paramilitary groups that used to operate as army auxiliaries. After the 30,000 members of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) were demobilized from 2003 to 2006, between 5,000 and 8,000 of them regrouped into around 20 criminal organizations operating in a dozen departments. They include the feared Black Eagles.

GUERRILLAS

Finally, there are guerrilla movements whose survival instincts have led them to gradually abandon traditional armed struggle for criminal activity. This is the case with Colombia's FARC, which has been much weaker since 2008. In Peru, "Shining Path" is now used by criminal groups as a brand name for a certain kind of terror, whose victims include local journalists, and has little to do with the Maoist guerrilla movement of that name, of which only a rump survives. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's political and ideological foundations would not suffice without the economic base resulting from drug trafficking.

While these guerrilla groups have continued their drift into crime, new armed groups have emerged combining a revolutionary ideology with an organized crime model. In Greece, they include the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire and the Sect of Revolutionaries, which was blamed for the murder of the journalist Sokratis Giolias on 19 July 2010 in Athens. A similar model has been adopted by the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP), which has around 15 "soldiers" adept at kidnapping and other forms of criminal violence. It was blamed for a bomb attack on the Canal 9 TV station in Asunción on 12 January 2011.

➤ Abandoning by-lined investigative reporting or indeed any kind of articles about crime and just using police communiqués is an option taken by many local media in Mexico but even this offers no safety guarantees. The cartels regard the authorities as competitors and even their bad publicity can cost dearly. The self-censorship adopted by *El Mañana*, a daily based in Nuevo Laredo, in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, failed to prevent an attack with heavy weapons on its premises in February 2006.

When the authorities are the only source, coverage is liable to be compromised. "Their collusion with organized crime is well known, although hard to evaluate," a journalist in the Balkans said on condition of anonymity. "Politicians have a clear interest in controlling the news and much less interest in protecting journalists. More or less direct censorship and pressure, especially financial pressure, are other obstacles to real investigative reporting and encourage self-censorship." He cited the case of the Serbian radio station *B92*, which quickly found it had very little advertising after it raised questions about the financing of Delta Holding, a manufacturing, retail and services conglomerate that represents about 40 per cent of Serbia's economy.

The situation is just as stark in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the first anniversary of the kidnapping and murder of independent journalist Sardasht Osman will be celebrated on 4 May. "Either the media depend financially on the authorities, and they ask no questions, or the media are really independent, in which case they get no response from the authorities," a local journalist told us. "In Kurdistan, the right to receive and impart news and information is not accompanied by any legal guarantees. This discourages journalists from questioning the authorities."

In the former Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau, which international drug traffickers have turned into "narco-state," the situation of journalists is so precarious that they rarely fear reprisals. Aside from the four government news media, there are four commercial radio stations and five newspapers that are mostly owned by the heads of political parties or government politicians. "You cannot even talk of censorship or self-censorship," a local observer told us. "Journalists are paid insignificant salaries and can expect more from offering their services to a politician."

He cited the case of Radio Bombolom FM journalist Mama Saliu Sané, who fled to Burkina Faso for a while in 2009 after receiving threats at his home that were due more to the fact that he was an "adviser" to the attorney-general. The su-

bordination of journalists to the political class explains the popularity of the so-called "informative magazines" – summaries of the frequent news conferences by officials or other politicians or social actors that are published or broadcast without any kind of editorial control. "This suits everyone," a local journalist said. "Some journalists have nonetheless realised that better information can be obtained from more international sources, especially NGOs."

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A quarter of the cocaine produced in Colombia transits through Venezuela, where there were 18,000 murders in 2010, according to unofficial sources. Javier Mayorca, head of crime reporting at the Caracas-based *El Nacional* daily, says official sources are of limited use. "Information about everyday and large-scale crime is controlled very tightly by the Venezuelan government and its agencies," he said. "This is all the more so since President Hugo Chávez broke off all cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration in 2005. We are forced to use outside sources. The authorities are concerned about the country's image. They don't want to appear powerless. So their information is biased."

Such an attitude is only to be expected from overwhelmed governments, which are more ➤

► able to announce spending plans than to claim lasting successes. Under the Merida initiative, the United States spent 1.6 billion dollars on trying to combat drug trafficking in Mexico, Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic from 2007 to 2010. Under Plan Colombia, launched 10 years earlier, more than 7 billion dollars were spent on a similar goal, mainly for controversial military operations. But with what result? Ninety percent of the 85,000 firearms seized in the past four years of the war on drug trafficking in Mexico came from the United States. The rejection by the US Congress in 2004 of an Assault Weapon Ban restricting the sale of high-calibre firearms has had



« A raid or an arrest is a ready-made media story and focuses on faces »

a major impact in Mexico, and on the results of the military offensive. Highly-publicized announcements and statistics, combined with ad hoc media coverage, all help to obscure the complex reality.

DISTORTING MIRROR

Do arrests of Mafiosi serve any purpose?” asked a provocative headline by *Slate.fr* journalists Margherita Nasi and Grégoire Fleurot last December. The photo accompanying the article showed Antonio Iovine (photo), identified as the head of the Neapolitan Camorra, with a triumphant expression, surrounded by embarrassed-looking policemen and carabinieri. The story did not say whether Domenico Giorgi, a member of the Ca-

labrian ‘Ndrangheta who was arrested two days later in Turin, managed to give his arrest the same appearance of a publicity coup.

Accused Jamaican drug lord Christopher “Dudus” Coke, also known as “The President,” managed to maintain his reputation as a philanthropist in the West Kingston neighbourhood of Tivoli Gardens until his arrest in May 2010 after a month-long siege, and then to portray himself as the injured party when his government extradited him to the United States. The most spectacular aspect of the raids on US branches of Cosa Nostra in the states of New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island on 20 January was the number of people arrested – 127 – of whom 91 were suspected of belonging to the five leading Italian-American crime families (Genovese, Gambino, Lucchese, Colombo and Bonanno). The story had all the right keywords – raid, godfather and mafia – and the pictures to go with it. A godsend for the media but not necessarily for the fight against organized crime.

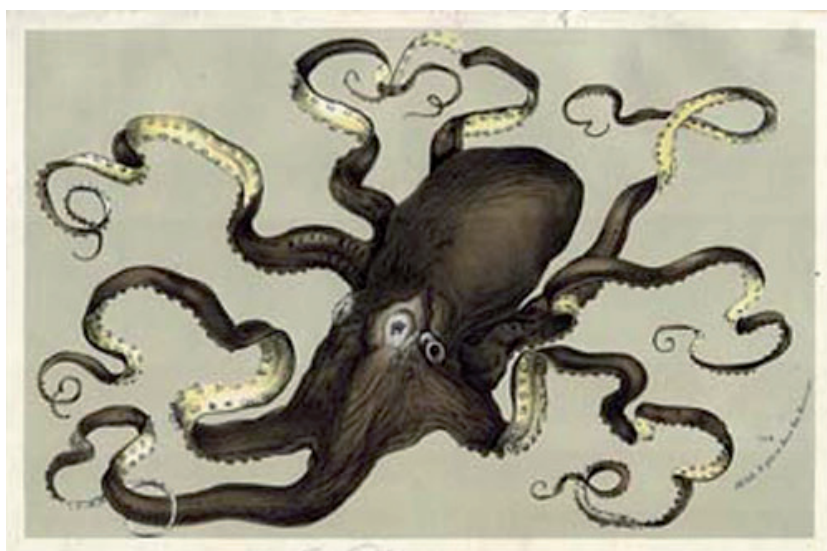
“Such images have the disadvantage of identifying organized crime with the traditional figure of Don Vito Corleone,” University of Miami’s Professor Bagley said, alluding to Marlon Brando’s famous role in *The Godfather*. “It also suggests that organized crime has the relatively centralized, pyramid structure that characterizes traditional Italian mafias. But not all organized crime follows this model.”

Even in Italy, La Magliana – a gang made famous by the film *Romanzo Criminale*, which sometimes did jobs for the mafia and sometimes did “counter-terrorist” work for the state during the political extremism of the 1970s – operated mainly as a network of partners and associates that was very different from the family structure of the ‘Ndrangheta or, originally, Cosa Nostra. “A raid or an arrest is a ready-made media story and focuses on faces, but it has no effect on the general dynamic of organized crime,” Bagley said.

The French criminologist Xavier Raufer made the same point when he referred ironically in an interview for *Slate.fr* to “the trick of making the media think that a particular crime organization is the most important one or that a particular mafioso is the most wanted crime boss.” It makes little difference that Domenico Giorgi is behind bars when, according to the *Mafia.fr* research website, an estimated 155 ‘Ndrine (‘Ndrangheta families) with 7,000 members are responsible for 3 per cent of Italy’s GNP.

Colombian journalist Maria Teresa Ronderos, the founder of the *Verdad Abierta* website, cautions against any tendency to romanticize crime ►

figures or the organizations they head. “The Colombian press has too often portrayed paramilitary chiefs such as Salvatore Mancuso or traffickers such as Pablo Escobar as colourful and invincible individuals, great business minds and sometimes protectors. The traumatized Colombian public logically remembers that the paramilitaries were responsible for more than 1,000 major massacres and 45,000 disappearances in a decade. But these paramilitary regional groups, like the cartels, have also become the tools or a much bigger economic – and sometimes political – system in which everything is quickly replaceable and interchangeable.” And often behind the scenes.



POOLING INFORMATION

How are the trafficking routes organized and controlled? How are organized crime networks established and maintained? What financial channels and arrangements are used to cross the frontiers between the parallel economy and the legal economy? Covering organized crime from the limited perspective of everyday crime stories clearly fails to address these questions. And the challenge concerns the industrialized countries as well as the developing ones, democratic states as well as authoritarian regimes. No media anywhere can claim to be better equipped than others for the challenge.

“Widespread ignorance about the drug phenomenon has given rise to the oversimplification

« We should pool our information and sources and work together to be able to cover this complex subject properly »

that production is located exclusively in the South and consumption is just a problem for the North,” said Alvaro Sierra, a former reporter for Colombia’s *El Tiempo* who is now a university academic in Costa Rica. “Organized crime coverage does not question international policy sufficiently. That is why ‘defensive clichés’ such as Colombia equals cocaine, Mexico equals violence and Afghanistan equals terrorism endure.”

The difficulties of covering organized crime is readily recognized by Mauri König, a Brazilian newspaper correspondent in the tri-border area between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, where prostitution and trafficking in drugs and firearms are usually seen as the main criminal activities. “In the very touristic Iguazu area, money-laundering and its reinjection into legal circuits is at least as important a criminal activity as trafficking in the strict sense of the term,” he said. “The competition between the isolated representatives of rival media hampers effective coverage of this barely perceived phenomenon, in which the interests are enormous. Each journalist wants to be first with a story. They do not take the time to talk to their colleagues. We should pool our information and sources and work together to be able to cover this complex subject properly.”

Protecting journalists

Some ten journalists live and work under police protection in Italy. But using police bodyguards has its limits. In Colombia, the use of members of the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) – an intelligence agency infiltrated by paramilitaries – proved disastrous for journalists who were critical of President Alvaro Uribe’s “national security” policies. The confidentiality of journalists’ sources, if not their physical safety, is easily threatened by such arrangements.

Mexico’s federal government signed a new convention on the protection of journalists in 2010. It aims to promote a better response when journalists are threatened, and to make murders and physical attacks on journalists a federal crime. “Making them a federal crime is not a new idea,” former federal attorney general Samuel González said. “President Felipe Calderón raised it at the start of his term. But, without any structural reform of the relevant agencies, there is a danger that this will just increase the likelihood of cases getting bogged down in the bureaucracy.”

Pending the adoption of appropriate international policies, journalists and press freedom organizations try to rely on their own resources, but the creation of support networks for journalist continues to be rare. The Journalists Alert and Protection Network, an offshoot of the Bogotá-based Press Freedom Foundation (FLIP), has helped around 400 journalists in the past 10 years. A watchdog role is also performed in the Balkans by the South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO), which has 800 members in around 20 countries.

Organized crime rarely shows its violent side in Senegal, another prized tourist destination. Citing unofficial sources, the daily *La Gazette* estimated in April 2009 that around 150 billion CFA francs ➤

➤ (about 250 million euros) – the equivalent of the government’s annual budget – was invested in the informal sector and then recycled through small businesses (second-hand cars, gambling, restaurants and hotels). A lot of money is also laundered through the free asset flow system introduced by trade accords between West African countries, through currency exchange bureaux and through public markets.

Media consultant Mamadou Ndao told us that Senegal’s journalists operate on the assumption that they can start investigating once a scandal is out in the open. This was the case when the Guinean billionaire Kerfala Person Camara was arrested at Dakar international airport last December with 130,000 dollars, carrying it in cash as the many cross-border money mules reportedly do. Journalists can also approach the sluggish bureaucracy but there is no legal protection for their sources and they risk being accused of receiving stolen documents or violating the confidentiality of a judicial investigation. Worse still, they also risk being sued for large amounts in damages by prominent figures.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, where there seem to be few threats to media freedom, many journalists complain about the “banking secrecy” they encounter when any attempt is made to find out about offshore accounts. “Everyone is there for the capture of someone like Ducus Coke but nothing is said about the movements of funds through our banks and capital flows,” said *The Gleaner* editor Byron Buckley. “They want to talk about the tourist paradise but not the tax paradise.”

EASILY REASSURED

Such a comment would not be out of place in the European Union either, especially in Greece where, according to a joke that is popular in the current crisis, “there is no room for the mafia because the politicians have taken everything.” Nikos Zirganos, a journalist with the daily *Eleftheriotipia*, found there was some truth to this when he wrote about trafficking in antiquities and artworks. “We would be wrong to ignore the capacity to absorb organized crime products in this country, where tourism and tourism’s infrastructures offer enormous advantages.”

The “Switzerland of the Balkans” began receiving the assets of the former Yugoslavia’s warlords in the 1990s. “Since then, the contamination has continued in this area of the economy, not just in the hotel sector but also in banking,” Zirganos continued. “The Bulgarian mafia found new markets here and the phenomenon has clearly

grown since Bulgaria’s entry into the European Union. What will it be like one day with Albania, one wonders?”

Zirganos regards the overall level of media freedom in Greece as satisfactory but he is concerned about the current timidity of the Greek media as regards investigative journalism. “Tracking money-laundering and shedding light on criminal networks means having more or less reliable government statistics and data available and that is not the case.”

Another Greek journalist said even access to public information was hampered by corruption. “We need to overcome our lack of ambition,” he said. “Greece is in the process of becoming a hub of human trafficking and prostitution. This reality is barely or badly covered. Why? Because we also have a tendency to think that a country like ours, supposedly democratic and European for a long time, would be free from such problems. We are easily reassured. International-scale media have an important role to play in our countries.”

The same goes for all the countries of the “North” and so-called developed world, both for their politicians and their journalists. In November 2009, Silvio Berlusconi talked of wanting to

« We need to overcome our lack of ambition, We are easily reassured. International-scale media have an important role to play in our countries »

Palermo Convention

The fight against organized crime requires close judicial and financial cooperation between countries. This has existed, on paper at least, since the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime was signed in Palermo in December 2000. The Palermo Convention, which took effect in 2003, tries to limit the tendency for one country’s legislation against organized crime to neutralize the effect of another’s.

The Palermo Convention focuses in particular on protecting people who are the victims of human trafficking and combating money laundering – a major challenge given the 500,000 deaths and 500 billion euros in turnover that criminal activity is estimated to have been generating annually worldwide since the start of the 2000s. Ways for providing adequate protection for journalists, who are favourite targets, have yet to be defined.

In 2010, Frank La Rue, the UN special rapporteur for freedom of expression, called for the creation of a new internationally-recognised high-risk area category that is broader than “war zone,” which is limited to situations where war has been declared.

“strangle” all those who write books and make films about the Mob and thereby give Italy a bad image. “Even if he is joking, he is adopting the language of organized crime and, in effect, supporting the code of silence,” said Lirio Abbate, a journalist specialized in the mafia who lives in hiding and gets police protection. How will the media manage to respond to organizations that are as invisible as they are influential, organizations that have tentacles everywhere and are even capable of challenging governments?

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REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS REPORTS

- Guinea Bissau** (English and French):
<http://en.rsf.org/guinea-cocaine-and-coups-haunt-gagged-12-11-2007,24330.html>
- Iraqi Kurdistan** (English, French, Arabic and Kurdish):
<http://en.rsf.org/irak-between-freedom-and-abuses-the-03-11-2010,38736.html>
- Bulgaria** (English and French):
<http://en.rsf.org/bulgaria-resignation-or-resistance-bulgaria-05-02-2009,30207.html>
- Mexico** (English, French and Spanish):
<http://en.rsf.org/mexico-media-ordeal-blamed-on-escalating-28-09-2009,34603.html>
- Colombia** (English, French and Spanish):
<http://en.rsf.org/colombia-paramilitary-black-eagles-poised-22-05-2007,22241.html>
- Media and Environment** (English, French and Spanish):
<http://en.rsf.org/deforestation-and-pollution-high-03-06-2010,37654.html>

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International Secretariat
Reporters Without Borders
47 rue Vivienne
75002 Paris, France
Tel: 33 1 4483-8484
Fax: 33 1 4523-1151
Website: www.rsf.org
E-mail: rsf@rsf.org
Ambroise Pierre - Africa desk: afrique@rsf.org
Benoît Hervieu - Americas desk: ameriques@rsf.org
Vincent Brossel - Asia desk: asie@rsf.org
Elsa Vidal - Europe desk: europa@rsf.org
Soazig Dollet - Middle East desk: moyen-orient@rsf.org
Lucie Morillon - Internet desk: internet@rsf.org
Press contact: presse@rsf.org

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