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5 State of denial

Crime reporting and political communication in Sonora¹

Victor Hugo Reyna García

Mexican politicians have always tended to deny criminal and security risks. For most of the twentieth century, it was a staple of state governors' policy (Hernández 2008). But during Mexico's War on Drugs² this habit evolved until it became the accepted political communication strategy. Through it, politicians throughout the country used their economic and political power to characterize the territory under their jurisdiction as safe and secure.³ In the current environment, security provision has become synonymous with good government and politicians permanently campaigning for advancement don't want to be seen to fall behind. In the border state of Sonora, politicians have embraced the strategy of denial wholesale (Beck 2008; Wallace 2008: 395–409).⁴

For the following decade, the official discourse remained relatively stable. But media coverage shifted. From 2003 to 2009, Sonoran journalism was critical and somewhat alarmist; it highlighted an environment of chaos and fear. But, from 2009 onwards, this critical stance declined. Instead local newspapers and other media assimilated the official discourse of denial. This chapter examines these changes and continuities in the reporting of criminal risk in Sonora. As such, it is organized in two parts. The first section analyses the strategic uses of objectivity, irony and watchdog reporting that prevailed during the six-year term of Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) Eduardo Bours, 2003–2009. The second section focuses on the practices of self-censorship, deference and homogenization that arose during the administration of Partido Acción Nacional's (PAN) Guillermo Padrés,⁵ 2009–2015.

To this end, I examine the front page of Sonora's leading newspaper, *El Imparcial*. Here, I undertake a content analysis for the years 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012. In particular, I focus on: (a) the type of criminal risk, (b) the location of criminal risk and (c) the type of source. In so doing, I look at how crime is reported in Sonora and how power relations are mediated by it. I combine this with a qualitative analysis of the news that has showcased Sonora as the 'safest state on the northern frontier'.

Irony, objectivity and watchdog reporting (2003–2009)

In Sonora, spectacles of extreme violence began to gain public notoriety at the start of Bours' term, during the second half of 2003. Before that, the crime reports that newspapers like *El Imparcial* published on their front page predominantly concerned acts of international terrorism. In fact, the first news relating to home-grown drug-related violence appeared on 6 May 2003, under the headline 'Prende PGJE alerta' ('State Attorney General on Alert'). The piece looked at the rise of homicides in Sonora, but was careful to downplay the figures by offering a regional context:

Faced with an increase in the number of murders in Sonora, the state's attorney general suggested that police corruption and the protection of criminal groups might be the cause. Miguel Ángel Cortés Ibarra pointed out that the most recent statistics on crime were now a 'red flag' for his office. During 2002, about ten intentional homicides a month occurred ... 'Obviously, the state's number of murders can't be compared with the numbers of Baja California [italics my own] where 120 intentional homicides and 43 executions occurred during the first quarter of the year, nor those of Sinaloa, that had 143 deaths.' Nonetheless, he said that he was worried. (Arredondo and Larrinaga 2003)

Such news suggests that denying criminal risk by pointing to the regional context was not an invention of the Bours regime. In fact, it had been employed by his predecessor, the PRI's Armando López Nogales's government of 1997–2003, as well as earlier administrations. By comparing Sonora's security with that of other northern states, such a strategy not only denied local risks, but also highlighted those of the region as a whole. The logic presented by public officials was as follows: 'Yes, the state has some security issues, but they aren't as severe as those of our neighbouring states.' Sonora was repeatedly portrayed as comparatively free of, or, in the worst case, having fewer threats than other northern states. During the most sanguinary years of the War on Drugs, this systematic denial of criminal risk attempted to undercut the increasing atmosphere of fear, but had no effect on the actual incidence of crime.

During the 2000s, this official attitude caused increasing tension between Bours' administration and the local press. Bours – a businessman-turned-politician – maintained a hostile relationship with the media, and especially with *El Imparcial*, which he accused of demonstrating a distinct bias in favour of the opposition party, the PAN. The tensions went back to early 2003, when, during his campaign for the governorship, *El Imparcial* had published a series of articles which questioned his political skill (Guerra 2003; Rodríguez 2003; Sánchez 2003). Hostilities continued into his term in office and culminated with the governor filing a lawsuit for defamation against the news organization (Beyliss 2006).

In August 2003, with the election just decided in Bours' favor, *El Imparcial* made a bold move. It started to publish a regular news feature entitled 'Mafia en Sonora'. The first piece was entitled 'Caen "capos" en Sonora' ('Drug lords captured in Sonora') and concerned the capture of a lieutenant of a major drug cartel, the Sinaloa cartel, in Sonora (Larrinaga 2003). In the following days, while Bours ratified his victory before the Tribunal Estatal Electoral (TEE), the newspaper used this news feature to keep public insecurity on the public agenda and to prepare the ground for six years of political confrontation. From then on, crime reporting was employed to pressure the state government.

As Pablo A. Piccato argues, crime news and the media coverage of murder has always had a political dimension since the emergence of the *nota roja* (a sensationalized form of crime reporting) at the end of the Porfiriato (Piccato 2012: 627–653; 2013: 104–125; 2014: 195–231). This continues to this day. In fact, at present it may be more pronounced in the regions than in the relatively secure environment of the Mexican capital. As Celia Del Palacio argues, for years traditional journalism studies tended to downplay the relevance of crime news as a space of political struggle, but recently the political dimension of the *nota roja* has come to the fore (Del Palacio 2015). This academic shift has been paralleled at the level of local newsrooms. Before the War on Drugs, Sonoran crime reporters had seen the *nota roja* exclusively as a site of class conflict. 'La Policiaca es las Sociales de los pobres' ('The crime news is the society news of the poor') was a common black joke. Their staple fare was the gathering of police reports and accounts of relatively minor crimes. Drugs were viewed as a completely separate sphere. They were a public health problem and only became a public security problem if a drug user was caught stealing in order to sustain his or her addiction. But the War on Drugs changed this perception. The federal government's confrontation with the cartels turned drug trafficking and its associated violence into a major political story.

As Table 5.1 below demonstrates, the conflict between Sonora's main newspaper and Governor Bours gradually promoted criminal risk to *El Imparcial's* front pages. News of executions rose from 13 per cent to 18 per cent of total articles; news on firefights between criminal gangs or between gangs and the security forces increased from 0 per cent to 16 per cent; and news on drug trafficking grew from 11 per cent to 19 per cent between 2003 and 2006. In contrast, there was a steady decline of news on drug use (from 8 per cent to 5 per cent), diverse thefts (from 11 per cent to 1 per cent) and even killings without 'signs of execution' (Larrinaga 2009),⁶ which are traditionally attributed to organized crime (from 11 per cent to 4 per cent).

During Bours' successor government, that of PAN's Guillermo Padrés, some of these trends persisted but others changed. For example, drug trafficking remained a dominant theme, although it declined from 25 per cent to 14 per cent of front-page stories. News of executions stayed around the same at 22 per cent of stories. But decontextualized murders – not defined as

Table 5.1 Type of criminal risk in *El Imparcial* (2003–2012)

	2003	2006	Variation	2009	2012	Variation
Not identified	0%	0%	0%	7%	8%	1%
Aggression	0%	3%	3%	1%	0%	-1%
Drug use	8%	5%	-3%	0%	0%	0%
Disturbance	0%	4%	4%	0%	2%	2%
Fraud	0%	3%	3%	1%	0%	-1%
Homicide	11%	4%	-7%	7%	26%	19%
Theft	11%	1%	-9%	6%	9%	4%
Rape	0%	5%	5%	0%	2%	2%
Detonation	24%	13%	-10%	6%	3%	-2%
Extortion	0%	1%	1%	6%	2%	-4%
Execution	13%	8%	-5%	21%	22%	1%
Kidnapping	5%	11%	5%	10%	6%	-4%
Firefight	0%	16%	16%	11%	3%	-8%
Torture	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Drug traffic	11%	19%	8%	25%	14%	-11%
Others	18%	7%	-12%	0%	5%	5%
Total	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%

Source: Own elaboration

executions orchestrated by organized crime – re-emerged and became the most salient danger: 26 per cent of stories dealt with this theme.

Taken as a whole, the data demonstrate a daily and intense circulation of crime news in Sonora. Contrary to those who claim that there has been a gradual silencing of the Mexican press (Del Palacio 2015: 19–46; Rely and González de Bustamante 2014: 108–131; Rodelo 2009: 365–403), in Sonora there was not a decline but rather a rise in coverage relating to drug violence. The disappearance of *El Imparcial's* Alfredo Jiménez, a 25-year-old crime reporter, missing since 2 April 2005, did little to slow down the reporting of criminal risk. As we shall see, it may have changed the way this kind of news was approached, but it didn't mark its end.

Table 5.2 examines the location of the reported criminal risk. Here, it is clear that coverage of Sonoran crimes increased in *El Imparcial*. In 2003 and 2006, less than a third of reported crime news occurred in Sonora. But, by 2009 and 2012, local crime had grown to account for around half of all crime. In contrast, news that focused on the international aspect of crime decreased from 42 per cent in 2003, to 10 per cent in 2006, to 6 per cent in 2009.

El Imparcial is a local paper. Though there are readers and correspondents dotted throughout the state, most of its readers live in the state capital of Hermosillo. As a result, it is perhaps no great surprise that the bulk of crime news focused on this territory. But, the prevalence of such crime news

Table 5.2 Location of criminal risk in *El Imparcial* (2003–2012)

	2003	2006	Variation	2009	2012	Variation
Not identified	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Hermosillo	18%	27%	8%	15%	29%	14%
Sonora	32%	27%	-5%	54%	49%	-5%
Mexico	8%	32%	24%	21%	15%	-5%
International	42%	15%	-27%	10%	6%	-4%
Total	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%

Source: Own elaboration

countered the narrative put forward by Governor Bours that Sonora was the safest state in northern Mexico. If it was so safe, readers of *El Imparcial* might ask, why were spectacles of extreme violence, from beheadings to grenade attacks, reported on a daily basis on the paper's front page? Were news organizations exaggerating the threats? Or were they simply doing their job, publishing the news which public officials wished to keep quiet?

During Bours' term it became common to read highly critical reports on Sonora's security situation. These highlighted state complicity in criminal activity. And headlines included 'Sonora, base de poderosas bandas' ('Sonora, base of powerful gangs'), 'Temen que Sonora sea igual a Sinaloa' ('They fear that Sonora is becoming like Sinaloa') or the blunt and alarmist 'Cuenta Sonora con los peores policías del país' ('Sonora has the worst police in the country') (Ruiz 2005; Castro 2005; Padilla 2006), among others. Throughout the period, *El Imparcial* repeatedly stressed its adherence to ideas of journalistic independence and objectivity and claimed that such values forced its reporters to warn readers about the progressive penetration of organized crime. But, undeniably, the strategy also had a political correlative. Such coverage ran contrary to the state governor's line and echoed the criticism of opposition politicians and antagonistic members of civil society:

'We don't want to see Sonora becoming a Sinaloa or Ciudad Obregón or Navojoa, a Culiacán', explained Juan Leyva Mendivil. The president of the Alianza Campesina del Noroeste went on to express his concern over the wave of murders. 'We can't close our eyes and say it's only a drug-traffickers' problem, because the presence of gunmen on a regular basis in our society could "reach" those of us that are not members of those groups. Let's not wait until we're sharing restaurants and public places with drug cartels, as they do in Tamaulipas, Sinaloa and even Sonora ... we must stop this in time!' he said.

(Castro 2005)

In contrast, the denial of criminal risk Bours was trying to stress was ignored, minimized or, if it was mentioned, ridiculed. The last strategy was

commonly used to compare the governor's perception with the newspaper's crime accounts. For example, on 11 November, 2005, the paper featured an article entitled '¡Despiertan a balazos!' ('They awake to bullets!') (Moreno and Quintero 2005). Beside that piece on a gun attack that involved a businessman and his family in an upscale neighbourhood (Table 5.3), they published the headline '¿Cuál ambiente de inseguridad?' ('What climate of insecurity?'). In it, they mocked Bours' response the morning after the assault:

'What climate of insecurity?' said Governor Eduardo Bours Castelo, noting that people in Hermosillo were very calm, despite the violent events that had just occurred. 'The public perception is that there's no climate of insecurity. People are walking down the streets. Last night I went to dine on some tacos and people were completely calm. There's no climate of insecurity; that is very clear in all the surveys we have.'

(Medina 2005)

These stories were, in general, opinion-free and limited to quoting or paraphrasing the often ludicrously out-of-touch statements of public officials. This suggests that it was the paper's editors rather than the reporters that were asking readers to take the governor's words in an ironic fashion. Placing Bours' denial right next to the story of the attack and picking the quote about going to dinner out of what was a lengthy public statement was a deliberate tactic designed to satirize the governor.

Against accusations of sensationalism, *El Imparcial's* journalists could justify their conduct from a normative perspective, arguing that they were only doing their job, performing the role of watchdog reporters, exposing what the authorities insisted on denying. But such claims could not be entirely convincing. That there were political motives behind such moves became apparent as soon as Bours stood down. The leading editor, Jorge Morales,⁷ later became Bours' successor, Padrés', minister of communication.

Self-censorship, deference and homogenization (2009–2015)

In late 2004, *El Imparcial* raised the stakes in its confrontation with Bours by hiring Jiménez, a young Sonoran reporter who already had experience in Sinaloa, then the most dangerous place for practising journalism in Mexico. According to *El Imparcial's* editor, Morales, who acted as his boss and mentor, Jiménez was hired to help:

explain what was happening in Sonora: why suddenly in a restaurant there was a shooting spree where a waiter was killed for no apparent reason; why on a boulevard there was a gang of eight or ten people with high-powered weapons killing someone; why folks with bazookas and grenade launchers [were running amok].

(Morales 2006)

On his arrival in *El Imparcial's* newsroom, Jiménez took control of the regular 'Mafia en Sonora' feature and started researching and denouncing links between politicians and organized crime. This kind of journalism was unprecedented in the state and, as such, didn't last long. As anticipated above in the previous section, Jiménez disappeared on the night of 2 April 2005, when he left the newsroom to meet a source that was 'terribly nervous' (*El Imparcial* 2005). More than a decade later, his whereabouts are still unknown and the investigation into the case has stalled.

Jiménez's disappearance had a devastating effect on Sonora's journalistic culture. Risk was no longer hypothetical; it was now very real. Attacks on the press, which had been on the rise throughout the country, were now occurring in Sonora. Furthermore, as the authorship of the disappearance was never revealed, uncertainty ruled and everybody felt vulnerable. Criminal risk was no longer something reported from afar, but also something experienced by reporters as part of their daily routines.

In the succeeding years, Sonoran journalism has suffered a paralysis followed by a serious setback in journalistic standards. If the 1990s and early 2000s were marked by the technical and professional modernization of Sonoran journalism – with *El Imparcial* leading the way – the next six years witnessed limited advances. There were technological innovations, but norms slipped as declining sales and violence against journalists pushed editors and reporters back towards increasingly cosy relations with the political class.

Facing these threats, news organizations like *El Imparcial* required their reporters to limit themselves to official sources in crime reporting, as had been done prior to Jiménez's arrival. This compromised their editorial autonomy and was seized on by local governments in an attempt to regain editorial influence through official advertising (Rosagel 2012). As for the strategy of watchdog reporting, it saw a rapid rise and fall (Reyna 2011: 111–116; 2014: 93–104) that had eroded its prospects for reproduction. Jiménez's disappearance demonstrated to young journalists that publishing uncomfortable truths could end badly. As various journalists commented:

Instead of Alfredo's work sowing the seeds of denunciation and diffusion, of close observation of the narco phenomenon, it had the opposite effect. His disappearance created a sort of consensus among colleagues, newspaper managers and the government itself to work on a sort of implicit order that said: 'Look, it does happen, but we will only talk about it; do not publish it ... or publish it without giving details ... and at your own risk'.
(J. Ibarra, interviewed by the author, December 2010)

A clear line in the sand was marked in crime reporting by his disappearance. It was imperative for us to understand that there's no one there to save us, that even the bravest reporter is exposed.

(Santana 2012)

We, Sonoran journalists, know that we can't dig up narco stories because we would end up like Alfredo Jiménez, [whose disappearance is still an] unpunished case

(Medina 2012)

As a result, when Padrés' term began, this spirit of self-censorship was firmly in place and had been extended to almost every news topic. In crime reporting, it led to an increasing reliance on official sources and the predominance of a brief, superficial treatment of stories. In this context, the denial of criminal risk and the description of Sonora as the safest state on the northern frontier flourished. Public officials' statements were not interrogated or mocked, but taken at face value.

The change can be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, as Table 5.3 shows, there was a clear growth in the use of the state government as a dominant news source, from 21 per cent in 2006 to 38 per cent in 2009 and 2012. Second, there was a decline in the use of quotes from international governments, from 18 per cent in 2003 to 6 per cent in 2009 and 9 per cent in 2012. Among other possible sources, the voices of the victims and victimizers, as well as those of the academic and medical communities, were also generally marginalized.

In qualitative terms, these transformations propelled a framing shift that could be defined as the replacement of sensationalism by denial. Over-the-top headlines like 'Mutilan a 9 en Caborca' ('9 mutilated in Caborca') or 'Vive Sonora jornada violenta: matan a 3' ('Sonora lives out a violent day: 3 killed') became less frequent and were replaced by the deliberately moderate 'Balacera en Sonoyta no es por plaza: GPE' ('GPE says that shootout in Sonoyta is not over the plaza') or 'Tiene Sonora menos secuestros que otros estados fronterizos' ('Sonora has fewer kidnappings than other border states') (*El Imparcial* 2009), (Urquijo 2012).

The declining number of negative or alarmist stories is clear. Positive articles now came to the fore. But the question remains, why did this happen? Did murders and kidnappings really decline? Did Sonora really become safer? Or did security continue to be as problematic as before? Was it just that now Sonora's journalists were willing to toe the official line? It seems it was the latter. Watchdog reporting and the use of irony were replaced by the simple reproduction of official news bulletins. Rather ironically, the state's first PAN governor ushered in a return to the type of newspaper coverage first developed and perfected by the PRI (Rodríguez 2007).

Articles like the following, published in 2012, which compared Sonora's security statistics favourably both with those of other states and with the past, were increasingly frequent:

Compared to other border states, Sonora recorded fewer kidnappings in the first five months of the year and, also, those that have occurred have been resolved. Until May, six kidnappings occurred in the state, three

Table 5.3 Dominant source in *El Imparcial* (2003–2012)

	2003	2006	Variation	2009	2012	Variation
Not identified	21%	37%	16%	18%	22%	3%
Local government	0%	1%	1%	6%	6%	1%
State government	29%	21%	-8%	38%	38%	1%
National government	11%	16%	5%	21%	15%	-5%
International government	18%	8%	-10%	6%	9%	4%
Academic community	3%	1%	-1%	1%	2%	0%
Artistic community	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Medical community	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Religious community	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%
Mass media	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	-1%
Private sector	5%	4%	-1%	3%	3%	0%
Civil society	3%	0%	-3%	1%	0%	-1%
Victims	3%	8%	5%	1%	2%	0%
Victimizers	5%	0%	-5%	0%	2%	2%
Others	3%	0%	-3%	3%	0%	-3%
Total	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%

Source: Own elaboration.

fewer than the total recorded in 2011, revealed the National System of Public Security. Moreover, this figure is similar to the one from 2010, when six people suffered an illegal deprivation of their liberty in the same period. The National System of Public Security also reported that from January to May of this year, Tamaulipas had registered 50 kidnappings, Nuevo León 29 and Chihuahua 23.

(*El Imparcial* 2012)

This framing shift was most evident at *El Imparcial*, because of its previous emphasis on stressing the state's insecurity. But it could also be found in the rest of the state's print and online newspapers. If one conducts an online search of the terms *Sonora* and *seguro*, one can find at least 190 news items where Sonora is characterized as a safe state. In them, the homogenization of news production is striking. The idea that Sonora is 'the safest state on the northern frontier' appears in the headline of nearly all of them and is developed in a similar fashion, with the same information, in an analogous inverted pyramid structure.

Some of the headlines include:

Estudio ubica a Sonora como estado más seguro de la frontera norte
(Study ranks Sonora as most secure state on the northern frontier)

Se mantiene Sonora como el estado fronterizo más seguro (Sonora remains the most secure border state)

Sonora se mantendrá como el estado más seguro de la frontera *Sedena* (Sonora will continue to be the most secure state of the border: Ministry of Defence)

Es Sonora el estado fronterizo más seguro de México *Padrés Elias* (Sonora is the most secure border state in Mexico: Padrés Elias)

Es Sonora el más seguro *SEDENA* (Sonora is the safest: SEDENA)

Sonora es el estado más seguro de México: *Jan Brewer* (Sonora is the most secure state in Mexico: Jan Brewer)

As well as Governor Padrés, numerous public figures, from government ministers like Ángel Osorio Chong, Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda and Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, to local politicians like Ernesto Munro Palacio, to US governors like Jan Brewer, were dragged in to affirm the official discourse. However, one of the most frequently quoted sources of information was actually a private company, Prominix, a security consultancy from Nuevo León, which published a regular security update:

Once again, Sonora was recognized as the safest state on the border according to the Prominix's annual Semáforo Delictivo Nacional. In its 2013 edition, with statistical data from 2012, the research showed that Sonora was the only border state with a 'green' or safe security rating, placing it amongst the top eight safest Mexican states.

(*El Imparcial* 2013)

Sonora is the safest state on the United States border according to consultancy company Prominix's annual Semáforo Delictivo Nacional. In a news release, the Sonoran government stated that in its 2013 edition, using statistical data from 2012, [Prominix's] research showed that Sonora was the only border state with a 'green' or safe security rating, placing it amongst the top eight safest Mexican states.

(Notimex 2013)

These snippets were taken from *El Imparcial* and the national news agency Notimex, respectively. As can be seen, the contents are basically the same and the only meaningful difference is that Notimex makes clear that the information comes from a news release by the Sonoran government. It is clear, therefore, that the homogenization of crime news comes not from shared values but rather because news media are simply reprinting the same ready-made information. This has always occurred on the political scene. In fact, such was their reliance on official bulletins, political journalists were often termed 'boletíneros'. But it is something very new to crime reporting, which has traditionally relied far more on police reports, direct testimony or interviews.

This is where the revolving door between the state's newsrooms and its corridors of power played a key role. When *El Imparcial's* editor, Morales, became Padrés' minister of communication, he brought with him a profound knowledge of Sonora's journalistic culture. He was a former crime reporter. He knew that his erstwhile colleagues were willing to shift their 'framing' of the news if presented with ready-made information. In fact, it seems that the homogenization of crime news was something he had been pondering for years. His university dissertation was entitled 'Proposal for the creation of a news agency specializing in themes of security, drug trafficking, migration and the northern border' (Morales 2004).

Was Sonora more dangerous during Bours' administration? Did it suddenly become safer under Padrés? In some ways, it didn't really matter. Risk is a matter of perception and can be modified through perception. Morales, as a communications major, understood this and made denying risk his main strategy. It was true that Sonora was the only northern frontier state that had received a 'green' or safe rating in Prominix's Semáforo Delictivo Nacional from 2011 to 2015. Yet, this rating was for crime in general. In fact, in terms of the kind of crimes which generated the most fear, homicides and executions, Sonora was rated 'yellow' or 'red' or unsafe throughout the same period. And in the first half of 2016, the state was far above the national average in terms of homicides related to organized crime (Prominix 2016). Furthermore, alternative sources – which were hardly mentioned in the press of the time – highlighted the state's continued insecurity problems. The national statistics bureau's National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Security claimed that Sonora was the border state with the highest rate of crimes in both 2010 and 2011 and had the third highest rate in 2012, 2013 and 2014 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2016). The narrative of Sonora's exceptionalism was just that, a narrative, based on cherry-picked or incomplete information and dependent on the ruling party's ability to influence news production.

The ability of Padrés' administration to shift news coverage from relatively open, if alarmist, reporting to risk denial almost overnight is a worrying sign. It suggests that the efforts to professionalize the world of Sonoran journalism have not penetrated very deeply. Editors and reporters have been unable to resist the imposition of the official discourse, either because they wish to avoid another attack or because they fear losing advertising or losing (perhaps, even, under-the-table) revenue or 'chayote' Jiménez's disappearance, combined with the ongoing print media's financial crisis, has pushed Sonora's newspapers back towards the deferential and homogenizing practices of the heyday of the PRI.

Conclusion and epilogue

Crime reporting is a highly disruptive form of journalism. It often reveals what public officials would rather hide. And, in Sonora, since 2003 it has

played a major political role by highlighting the authorities' inability to maintain control of the state. Yet, gradually, crime reporting's unsettling role has declined, first because of the disappearance of the leading reporter, Jiménez, in 2005, and second thanks to the new publicity efforts of the PAN's governor. The trend towards toeing the official line has extended beyond the leading newspaper, *El Imparcial*, to other print and online news outlets. Padrés' media team, led by the former *El Imparcial* editor, Morales, have pushed a discourse that proclaims Sonora is 'the safest state on the northern border', despite ongoing problems with security, drug trafficking, and spectacles of extreme violence.

In September 2015, a PRI candidate, Claudia Pavlovich, won the governorship of Sonora. During the first months of her term, there were a handful of serious, high-profile security scares. In February 2016, somebody set fire to the car belonging to the mother of Pavlovich's communications minister in Navojoa. And the following month somebody set fire to a bridge built by the Padrés administration in Hermosillo. The bridge was painted with Padrés' omnipresent 'Nuevo Sonora' slogan. It is still unclear whether the fires were politically motivated or random acts of pyromania. But, what is clear is that, under Pavlovich, the press seems less deferential than under Padrés. Both incidents pushed journalists to challenge the new governor on security in the state. Pavlovich, interestingly, replied with a line that could have come from the Padrés era and suggests just how deeply ideas about managing the perception of risk have penetrated the ideology of Mexico's public officials: 'The security issue is, actually, a matter of perception. What happens is that [with] globalization [and with] social media, you see what happens in Colombia, Venezuela or Yucatan and you feel that it's happening in your state' (Arteaga and Álvarez 2015). And like her predecessor, she went on to deny that Sonora was unsafe (Arteaga and Álvarez 2015). Whether journalists will continue to challenge the state authorities about their security record or whether Pavlovich's perception management will win out, is still unclear.

Notes

- 1 A previous version of this chapter was published in Spanish (Reyna 2015: 365–403).
- 2 The so-called 'Mexican war on drugs' is the ongoing battle between the Mexican armed forces and the drug cartels that operate in that country. It was originally launched by PAN's Felipe Calderón at the beginning of his six-year term, in 2006, with the United States' support.
- 3 Numerous Mexican politicians have denied criminal risk during the 'Mexican war on drugs'. To cite three that did so recently, Silvano Aureoles of Michoacán, Alejandro Moreno of Campeche and José Francisco Olvera of Hidalgo. Even Javier Duarte, Veracruz's controversial governor from 2010 to 2016, has defined his state as safe and sound.
- 4 Drawing upon Beck and Wallace, we understand the spatial denial of criminal risk as the systematic denial of the presence of a certain criminal risk in a particular place. This denial could come from the state or the citizenship and is designed to characterize a particular territory as safe. Closely linked to the concept of spectacles

of extreme violence (*puestas en escena de extrema violencia*, in Spanish), this denial is paradoxical as the new generation of dangers operates outside traditional spatial boundaries and makes its calculation and control fruitless (Beck 2008; Wallace 2008: 395–409).

- 5 In 2009, Padrés became the first governor of Sonora from a party other than PRI. By the end of 2016, the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) ordered his detention on multiple charges of corruption, embezzlement, and extortion. At the time of writing, he is in jail, as is his son, Guillermo Padrés Jr.
- 6 José Larrinaga was a crime reporter for *El Imparcial*, but became the spokesman of the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado (PGJE) once Bours became Sonora's governor.
- 7 Morales was *El Imparcial's* editor-in-chief during Bours' administration. Owing to diverse and undisclosed problems, he was relocated to Tijuana to run *El Imparcial's* sister newspaper, *Frontera*. In 2009, he joined Padrés' campaign. He became Sonora's first Secretary of Communication later that year. At the beginning of 2016 he was jailed on charges of extortion. By the end of that year he was bailed but is still facing the extortion charges.

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