

## Writing the Stories Cartels Don't Want Told

In a Country Where Journalists Are Sometimes Killed, Daniel Pearl Award Winner Sandra Rodríguez Nieto Refuses to Back Down

> BY PATT MORRISON

The HACKED-UP BODY of a young newspaper photographer, just hired to cover social events, turned up in a street in a town in Northern Mexico. Another newspaper photographer, this one working for the major daily *El Diario*, was murdered in 2010. And a reporter for *El Diario* was killed in 2008. Following the latter's funeral cortege, one of his colleagues said that he didn't want anyone to open his coffin at his funeral.

Amid the thousands of people murdered in Mexico during the violence of the drug cartels, at least a dozen have been journalists, and a dozen more journalists have gone missing. Newspapers have installed bulletproof walls and windows.

Covering the drug violence is one of the most dangerous beats in the world. Rarely have these killings been seriously investi-

gated—"carpetazo" is the word, filed away and forgotten. Even more rarely have they been solved.

Some newspapers have stopped carrying bylines on their stories about the drug cartels in an effort to protect their staffs. Others have stopped covering the story altogether.

That is not the case for Sandra Rodriguez Nieto, the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club's 2013 Daniel Pearl Award for courage in journalism.

As Tracy Wilkinson of the *Los Angeles Times*' Mexico City bureau says of Rodriguez Nieto, "She was one of a handful of reporters (almost all women) who courageously tried to cover the news in Ciudad Juarez at the time of its worst violence. She wrote about the bad guys, the cartels and gangsters, but also and more importantly, perhaps, the victims, people whose relatives were slain or went missing."

She also, said Wilkinson, covered "the scourge of 'femicides,' the killing of women that became infamous in Ciudad Juarez. She covered corruption and the failure of authorities to investigate crimes or protect the citizenry. These may seem obvious or even mundane topics, but the dangers of writing about them in a place like Ciudad Juarez are enormous."

Rodriguez Nieto's reporting led her to craft a victims' database that revealed that most of

the Juarez victims were young and poor, not drug cartel members, as Mexican officials claimed. Additionally, 98% were unarmed. And 97 times out of 100, their murders were never solved.

Rodriguez Nieto is part of a group of journalists putting the world on notice about the plight of Mexican reporters who are threatened, intimidated, kidnapped or killed—sometimes by drug traffickers and sometimes by local authorities.

Despite the inherent danger, Rodriguez Nieto also aids others trying to cover the beat. She has been an international



La Fabrica del Crimen (The Crime Factory).



expert for visiting foreign journalists, offering advice and expertise about covering the bloody zone.

Her latest book is La Fabrica del Crimen (The Crime Factory). She was recently announced as the winner of a prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University, where she will study methods to develop sustainable online journalism with a focus on transparency and government accountability in Mexico.

Rodriguez Nieto is a fearless, one-woman encyclopedia on Mexico's drug cartels. She knows how the competing organizations operate and how they keep out of the reach of the law. Her work has been repeatedly recognized: In 2010, the Spanish newspaper El Mundo presented her with its "Reporteros Del Mundo" award for her work covering a conflict zone.

That same year, the Los Angeles Times named her a media hero for her reportage in one of the most dangerous cities on earth. She showed up for work every day, the story said, and in much of Mexico, that alone could be considered an audacious act.

She holds a BA and a master's degree from universities on both sides of the border. She received the Knight International Journalism award in 2011, and the John Peter and Anna Catherine Zenger award last year.

Rodriguez Nieto currently works for SinEmbargo.mx, but will be leaving for Harvard and the Nieman fellowship.

She is tireless and fearless, and she is this year's winner of the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. 🕮

Sandra Rodríguez Nieto is known for writing fearlessly about any problems concerning the government in Mexico, and even created a victim's database to prove how poverty has led many youth in the country to a street-life filled with drugs, crime and working for the drug cartels. Rodríguez Nieto holds a master's degree in journalism from the University of Texas at El Paso.

## Ponen a niños en el Han ejecutado a mi casi todos desarmados

El Diario / Ciudad Juárez, Chib. / Page 1 / Sección A / August 25, 2011 Thousands executed ... almost all unarmed

While official discourse insists on reassuring us that thousands of

While official discourse insists on reassuring us that thousands of homoides in the city are caused by a clash between people involved in drug trafficking or crime. State Government data indicates the vast majority of victims have been killed while unarmed. state Attorney General's Office statistics show that out of the 3,203 State Automity General's Office statistics show that out of the 3,200 homicide investigations from January 2010 to July 2011 in Ciudad nomicate investigations from January 2010 to July 2011 in Cludad Juarez, only in 59 crime scenes weapons were found next to the victim-that's less than two percent of the cases.

that's test than two percent of the cases. The dan, for which the State Attorney General's Office said has no official explanation, was interpreted by researchers in the field of violence as proof that the vast majority of victims are defenseless at the time of the attacks.

That also means, considered researchers, that the official story claim that also means, considered researchers, marine orientation in the second s

those killed were implicated in the drug trade is at stake. "What these data tell us is that, indeed, the victims were unarried and indo opportunity to defend themselves: then, the question is whether or not these people were actively involved in organized erme, and in this you would think that a person involved in organized erme, and in this salvador Cruz, a researcher at the Colegin de la Frontera who specialized in nurders of men.

According to Cruz, who also holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, the According to Cruz, who also holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, the dua may also may indicate that those who are being homicide victims, if the had links to organized crime, they were people working in the lowest level of the structure of the criminal organizations.



Reclama

In 2012, Rodríguez Nieto gave a book presentation at California State University, Northridge.

esús Araujo/El Nuevo