



René Blanco Villallon, who took this picture, is the 26-year-old son of Zeta editor Jesús Blancornelas. He heard the trembling voice of his father on the two-way radio: "We are shot..." He ran towards the bullet-riddled car, feeding film into his camera. He arrived to find the assassin slumped against the wall, dead, and his father wounded in the car.

# Targeting the Editors

By Michel Bajuk

**H**eavy gunfire meets the editor-in-chief as he's heading to the newsroom. Kneeling in the crossfire, Jesús Blancornelas squats on the passenger seat. The bodyguard is already dead. One hit. Two. Three. Four ... the spine stops a bullet. The 62-year-old Zeta editor prays for his life.

The shotgun turns silent. A ricochet from an AK47 hits the lead assassin, David "CH" Barron Corona, in the left eye. He drops dead before he can finish the job. The rest of the killer squad hurries away.

Tijuana, Mexico, 27 November 1997. The bloody battle against drugs goes on. The war is mirrored, examined and printed in a weekly magazine with 55 000 readers.

"Ya basta!" Enough is enough!

Threats, abuses, kidnappings and blood-stained attacks make up part of everyday life. Some of Mexico's most prominent editors have lost their patience.

"We aren't going to spend our time publishing the obituaries of fallen colleagues. We are going to prevent them from ever having to be written," says Jesús Blancornelas to the gathered press.

The expectant reporters are cautiously sceptical. In front of them sits a marked colleague. A role model with a guardian angel. A colleague on overtime. Thirty-one murders in Tijuana - this year. Today's date: 14 February.

Yesterday in Mexico City a journalist was shot in the head, repeatedly, at point blank range. But he was said to have been corrupt. Or was he? You get paranoid very quickly here. Who can you really trust?

For 20 years Blancornelas has scrutinised corruption and narcotics syndicates through Zeta, his weekly paper. A month before the attack, the governor dis-

missed Blancornelas' two federal bodyguards. The same day the main news in Zeta was an emotional and detailed letter from a grieving mother. It was addressed to Ramón Arrelano-Félix, leader of one of the most violent drug cartels, and one of the FBI's 10 most wanted criminals.

The assassin "CH" was responsible for the security of Arrelano-Félix. He was wanted for a great number of crimes and several murders, among them the murder of a Catholic cardinal in Guadalajara in 1993. The meaning of his nickname "CH"...? "Caballero Honorable" - honorable knight.

The hotel is surrounded by undercover policemen and soldiers. The famous publisher is now protected by the President. With a steady gaze and a slightly trembling voice he again challenges the drug lords, this time through television.

"If we don't stop the drug cartels now we may never be able to do so. Politicians, the police force, the army and the FBI cannot do it. How will journalists be able to stand up to heavily armed and economically well-fed narcotics syndicates?"

"In the only way we know of - with good journalism and well-prepared research. When the 'capo' of an international drug cartel tries to get back at the editor of one of the leading weeklies of the country, we have to hit back. If they get away with this they can get away with anything," says Jorge Zepeda. He is the editor-in-chief of *Publico* in Guadalajara. This city of four million is the "third Medellín" of Mexico, home to a number of rival cartels.

Just like the other editors on the panel he lives under death threats. They have lost patience with the incompetence of the government. That is why they have just

formed a Mexican branch of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

They are now organising a special aid force, with the help of *Periodistas de Investigación*, an organisation for investigative journalists with sister associations in the US and Scandinavia.

If one reporter is silenced, at least 20 others will rise up to finish the story. What they find will be published simultaneously in all participating media.

The inspiration comes from the Arizona Project. Don Bolles, an investigative journalist in Phoenix, Arizona, was killed by a car bomb in 1976. He was one of the founders of the organisation, *Investigative Reporters and Editors*. The attack shocked and upset the press. Bob Greene, the legendary double Pulitzer Prize Winner at *Newsweek*, led a thorough investigation in Phoenix with participating journalists and newsrooms from all over the country. Organised crime and corruption was scrutinised and exposed systematically and minutely. The murderers were arrested and convicted. However, the intention was never that the journalists should do police work. The goal was to write those articles that Bolles could not finish.



Zeta editor Jesús Blancornelas ... wounded but not broken.

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