

Self-censorship: the only weapon against fear following the murder of a journalist

By María Idalia Gómez

Miguel Angel Villagomez Valle was murdered on October 9 this year. One month later his newspaper, *La Noticia de Michoacán*, continues to appear in Lázaro Cárdenas but it no longer includes news of organized crime, nor even any follow-up to the murder and the failure of the authorities to make any progress. The reason: his family and the journalists are scared.

“If we knew what annoyed them, what happened, we would still be in pain but we would be in a different situation. This shook us. We have taken steps for the safety of our people. We try to live with fear, because if not the newspaper will be taken over.”

Francisco Rivera’s words are uttered softly, dispiritedly, sadly. He is speaking just a few days after the murder of his good friend and boss, whom he has now succeeded as the newspaper’s executive editor.

Miguel Angel Villagomez Valle was killed from behind at midnight on Thursday, October 9 in the middle of a garbage dump. Just the week before, on September 29, he had celebrated his 29th birthday. For the last four years he was the owner and editor of *La Noticia de Michoacán*, the leading newspaper of the Lázaro Cárdenas region in the south of the state.

There had been no prior threat, only some indirect warnings that Villagomez never regarded as serious and did not even comment on in the paper. For now, the characteristics and available information give rise to the initial theories point to organized crime, to one of the groups operating in the area and to the fact that it could have been annoyed at the coverage the newspaper gave to the hurling of grenades in Morelia city during Independence Day festivities (on September 15) which resulted in the death of eight people and more than 100 wounded.

The authorities have identified as one of the possible motives the publication of a news item about a placard in one of the Lázaro Cárdenas City main streets, probably placed there by one of the drug trafficking organizations. This was information that nobody else published, because death threats had been received in a number of newsrooms but apparently the warning did not reach *La Noticia* in time.

The newsroom, a friendly place

On Thursday, October 9 Miguel Angel Villagomez was working in the offices at the newspaper, an austere place in a white-fronted house in the very center of the city on 8 de Mayo Street. The staff had practically wound up the work of the day; all there was left to decide on were two pages and some photos.

It was just past 10 o'clock at night. It was already late to be walking in downtown Lázaro Cárdenas those days, because there was construction work and unfinished deep drainage holes that made passage difficult, pedestrians having to take a roundabout route and so few people went to the area.

Miguel Angel offered to give a ride to two of his employees that had worked overtime that day and one of them in addition had to work an extra shift the next day. There is a great deal of camaraderie in the newspaper, ask anyone and they will tell you they all get along well and regard themselves as a team, because they have been working together for four years now. Support is a daily routine. Villagomez left the office around 10:40 that night. He would be back soon, he announced, because he had to look over the last two pages and print the paper, something he supervised personally. He only had to go less than a mile and a half at a time when there was little traffic.

The three got into Villagomez' red Chevy Monza and he left each of them at the door of their house. The last house to be visited was barely 700 yards from the newspaper, but with all the street construction work they had to drive a little farther. Then the trail was lost. He was intercepted, they do not know where, by how many or how. They simply overpowered him and took him away.

At the *La Noticia* newsroom they were waiting for him. They called him on his cell phone several times, but with no reply. It was getting late, so they decided to finish the pages that were left and send the paper to press. As they were doing so a police report came in at about 11:30 p.m. that spoke of a "stick-up" but there were no details about where or who was involved. They could not report any further and left it out to check the next day.

"We did not believe it was our colleague," someone at *La Noticia* said. The paper came out slightly delayed.

They picked a spot

Villagomez was found shortly after 5:00 a.m. on Friday, October 10 a yard from the sidewalk among bags, bottles and boxes, the remains of an illegal garbage dump. It is a small spot beside the Zihuatanejo to Lázaro Cárdenas highway, one mile from the road to the town of La Unión, Guerrero state.

His body was discovered by state police officers while on a routine patrol. The word got out quickly.

To reach there from Lázaro Cárdenas City the abductors went by way of the highway to Guerrero and after traveling some 30 miles, approximately a one-hour journey, they stopped. They took advantage of the darkness and the loneliness of the

place. Less than a half mile from there is a State Police station, now also occupied by Federal Police.

That is where they killed him. Found there was blood and the spent cases of 10mm bullets. Miguel Angel was facing down, they had shot him six times in the lower back and given him the coup de grace in the neck.

They left his keys, money and wallet. He had a *La Noticia de Michoacán* identification card and that is how the police were able to easily identify him later and his family members learned very soon. The killers only took his cell phone and the red Chevy Monza automobile, which have not been found yet.

At midday on that Friday the Guerrero State Public Security Office issued an initial official report, containing preliminary details that would later be changed when more information became available: "It became known that on this day it being 6:00 a.m. on the Zihuatanejo to Lázaro Cárdenas federal highway, a kilometer before reaching the entrance to La Unión de Isidro Monte de Oca township there was found the body of a person of the male sex. Members of this agency went to the place, reporting that the deceased presented three bullet impacts, two to the abdomen and one to the head, he had an identification card with the name of Miguel Angel Villa Gómez Valle, editor of the newspaper *La Noticia de Michoacán*. The motive for the actions is unknown, as is the identity of the killer or killers."

"For a press with values"

Miguel Angel Villagomez was frank and direct. He was a young man dedicated to work and a constant organizer of projects.

"Many of us will miss 'Miguelín' and for many reasons, for his way of doing things, his invincible character, the way he faced challenges and for his tenacious battle to be increasingly different from the others," wrote a week after the murder in his column his friend Arnulfo Mora, editor of the Lázaro Cárdenas newspaper *Panorama del Puerto*.

His original job was as a printer, starting out at a young age as a pressroom assistant, later also becoming an editor. He first worked at the newspaper *Contextos de la Costa* and then at the now defunct *Infórmate Diario*. By then he already liked not only printing and fixing machines but also reporting.

Francisco Rivera Cruz recalls that because of his pleasant manner and the friends he made during his years at work Villagomez was offered at a good price and on credit a printing plant to start his own business. They talked about it together, as he wanted him to be his news editor.

“He invited me to be a part of the project. With some debts it goes under way with computers and machinery. He was only dedicated to the newspaper, it was his love for the workshops,” Rivera Cruz says.

Amid setbacks and doubts but with the will to succeed and effort the newspaper *La Noticia de Michoacán*, “for a press with values” was born. Its first issue was on July 12, 2004. In a short time it became the most read and trusted by readers, enabling the office to grow to 16 staffers in the newsroom and management. Currently, according to its own figures, on Mondays it has a circulation of 5,200 and Tuesdays to Saturdays around 1,500.

Added were new sections dealing with issues concerning the port, economy, politics and social affairs, as well as a gossip page. It gave space in its columns to views that previously were not aired in other media.

“He liked to be very much to the point, in the economic and political areas he was very timely in reporting what was going on in Michoacán and in the Port,” says Francisco Rivers. “When something had to be investigated, when there was some concern, we put all our energy into finding the information.”

His colleagues and other journalists agree that Miguel Angel had a nose for news, although he never wanted to write a column. He drank little; he did not often go to meetings of journalists or officials.

“He had a good character, he did not seek confrontation and was reserved,” a reporter adds.

His financial situation was sufficient, he had just a simple house a few minutes from the city where he lived with his wife Irania and three children aged two, five and seven.

The deterioration of Michoacán

Michoacán is located on Pacific coast of Mexico. It is a state of customs, of a tranquil life and of people working mainly in commerce, agriculture and mining. Some four million people in all live in the state, of whom more than 10% are in Lázaro Cárdenas City, where the state’s only port is located, one of the most important in all Latin America because of its capacity to handle modern, deep-draft vessels but also because of the commercial routes that have been developed to the center and western seaboard of the United States.

Figures produced by the INEGI (Mexico’s statistical agency) show that less than 300,000 people live in Lázaro Cárdenas and its suburbs. That is why it is still a place where families know each other, know their history and greet each other. The homes are mostly unassuming and various streets are still unpaved and some go unclean and lack drainage and lights. It is a region endowed by nature, with big

rivers, many of its beaches are in their natural state without hotels where you can see sea turtles and crocodiles that surround them and take care of them, while mining products are one of the strengths of the local economy.

The daily life of the city is dominated by the port activities, the cargo that comes and goes. It is a busy place. It produces strategic revenues for the state and the country. Last year more than 324,000 containers and nearly 14,000 tons of cargo passed through the port. Projected new customs and rail infrastructure will next year make it Latin America's leading port according to officials of the state government and the Communications and Transportation Ministry.

Organized crime

But the geography of the state of Michoacán is also strategic for organized crime. For decades the growing of marijuana has pervaded the region's warm lands. The mountains are almost impregnable, with operations when they are carried out being done by well-trained members of the Army and the Federal Police moving swiftly and in great numbers.

Reports by the Mexican Attorney General's Office (PGR) describe the Michoacán coastline as one of the main entry points for drugs coming from Central and South America, which are hidden in containers or unloaded on the high seas by high-speed boats. In 1999 the PGR identified in this state the Valencia family cartel (also known as the Millennium Cartel) as the principal operator in the area. In 2002, according to the same reports, the organization was split up and a group allegedly headed by Carlos Rosales (arrested in 2004) squared off against the Valencia family and in doing so allied itself with the Gulf Cartel, hiring as hitmen a group of military deserters calling itself "zetas" (zees).

In November 2006, through a strategy of distributing pamphlets and placing paid ads in newspapers in Morelia, a group calling itself "la familia" (the family) made its presence in the state known. It claimed it would work to restore peace and remove the drug traffickers who were selling the drug known as "ice," among other things. Since then alleged members of that group have taken over their drug preparation operations in exchange for protection, taking charge somewhat as the Sicilian mafia do. Also since then there has been another kind of confrontation between rival groups which in addition to violence has included intelligence and counter-intelligence strategies, such as the placement of placards and messages, the appearance of severed heads of people to instill terror, as well as the generation of confusion and mistrust among the population.

Since then the territorial battles of groups in Michoacán have unleashed a level of violence that includes the assassination of officials, the beheading of alleged members of these groups and clashes between the authorities and the drug traffickers that have gone on for hours and in which bazookas, sub-machineguns and grenade launchers, for example, have been used.

Between January and October 25, 2008 throughout the country there have been 3,875 reported executions possibly linked to the illicit drug trade. In Michoacán state alone the count shows that at least 181 people had been murdered apparently for the same reasons. As of June this year Michoacán occupied the sixth place in the number of executions in the country, after Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, Baja California and Guerrero, according to ICESI and CIDAC figures.

In previous years the number was higher: in 2007 238 people were executed and in 2006 a total of 543. The reduction in the crime rate is due, the agency reporters say, to the fact that the strategy of causing terror and subjugating rival gangs and the population itself had worked.

“We are living in a state of terror and the narcos control everything, whole regions, they charge for protection and decide which criminals may work as thieves, sellers of stolen goods and other things,” a local editor says.

The new face of fear and violence is also reflected in the work of the press. In just two years two journalists have been murdered and three others have disappeared, added to the murders that have gone unpunished for more than a decade. None of these crimes has been solved by the Michoacán State Attorney General’s Office – on the contrary, reports provided to the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) in response to demands for justice to be done show that there is no clear will to advance in the inquiries. Given the number of attacks upon journalists, the existing impunity, the presence of organized crime and corruption Michoacán has become one of the most dangerous places to work as a journalist, together with Tamaulipas (eight murders), Oaxaca (seven) and Chihuahua (six).

Suggestions = Threats

If you ask the staffers of the newsroom at *La Noticia de Michoacán* if Miguel Angel had received threats, or any of them, the automatic reply is no. The same thing happens with his widow, Irania. But as the conversation continues and the days pass they begin reflecting on comments, on facts and warnings they had not taken into account before.

It all was very rapid and over in a short time. The signs that they did not see before as real warnings began in the last three weeks, after September 16.

When the two hand grenades were exploded in Michoacán, the state capital, the newspaper was able to obtain fresh information and even photographs, Francisco Rivera says. Although the paper’s resources were not sufficient to be able to have a correspondent in the state capital, its friendship with reporters and photographers from Morelia allowed it to get the material.

“It was the only newspapers [in Lázaro Cárdenas] that followed the issue so fully. It was what took up so much space,” Francisco declared. “That could have annoyed them, I don’t see anything else, in all the issues, in all the political or economic affairs, when someone, a person, was named there was always an opportunity for rejoinder. In those sectors there is a good relationship.”

While coverage was not in-depth it was always precise, Rivera says, and included statements by officials and progress in the investigations.

Miguel Angel Villagomez might not have mentioned to the members of the *La Noticia* newsroom that he had received any threat, but his friend Arnulfo Mora wrote in his column a week later about his death, “I remember a nighttime chat with Miguel on this subject. ‘Mora, I am getting calls indicating to me that I should not touch certain topics, but the sales of the newspaper come first and I’m not going to surrender.’ My response was sincere: ‘Miguelín, there’s no need for heroes or martyrs, my suggestion is that you don’t take any risks in response to anonymous threats, it’s better not to challenge people we don’t see and even less know.’ ‘It’s no problem, it’s a matter of not being scared of them’ was his immediate response in that nighttime chat about four months ago.”

On Friday, September 26 the PGR announced that one day earlier it had taken three persons into custody in Apatzingán, Michoacán, who it said belonged to the “zetas” and had confessed to having taken part in hand grenade explosions against civilians 11 days previously. The three detainees were from Lázaro Cárdenas, according to a report that day from the Michoacán news agency Quadratín.

But 11 days later, as part of a strategy in various states and cities, in Uruapan, Morelia and Lázaro Cárdenas, several placards appeared accusing the “la familia” group of the explosions and offering a reward. Although in Lázaro Cárdenas those messages were withdrawn almost immediately by the municipal police local journalists found out that five had been placed throughout the city and that some of them said, “We the Gulf Cartel energetically condemn the September 15 attacks, we offer our help to the people to arrest the leaders who call themselves La Familia, after being drug traffickers they have gone on to be terrorists. The Gulf Cartel offers 5 million dollars for any information that leads to the arrest of Rosario Moreno González or its equivalent in euros or any other currency We urge you to join with the Gulf Cartel and you will have our support ...,” is how it appeared in the newspaper *Cambio de Michoacán*.

La Noticia de Michoacán in Lázaro Cárdenas ran the item and included a photo. The rest of the publications did not do so, only mentioning it “between the lines,” local reporters said.

According to a report by the Michoacán authorities on October 13 there had appeared on October 7 in the city of Uruapan a placard similar to those in Lázaro Cárdenas outside the newspaper *La Opinión*. The news did not appear because

anonymous calls were received at the newspapers in which there were death threats should they publish that information.

The Guerrero State Attorney General's Office took this information as having triggered or being the motive for Miguel Angel Villagomez' death.

Reporters and executives did not report any death threats said to have been made weeks or days earlier to the *La Noticia* offices. However, the night that the editor was abducted something strange was noticed, that even after his murder they regarded as a dangerous situation the fact that the night of Thursday, October 9 several people, at different times, arrived asking for Miguel Angel, but as he was very busy he could not attend to them. A chubby man with an out-of-town accent wearing a cap, big and shiny gold chains around his neck and on his wrists asked for the editor. The man said he wanted to place an ad. He was attended to and the staff in charge made him the best offer, but he insisted on seeing Villagomez personally, because as he explained he wanted him to give him as good a rate as he had given to a family member some weeks earlier.

The man wanted to advertise his pickup truck for three days and at the time – just past 9:00 p.m. – asked them to photograph it so he could sell it quickly, as he was in a hurry. The staff told him that the ad would not come out that day as the paper was already closing its pages, so they would deal with it the next day. The man stayed around a little longer, intending to talk to the editor.

At that moment Miguel Angel was attending in his office to a number of people, people were coming in and out, so he could not be told of the presence of the man, who “made everyone feel uneasy.” The editor came out of his office so rapidly and went off with the two staffers in his Chevy automobile that no one was able to give him the message. The man had by then already also left.

“Let them bury me with the gang”

Miguel Angel Villagomez' body was taken to a funeral parlor set up as the Zihuatanejo, Guerrero, Forensic Medical Service, because the place where he was killed was on the outskirts of Michoacán, inside Guerrero state. Camilo Blancas, the public prosecutor working for the La Unión municipality, ordered this move after arriving at the scene of the crime with the experts.

The initial inquiries were begun. Investigators found evidence of seven shots, two of the bullets still in the body. The corpse showed no signs of beating or torture. The forensic report indicated that death had occurred around 12:00 midnight.

Michoacán Governor Lonel Godoy was at pains to say that he regretted the publisher's death and that he would give every support to the family. However, so far the State Attorney General's Office has not carried out any inquiry into the case whatsoever, unless the new editor or the victim's family has any news.

Miguel Angel's widow, family members and newspaper colleagues went there to testify and claim the body – two hours' traveling time each way. That is why *La Noticia de Michoacán* did not publish on the Saturday. On Friday was the wake and on Saturday they cremated him. "The paper did not come out on Saturday because events overtook us. We were not prepared," explained Francisco Rivera.

The funeral cortege arrived at the San José Obrero church very early. It was 7:00 a.m. After mass his family, friends and reporters accompanied him through the streets, walking against a background of mariachi songs. They reached his newspaper's offices and pressroom.

They placed the coffin amid hundreds of flowers to one side of the pressroom. In his honor they started up the presses and let them run for several minutes. There were tears and applause. Friends, neighbors and colleagues had no room inside so had to remain outside, where they also laid flowers.

Miguel Angel's family remained standing, to one side. The newspaper colleagues hugged them and hugged each other. The band sang the songs he loved – *Mi Gusto es, Puño de mi Tierra, Que me entierren con la Banda* (My Pleasure Is, The Strength of My Country, Let Them Bury Me With The Gang). His eldest son asked to see him for the last time and they opened the coffin. There were tears all around.

And only then the song *Las Golondrinas* (The Swallows). People stepped aside as the coffin was placed in the hearse. It was raining outside. And that's how he went.

The upshot: self-censorship

Weeks went by. The bitter aftertaste of Miguel Angel's death is evident. The reporters are working in unspoken and constant fear, they take care. *La Noticia's* editorial policy changed.

The fear reached such a point that there is the idea in the paper that if the causes of the death of its editor and those who may have been responsible are investigated and published they could put themselves at risk.

"We no longer have dealt in any way with the matter (Villagomez' murder), the stringers, the op-ed writers have taken that over, as a memory, nothing more," editor Francisco Rivera explains.

Neither have the rest of the newspapers in Michoacán investigated the case. At first the journalists thought of staging a demonstration and then calling on the authorities, but it all ended up, Rivera says, in just moral support. The silence extended to the rest of the Mexican media.

Two weeks after Miguel Angel's murder on the Lázaro Cárdenas to Morelia highway the authorities found a human head in an icebox accompanied by a message that said, "Greetings, Chayo, Rogaciano and Changa. This is for all the shits that support La Familia terrorists, we do not kill innocent people, we kill terrorists like this one and for ... (illegible) ... not to go about making uprisings we do not want them to work with us or to butt in, anyone who butts in beware of the consequences, and thank you who are supporting us: Gulf Cartel 100%," according to reports by Notimex and EFE news agencies.

No newspaper in Lázaro Cárdenas City published anything about this. By then *La Noticia de Michoacán* had already undergone a significant change on its pages – it had stopped publishing anything to do with organized crime. It resorted to self-censorship. That voluntary omission has been protested by the readers, but it is the only weapon that Rivera says he has against the risk that his reporters face and to be able to "live with fear." He declared, "We have avoided giving information other than that produced by the Attorney General's Office about any murder, any discovery (of a body), but it is very brief. We don't give much coverage to this topic. We give it light treatment, and the information has also been downplayed in other media. If we see there has been some ambush or anything like that we leave it alone."

Following the murder have there been any serious incidents of violence in Lázaro Cárdenas that the newspaper has not published? The editor was asked. "Yes, there have been some 'uprisings,' some executions we know about but we don't publish them. The readers protest because we do not bring out the facts, but we hope, or want to believe, that the readers don't understand why we are not publishing them."

To date the authorities of Guerrero and Michoacán have not produced any progress in the investigations into Villagomez' murder. The newspaper has received no subpoena or notification whatsoever.

Given the scant progress in the investigations into all the cases of the murder or disappearance of journalists in Mexico the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) has repeatedly asked the Mexican government to comply with the treaties and agreements that it has signed and which hold freedom of expression to be a fundamental right that must be protected and guaranteed. At the 2nd Meeting of Editors and Publishers of the Mexican Republic more than 50 media leaders called on Mexico's President Felipe Calderón and the national Congress to make crimes committed against journalists federal offenses so that they can be dealt with and solved impartially and effectively. Proposals regarding this issue are under debate in the Chamber of Deputies.

Case File:

Date of murder: October 9, 2008.

Where and how murder: Villagomez was found shortly after 5:00 a.m. on Friday, October 10 a yard from the sidewalk among bags, bottles and boxes, the remains of an illegal garbage dump. It is a small spot beside the Zihuatanejo to Lázaro Cárdenas highway, one mile from the road to the town of La Unión, Guerrero state. He was facing down, they had shot him six times in the lower back and given him the coup de grace in the neck.

Possible motives: The characteristics and available information give rise to the initial theories point to organized crime, to one of the groups operating in the area and to the fact that it could have been annoyed at the coverage the newspaper gave to the hurling of grenades in Morelia city during Independence Day festivities (on September 15) which resulted in the death of eight people and more than 100 wounded.

Suspects: Organized crime

Personal file:

Date of birth: September 29, 1979.

Age at time of death: 29

Marital status: Married with three children (2, 5 and 7 years old)

Profession/occupation: His original job was as a printer, starting out at a young age as a pressroom assistant, later also becoming an editor. He first worked at the newspaper Contextos de la Costa and then at the now defunct Infórmate Diario. By then he already liked not only printing and fixing machines but also reporting.

Reporters murdered or disappeared in Michoacán state

1991–2008

This is the list of reporters murdered or disappeared in Michoacán state. None of the cases has been solved and therefore in all the motive and the circumstances in which they occurred remain unknown.

The majority of the investigations are being handled by the Michoacán State Attorney General's Office (PGJM), which has not taken into custody any of the guilty, so impunity prevails.

Miguel Ángel Villagómez, editor and publisher of La Noticia de Michoacán	Murdered	October 9, 2008	The investigations are under the jurisdiction of the Guerrero State Attorney General's
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Mauricio Estrada Zamora, reporter and photographer of La Opinión in Apatzingán	Disappeared. No progress in the investigations.	February 12, 2008	The investigations are under the responsibility of the Michoacán State Attorney General's Office
Gerardo Israel García Pimentel, reporter of La Opinión de Michoacán	Murdered. No progress in the investigations	December 8, 2007	The investigations are under the jurisdiction of the Michoacán State Attorney General's Office
Juan Pablo Solís, radio and television owner in Zitácuaro	Kidnapped. His whereabouts remain unknown and the investigations have produced no results	December 7, 2007	The State Attorney General's Office has the case file
José Antonio García Apac, owner and editor of the weekly Ecos de la Cuenca in Tepalcatepec	Disappeared. No progress nor interest on the part of the authorities.	November 20, 2006	The Michoacán State Attorney General's office has the case file
Jaime Arturo Olvera Bravo, freelance journalist in La Piedad	Murdered. The investigations have produced no result	March 9, 2006	The Michoacán State Attorney General's office is in charge of the inquiries
Ramiro Ramírez Duarte, managing editor of El Heraldito in Zacapu	Murdered. The investigations have produced no result	April 28, 1999	The Michoacán State Attorney General's office has the case file
Lázaro Cárdenas, announcer at Radio Azul	Murdered. No progress or light shed on the case.	March 1991	The case file is in the hands of the State Attorney General's Office