

Whistleblowers wanted: Mexican journalists seek tips through website

Associated Press. 16 March 2015



Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui was fired on Sunday after her employer MVS Radio denounced her involvement in Mexicoleaks without its permission. Photograph: Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP/Getty Images

Top radio presenter Carmen Aristegui was fired on Sunday for participating in Mexicoleaks alliance to gain anonymous information to expose state corruption

In a country rife with corruption, criminality and abuse – and where saying the wrong thing in earshot of the wrong people can get you killed – Mexican journalists can have a hard time obtaining the kind of solid information required to sort out rumour from reality.

Now an alliance of eight Mexican media outlets and civil society groups is courting potential whistleblowers with a new digital platform that promises to protect the anonymity of sources with the help of sophisticated encryption software.

Mexicoleaks describes its mission as the construction of a “Transparent Mexico”, and participants say they hope it will help them document political corruption, human rights abuses and other misuses of institutional and economic power.

“It is a tool we hope will facilitate independent journalism that is critical of institutional and de facto powers,” said Homero Campa of the leading investigative weekly magazine Proceso. “Lots of sources are frightened of reprisals.”

Campa said that within a day of the website’s launch on 10 March, his magazine had received 10 tips, which were waiting to be evaluated with the help of a code of ethics designed to ensure only information that is in the public interest is used, and any investigations triggered are carried out with particular rigour.

But the launch of Mexicoleaks has already highlighted the daily challenges facing even the country’s most high-profile journalists. Leading radio presenter Carmen Aristegui, whose reporting team has helped expose a string of alleged abuses of power, was fired from her morning news show on Sunday after executives from the MVS radio station objected to her team’s participation in the Mexicoleaks alliance without its authorisation.

The project began as an initiative of the Amsterdam-based group Free Press Unlimited. It relies on software provided by a group called Global Leaks that is partially based on Tor encryption technology, and promises that uploaded information cannot be traced back to its source, even by participants in the alliance.

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Albana Shala, of Free Press Unlimited, says the Mexican members of the project have received training in how to avoid inadvertent revelations that could lead to the identification of contributors, once they have the information in their possession. The project also urges sources not to make themselves vulnerable by, for example, using a computer that can be traced to them in any investigation launched to identify where leaks originated, or making an indiscreet comment to a colleague or friend.

“The system might be foolproof, but people are not,” Shala said. “What is at risk is the life and trust of the whistleblower.”

It is not only sources who are potentially at risk: the Committee to Protect Journalists has documented the murder of at least 25 journalists and the disappearance of 13 since 2000. The death toll is closer to 100 if laxer criteria are used that do not require confirmation that the journalists were targeted because of their work.

Lucía Vergara, of the press freedom group Article 19, said that the number of murders has reduced in recent years. But, she added, other kinds of attacks such as threats and harassment have grown dramatically to reach a total of 326 in 2014.

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“This means the zones of silence are growing,” said Vergara, referring to the areas of the country where local media regularly self-censor. “It means people are increasingly turning to anonymous posts on websites.”

But even these are not always secure.

In late 2011, the Anonymous hacker collective posted a YouTube video threatening to release hacked information about taxi drivers, police officers and journalists working for the Zetas cartel, unless a kidnapped hacker was released. Within days, Anonymous called off the project – dubbed #OpCartel – out of concerns that it could result in the murder of any participants.

The aborted operation came shortly after the dismembered body of journalist Elizabeth Macías was dumped in the state of Tamaulipas, where local media long ago stopped publishing even basic information about shootouts for fear of reprisals.

A message left with her body said she had been killed for social media posts she had made under an assumed name. The newspaper where she worked as an editor did not report her death.

Three years later, in the same state, gunmen kidnapped Rosario Fuentes, a doctor and citizen journalist who contributed to a local blog warning of cartel activity. Hours later, photographs of what appeared to be Fuentes’s dead body were posted on her own Twitter account.

Though Mexico’s many brutal drug gangs are regularly blamed for the terror that muzzles traditional and citizen journalism in many parts of Mexico, Article 19 says that organised crime has only been directly involved in around 10% of all the attacks on journalists. Public officials, meanwhile, account for about 40%.

The national organisations involved in Mexicoleaks are less vulnerable to physical attacks than journalists in the provinces, but they can still come under intense pressure apparently designed to curb criticism of entrenched interests.

That kind of pressure was illustrated last Thursday, two days after the Mexicoleaks launch, when MVS Radio fired two reporters from the popular morning news show presented by Aristegui. The station said the inclusion of MVS’s name within Mexicoleaks without express authorisation was “an affront and an offence”.

Arestegui has won large audiences thanks to her dogged interview style, critical monologues and a string of high-profile investigations, including the revelation that a favoured government contractor had paid for a multimillion-dollar modernist white mansion that was built to measure for the family of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

The “white house scandal” remains unresolved, feeding a deep credibility crisis neither the president nor the government appear willing to seriously address.

The use of an apparently minor violation of trademark protocol to launch an attack on Aristegui’s team prompted a protest outside the station’s offices denouncing censorship on Thursday night. It also triggered an online petition that obtained over 100,000 signatures by the time Aristegui described the situation as “a battle for our freedom” during her show on Friday.

MVS responded by firing Aristegui herself on Sunday, in a move described by the station’s ombudsman as “a sad night for journalism”. By Monday morning, the hashtag #IndefenceofAristegui was within the top worldwide trending topics.