

Narcotrafic and Mexican journalists: Challenges in the line of duty according to profesional life cycle

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Abstract. Mexico has been classified as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for the exercise of journalism. In spite of national and international organizations' attempts to promote an environment that protects the freedom of the press, the self-censorship and aggressions have continued. This has been partially accredited to the violence derived from drug related activities and divergent political ideologies. As Mexico continues on its road to a stronger democracy, it is increasingly important to understand the challenges that the journalist experience on a daily basis. In light of the importance of the role of the journalist in a democratic society, the purpose of this study is to identify the challenges that Mexican journalists currently face through a series of case studies of journalists with activities in Monterrey, Mexico. In doing so it provides an inside look at how public policy, the justice system, organized crime networks and corruption, among others, affect the exercise of journalism in a particular society. Based on previous authors'

work¹ that identifies and classifies the barriers to effective media development in Latin America, this study provides a personal account of the challenges that journalists in Mexico face in the line of duty.

Keywords: journalism and drug violence, new professional challenges, professional life cycles

Introduction: Journalism in the Mexican society

In Mexico, just like in many other Latin American countries, there exists little interest to study journalists and the conditions they face in the line of duty. There are very few studies that focus on their preparation, the development of their field and the barriers they face at the institutional level. Raising the professional standards of this field is a relatively new topic since there is no central organ that determines and evaluates the requisites to be a journalist. Because there are no minimum requirements, any person, regardless of their academic background or lack thereof, can be hired as a journalist. The requirements are for the most part, determined by the company for which they wish to work for. This translates into a great diversity of preparation and background for journalists in Mexico.

Until the second half of the twentieth century teaching journalism as a professional degree in the universities did not exist. The first formal attempt

¹ Especially: Sallie Hughes & Chappell Lawson. 2005. The barriers to media opening in Latin America. *Political Communication* Vol. 22: p. 9-25.

was the Escuela de Periodismo Carlos Septin Garcia which focused on the formation of reporters. Before this university, the Universidad Femenina had offered a journalism degree that was never able to position itself as a competitive option (Baldivia, 1981, p. 9).

Obtaining official figures about journalists in Mexico proves to be a complicated task. This due to the fact that the Instituto Nacional y de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI), the central organ in charge of providing data regarding Mexico's population, classifies journalists in a category that also includes critics and writers, making it very difficult to recreate an accurate panorama of the journalists and their conditions.

It can also be said that the Mexican society is not one that particularly values the work of the journalists. Current laws have barely begun to reflect a concern to protect the journalists' rights and in many cases they include vague and ambiguous clauses that generate further conflicts. It wasn't until recently that defamation and slander were moved from the federal penal code to the civil one. Needless to say, there is still much work needed in order to standardize federal and state codes regarding these issues. On the other hand, it wasn't until 2003, when the Ley de Transparencia y de Acceso a la Información Pública was approved, promoting the right to have access to a wealth of information that was unavailable in the past.

Mexico in transition: the democratic opening

Mexico is still on its path to consolidating its democracy and has thus experienced major institutional changes after the 2000 presidential elections when the PAN's Vicente Fox broke a 70 year PRI regime that established the

limits and possibilities for the country. The political, economic and social changes that occurred in the country during the last thirty years have greatly changed the way that journalism has developed in Mexico, how the media is regulated and the relationship that the journalists hold with the innermost circles of power. The model proposed by Carreño (2000, p. 5) still persists today and is denominated as “a press subordination model, a model consolidated in the first decades of the governments created after the 1910-1917 revolution, and in spite of all the changes that can be argued, it still survives with some key characteristics, even one hundred years later, as one of the most dramatic drawbacks to the Mexican modernization process upon the new century”.

Regarding changes in the Mexican context, Hernández (2004) points out that an analysis is “highly required if we observe that the tendencies that have characterized Mexican journalism cannot satisfy the expectations generated during this crucial period, marked by economic, political and technological changes. The critiques continue and new elements have come into the scene, as well as new actors and new questions” (Hernández, 2004a, p.1). Today, journalists in Mexico have to face precisely those new actors: organized crime and new social groups (Trinidad, Soto y Martínez, 2007), which are linked to the majority of the aggressions, murders and kidnappings or “desapariciones”.

New actors: new threats

Traditionally it was the caciques, politicians and public servants who interfered with a journalist’s job. Today journalists predominantly receive

orders from members of organized crime networks, and particularly, of the drug cartels, as noted by the Drug Enforcement Agency of the U.S. (Lara, 2007). This has raised the potential danger for Mexican journalists. Even though the state is now increasingly open to criticism, due in greater part to international observation than to its own conviction, the new actors have caused an increase in self-censorship. According to the *Red de Protección a Periodistas y Medios de Comunicación* (RPMP), a group of organizations that have joined forces in defense of the freedom of expression and human rights since 1997: "Almost all of the crimes against communicators have gone unpunished, which affects not only the rule of law but the construction of a democratic society that all of us [Mexicans] aspire to".

In the case of the city of Monterrey, which is the focus of this study, it's relevant to comment briefly about recent changes in the international illegal drug market. In the past, Mexico was considered a transit country that allowed drugs to reach their target market, however it no longer holds this status. The fall of drug cartels, among other factors, have forced drug dealers to search for new markets. Today, Mexico is considered a country of consumption, where drugs are being sold in the main urban areas, including Monterrey, causing violence and intimidation of the media. Mexico and its journalists live in a situation similar to that experienced by countries at war. "There are 28 000 killed, 30 journalists killed or missing, the Army on the streets, may not fit the international definition of a war, but it feels like one", report the RPMP.

Changes in the legal context for Mexican journalism

Important changes in the legal context for Mexican journalists include the creation of the Ley de Transparencia y Acceso a la Informacion Publica, which was made valid in 2003 and guarantees the right to have access to information from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government, with the exception of information that can generate a threat to the national security. The creation of this law has allowed the public to obtain information that was previously impossible to receive, reflecting Mexico's efforts to promote transparency in the governmental processes, (Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal).

Other important changes include moving defamation and slander offenses from the federal penal code (Articles 350 to 363) to the civil one, making it possible to punish these offenses with fines in a civil court instead of punishing the journalists with jail time. However, different state laws still need to be modified to account for these changes at the federal level. Also, since 2006, both the federal government and the Federal District approved professional secrets for journalists, allowing them to protect the identity of their sources. Other governmental effort to protect journalists include the creation of the Comision de Defensa de los Derechos de los Periodistas in 2006, as well as the creation of the Comision de Derechos Humanos in the Federal District to track abuses and aggressions carried out against journalists, and more recently, in 2010, the Special Prosecutor for Crimes Against Journalists.

The arrival of the PAN's government in 2000, brought great changes, some real and others symbolic for the Mexican population. The democratically

elected government brought promises of social change that would promote a state of checks and balances. Some issues remain unsolved like the murders of more than 75 journalists during the last 10 years of PAN government. Surely this step marked the beginning of a democratic transition for Mexico. Journalism in Mexico went from being one where the government dictated the news days before it occurred (Bohmann, 1997), to one where the journalist was free to investigate, criticize and question the authority itself. The opening of information and the strengthened freedom of the press marked the beginning of a new stage for Mexican journalism, where once liberated from the repression of the state, it would be confronted with new actors that could threaten its development. Without the repression that characterized the state before and without adequate and fast institutional changes, the journalist would now be faced with a greater wealth of information and freedom of speech without necessarily having better protection. While it is true that the journalists now have more freedom, it is also true that they do not have better tools to defend themselves in the line of duty.

Mexico has been classified as one of the most dangerous countries for the exercise of journalism, from 2000 to 2011 more than 74 journalists were killed and others were declared missing and never found, all for causes related to their job. The majority of the attacks have occurred along the Mexico-US border “where the drug cartels impose their own laws” (Camacho, Olivares y Pérez, 2011).

There are various points that should be emphasized in order to properly understand the current state of journalism in Mexico. First, as

mentioned previously, different components of journalism began changing but not at the same rhythm. In other words, even though the efforts to promote freedom of the press have increased, they haven't been developed at the same time as mechanisms to protect the journalist who now has access to much more sensitive information than before.

In second place, and related to the first point, there hasn't been a notable effort to adequately train the journalist and to raise the professional standards. Being a journalist in an oppressive regime is very different than being a journalist in a democracy, and the Mexican journalist has not been equipped with the proper tools to inform adequately in this new context.

In third place, the conducts and habits developed during the PRI regime will take a long time to change. Mexican journalism, generally speaking, still has a long way to go before it embraces a culture of investigative reporting. Old habits of recycling news, reporting without verifying the sources, obtaining information from only one source, receiving bribes by the authorities, are actively present today. Although a better regime of information access has been installed, it is still necessary to carry out aggressive efforts to promote its use.

Barriers to media opening in Latin America according to Hughes y Lawson

Hughes and Lawson (2005) in their study "The barriers to media opening in Latin America", describe the "five general barriers to the creation of independent, pluralistic, and assertive media systems in the region". These five barriers are clearly represented in the Mexican case. In the first place,

Hughes and Lawson point out a generalized weakness in the rule of law that increases the journalists' vulnerability. In this context, they emphasize the importance of non state actors as the perpetrators of violence. They explain: "Most countries fall somewhere between these extremes, where the line between state and non state actors blurs. In Mexico, where 74 journalists have been killed in the same period during PAN's government, the main culprits have been drug dealers, police in collusion with the criminals and corrupt politicians. Whoever the actual aggressor, the crimes often went unpunished (Camacho, Olivares y Pérez, 2011) even when the agents of violence were not themselves officials, state inaction or inefficacy played an important role. At best, such threatening circumstances discourage investigative reporting; at worst they lead to systematic censorship" (Hughes and Lawson, 2005, p.11). For the case of Monterrey specifically, organized crime has proved to be a perpetrator of violent acts, from January to the end of September 2011, 1,400 persons were killed due to matters related to organized crime, a third of them were police officers and chiefs.

A second barrier to media opening in Latin America is what Hughes and Lawson describe as a "hostile and antiquated legal climate" that is still active today. Regarding this second point the authors establish that "repressive elements of the region's legal architecture include criminal defamation laws, *desacato* or "insult" laws protecting the 'honor and dignity' of public officials, lack of protection for journalists sources, and lack of access to government information". Although the criminal defamation laws in Mexico have been replaced by civil laws, there is still much progress needed to standardize federal and state legislations, furthermore it is still necessary to

carry out efforts to make sure the laws are respected and properly carried out, which is also the case for the Ley de Transparencia y Acceso a la Informacion Publica and the laws regarding the confidentiality of the journalist's sources.

Concerning the third barrier, the oligarchic ownership of media outlets, Mexico shows the highest market concentration amongst its Latin American counterparts. Hughes and Lawson explain that “market concentration is typically the result of media owners' collusive relations with political elites, be they the autocrats of previous years or today's elected leaders. For instance, Mexico's Televisa and Brazil's Globo Emerged and expanded with the aid of authoritarian regimes that protected and promoted those companies”.

The structure of the Mexican media today is characterized by the powerful media enterprises developed during the second half of the twentieth century under the protection of the PRI, who frequently provided them with concessions all over the country, as is the case for Televisa (Hughes and Lawson, 2005). Televisa's monopoly was active until the privatization of channel 13 in 1993, as a result of policies derived from the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Channel 13 was acquired by the Salinas Group and became TV Azteca, Televisa's prime competitor. TV Azteca has achieved a considerable expansion throughout the country.

State participation in the media has been decreasing due to policies that have been eliminating the existence of newspapers, press agencies, television and radio stations that were previously state property. Esteinou (2000) explains that “pressured by the withdrawal of the state as a regulatory instance of the media and by the imposition of the strong tendencies that have

been introduced by the econometric neoliberal policies to turn the Mexican state into a 'highly efficient' entity, a severe crisis has been generated and at the same time, the disappearance of a public service media model that had functioned in Mexico for the last three decades; this, to pave the way, in great part, to a market project with private information systems”.

The fourth barrier, uneven journalistic standards, proves to be especially relevant for the Mexican case. There are differences in journalists' standards throughout the country and they are enhanced when factors such as regional development, difference in salaries from state to state, and the centralization of education are taken into consideration. Journalism in Mexico faces a lack of professional standards, due in part to the absence of a central organ to regulate the requisites to become a journalist. The lack of this central organ means that job requirements and on going training is determined by the media enterprise. Hughes and Lawson (2005) point out that “one indicator of the paucity of workplace training is that 80% of Latin American journalists surveyed in 2001 had received no workplace training in using the Internet-presumably a crucial resource for modern reporters (Kaagan Research Associates, 2001)”. In spite of this, there are notable efforts by the civil society to raise the professional standards for journalists in the country. These are, however, generally focused in the main urban areas and do not represent the country's entire landscape.

On the other hand, the uneven journalistic standards are amplified by the diversity in salaries. The journalists' salaries fluctuate as much as the work conditions and range from the minimum professional salary of 180 - 390

to 2,500 monthly USD for prominent journalists who have a solid work history and work for large television and radio chains in the most important cities of the country. It is important to mention that the minimum professional salary, fixed by the Comision Nacional de Salarios Minimos from the Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social, is a governmental effort to alleviate those disparities. The Commission divides Mexico into three regions, each with their respective minimum salary, to account for regional differences within the country (Comision Nacional de los Salarios Minimos).

The journalists' low salaries can be, to a certain degree, a justification to carry out different activities in an effort increase their quality of life. In some cases, carrying out different activities can result in ethical dilemmas for the journalists, as is the case for those journalists that sell publicity to their sources. In some enterprises, such as the Grupo Reforma, there are specific policies in place to prevent the loss of objectivity by the journalists, for example by prohibiting them to sell publicity. Ríos (2005, p. 4) says “The independence is in danger when the journalists sell publicity, there is dishonesty on any level of the notes. Because we are always talking about independence, we often think it deals with the highest levels of management. Independence issues are at the lower levels as well”.

Hughes and Lawson (2005) describe the fifth barrier as a “limited audience access to diverse sources of information”. In the case of television in Mexico, there is a large quantity of open television stations, however most of the local channels retransmit the programming provided by the larger chains. It is estimated that 59% of the programming consists of retransmitting

national programming. Furthermore, the authors point out that: “the dominant medium in the region [Latin America], broadcast television remains the most concentrated and controlled”.

Methodological description

This study is part of a larger research project that seeks to reconstruct the identity of the Mexican journalist. It follows the qualitative tradition allowing it to gain a deep understanding of how the Mexican journalist perceives his role as a social actor in the Mexican context. The study is based on case studies using the in depth interview technique. Its objective includes the identification of the barriers that the Mexican journalists face in the line of duty. The sample included 20 journalists in various stages of their professional lives. The first phase of the study includes the preliminary results based on 10 of the journalists. All of the journalists had activities in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico for at least one year at the time the interviews began and worked for the local media, although in some cases some of the journalists carried out activities for the national media. The in-depth interviews were done following a series of questions elaborated based on the model proposed by Torres (2005). In most cases, it was necessary to carry out two to three sessions to complete the questions. All field work was done from March to May, 2007. All of the interviews, transcriptions and interpretations were done by members of the research team.

Limits and strengths

This study faces various limitations. In the first place, there is little information available regarding the current status of journalism practices in

Mexico. The various national organizations in charge of processing labor information do not dedicate much space to journalists as a single group, which translates into inexact statistics regarding their situation.

Regarding the different labor conditions that the journalists face, it is important to keep in mind the great developmental diversity that exists from region to region in Mexico. The situation of a journalist in a rural context will be very different than that of a journalist in the city, for example, in regards to the access to information, training, salaries, etc. The diversity in conditions is a factor that must be taken into consideration as the reader formulates her own conclusions about the journalists in Mexico.

Finally, this study is based on the *perspective of the journalist*, thus it may be considered subjective and biased. However, the authors consider that far from being a limiting factor, it's actually a strength since the objective is precisely to expose the reality based on the journalist's experience. This study seeks to describe the barriers as seen by the journalists as they try to carry out their activities. In this sense, the reader should keep in mind that it exposes only one side of the story.

Results

The results of this first phase of the investigation are focused on two areas. The first is the identification of four stages of the professional lives of journalists: 1. decision to enter the field; 2. Idealism; 3. development of a conscience; 4. expansion and transcendence. And the second, more relevant to this particular phase: the perceptions of the journalists with respect to the barriers and problems they face in the line of duty.

Stages of the professional lives of the journalists:

Decision to enter the field: During this stage the journalist identifies elements of his or her personality that are compatible with the field and recognizes a calling for the job. There are two possible sources for this calling. One is that the journalists reflect on their own interests and aptitudes and the other, the influences promoted by their environment. In two of the ten cases studied, one of the parents, in both cases the mother, were university educated. A reoccurring factor was an environment of limited economic opportunities and even poverty. In some cases, starting university studies, which was rarely done in journalism or communication, inspired the decision to become a journalist. In other cases, it was inspired by doing odd jobs or by the need to obtain a higher income.

Idealism: This phase usually takes place during the first months of being a journalist. During this second phase of the professional life, the journalists feel that everything can be achieved through journalism and do not perceive the dangers of the field. They generally consider themselves exploited by their first jobs, since they frequently do 12 hour days, seven days a week. In other cases, the feeling of exploitation takes root in the fact that they don't receive credit for their notes, since they are generally accredited to the "staff" making them perceive a lack of confidence in their work.

During this phase, they perceive that journalists can change the world through their writing. They feel that they are able to transform society, eliminate inequalities, and hold the government accountable for its actions. In this stage they do not yet feel that they deserve to be called journalists. They

consider that being a journalist “is someone very important, someone who has overcome everything and is a role model”.

Development of a conscience: This phase is generally characterized by the overestimation of themselves, of their work and of its social impact. Generating a conscience for the journalists can occur in various ways: “It’s when you realize that journalism has an objective and you work towards achieving it”. For some, this objective is giving a voice to those that are unheard, for others, it means using journalism for their own benefit. It is during this stage that they often perceive themselves as defenders of social causes but it is also when they come to understand the dangers of the field. They begin to collide with the existent power structures, whether they are the government, organized crime, or others. They feel they are underpaid and do not feel protected by the government or by the companies for which they work. According to one journalist: “It is a kamikaze profession, whoever enters it knows that they will not have the protection of the government or the media, the only protection one has it’s one's own work”.

Transcendence: During this stage the journalists make a decision in regards to the kind of reporting they want to do. They either take up the responsibility of doing journalism in an objective and ethical manner or they choose to consolidate their own economic situation based on their relationships with the power circles, turning them into spokespeople for those groups.

The journalists that head for the first option usually assume the role of influencing other journalists, they often enter the academic field to

complement their own journalistic activities or become counselors to other younger journalists. Those that go with the second option often use their relationships with powerful people to increase their own wealth by obtaining licenses or permits for self started businesses.

Regarding the barriers that the journalists face in the line of duty, results of this study reflect the barriers explained by Hughes and Lawson (2005). With respect to the uneven journalistic standards, it is important to reiterate the poor salaries. The financial support offered by the companies to carry out additional training and to update techniques is still very limited, leaving these activities up to the journalists themselves. Their search is, in turn, limited by the low salaries, which are often comparable to that of a qualified technician: "I've been living as a journalist for ten years and I see it as very poor...it is a very poor journalism...in the sense that the majority of the notes are based on declarations...there is very little research, investigative reporting is done in a few places, but it is hard!...Especially because research is expensive, it is hard to economically support someone so they can deliver one note...or a series of notes. Journalism in Mexico is very poorly paid, there is still a lack of preparation among the people that work in this field."

Given these circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine that the Mexican journalist can be easily corrupted by those who wish to manipulate the information that will be published. The ethical aspect of journalism is still highly underdeveloped and the manipulation of information is still justified by the need to have other sources of income to make up for a lacking salary: "A lot of business can be made being in journalism due to the close relationships

with people with power, but I think that those who do it do not understand their role, there are people that are in the media that have been corrupted, I don't blame them because many times the salaries the companies offer are very poor, we are professionals and they treat us like unskilled workers...and people have to ask for money from the authorities to compliment their salaries.”

Another reoccurring factor in the interviews, also related with the uneven journalistic standards is that, according to the journalists, both the academic and practical preparation they have received has proved insufficient to carry out the tasks that have been necessary in their fields. In other words, the kind of preparation is uneven and incomplete. The majority of the cases describe not having had enough training in the different areas of their fields, such as the the press, radio and television.

The interviews reveal that the journalists still perceive a “hostile and antiquated legal system”. In spite of the efforts to modernize the legal framework that affects them, the journalists continue to perceive the authorities as untrustworthy. In one case, a journalist even reported being unsure of who was behind the aggressions, the government or the organized crime: “I think that if it [a real democracy] is not occurring, the government will continue to take advantage of the insecurity that exists...to teach the journalists a lesson...like it has happened with the people that receive threats in the name of organized crime...where we don't really know if they really are threats from the organized crime or not.”

Although the legal context can change step by step it's even a more difficult task to change what the public perceives. In this case, the journalists still hold the perception of the government that they developed under the old regime. They perceive the government as an inefficient system whose actions are insufficient to really protect them in the field: "...the Mexican government did a spectacular campaign in defense of the journalists, that in reality has not worked. Fox approved a special commission to follow-up on the aggressions against journalists...but to this moment there are no results, the aggressions continue...the murders continue..." In some cases, the journalists even reported having been victims of threats or knowing a colleague who had been a victim of a threat for reasons related to their work.

Organized crime was frequently mentioned as an important threat. The journalists recognized it as a new actor and identified the need to be better prepared and to produce quality work in order to avoid exaggerated notes that could put them in danger. As far as the most dangerous regions for the exercise of journalism, the US-Mexico border was among the most frequently named: "No one tells you that when you receive a note from the organized crime, it is from the organized crime, but doing journalism as a means of exposing the corruption, the crime, is becoming a dangerous activity because we have become sources of discomfort for those people, so it is becoming a dangerous job, especially here [in Monterrey]. Tamaulipas is terrible for journalism, you cannot do journalism in Tamaulipas because of the control that the organized crime has there. It is terrible, there are journalists that are called 'narcoperiodistas', which are journalists that are at the service of the

drug cartels...That is happening in Tamaulipas and it is operating here [in Monterrey], here the model is beginning to be reproduced.”

The appearance of 'narcoperiodistas' is a phenomenon in itself. These journalists are dedicated to covering the news related to the drug cartels and in many cases have strong relationships with them. They are a prime example of the high level of corruption that can be reached when new actors enter the scenario and of the biased information that can make it to the newsstand.

It appears that the best type of protection that the journalists have after the lack of governmental protection and new and increased threats, is raising their own professional standards: “I don't know if they [journalists in Mexico] feel protected, [but] they are not, they are not protected by the government or by the companies that they work for...the only protection they have, I think, is their own work, that will protect them”. When a particular journalist was asked how he protected himself from the dangers of the field he responded: “the best form of protection is doing quality work...letting the truth come through...I think those that have been murdered have been murdered for working as 'narcoreporteros' or for working on behalf of a cartel, there are exceptions”.

Related to what Hughes and Lawson (2005) describe as a “limited audience access to diverse sources of information” the journalists show an understanding of the business aspect of the media. They recognize that the media companies have economic objectives that they need to meet and that are often a higher priority than properly informing the public. They also describe that their own desire to publish or inform regarding specific areas

can be limited by the objectives of the companies for which they work: “The media is a business and has interests, the information has to go through filters...There are the editors, the producers...the reporter has control of the information he writes, but the real control is in the management...”

Finally it is important to mention a reoccurring element that deserves a brief comment because it represents a source of hope and for the future of media opening in Mexico. The journalists show an understanding of their roles as social actors and of the importance of their job. They perceive themselves as a bridge of communication between the vulnerable sectors of society and the circles of power, in this sense they speak of a “journalism of service”. This realization has great implications for the future of journalism in Mexico because it demonstrates the existence of a will to improve the journalistic practices.

Conclusion

This study offers a look into journalism in Mexico through the eyes of the journalists themselves. The results show that in spite of recent government actions to protect the journalist in the line of duty, they continue to feel unprotected and to perceive the authorities as inefficient. It also reflects the necessity to carry out aggressive efforts to raise the professional standards of the field. As Mexico continues to consolidate its democratic processes, it will be increasingly necessary to address these barriers to allow the journalists to perform adequately and freely. On the other hand, businesses in the media should incorporate formal training programs to raise the professional standards. This would contribute to the formation of well

equipped, properly trained, ethical journalists. The journalism context in Mexico has certainly changed, new actors have become involved in the social science, globalization has immersed Mexico into the global economy, and a democracy has begun. These changes place new demands on the journalists who have to be better prepared to deal with a changing society.

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