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We encourage and conduct investigative reporting that empowers citizens, strengthens accountability and helps build a more just and transparent society.

Inequality, impunity, and corruption continue to damage Mexico. This is why we are committed to investigations that expose the asymmetries, abuses, and failures of the powerful, and the imbalance in the exercise of citizens’ rights.

We are an independent organization, and using this autonomy, we rummage where we’re not supposed to, we find what is hidden in the closet and we look under the carpets, and we place in the public eye what is not otherwise seen or debated.

We believe that collaboration with others strengthens the kind of journalism that sheds light on issues of public interest. We team up with journalists, media, and several organizations to carry out investigations that would otherwise seem unattainable or dangerous.

Since our launch in 2017, we have consulted on, produced, and published relevant stories that have had diverse effects on the political and social scene. Some of them have merited awards as outstanding works within investigative journalism.
This is a selection of the most relevant investigations we published throughout the year. Those marked with an asterisk are stories that we incubated and supplemented with advice, production, and funding, after a jury chose them from among dozens of submissions in response to our annual call for proposals. The others are in-house investigations.
Quinto Elemento Lab revealed in 2017 that one of the closest aids of then President Ernesto Peña Nieto had received $10.5 million USD in bribes from the Brazilian company Odebrecht. The public officer was at the time CEO of Pemex, the national oil company and the alleged bribes were transferred between 2012 and 2014.

But we found there was more. Odebrecht made at least 25 more bribes years prior, for $9.2 million USD, according to secret accounting records to which we gained access to.

The new documents that further exposed the company’s web of corruption were obtained by an alliance of Latin American journalistic organizations we are part of, called the Structured Journalistic Investigations Network; together we have been following the Odebrecht case for five years.

The news of the newly discovered bribes was published as a scoop on the front page of El Universal newspaper and was picked up by dozens of news outlets in Mexico and abroad. It was cited by Europa Press, EFE, Infobae, and América Economía, among others.
**Transparency victories**

The Mexican government reached an agreement in 2021 with businessman Alonso Ancira and his company Altos Hornos de México (AHMSA). Ancira, facing federal charges, was released from jail and his case was suspended with the sole condition that AHMSA would reimburse Pemex $216 million USD. Such an agreement was unprecedented in the Mexican judicial system, and the specifics of the deal were sealed as confidential. Quinto Elemento Lab contended this decision and won the battle of access to information. The document, which allows to check the agreement’s compliance, is now a public record.

Quinto Elemento Lab had other wins in the access to information front. Our team was able to overturn the federal government’s decision to reserve the criminal file of the Odebrecht-Pemex corruption case. We also brought down a federal disposition that would charge 1.7 million pesos (85 thousand USD) for access to the file.
The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) coordinated in 2021 the largest global investigation ever conducted to date, and Quinto Elemento Lab participated along with more than 600 journalists in 117 countries.

Months of work led us to discover that the Legionaries of Christ shifted millions of dollars to tax havens just as the Vatican was investigating the congregation for sex abuse cases committed by its founder, Marcial Maciel.

We also revealed that members of the presidential cabinet, senators, former governors, and other high-ranking officials failed to report their offshore investments in their asset declarations, as they are required to do.

Our team investigated the use of tax havens by more than 3,000 clients in Mexico who have taken their money to offshore entities and were able to reveal the participation in tax havens of dozens of politicians and businessmen. The reports were picked up by a handful of local and foreign media.

In the wake of the Pandora Papers, the Mexican government’s Financial Intelligence Unit announced the opening of an investigation, and members of the upper house introduced bills seeking to regulate investments by public servants in tax havens.
The presence of arsenic and fluoride in very high concentrations in underground water has spread in Mexico in the last decade. The government has not informed the public of the toxicity and the possible impact in health of consumers nationwide. The project “Poison in my water” was submitted by a team of data journalists Data Crítica in one of our public calls. The story revealed the increase in concentrations and geographical expansion of the problem is consequence of uncontrolled extraction of groundwater. Civil society organizations and local media in several cities picked up on the story’s findings. We provided them with an interactive database that allowed citizens to review their community’s specific case. Based on our information, journalists from Aquascalientes, Baja California Sur, and the states along the Mexican Caribbean also identified sites with high levels of contamination in the water.
Money laundering in Sinaloa*

Together with the prestigious local weekly in Sinaloa, Río Doce, we accompanied two journalists in the investigation of an influential business group in the Pacific region that is being investigated by Mexican authorities for alleged money laundering.

Juan José and Erick Arellano Hernández head a consortium of more than 100 real and shell companies whose business niche is, according to the official investigation, to provide money laundering services to individuals or organizations that require it.

The story was published in media in Mexico and in Telemundo’s website, in the United States.

The authors participated in the organized crime roundtable at the Latin American Investigative Journalism Conference in 2021 and shared with colleagues the lessons they learned in covering white-collar crime.
A group of journalists from 11 media outlets and 6 countries (Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and the United States) joined forces to investigate the far-reaching damage done by the war on drugs, an offensive launched by US President Richard Nixon in 1971.

Why is Latin America still stuck with a policy that makes us all lose? Why are we still betting on militarization when we are already the most violent region in the world? To answer these questions and present a special report with Latin American stories, Quinto Elemento Lab teamed up with the Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP), Dromómanos, El Universal, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), El Faro, IDL-Reporteros, 070, Verdad Abierta, Ponte Jornalismo, and El Nuevo Herald.
Through our exposés, we aim to bring about change, push for reform for the common good, and contribute to accountability. Historically, this has been difficult to achieve in Mexico. Nevertheless, some of our findings led to tangible results in 2021.
In January, the Mexican government fired the top official in charge of overseeing vulnerable activities in the country's tax collection system, after a story by Quinto Elemento Lab and the organization CONNECTAS which uncovered his shady past.

Ramón García Gibson is an executive who worked at HSBC bank in the last decade but failed to prevent money laundering within the financial institution, as our report revealed. García was hired by tax authorities in 2019 to detect possible illicit activities in the Mexican tax system, but after the story broke in 2020, Mexico's President ordered an internal investigation that culminated in the official's dismissal.

Florian Tudor, who allegedly led a criminal gang dedicated to credit card cloning and ATM fraud in the Mexican Caribbean, was arrested in May by local authorities for extradition to Romania.

Tudor's arrest, the freezing of the organization's bank accounts a few months earlier, and the imprisonment in Romania of six of his accomplices followed the publication in 2020 of an extensive international investigation by OCCRP, Quinto Elemento Lab, Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity and the Rise Project on the criminal activities of the Riviera Maya gang.
Jail for two protagonists of the Odebrecht-Pemex scheme

In 2021, two protagonists in the Odebrecht construction company’s corruption scheme in Mexico went to jail as a result of our investigative work.

Businessman Alonso Ancira was extradited in February from Spain and spent several months in prison, from where he was released when he pledged to return $216 million USD to the Mexican government.

Ancira’s problems with justice began in 2018, after an investigation by Quinto Elemento Lab revealed million-dollar transfers from the accounts of his company, Altos Hornos de México, to an offshore firm owned by Odebrecht, which in turn channeled the alleged bribes to Emilio Lozoya, then director of the national oil company, Pemex.

Lozoya was also put in jail in November, accused of receiving bribes from Odebrecht executives, a revelation that was published in 2017 by Quinto Elemento Lab.

Jalisco officials accused of abuse of authority

Two Jalisco state officials involved in the irregular handling of dead bodies were charged in September with abuse of authority to the detriment of the victims and society.

The accused were linked to the operation of two roving trailers with 322 corpses on board that traveled the streets of Guadalajara, as was reported in an investigation published in 2020 by Quinto Elemento Lab, by our division specialized in human rights A Dónde Van los Desaparecidos (Where do the vanished go?) in collaboration with ZonaDocs.

The investigation was part of a special project on the Forensic Crisis, in which we reported on overflowing morgues, the rampant violence in Mexico, and the drama experienced by families searching for their missing relatives.
These are some of the most relevant materials published by adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org, our multi-award-winning division dedicated to covering the human rights crisis.

On this website, we publish the stories investigated by a network of journalists throughout Mexico and the analysis of specialists regarding the enforced disappearance of people and the failures that are hindering the search for people and that keep these crimes in a state of impunity. As of December 2021, the federal government had a record of 95,000 missing persons.
“Extermination camp” discovered in the state of Morelos

In October, eight sites containing human remains were confirmed to have been found in an old sand mine South of Yecapixtla in the state of Morelos; dozens of bodies lie in these clandestine burial sites.

Where are the Yaquis of Loma de Bácum?

Seven Yaqui people and three non-Yaqui men disappeared in July in Sonora. The women of Loma de Bácum, a territory coveted by megaprojects and drug traffickers, have not remained with arms crossed: they move together, search in the hills, and march, demanding the return of these people, alive.

They were looking for a missing family member; they were murdered

Mothers, fathers, spouses, siblings... at least 12 people searching for their missing relatives in Mexico have been murdered. In July alone, Aranza Ramos, from Sonora, and José Nicanor Araiza, from Zacatecas, were killed. National institutions failed them and did not protect them.
A Dónde Van produces content and strengthens reporters.

In alliance with Hacemos Memoria and the University of Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia, we offered a course on “Journalism and Memory” in which 42 journalists from Mexico and Colombia participated.

In 2021, we also created the Network of Journalists Covering Disappearances, which brings together more than 40 journalists from all over Mexico and provides them with psychosocial support and training.

Genetic database of missing persons is in the hands of the National Guard

Adondevanlosdesaparecidos.com revealed the National Guard, a civilian police force run by the Mexican military, now manages the national database of missing persons. The Guard, created in 2019, purchased specialized software to process and update data and genetic information originally concentrated in another agency in charge of the search. According to investigations, military have been involved in many forced disappearances.

Cinco años después, aceptan existencia de “centro de exterminio” en Matamoros

In 2016, the Tamaulipas Procurator’s Office and the military found a site with remains. They reported these could be either animal or human remains. It was until 2021 that the Mexican government announced the recovery of at least half a ton of human bones (reported with Elefante Blanco website).
MásterLAB, A COURSE FOR INVESTIGATIVE EDITORS

Quinto Elemento Lab launched the first training program for investigative reporting editors in the Spanish speaking world. The program has a special interest in training women editors and journalists in regions of Mexico were carrying out independent journalism is more difficult or risky.
Editors are key players in ensuring the quality of the information we bring to the public. They define the selection of topics and are the filter responsible for ensuring that the information is accurate, solid, balanced, and complete. In other words, a good editor is a multiplier of good practices within a newsroom.

For this reason, we created MasterLAB for investigative editors, the first program of its kind in Latin America. This year, 22 journalists participated in the program, which was taught and mentored by some of the best journalists in the world. Journalists from Veracruz, Sinaloa, Baja California, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Jalisco, Yucatán, Puebla, Guanajuato, Chihuahua, and Mexico City participated.

The program comprised 15 online instruction sessions and 14 hours of one-on-one mentoring with some of the best journalists from the continent and Europe.

MasterLAB was described by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the Global Investigative Journalism Network as an innovative project that “is changing the way investigative journalism is produced in Mexico and its relevance to the lives of Mexican citizens”.

OUR FIGHT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The government’s decision to keep documents that are relevant to society hidden and confidential has led us to undertake legal battles for greater transparency and access to public information. Our work has also been threatened by cases of wiretapping and judicial harassment against our journalists.
The Pegasus Project, a global investigation by Forbidden Stories in collaboration with Amnesty International, discovered in July that at least 188 journalists around the world had been targeted for surveillance with NSO Group spyware. Mexico was the country with the most journalists potentially spied on. At least 25 were targeted through their cell phones; among them, the four founders of Quinto Elemento Lab.

Alejandra Xanic, Marcela Turati, Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna, and Daniel Lizárraga were included in the list of journalists vulnerable to spying, along with other Mexican reporters and foreign correspondents in the country. Between 2015 and 2016, the first wiretaps were identified on the cell phones of journalists in Mexico.

Our founders and editors published op-eds in Reforma and The Washington Post to condemn the spying practices against the press carried out by the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto and joined a class-action lawsuit with journalists from 7 countries and Reporters Without Borders against the Israeli company NSO Group.

This was not the only case of espionage we discovered this year. Marcela Turati learned that she, along with a human rights defender and a forensic specialist, was surveilled and spied on as part of an illegal judicial strategy by the Mexican government. They were spied on between February 2015 and April 2016, when they were investigating the San Fernando massacre: the murder of more than 190 people, many of them migrants from Central America, whose bodies were discovered in clandestine graves.

The judicial harassment against Turati was condemned by the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Pedro Vaca Villarreal, while a group of senators demanded that the government investigate the case. The journalist received the solidarity of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and more than 300 journalists and activists from 63 countries signed a letter in which they condemned the arbitrary and illegal acts of the then Attorney General’s Office and demanded punishment for those responsible.

Our battles for freedom of the press and the right to information also led us this year to wage several fights against obscure agencies that refused to disclose the documents and data under their custody. These disputes were successfully won by Quinto Elemento Lab’s journalists.
With more than 96,000 people having gone missing in Mexico since 2006, the phenomenon of disappearances is of paramount importance to society, and journalistic investigations have played a crucial role in shedding light on the magnitude of this problem.

The government’s database on disappearances in Mexico (the National Registry of Disappeared and Missing Persons) would allow for more sophisticated and complex analyses to better investigate this grave humanitarian crisis, but these data remain hidden and inaccessible. Quinto Elemento Lab succeeded in March in getting the National Commission for the Search of Persons to hand over part of that database. The Commission refused to open the entire database, and we have undertaken two legal processes to obtain the complete disclosure of the data held by the government.

In a related matter, in September Quinto Elemento Lab obtained a legal victory ordering the National Commission for the Search of Persons to hand over the documents with which it produces the National Registry of Clandestine Graves and Exhumed Bodies. This information is of great public interest given that the discovery of clandestine graves may imply serious human rights violations.

On the other hand, the Prosecutor General’s Office, which had refused to disclose relevant details of the investigation it is conducting into Odebrecht’s corruption in Mexico, was forced to provide the information requested by Quinto Elemento Lab. In November, the Prosecutor General’s Office was obliged to hand over information about interrogations and the list of people who have been called to testify or who face accusations, and it must publish on its website a publicly available, digital version of the criminal file of the Odebrecht case so that it can be known by anyone.
AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

In 2021 our staff, our organization, and some of the collective projects in which we participate were honored with various awards.

**Journalism Award**
**Javier Valdez Cárdenas 2021**

Our co-founder and special projects coordinator, Marcela Turati, won the Penguin Random House award in May. The award includes the publication of a book in 2022 which presents the journalist’s investigation of the massacres in San Fernando, Tamaulipas.

**FinCEN Files, Pulitzer Prize finalist**

The investigation on money flows in the international financial system, conducted in 2020 with the leadership of ICIJ and the participation of more than 100 media outlets around the world including Quinto Elemento Lab, was selected in June as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in the International Coverage category.
Carlos Montemayor National Award 2021 and John Reed Award 2021

In August, journalist Marcela Turati, together with relatives of the disappeared in Mexico and UNAM researcher Enrique Semo, won the award dedicated to making visible the phenomenon of the disappearance of persons. She also received the John Reed 2021 award in December for her journalistic career.

Camino a encontrarles, nominated for the Gabo Award 2021

The series of stories and the podcast Camino a encontrarles: Historias de búsqueda (On the way to find them: stories of searches) was selected in November as one of the 10 best pieces of journalistic coverage in Latin America. The work was designed and coordinated by A Dónde Van los Desaparecidos (Where do the vanished go?) and Quinto Elemento Lab and co-produced by IMER Noticias.

Barba Varley Foundation Award

The Barba Varley Foundation of Italy awarded in November the work of A Dónde Van los Desaparecidos and the National Search Brigade for their informative work on disappearances in Mexico and for their work in training journalists.

“Forensic Crisis”, third place in the Latin American Investigative Journalism Award

The special “Forensic Crisis”, produced by Quinto Elemento Lab and A Dónde Van los Desaparecidos, obtained the third place as the best investigation in Latin America, in the awards given at the Latin American Conference of Investigative Journalism (Conferencia Latinoamericana de Periodismo de Investigación, COLPIN) 2021.
ALLIANCES AND PARTNERS

More than 40 media outlets in Mexico and abroad published our stories. More than half a hundred picked up and quoted our investigations and some twenty radio and television stations invited our journalists to comment on our findings.

Media and organizations that published Quinto Elemento Lab’s stories:

National
- Aristegui Noticias (Mexico City)
- AVC Noticias (Veracruz)
- Business Insider Mexico (Mexico City)
- Chiapas Paralelo (Chiapas)
- e-consulta (Puebla)
- El Diario NTR (Zacatecas)
- El Economista (Mexico City)
- El Universal (Mexico City)
- Elefante Blanco (Tamaulipas)
- Expansión (Mexico City)
- Grupo Fórmula (Mexico City)
- Instituto Mexicano de la Radio (Mexico City)
- La Octava (Mexico City)
- La Verdad (Chihuahua)
- Lado B (Puebla)
- Pie de Página (Mexico City)
- POPLab (Guanajuato)
- Proceso (Mexico City)
- Proyecto Puente (Sonora)
- Noroeste (Sinaloa)
- Raichali (Chihuahua)

Foreign
- Artículo 19 (Latin America)
- Border Hub (US)
- CONNECTAS (Colombia)
- CLIP (Latin America)
- CIPER (Chile)
- El Espectador (Colombia)
- El Faro (El Salvador)
- El País (Spain)
- Factiva / Dow Jones (US)
- LaBot (Chile)
- Spotify (US)
- Telemundo (US)
- The Washington Post (US)
- Univision (US)
Radio and TV stations that invited our journalists:

- CNN
- Canal 14
- Canal 21
- Grupo Fórmula
- El Heraldo Radio y TV
- El Financiero Bloomberg
- Enfoque Noticias
- Estación Pacífico
- Instituto Mexicano de la Radio
- La Octava
- La W
- Milenio TV
- MVS
- Notisistema
- Radio Centro
- Radio Educación
- Radio Francia Internacional
- Radio Ibero
- Radio UNAM
- Señal Informativa

Media that quoted the findings of Quinto Elemento Lab’s stories:

- ABC Noticias
- Alto Nivel
- América Economía
- Animal Político
- Ciudadanos en Red
- Diario El Mundo
- Diario del Istmo
- Eje Central
- El Contribuyente
- El Financiero
- El Heraldo
- El Heraldo de Saltillo
- El Horizonte
- El Imparcial
- El Informador
- El Mañana de Reynosa
- El Siglo de Durango
- El Siglo de Torreón
- El Sol de México
- El Sol de Puebla
- El Tiempo de Monclova
- El Universal
- EFE
- Energía Hoy
- Etcétera
- Europa Press
- Global Energy
- Imagen del Golfo
- Imagen de Veracruz
- Infobae
- Informativo Noticias
- Latinus
- La-Lista
- La Prensa de Monclova
- La Silla Rota
- La Unión de Morelos
- Los Angeles Times
- Mediotiempo
- Meganoticias
- MSN Noticias
- Nación 321
- Norte Digital
- Noticieros Televisa
- NTR Guadalajara
- Periódico Central
- Por Esto!
- Pulso de San Luis Potosí
- Quadratín
- Reporte Índigo
- Revolución 3.0
- Ruido en la Red
- SDP noticias
- SinEmbargo
- Sputnik News
- The New York Times
- 24 Horas
DONATIONS AND FINANCING

INCOME 2021
- Open Society Foundations
- Ford Foundation
- National Endowment for Democracy
- Free Press Unlimited
- Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung e. V. / Brot für die Welt
- Resilience Fund / The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
- Heinrich-Böll Stiftung
- Google México
- Fondazione Barba Varley Award
- The Fund for Global Human Rights
- Others

EXPENDITURE 2021
- Salaries
- Journalists
- Training
- Production
- Cybersecurity
- Programming
- Accounting and audits
- Office
- Web host and platforms
- Computer equipment
- Travel
- Others

Open Society Foundations
Ford Foundation
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung
Norsk Journalistlag
National Endowment for Democracy
Free Press Unlimited
The Fund for Global Human Rights
Resilience Fund / The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung e. V. / Brot für die Welt
Google México

28.5%
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OUR TEAM

Quinto Elemento Lab has a compact work team and draws on the talent and knowledge of a wide network of journalists and people with other skills and abilities.

Alejandra Xanic  
Director, Co-founder

Marcela Turati  
Project Coordinator, Co-founder

Armando Talamantes  
Deputy director

Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna  
Editor, Co-founder

Andrea Cárdenas  
Investigative reporter

Efraín Tzuc  
Investigative assistant

Diana Partida Arteaga  
Administrator

Alan Sánchez  
Coder and webmaster

Kathy Corcoran  
MasterLAB Co-coordinator and Director of Cronkite News

Mariana Rosas  
Sebastián Fuentes  
Iker Jáuregui  
Perla Díaz  
Interns