



5ºELEMENTO
LABORATORIO
DE INVESTIGACIÓN
PERIODÍSTICA

**2020
ANNUAL
REPORT**

From our Director

2020 was an unprecedented year for the whole world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but we know that the best journalism tends to shine in the most convulsive times.

At Quinto Elemento Lab, we could not resist the urge to do our bit. So, we teamed up and joined forces to document what was happening with COVID-19 and the governmental response to it in Mexico and the Americas.

We also resolved to keep our grip on issues not related to COVID-19: those other investigations we had been advising on for months and other issues that were at risk of being buried under the news avalanche of the pandemic if not given due attention.

It turns out we had a great year: we managed to collaborate in and produce more investigations than in any previous year —46 journalistic pieces published in more than 40 media outlets in Mexico and abroad.

Our award-winning reporting has had an impact: Quinto Elemento Lab's investigation into money laundering at HSBC resulted in the firing of a top public official at Mexico's IRS. Our joint investigation led by OCCRP into a Romanian criminal group operating in the Riviera Maya prompted regulators to block dozens of bank accounts involved in skimming ATMs. Several local governments improved their data and accuracy regarding COVID-19 cases following a story we did on the lack of transparency in each state.

Also during 2020, we brought content to the community of Mexican journalists to help them improve their reporting during these uncertain times; we offered them webinars on techniques to enhance their investigative capabilities within the quarantine situation.

We cannot imagine greater challenges for journalism than those that 2020 brought us. Never before have we lived at a time when serving as journalists was more important or when accurate and clear information has been more necessary, and also when it has been more difficult to investigate!

Alejandra Xanic
Director
Quinto Elemento Lab



Who we are

Quinto Elemento Lab is an independent, non-profit organization that produces and supports investigative journalism across Mexico and the Latin American region.

We look for meaningful in-house stories and other proposals that are selected out of a national public call. We incubate these investigative projects by providing editorial advice and financial support.

Since 2017, we have teamed-up with reporters all across Mexico, we mentor and guide them, we fund their projects, edit and produce their stories. Once we have those investigations ready, we plan the dissemination strategy in order for each piece to reach specific audiences and have more impact.

Our in-house investigations as well as the stories we cherish from journalists are published regularly by leading local, national and international media outlets.

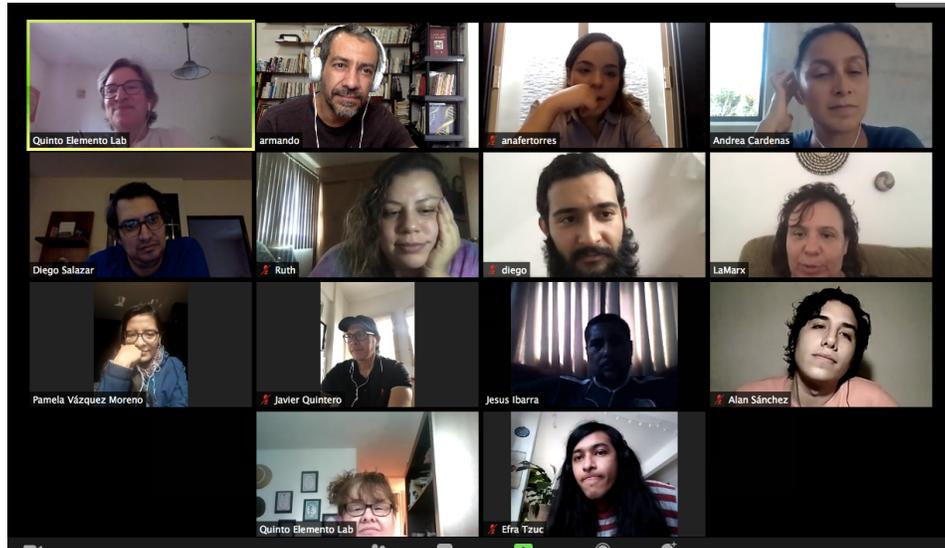
We also work with global networks that promote collaborative investigative journalism projects, and we are actively seeking training for journalists organizing boot camps and online workshops for reporters and editors.

We are strong believers that sound and rigorous investigative reporting is healthy for the lives of communities and a democracy. We encourage investigations that look into inequality, corruption, impunity and the abuse of power and Mexico's human rights crisis. Our main focus is on topics of very high public interest that traditional media are no longer pursuing or can no longer afford.

Our work is sponsored by international foundations, and thanks to their funding we've been able to investigate and publish stories that have been awarded international prizes like Premio Gabo (Gabriel García Márquez Foundation in Colombia), Javier Valdez Investigative Journalism prize (Latin American Conference on Investigative Journalism - COLPIN), Breach/Valdez Prize (United Nations) and an Editor & Publisher EPPY Award.

Our staff

We are a compact newsroom that constantly works with external collaborators, and partners with freelance journalists or colleagues from media outlets.



The new normal. Our team, interns and associates planning Covid-19 investigative and reporting ideas.

Alejandra Xanic
Director, Editor in Chief and co-founder

Armando Talamantes
Deputy Director and Editor

Efraín Tzuc
Editorial Research Assistant

Diana Partida
Administrator

Marcela Turati
Special Projects Coordinator and co-founder

Andrea Cárdenas
Investigative Reporter

Ruth Muñiz
Social Media Planner

Alan Sánchez
Webmaster

Impact from our stories

At Quinto Elemento Lab, we try to do the most interesting stories that are meaningful for the audience. We want readers, journalists, opinion leaders, decision makers and policy officials to talk about our stories. Sometimes our investigative work has its consequences and impact in our day-to-day life in Mexico.

During 2020 we published 46 stories, some were done entirely by our own staff, others were produced with journalists and reporters selected from our public call, and some others were the result of collaborative projects carried out with international partners like the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).

Lozoya, arrested and extradited from Spain



Quinto Elemento Lab's scoop in 2017 [exposed the ties](#) between Emilio Lozoya, the former boss of Mexico's state oil company Pemex, and Brazilian company Odebrecht. Spanish police arrested Lozoya in February 2020 and he was extradited in July. Under house arrest while his trial takes place in Mexico, Lozoya has become the highest-profile official to be detained on corruption charges.



Dirty money... and the firing of a top official

HSBC was for many years the bank of choice for Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers to launder money and [Ramón García Gibson was in charge](#) of preventing that from happening. We found out he held a high position in the federal government, after we ran the story, the former official [was fired](#).

Forensic Crisis: A nation overwhelmed by its dead



This [investigation](#) revealed the magnitude of Mexico's crisis in dealing with the remains of murder victims. Since 2006 more than 38,500 unidentified bodies have been delivered to the country's morgues, ending up in refrigerated rooms, mass graves, or medical schools. Our work revealed the never-before-known figure. The data became a reference used by human rights organizations, victims' groups and even some government officials. Along with the investigation we built a friendly user database so families, activists and experts could search through the records.

Los Angeles Times

A recent [investigation](#) by the news team Quinto Elemento Lab revealed through public records requests that there are nearly 39,000 unidentified bodies dating back to 2006 in government custody.



Mexico's drug war leaves 39,000 unidentified bodies in its morgues



Mexico's drug war leaves 39,000 unidentified bodies in its morgues
Investigation by Quinto Elemento Labs finds alarming number of people buried in common graves
[theguardian.com](#)

3:21 PM · Sep 22, 2020 · Echobox

Our investigation was published in several news websites in Mexico, Argentina, the US and Spain; the article was also picked up and quoted by The Guardian and Los Angeles Times

Mexico freezes accounts of Romanian Riviera Maya Gang

Along with OCCRP and MCCI, [we investigated and exposed](#) a Romanian-born criminal organization that has made a fortune stealing information from ATMs in hot tourist spots in the Mexican Caribbean. Our story was published in June, and 8 months later a coordinated investigation by Mexican authorities and the FBI [led to block dozens](#) of bank accounts involved in skimming ATMs. This reporting received the Editor & Publisher [Eppy Award](#) 2020 in the category of Best Collaborative Investigative/Enterprise Reporting.



Fast business in the new Administration



We dug into thousands of contracts signed by companies making money with the Mexican government, and [exposed](#) that a large number of them didn't have previous experience and were created in the midst of tenders or at the arrival of the new administration. The story was published by Proceso magazine, one of the most powerful brands in Mexican media.

The Vestiges Project visibilizes murdered journalists



LatAm Journalism Review en español
@LatAmPeriodismo

Periodista mexicano fotografía objetos personales de colegas asesinados como homenaje en proyecto Vestigios latamjournalismreview.org/es/articulos/pe...

Translate Tweet



4:00 PM · Dec 16, 2020 · TweetDeck

This was a [catalog of objects](#) recovered by the families of six journalists murdered in the last decade in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The [portfolio](#) was published by [Le Monde](#) and [The Washington Post](#), and the project was carried out in collaboration with Article 19, the organization which defends and promotes freedom of expression and freedom of information.

Representatives from Oaxaca demand accountability



Prometeo, a company that has been [making big money](#) with the government of Oaxaca is under investigation in another state, Chihuahua, for possible corruption schemes in the sale of food aimed for the poor. Following our report, deputies at the local Congress [raised their voice](#) demanding transparency regarding the multimillion contracts given out by governor Alejandro Murat.

FinCEN Files footprint goes to Mexico's Emilio Lozoya

Tocho Holdings is a private company owned by former Pemex CEO, Emilio Lozoya, and its banking accounts and transactions were unveiled by the FinCEN Files, a global investigation led by ICIJ that involved more than 400 journalists from 88 countries. Our story was published in the front page of Reforma, one of Mexico's leading newspapers. Meanwhile, Lozoya faces money laundering and fraud charges since Quinto Elemento Lab uncovered in 2017 his involvement in Odebrecht's corruption scheme.



Our Covid-19 coverage

Quinto Elemento Lab's annual public call for proposals from journalists all over the country was modified in 2020: it had the condition that the topics submitted by reporters were related to Covid-19 and the havoc caused by the outbreak in Mexico.

Under this initiative we were able to publish [10 stories](#), including a five-part-series about migration from Central America. The articles on the coronavirus were published not only by websites and newspapers within the country but also by international media in the United States, Latin America and Europe.

Our in-house team also conducted a series of investigative stories on Covid-19 and the government's response to it. Also, we teamed up with Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP) to carry on a pan-regional project with several Latin American partners.



Three times more people have died of Covid-19 in Mexico City than reported by authorities

A look into the capital's 911 system confirmed what was suspected. This article was widely quoted in Mexico and [abroad](#) and reached the [Financial Times](#). The work was taken up [again](#) by the Columbia Journalism Review and was presented at the Latin American Conference on Investigative Journalism (COLPIN).

States improve their Covid-19 data



We conducted an exercise to evaluate the transparency or opacity of the governments of thirty-two Mexican states regarding the pandemic's progression in their regions. This initiative triggered competition among local governments. Following a [report that revealed](#) that at least five states were reluctant to disclose the number of Covid-19 cases and their location, all governments improved their data and became more accurate and transparent at the municipal level.

Learning at home during the Covid-19 pandemic



Only half of the homes in the country have an internet connection. Moreover, many of the students depended on the schools for food. Six photographers documented the experience of six children taking classes online and by television. In addition to regional media, we ran this [photo essay](#) in The Washington Post.

Migrating under Covid-19 rules

A reporter and a photographer traveled for ten days along the migration route in Southern Mexico. The five-part series documents the growing number of migrants who travel on foot along hidden routes, the crisis caused by the closure of shelters, episodes of xenophobia, and the obstacles faced by migrants from Haiti and Africa. The series were published by [Univision](#), [Plaza Pública](#), [El Faro](#) and the Knight Center's [LatAm Journalism Review](#), among others.



A broken drug supply chain

An [investigation](#) that showed how the federal government dismantled the chain that supplied the health sector to try a new model, leaving visible fissures: in the middle of a pandemic, medicines travel by courier or fail to arrive and prescriptions are not filled, thus affecting people with all kinds of ailments.



Partners & Allies

During 2020, our content was published in more than 50 media outlets in Mexico, the United States, Europe and Latin America. Our journalist and investigative work was carried out either by small websites in Chiapas and Oaxaca as well as leading newspapers in Paris and Washington.

Publishing and investigative partners in 2020 (**new allies marked in bold**)

- **A Tiempo TV (Coahuila)**
- **Ágora Digital (Zacatecas)**
- Animal Político (Mexico City)
- Artículo 19 (Mexico City)
- Aristegui Noticias (Mexico City)
- **AVC Noticias (Veracruz)**
- Bellingcat (UK)
- **BI Noticias (Aguascalientes)**
- **Business Insider México (Mexico City)**
- **Border Hub (Mex/US)**
- **CIMAC Noticias (Mexico)**
- **Ciper (Chile)**
- **CLIP (Colombia)**
- **Columbia Journalism School (US)**
- **Conexión Migrante (Mexico City)**
- **CONNECTAS (Colombia)**
- **Cosecha Roja (Argentina)**
- **Chiapas Paralelo (Chiapas)**
- **Divergentes (Nicaragua)**
- **El Debate (Michoacán)**
- **El Diario.es (Spain)**
- **El Diario de Yucatán (Yucatán)**
- El Economista (Mexico City)
- **El Faro (El Salvador)**
- El Informador (Jalisco)
- **El Mañana (Tamaulipas)**
- El Noroeste (Culiacán)
- El País (Spain)
- **El Siglo de Torreón (Coahuila)**
- **El Universal (Mexico City)**
- **Expansión (Mexico City)**
- **Fortune en Español (Mexico City)**
- **Hilo Directo (Chihuahua)**
- **ICIJ (US)**
- **IMER (Mexico)**
- **Insight Crime (US)**
- **La Silla Rota (Mexico City)**
- **La Verdad de Juárez (Chihuahua)**
- **Lado B (Puebla)**
- **Le Monde (France)**
- **Luces del Siglo (Quintana Roo)**
- MCCI (Mexico City)
- **Noticaribe (Quintana Roo)**
- OCCRP (Rumania)
- **Página 3 (Oaxaca)**
- **Pie de Página (Mexico City)**
- **Perimetral (Jalisco)**
- **Plaza Pública (Guatemala)**
- **PopLab (Guanajuato)**
- Proceso (Mexico City)
- **Raichali (Chihuahua)**
- **Red es Poder (Coahuila)**
- **Reforma (Mexico City)**
- **Revista Espejo (Sinaloa)**
- **Revista Factum (El Salvador)**
- **Plaza Pública (Guatemala)**
- Río Doce (Sinaloa)
- **Salud con Lupa (Perú)**
- Sin Embargo (Mexico City)
- **Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany)**
- **Tamedia Group (Switzerland)**
- **Telemundo (US)**
- The New York Times (US)
- **The Observer (Estado de México)**
- **The Washington Post (US)**
- **Univision (US)**
- **Urbano (Tlaxcala)**
- **Vanguardia (Coahuila)**
- Zeta (Baja California)
- **Zona Docs (Jalisco)**
- **Zona Franca (Guanajuato)**

Innovation & Lab

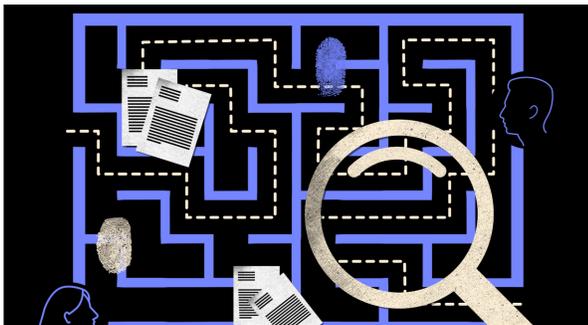
As part of our ongoing efforts to improve our storytelling and find new ways to reach out to our audience, we launched several projects involving multimedia and interaction.

Five episodes podcast



Along with our partners IMER Noticias and A dónde van los desaparecidos, we produced and financed a [series of five podcasts](#) regarding the thousands of people that have disappeared in Mexico.

Unidentified bodies database



As part of our Forensic Crisis coverage, we assembled an [interactive database](#) with the +38,000 registers of unidentified bodies that have been delivered to Mexico's morgues, ending up in refrigerated rooms, mass graves, or medical schools. Families looking for their loved ones can access this user-friendly database to try to find them. Scholars, researchers and other experts can also take advantage of this tool.

First hand witness at a COVID-19 hospital



Two emergency physicians [recorded](#) their experience at a Covid-19 facility in Orizaba, Veracruz. Their video was shown in several websites, including [Animal Político](#), one of Mexico's most influential online news publications.

Webinars & Training

Already immersed in the pandemic, during 2020 we organized a [dozen webinars](#) with guest speakers to talk about working from home and handling emotions in these times, and online workshops with people knowledgeable about digital research tools, such as Bellingcat experts.



5°ELEMENTO

Quinto Elemento Lab te invita al webinar:

Uso avanzado de redes sociales para hacer periodismo desde casa.

¿Cómo rastrear y verificar información de Facebook, Twitter e Instagram?

Impartido por Gisela Pérez de Acha



Transmisión en www.facebook.com/quintoelab/

Viernes 22 de Mayo de 12:00 a 13:30 PM



More than 700 journalists and people interested in investigative journalism joined the live webinars at the announced time and date. Thousands of new users have been able to watch the videos later on our [Facebook page](#). The workshop videos accrued more than 40,000 views over the past year.

Our staff also actively took part in webinars and online workshops organized by other media outlets, institutions and colleagues...

LIVE
facebook.com/ElEconomista.mx
facebook.com/quintoelab
 LUNES 27 DE JULIO,
 A LAS 5:00PM

EL EXPEDIENTE LOZOYA Y OTROS TRAJOS SUCIOS

UN WEBINAR DE

EL ECONOMISTA **5º ELEMENTO**
 LABORATORIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN PERIODÍSTICA

PARTICIPAN:

- Alejandra Xanic**, periodista de Quinto Elemento Lab y ganadora de un Premio Pulitzer
- Andrea Cárdenas**, periodista de Quinto Elemento Lab e investigadora del caso Lozoya
- Luis Miguel González**, Director General Editorial de El Economista
- Octavio Amador**, editor de la sección Empresas y Negocios de El Economista

Facebook Live de El Economista y Quinto Elemento Lab
 LUNES 27 DE JULIO, A LAS 5:00 PM HORA DE LA CDMX

elEconomista.com.mx

#YoLeoEnCasa
 #CACenCasa

LIVE @festivalcac
 Centroamérica Cuenta

Autores en cuarentena

Juan Villoro y
 Marcela Turati

- Miércoles 3 de junio
- 7:00 p.m. (Managua)
- 8:00 p.m. (CDMX)

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 CON EL APOYO DE **HENRICH BULL STIFTUNG**

NABJ NABW
CONVENTION & CAREER FAIR
 August Virtual 2020
 #NABJNAHJ20

MODERATORS:
 Jessica Ratis (THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA)
 Lyng-Hui Ramirez (GRUPO DE EMPRESAS AMERICA GOAL)

QUINTO ELEMENTO LAB SPEAKERS:
 Maria Teresa Ronderos (CENTRO LATINOAMERICANO DE PERIODISMO DE INVESTIGACIÓN - CLPI)
 Armando Talamantes
 Verónica Ramirez (UNIVISION)

COLABORACIONES PERIODÍSTICAS ENTRE AMÉRICA LATINA Y ESTADOS UNIDOS: PROYECTO CENTINELA-COVID 19

What's next



By the end of 2020, we launched our call for investigative editors to join our brand new editing school: MásterLab. We received 81 applications from all across the country, and we selected 22 students to attend our first training course taking place in 2021.

Those selected will be given full scholarships and will participate in a seminar that lasts 15 weeks, with a panel of well-known and highly respected instructors and journalists from Mexico, the US, and other countries. We'll also have a one-on-one mentoring for six months with an editor coaching each of them in conducting investigative projects in their newsrooms.

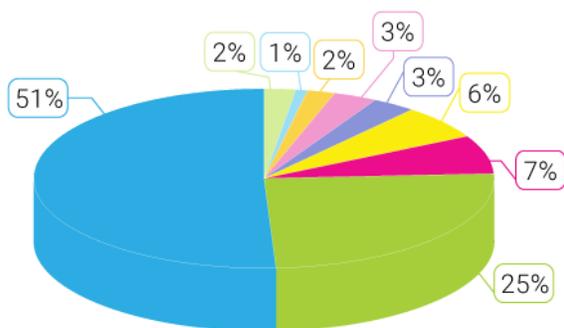
The lack of editors is one of the driving forces that has propelled Quinto Elemento Lab since its inception. We believe that journalists in Mexico are deprived of this guidance and that training investigative editors can have an important multiplier effect. Kathy Corcoran, former head of the Associated Press' office for Mexico and six Central American countries, is collaborating closely with Quinto Elemento Lab on this initiative.

While MásterLab will be a key project during 2021, our team will also continue to investigate and uncover meaningful stories as we've done for the last four years, and we will launch our annual public call so we can receive new proposals from journalists across the country.

Donors in 2020

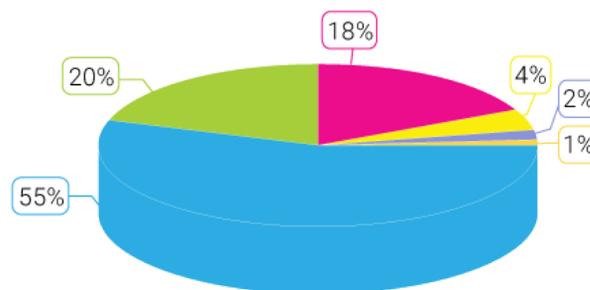
- Open Society Foundations
- Ford Foundation
- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Heinrich-Böll Stiftung
- International Women’s Media Foundation
- Norsk Journalistlag
- Fondo Semillas
- National Endowment for Democracy
- Google LLC
- Free Press Unlimited
- The Fund for Global Human Rights
- Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística

Income 2020



- Open Society Foundations
- Ford Foundation
- National Endowment for Democracy
- International Women’s Media Foundation
- Fondo Semillas
- Norsk Journalistlag
- Free Press Unlimited
- Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung
- Others

Expenses 2020



- Personnel
- Journalists & other consultants
- Content production
- Training
- Indirect cost
- Operational cost