

coverage of drug trafficking and organized crime in Latin America and the caribbean



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**A CONTRIBUTION TO JOURNALISTS
COVERING DRUG TRAFFICKING
AND ORGANIZED CRIME**

**By
Rosental
Calmon Alves**

The 8th Austin Forum on Journalism in the Americas started hours after the assassination of a 21-year-old photojournalist of the Ciudad Juarez newspaper *El Diario*. (Another young journalist, an intern, barely survived the same attack.) The shocking news gave a gloomy tone to the conference, where almost 50 journalists and experts would discuss the coverage of drug trafficking and organized crime in many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It became a dramatic reminder of the seriousness and complexity of the forum's topic.

Reporters and editors risk their lives, and many have been killed in the line of duty, as they tried their best to inform about the activities of criminal organizations. Mexico has become the most dangerous country for journalists, who found themselves as targets, in the middle of the crossfire of the so-called drug wars, especially on the border with the United States but also in many other regions. Drug trafficking and organized crime, however, is a widespread problem, affecting virtually all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As we found out during the Austin Forum discussions, it is not only extremely dangerous to cover this issue, but also very complex to explain its real dimensions and implications.

Drug trafficking and organized crime are a global plague with ramifications that cannot be understood through the traditional, body-count-based local coverage. Its coverage poses some of the most difficult challenges journalists face in this hemisphere nowadays.

This book contains a series of articles by journalists and experts analyzing dilemmas journalists face as they cover this topic in the Americas. But they try also to delineate the real dimensions of the problem. The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, Tyler Bridges, a veteran U.S. correspondent in Latin America, presents his account of the two days of discussions in Austin; in the second, University of Miami's Professor Bruce Bagley explains the major trends of drug trafficking and organized crime in the region, from his academic perspectives; in the third, Colombian journalist Alvaro Sierra talks about the "the strange paradoxes of the drug coverage in the news;" the fourth chapter shows the findings of a study on the "spiral of violence" that is silencing the press in Mexico; and the fifth chapter is an analysis of the drug trafficking problem in Mexico and Central America by Samuel Gonzalez, former Mexican Chief Prosecutor Against Organized Crime.

We at the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas are grateful for the immense support and inspiration given by the Open Society Foundations, through their Latin American and Media programs, and hope this book becomes a contribution to journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**JOURNALISTS, VITAL
TO WIN THIS BATTLE
AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME**

We present in this report a summary of the deliberations of nearly 50 journalists and academics from Latin America and the Caribbean to discuss media coverage of organized crime and drug trafficking in the continent. The Open Society Media Program and Latin America Program, in conjunction with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin, gathered this group in the hope that efforts such as these benefit the journalism community in understanding the implications that organized crime has on societies and local communities, and to report on these implications.

We trust that this report will raise the understanding that covering organized crime requires a new approach, new tactics and new strategies. This is a global phenomenon that knows no borders and that speaks all languages. As such, cross-border collaboration, and regional and global cooperation among those that try to uncover the realities of this business, is fundamental. Journalists in the region are re-thinking media coverage, and there is a need to go beyond the body count and focus on an in-depth analysis of the issues.

In the socio-political context of the most affected regions, such as Mexico and Central America, with weak states and outrageous levels of impunity, it is all the more important for journalists to find effective ways to send the message across to societies that the role of journalists is vital to win this battle against organized crime.

**The Open Society
Foundations at the Austin Forum**

The Open Society Foundations have been collaborating with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas in defining topics for debate among professionals since 2007. In an effort to facilitate learning among fellow journalists, and combining forces to find solutions for some of the salient problems that journalism in Latin America faces, the Austin Forum has addressed the topics of Freedom of Expression (2007), Investigative Journalism (2008), and new business models (2009).

As a network of organizations and individuals with similar core values and understanding of the importance of journalism for democracy, governance and justice, the Austin Forum is the perfect host for discussions and debates of this nature.

The Open Society Foundations wishes to thank Professor Rosental Alves and the staff of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas for their efforts on behalf of the journalism community in the region. Also, the Open Society Foundations wishes to thank Tyler Bridges, author of the conference brief, and furthermore to Bruce Bagley, Alvaro Sierra, and Samuel Gonzalez for the papers written for this conference. Finally, thanks to all of the participants for their intelligent contributions and for their passion. It gives us hope that independent, quality journalism can play a role in solving the problems facing Latin America.

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COVERAGE OF DRUG TRAFFICKING AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The drug kingpins and organized crime bosses have extended their tentacles so deeply into civil society and the military that they are imperiling the fundamental principles of democracy, particularly in Mexico but also in Central America. They are buying politicians, judges, police commanders and generals. They are silencing the media. They are killing those who won't be intimidated or purchased. In that context the 8th Austin Forum on Journalism in the Americas took place.



By
**Tyler
Bridges ***

Authorities make a big drug bust in Latin America. They seize a haul of drugs and nab a big fish. A newspaper's police reporter covers the story and trumpets the authorities' claim that they have dealt a mortal blow to a notorious drug cartel. Politicians hail the good news.

We've all seen these kinds of news stories. They typically are published on the front page and suggest that a scourge has been vanquished.

These stories may report all of the facts accurately. But they usually don't tell an accurate story about drug traffickers and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, three dozen journalists from throughout the region were told at the 8th Austin Forum on Journalism in the Americas in mid-September, 2010, at the University of Texas.

The conference included tough self-appraisals that cited the shortcomings of journalists in covering complicated stories involving drugs and organized crime.

"We have a lot of journalists who cover the news," said Ricardo Trotti, the director of the Impunity Project at the Miami-based Inter American Press Association. "We don't have many journalists who uncover the news."

Drugs and organized crime have become so complex that simply covering them the same way won't cut it anymore. That was a central theme that emerged as journalists from different countries offered their perspectives on the interrelated problems of drug trafficking and organized crime, at the event organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas and the Open Society Foundations, which includes programs that focus on Latin America and the media.

The drug kingpins and organized crime bosses—who are often one and the

(*) Tyler Bridges is a freelance journalist based in Lima, Peru, and former correspondent in Latin America for The Miami Herald and McClatchy Newspapers



“WE HAVE A LOT OF JOURNALISTS WHO COVER THE NEWS. WE DON’T HAVE MANY JOURNALISTS WHO UNCOVER THE NEWS.”



Ricardo Trotti, the director of the Impunity Project at the Miami-based Inter American Press Association.

same—are constantly changing their business practices to keep one step ahead of authorities. Journalists have to change their ways to keep up, too.

Against that backdrop, here are the key lessons that were outlined during the two-day conference:

*Drugs and organized crime are increasingly imitating successful corporations by becoming globalized enterprises. Borders are becoming mere artifices. For journalists, this means that simply examining the problems in their countries could easily mean missing a key part of the overall story that has spilled into other countries.

*Drug lords and organized crime bosses are increasingly preying on countries with malleable government officials whom they can corrupt and intimidate.

*Covering drugs and organized crime with police reporters means a superficial focus on the latest killings and not an examination of the more profound stories involving political corruption, the problems

spawned by poverty and violence and such crimes as money laundering.

*Aggressive journalists need to understand that their work will likely prompt harassment from government officials put on the spot. The journalists could even be placed in danger, particularly in Colombia and Mexico.

*There is good news. Savvy journalists are implementing new tools to cover and report the drug problem, including blogs, social media, and websites that provide background on the bad guys and tips on how to uncover their activities.

The conference occurred at a time when the stakes are becoming higher. The drug kingpins and organized crime bosses have extended their tentacles so deeply into civil society and the military that they are imperiling the fundamental principles of democracy, particularly in Mexico but also in Central America. They are buying politicians, judges, police commanders, and generals. They are silencing the media. They are killing those who won’t be intimidated or purchased.

A reminder of the stakes came when the journalists arrived in Austin and learned that gunmen only hours earlier had gunned down Luis Carlos Santiago, a 21-year-old photographer at El Diario newspaper in Ciudad Juárez. The attack also wounded an 18-year-old newspaper intern.

Outraged at the news, the journalists in Texas spontaneously drafted the “Austin Declaration.” It demanded that the Mexican government take measures to protect journalists at risk.

The “Balloon” and “Cockroach” Effects

Just a few years ago, the drugs and organized crime story was simpler. Drugs, particularly cocaine, flowed from South America to the United States.

But now, according to the 2010 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, cocaine is increasingly becoming the drug of choice in Europe and elsewhere in South America.

The number of cocaine users in the United States has dropped from 10.5 million in 1982 to 5.3 million in 2008, reported the U.N. agency. The United States remained the biggest dollar market for cocaine (\$37 billion in estimated sales), but Europe was gaining rapidly (\$34 billion).

The United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and Germany are becoming lucrative markets in Europe. In South America the big markets are Brazil and Argentina.

Because the Uribe government cracked down on coca growing in Colombia during its eight years in office, drug traffickers have been planting more and more coca in Peru and Bolivia—and most of the cocaine that is refined from the raw coca leaves in those two countries now goes to Europe and South America.

Bruce Bagley, who chairs the Department of International Studies at the University of Miami, labeled it the “balloon effect.” If you squeeze one area, it will pop up elsewhere.

As the U.N. agency described it: “As the Colombian Government has taken greater control of its territory, traffickers are making more use of transit countries in the

region, including the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Ecuador.

“Mexican drug cartels emerged over the last 10 to 15 years as the primary organizers for shipments of cocaine into the United States, largely replacing the previously dominant Colombian groups. In response to Mexican enforcement efforts, Central American countries are increasingly being used as transit countries. West Africa started to be used as a way station to Europe around 2004.

“The situation remains fluid, and the impact on transit countries can be devastating.”

Bagley is particularly adept at defining problems. He has devised the term “the cockroach effect,” which describes how the drug traffickers have scurried away from government heat in Mexico and Colombia to operate more freely elsewhere.

Claudia Mendez Arriaza, a reporter for *elPeriodico* in Guatemala, sees the spillover of the “balloon” and “cockroach” effects in her coverage.

“I imagine someone who is fumigating his house,” said Mendez Arriaza, picking up on Bagley’s analogy. “Where do the cockroaches go? To the house of a neighbor who is trying to recover from past problems. That describes the situation in Guatemala.”

Two of the country’s former national police chiefs have been jailed on drug charges. In June, Guatemala’s highest court removed the country’s attorney general, after he had been accused of having links to organized crime and had caused an uproar by removing prosecutors and investigators



“IN RESPONSE TO MEXICAN ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS, CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES ARE INCREASINGLY BEING USED AS TRANSIT COUNTRIES.”



Bruce Bagley, Department of International Studies at the University of Miami.

from important cases. The moves seemed aimed at weakening the justice system.

Mendez Arriaza noted that the U.S. Department of State has estimated that 75 percent of the drugs that enter the United States pass through Guatemala.

Some 98 percent of crimes go unpunished in Guatemala, where the weak justice system has minimal capacity to handle common crimes, especially when it comes to organized crime. That’s why the direct intervention of the United Nations was sought to create a commission that functions like an international sheriff in the country.

Besides Guatemala, drug traffickers’ activities have leaked into neighboring countries.

“In addition to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are most heavily threatened by the spread of the Mexican traffickers,” Bagley said.

Carlos Dada, founder of El Faro, an online newspaper in El Salvador, said that

authorities there recently found five barrels stashed with a total of \$15 million. “We believe that it’s drug traffickers’ money,” Dada said. “El Salvador is the place today where organized crime is trying to take over a state. They’ve already tried in Guatemala.

“The army has been penetrated in Honduras and Guatemala,” Dada added. “That hasn’t happened yet in El Salvador. El Salvador doesn’t have room for clandestine airstrips.”

Dada and El Faro have been recognized for their tough, uncompromising reporting in the digital age. But the drug phenomenon has left him flummoxed.

“We don’t know how to cover all of this,” Dada said, adding, “We know we shouldn’t cover it as a body count.”

As the U.N. report noted, Venezuela has also become a notorious drug transshipment point. “Between 2006 and 2008, over half of all detected maritime shipments of cocaine to Europe came from Venezuela,” the agency reported.

Caribbean countries also have become transshipment points, in yet another manifestation of the balloon and cockroach effects.

Gotson Pierre, a journalist with AlterPresse in Haiti, said the United Nations has reported that drug traffickers have reestablished clandestine airstrips on the island nation, following the devastating January 12 earthquake.

Pierre also said that drug traffickers have acquired so much political muscle that “the United Nations believes that the upcoming

presidential elections could be at risk of being financed by 'the fruit of illegal activities,' especially drug trafficking."

(It's worth noting that many journalists, including María Teresa Ronderos, from Colombia, don't accept the police version that presents organized crime groups as big and organized. Instead, she believes, they represent a welter of interests that are often in conflict and not easy to cover.)

Preying on the Weak

So many countries have gone from military dictatorships to elected civilian governments during the past 30 years that strong democratic institutions have yet to fully take root. Ruthless and agile, drug lords and organized crime bosses have exploited those weaknesses to set up flourishing enterprises that buy off and kill opponents.

"There are many weak states in Latin America," Bagley said. "The transition from authoritarianism to democracy weakens traditional institutions. You don't immediately create new institutions to control them. Mexico is going through this transition now."

The PRI operated a one-party "democracy" in Mexico for 71 years until Vicente Fox was elected president in 2000. Other political parties and government institutions haven't been strong enough to fill the gap. That has created an opening for the drug traffickers, who make huge profits by smuggling cocaine, heroin, and marijuana to the United States.

Samuel Gonzalez, an independent

analyst who formerly headed the Mexican government's unit against organized crime, described a country in deep trouble. Gonzalez said violence in Mexico has increased by 50 percent in the past two years. Drug money finances the country's political parties, he added. Practically no one is punished for committing a crime.

"When you have total impunity, it shouldn't be a surprise that you have a total war," Gonzalez said.

Michael O'Connor has spent the past two years in Mexico chronicling how these developments have spawned attacks against journalists and silenced the press, especially in Northern Mexico. O'Connor is an investigator for the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. His group reports that one Mexican journalist had been killed on the job from January through September 2010 while the motives in the murder of another seven had yet to be established.

Organized crime figures "have effective control over large parts of territory," O'Connor said. "One of the first things they do when they move into a territory is take over the local press. It may not be the first thing they do but it's on their to-do list.

"When they move into town," O'Connor added, "they will change the local power structure: the mayor, the police, the local army commander. They do not want the press reporting that. That's a great story. When your mayor is being corrupted by someone else, that's a great story."

As a result, O'Connor said, "some reporters get paid off." The drug traffickers "threaten those who won't get paid off. If nothing else works, they'll kill."



“WE DON’T KNOW HOW TO COVER ALL OF THIS. WE KNOW WE SHOULDN’T COVER IT AS A BODY COUNT.”



Carlos Dada, founder of El Faro, an online newspaper in El Salvador

Perhaps no city in Mexico has suffered more than Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso. Few reporters have chronicled the city’s agony more vividly than Judith Torrea, an independent journalist and blogger from Spain who lived for a time in New York. Torrea told the Austin conferees that watching people in New York tranquilly consume the cocaine that was causing so many deaths in Juárez helped convince her to return to the Mexican border city.

“I began to ask myself many questions about the so-called drug war,” Torrea said. “Every two months, I traveled to Juárez and I found out that my sources had been killed, but they weren’t drug traffickers, as President Calderón had justified in explaining so many deaths. A moment arrived when I decided I had to return to tell the stories that had to be told. My heart may have been born in Spain, but it’s pure Juárez.” She publishes the widely-read blog “Ciudad Juárez, en la sombra del narcotráfico” (<http://juarezenlasombra.blogspot.com/>). Torrea won Spain’s Ortega y Gasset Prize in 2010 for Digital Journalism.

Torrea said that residents live in a

militarized city under siege, where the drug cartels fight savagely for the right to control the drugs transported by boat from Colombia that will pass through Juárez on their way to the United States. She said that since the federal government sent troops to Ciudad Juárez, the number of assassinations has soared. A government human rights commission has documented significant increases in extortions, kidnappings, and other human rights violations committed against the city’s population.

“The danger has become more democratic,” Torrea said. “Now the danger is in being alive. What remains from the so-called drug war are more than 10,000 orphans who also belong to Mexican authorities. If they don’t do anything, these orphans will become the hired guns who today are cutting off heads.”

Torrea said that more than 7,200 killings have occurred since 2008 when the so-called drug war began, backed by the army and the federal police. The city, with a population of slightly more than 1.3 million, now experiences 6 to 27 murders per day, according to official statistics.

“Some 116,000 houses have been abandoned, according to the Juárez mayor’s office, and 10,000 businesses have been closed, according to the National Chamber of Commerce,” Torrea said. “The vitality of life in Ciudad Juárez no longer exists. And this is spreading little by little to the neighboring city of El Paso, where thousands of Juárez residents have fled, along with their businesses. Almost 97 percent of the crimes go unpunished, according to figures from the Attorney General.”

Three days after the murder of photographer Luis Carlos Santiago, El Diario de Juárez—the newspaper with the highest circulation in what is perhaps the most violent city in the world—published a front-page editorial where it asked the drug cartels to explain what they could and couldn't publish, to avoid more attacks.

The editorial had the effect of shining an international spotlight on the government's weakness in Juárez, where journalists continue working in a city where virtually all other institutions have collapsed. That same week, the investigative unit of El Diario published a front-page report that raised doubts about the optimistic statements offered by Mexico's president regarding the investigation of another one of the paper's assassinated journalists. Those statements were based on highly questionable confessions from suspects who had had been repeatedly tortured.

"The city that I love is falling apart," Torrea told the journalists in Austin. "Freedom of the press no longer exists. The pressures not to report anything are growing ever more powerful."

She paused. "I can't say more. I'm getting emotional," she said.

The Elephant in the Room

Speakers in Austin made it clear that too many journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean are not trained to do the spade work needed to spotlight the misdeeds by sophisticated crime networks. "There's a lot of coverage, but it's very superficial," said Alvaro Sierra, a Colombian who teaches at the Universidad para la Paz en Costa Rica.

"Police reporters usually cover the drug story. They focus on the body count. It's very clear how to cover the first murder or the tenth. It's not clear how to cover the fiftieth and one-hundredth. Drugs, their production, consumption, and trafficking are a complex global phenomenon, not a local police story, and they should be treated accordingly in the media."

Sierra added that drug reporters need to expand their sources of information

"One of the big problems is that the media become kind of the carrier of the official narrative," he said. "We cover the war on drugs, and we don't cover the rich academic and public debate on drugs and drug policies. The media should have a more independent narrative. That doesn't mean not using official sources. They are important. But we should develop other sources, and not limit the media story to the official versions of the so-called 'war on drugs' or the 'war on narcos' in Mexico, which consist mainly of one killing after the other, hunted-down kingpins and tons of drugs or millions of dollars seized."

Claudia Mendez Arriaza sees a similar problem in her country.

"I don't see a policy for covering drug trafficking in Guatemala," she said. "We cover an attack or a killing. The media react to events. We never get to the root of the problem."

Ana Arana, director of the Mexico City-based MEPI Foundation, which promotes investigative reporting and freedom of the press, pinpointed a major problem.

"Provincial reporters aren't trained well," Arana said. "They often have poor ethics."



“VIOLENCE IN MEXICO HAS INCREASED BY 50 PERCENT IN THE PAST TWO YEARS. DRUG MONEY FINANCES THE COUNTRY’S POLITICAL PARTIES. PRACTICALLY NO ONE IS PUNISHED FOR COMMITTING A CRIME.”



Samuel Gonzalez, an independent analyst who formerly headed the Mexican government’s unit against organized crime.

The problems in Mexico are deep-rooted and long-standing, said Michael O’Connor, dashing hopes of anyone who thought there could be a quick resolution to the problems.

“There’s a history, especially in the states, of corruption in the Mexican press, from the newest reporter to owner,” said O’Connor. “There’s a history of endemic corruption. The government is the biggest advertiser in states. That gives the government enormous control. When your biggest advertiser says don’t run a story, you don’t run it.”

O’Connor added, “There’s a history of influence by local political and economic elites.”

The shortcomings in Mexico add up to a shameful result, O’Connor said. “The Mexican press is doing a terrible job of covering the [drugs] story.”

The comments by O’Connor and the

others prompted Bruce Bagley to jump in. “Nobody’s talking about the elephant in the room,” Bagley said. “How can we have professional, well-paid reporters?”

No one had a good answer, although Gustavo Gorriti, a long-time Peruvian journalist who now runs an online investigative reporting site, heaped blame on newspaper owners for not doing enough.

Gorriti described an incident where a Mexican newspaper sent a reporter to Ciudad Juárez, without any preparation for the dangerous conditions. The hotel where the paper sent the reporter to stay was chosen not because it offered a safe haven, but because it offered a cheap price.

“The taxi driver out front already knew who the reporter was,” Gorriti said, telling the story to illustrate a larger point: “The negligence in how editors send reporters to conflict zones is terrible. Media owners want to spend as little as possible.”

It’s not just the owners of Mexico’s newspapers and TV networks that have to do more to protect reporters. The government must do more, too, said Marcela Turati, a free-lance journalist in Mexico City who writes for *Proceso* magazine and has organized “Red de Periodistas de a Pie” (Journalists on Foot). The group is pushing for safer conditions for journalists.

Turati and others are trying to reverse a situation where Mexico City’s journalists have shown little concern for the plight of journalists getting killed in the provinces.

Turati helped organize a march that attracted more than 1,000 journalists

in early August in Mexico City. “Ni Uno Más” (Not One More) was the theme. The marchers showed solidarity with the slain journalists and demanded that the government prevent others from getting gunned down.

“It was a break-through moment,” said Turati. “We gained confidence and told everyone that we care about what happens to journalists.”

Mónica González, a veteran journalist in Chile who founded a powerful investigative news website, Ciper-Chile, applauded Turati’s efforts.

“When ego and fear get in the way, we become our own worst enemies,” said González, who was jailed by the Pinochet government because of her aggressive reporting. “If journalists don’t study the new situation, if we don’t prepare ourselves, if we don’t organize ourselves to act as a team instead of simply reacting, nothing will change. The only way to have an impact that helps citizens is through pressure.”

Marco Lara Klahr, an independent investigative journalist and analyst with the Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia (Institute for Security and Democracy), a human rights group based in Mexico City, gave a tough critique of journalists and violence.

Lara Klahr said that journalists are feeding Mexico’s downward spiral by playing up bloodshed and violence in their coverage. The news reports, he added, too often lack context, nuance, and confirmation of the facts provided by the government.

“We feed the monster,” Lara said, citing the

words of a photographer-reporter in the state of Morelos.

Push-Back

Ginna Morelo faces the threat of attack from right-wing paramilitary squads and their offshoots, which go by names such as “The Black Eagles” and “Castano’s Heroes.” These groups have become active again through extortions, kidnappings, and drug trafficking. They kill with impunity.

But Morelo is tough and willing to stand her ground. She is a reporter at *El Meridiano*, a newspaper in Montería, a city in northwestern Colombia.

Morelo’s investigative articles have angered powerful forces in local government and criminal networks.

“There are some who say you can’t compare eras, that now is better than before, when paramilitary groups reigned in the region and allied with politicians to become the new power brokers,” Morelo said. “Many journalists believe, to the contrary, that the situation has worsened. The criminals have changed their ways of doing business in an astonishing number of ways. Too many of them act freely in Córdoba and throughout the country. They are winning the legal battle and sowing anguish that has eaten our soul for decades.”

The account by Morelo and several other journalists demonstrated how hard-hitting reporting often produces an unpleasant push-back.

Morelo has learned to lie low after her



“SOME REPORTERS GET PAID OFF.” THE DRUG TRAFFICKERS THREATEN THOSE WHO WON’T GET PAID OFF. IF NOTHING ELSE WORKS, THEY’LL KILL.”



Michael O’Connor, investigator for the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

latest investigative article is published, before tackling her next assignment.

“My next story will be on sex and drugs involving underage children,” Morelo said, before adding, “I don’t want people to cry over my reports. I want them to really understand what’s happening, and to understand where we’re going.”

The pressure faced by journalists like Javier Mayorca in Venezuela comes from the government of President Hugo Chávez. Seeing himself as a latter-day Simón Bolívar, Chávez believes that he is pushing Venezuela into the pantheon of great nations, through what he calls “21st Century Socialism.”

He brooks little criticism.

Chávez’s government has been quick to attack newspapers and TV stations that report unflattering news, especially accounts that describe how Venezuela has become an important cocaine transshipment point.

Mayorca, who reports for *El Nacional* in Caracas, is among the journalists who have been frozen out by angry government officials.

“We’ve had to change our strategies to have access to sources,” Mayorca said. “Since 2005, our main sources have been drug certification reports from the United Nations and the U.S. State Department. We can only get the information extra-officially.”

El Nacional and *El Universal*—two of Caracas’ most important dailies—refuse to be cowed by Chávez. *Globovision*, an independent TV station, has also refused to knuckle under to Chávez.

In Jamaica, the *Gleaner* newspaper showed its courage when it continued to aggressively report a controversial 2009 extradition request by the United States for Christopher Coke, on charges of gun running and drug trafficking. Coke was a particularly notorious crime boss with a fervent following in his neighborhood.

Byron Buckley, a *Gleaner* editor, told the Austin conferees that the police passed along intelligence to the *Gleaner* and another media company, RJR Communications Co., “that both entities were under threat by elements supportive of Coke.”

Complicating matters, Buckley said, Coke “was a known supporter of the governing Jamaica Labour Party and a resident of the West Kingston constituency represented by the Prime Minister of Jamaica. The political enclave of Tivoli Gardens, in West Kingston, has been described by a former army/police chief as the ‘mother of all garrisons.’”

The Gleaner and RJR took precautions, Buckley said, but they continued their aggressive reporting. “Over the 12-month period since the U.S. made the extradition request, The Gleaner print and online editions together published more than 1,000 stories, letters, commentaries, and editorial leaders on the topic.”

Coke refused to surrender. Pressured in part by the relentless media coverage, the Jamaican government sent in troops to capture Coke. A bloody gun battle ensued, but Coke was finally caught and extradited to the United States.

“The media, by its own advocacy, coverage, as well as giving a voice to civil society, played a significant role in the outcome of the request by the U.S. for the extradition of Coke,” Buckley concluded.

New Tools

Drug trafficking gangs are devising new ways to keep the illegal profits flowing.

Journalists are adapting, too. The Inter American Press Association is holding workshops for journalists in Latin America that teach them how to work more safely in conflict areas.

The Digital Journalism Center at the University of Guadalajara is offering virtual seminars on how to work ethically and safely.

Journalists such as Judith Torrea in Ciudad Juárez, Mónica González in Santiago, and Carlos Dada in San Salvador—and other organizations in Mexico, such as Red de Periodistas de a Pie—are producing

innovative blogs and online newspapers.

One of the best sources for information on the drug war in Mexico comes from a surprise source. It is blogdelnarco.com. David Sasaki, a specialist in new media at the Open Society Foundations, called it “a citizen replacement for a media that’s been silenced. They publish photos of sons and daughters of narcos. They have a Facebook account. They put information on attack plans, on the guns [the drug traffickers] have, how much drugs they sell. You’ll see photos of narco-bloqueos on Twitter accounts.”

The identity of the blog’s publisher is not known. “It’s impossible for us to judge the motivation of the blogger,” Sasaki said, raising an obvious red flag. “He accepts content from anyone. He wants to put on as much as possible. He doesn’t filter anything. Blogdelnarco has more readers than Reforma and El Norte in Monterrey and the main paper in Torreón.”

Other online tools are increasingly becoming available for reporters. One of the most exciting is Cosecha Roja, sponsored by the Open Society Foundations and the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano. (Go to: <http://cosecharoja.fnpi.org/>)

Published in Spanish, the new site aims to provide an all-in-one place that aggregates news on violence in Latin America and gives journalists a site where they can exchange information, post articles, and debate ideas.

“Traditional journalism is in crisis,” said Cristian Alarcon, an Argentine who is a founder of the site. “We’re looking for new ways to cover violence.”



“DRUGS, THEIR PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND TRAFFICKING ARE A COMPLEX GLOBAL PHENOMENON, NOT A LOCAL POLICE STORY, AND THEY SHOULD BE TREATED ACCORDINGLY IN THE MEDIA. DRUG REPORTERS NEED TO EXPAND THEIR SOURCES OF INFORMATION.”



Alvaro Sierra, professor at the Universidad para la Paz en Costa Rica.

A second site is the Investigative Dashboard, which provides “tools for international reporters to follow the money.” It is the brainchild of Paul Radu, a Romanian journalist who honed his project as a Knight Fellow at Stanford University. (Go to: <http://investigativedashboard.org/>)

Radu discussed a recent trip to the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and

Paraguay that authorities have identified as a prime spot for smuggling cocaine, weapons, and knock-off electronic devices.

Steve Dudley, who was formerly based in Colombia for the Miami Herald, has created another site that will feature detailed information in English and Spanish. Called InSight, it will feature a small team of researchers who will monitor, analyze and investigate the phenomenon of organized crime throughout Latin America. The site is financed by the Open Society Foundations, the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (based in Bogotá), and American University in Washington, D.C. (Go to: www.InSightCrime.org)

InSight will help journalists put together the disparate pieces of an organized crime or drug story, Dudley said. “It will depend on the collaboration of reporters like you regionwide to succeed,” he added.

Even though journalists in Latin America and the Caribbean face difficulties in covering drug trafficking and organized crime, they are meeting some of these challenges with new tools to improve their work.

Information that makes issues invisible

By Marco Lara Klahr

Historically, there is a paradox in news coverage of crime and violence throughout Latin America. The media industry and journalists in general often rely on official information that is unreliable and unverifiable (and even fictional). We then disseminate this information widely among the population, often treating it more as infotainment and less as serious news.

This information often makes the inefficiency and corruption of police and judicial institutions invisible, and gives the impression that they are functioning because, according to them—through their accounts that we as journalists help validate—“all individuals who are apprehended or killed are the worst criminals.”

We have ended up becoming appendages of a criminal policy that demonizes, stigmatizes, and violates the due process rights of citizens who have entered into real or perceived conflict with criminal law, while enabling very high levels of impunity. (The non-profit Center of Research for Development—CIDAC, for example, says this could rise to 98.3 in Mexico).

When journalists are attacked and silenced by the same inefficient and corrupt criminal justice system that they often help legitimize on a daily basis, it highlights the grave paradox that journalists face: they are both facilitators and victims of a repressive system that they should be challenging.

DRUG TRAFFICKING AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE AMERICAS: MAJOR TRENDS IN THE 21st CENTURY

Analysis of the major trends that have characterized the evolution of illicit drug trafficking and organized criminal networks in the Americas over the last 25 years, with special emphasis on the main transformations or adaptations—economic, political and organizational—that have taken place within the region’s illegal drug economy during the first decade of the 21st century.



**By
Bruce
Bagley ***
University of Miami

Eight key trends or patterns are highlighted: 1) the globalization of drug consumption; 2) the limited or “partial victories” and unintended consequences of the U.S.-led “War on Drugs,” especially in the Andes; 3) the proliferation of areas of drug cultivation and of drug smuggling routes throughout the hemisphere (balloon effects); 4) the dispersion and fragmentation of organized criminal groups or networks within countries and across sub-regions (cockroach effects); 5) the failure of political reform and state-building efforts (deinstitutionalization effects); 6) the inadequacies or failures of U.S. domestic drug and crime control policies (demand control failures); 7) the ineffectiveness of regional and international drug control policies (regulatory failures); and 8) the growth in support for harm reduction, decriminalization, and legalization policy alternatives (legalization debate).

The Globalization of Drug Consumption

Many Latin American political leaders have long argued that if the U.S. population did not consume so many illegal drugs—if there were not so many American drug addicts and users—then Latin American countries would not produce large quantities of illegal drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and heroin for export, and the region would not be plagued by the powerful and well-financed drug trafficking organizations—often called cartels—that have sprung up in the region over the last 25 years. It is certainly accurate to claim that the United States has been for decades, and remains today, the largest single consumer market for illicit drugs on the planet. Although there is no definitive estimate, the value of all illicit drugs sold annually in the United States may reach as high as US \$150 billion. Some \$40 billion per year may be spent on cocaine alone.

Nonetheless, illegal drug use (and/or addiction) is not a uniquely “American” disease, despite the title of David Musto’s famous book on the topic. Over the last decade, the current 27 member states of

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“IT IS CERTAINLY ACCURATE TO CLAIM THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN FOR DECADES, AND REMAINS TODAY, THE LARGEST SINGLE CONSUMER MARKET FOR ILLICIT DRUGS ON THE PLANET. NONETHELESS, ILLEGAL DRUG USE (AND/OR ADDICTION) IS NOT A UNIQUELY “AMERICAN” DISEASE.”

the European Union have rapidly equaled or surpassed the approximately 6 million regular cocaine users found in the United States. Indeed, levels of cocaine use in the United States have remained roughly steady over the last 10-15 years while cocaine consumption in Europe exploded exponentially during the first decade of the 21st century. Moreover, the Europeans pay roughly three times as much per gram, ounce, kilo or metric ton as do American consumers. Indeed, the American market has for the last two decades absorbed some 320-350 metric tons of cocaine annually; Europe today is estimated to import some 300-320 metric tons each year, while consuming significantly higher amounts of heroin per capita. Over the last decade or more, the bulk of the heroin consumed in Europe has come from Afghanistan (over 90 percent of world production), whereas most of the heroin consumed in the United States comes from either Colombia (roughly 2 percent of world supply) or Mexico (roughly 1.5 percent of world supply). Cocaine, in contrast, is produced only in three countries of the Western hemisphere: Colombia (40-45 percent), Peru (35-40

percent), and Bolivia (15-20 percent). Cocaine is trafficked from these three Andean countries to consumer markets around the globe.

Cocaine consumption is not limited only to advanced capitalist markets such as those of the United States and Europe. Cocaine use in Latin America has also skyrocketed over the last decade. Indeed, Latin American consumers in 2010 were estimated to absorb over 200 metric tons of cocaine. Until 2009, Brazil was considered to be the world's second largest market for cocaine behind only the United States. In its 2010 World Drug Report, the United Nations reported that Argentina had replaced Brazil as the second biggest cocaine consumer while Brazil was ranked third and Spain was ranked fourth. Cocaine consumption rates in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Asia also appear to be increasing rapidly. The dramatic rises in European and South American cocaine consumption specifically have greatly expanded world market demand for this illicit Andean product over the past decade. As a consequence, a pronounced trend toward the proliferation of new global trafficking routes and the increased involvement of criminal trafficking networks originating outside the Andean sub-region has become increasingly evident.

Partial Victories in the War on Drugs

From the middle of the 19th century through the mid-1980s, Peru and Bolivia were the two principal country-suppliers of both coca leaf and of refined cocaine to the U.S., European and other world markets. As of 1985, Peru produced

(1) World Drug Report 2010, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime p. 71

roughly 65 percent of the world's supply of coca leaf while Bolivia grew approximately 25 percent and Colombia 10 percent or less. With the "partial victories" achieved by the U.S.-led war on drugs in the southern Andes during the late 1980s and early 1990s—specifically, U.S.-financed crop eradication programs in Bolivia's Chapare province under President Victor Paz Estenssoro after 1986 (Operation Blast Furnace), and Hugo Banzer after 1998 (Plan Dignidad), and Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori's interruption of the "air bridge" between the Alto Huallaga growing area in Peru and Colombia in the mid-1990s—coca cultivation in the Andes rapidly shifted to Colombia in the mid- and late 1990s. By 2000, Colombia cultivated an estimated 90 percent of the world's coca leaf while production in Peru and Bolivia dwindled to historic lows.

In the early 1990s, Colombia's U.S.-backed all-out war against drug lord Pablo Escobar and the Medellín cartel during the Cesar Gaviria administration led to Escobar's death on December 2, 1993, and the rapid dissolution of the Medellín cartel. Subsequent plea bargaining in 1994-95 during the Ernesto Samper administration with the major drug lords of the Cali cartel, specifically the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, catalyzed the dismantling of the Cali cartel. While some large criminal trafficking networks (e.g., the Cartel del Norte del Valle) and some 300-plus smaller drug trafficking organizations (known as *cartelitos*) continued to operate in Colombia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, by the late 1990s an unanticipated and unintended consequence of the demise of the country's two major cartels was the emergence of Colombia's leftwing FARC guerrillas and rightwing AUC paramilitary

groups as the major controllers of coca leaf cultivation throughout Colombia. The rise of these two groups of armed illegal actors led to increased drug-related violence, as FARC and the AUC sought to eliminate each other and to consolidate their territorial control over drug cultivation regions across the country.

The spiral of violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s resulted in Colombia becoming one of the most dangerous and violent countries in the world. In July 2000, President Clinton and the U.S. government responded by backing the Andrés Pastrana administration in its war against runaway drug trafficking via the adoption of Plan Colombia. In August 2002, the newly inaugurated government of Álvaro Uribe received additional drug war assistance from Washington and the Bush administration in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Supported by some \$8 billion in U.S. Plan Colombia aid over the decade, by 2010 Colombian President Uribe and his program of "democratic security" had managed to beat back the FARC guerrillas, demobilize many—if not all—of the country's paramilitary bands and substantially reduce the country's astronomically high levels of drug-related violence.

Despite the substantial achievement of Plan Colombia and the Uribe administration, Colombia in 2010 still remained the principal source of coca leaf and refined cocaine in the Andes, and drug-related violence and criminality appeared to be on the rise once again. Most importantly, clearly as an unintended consequence of the U.S.-backed war on drugs in Colombia, the locus of organized criminal involvement in cocaine

“DESPITE THE SUBSTANTIAL ACHIEVEMENT OF PLAN COLOMBIA AND THE URIBE ADMINISTRATION, HOWEVER, AS OF 2010 COLOMBIA REMAINED THE PRINCIPAL SOURCE OF COCA LEAF AND REFINED COCAINE IN THE ANDES.”

trafficking gradually shifted northwards from Colombia to Mexico. As the Uribe administration succeeded in Colombia, the major drug trafficking networks in Mexico took advantage of the vacuum left in the drug trade to seize control of cocaine smuggling operations into the United States. As a consequence, drug-related violence and criminality shifted northwards into Mexican territory as various Mexican trafficking organizations vied for control over the still highly lucrative smuggling trade from Colombia and the Andes into the large and profitable U.S. market.

Thus, Mexico’s current drug-related bloodbath is, in part, directly attributable to the partial victory in the war on drugs achieved in Colombia in recent years via Plan Colombia. If Mexico’s U.S.-backed Merida Initiative achieves results similar to those of Plan Colombia, it will not halt drug trafficking or end organized crime in Mexico or the region. The most likely outcome is that it will drive both further underground in Mexico while pushing many smuggling activities and criminal network operations into neighboring countries such as Guatemala and Honduras or back to Colombia and the Andes.



Courtesy of the newspaper Vanguardia (Saltillo, Mexico)

Proliferation of Areas of Cultivation and Smuggling Routes

The 2010 World Drug Report indicates that Colombia has successfully reduced the total number of hectares under coca cultivation within its national territory since 2008, although it has still not returned to pre-2000 levels. How large the reductions in coca cultivation in the past few years have actually been in Colombia is a controversial topic, plagued by inadequate data and methodological problems. Coca cultivation in both Peru and Bolivia has once again begun to expand. Most observers believe that overall coca leaf production and cocaine availability remain roughly on par with 2000 levels and well above those of 1990 or 1995. Evidently, the balloon effect that allowed coca cultivation to shift north from Bolivia and Peru to Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s continues to operate as cultivation moves back into Peru and Bolivia from Colombia at the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Various observers have noted the possibility that the tropical variety of coca— known in Portuguese as *Epadu*— might well balloon coca cultivation from its traditional growing areas on the eastern slopes of the Andes into Brazil and elsewhere in the Amazon basin in coming years, if ongoing or renewed eradication efforts prove successful in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru.

The 2010 UN report indicates a 10-20 percent decline in coca production in Colombia during 2008 and 2009. But enthusiasm regarding such statistics should be tempered by realism. First, it is important to note that year-to-year variations are commonplace; declines over several years are required to identify enduring trends. Second, the

UN statistics are approximations along a range rather than firm data points; it is entirely possible that this year's or last year's UN reports underestimate the real levels of production. Third, innovations in more productive hybrid plants, yields-per-hectare, and processing can produce higher levels of cocaine than anticipated by the UN experts. Finally, the ongoing decentralization of cultivation in Colombia makes accurate mapping of the total numbers of hectares under cultivation a very problematic endeavor.

Such caveats aside, the key reason that Colombia appears to have witnessed a significant decline in coca production in 2008 and 2009 is that the Uribe government moved away from its almost exclusive (U.S.-backed) reliance on aerial spraying to a more effective mixture of spraying and manual eradication linked to comprehensive alternative development programs in key coca growing areas such as La Macarena. In combination with the weakening of FARC control in vast stretches of rural Colombia and the partial demobilization of the paramilitary bands engaged in drug trafficking, 2008/09 marked the beginning of an important decline after at least three years of steady increases in total production. To sustain this decline will require that Colombia continue its manual eradication efforts and that it provide additional funds for well-designed and executed alternative development programs in coca growing areas throughout the country.

Meanwhile, increases in coca cultivation in both Peru and Bolivia suggest that the focus of U.S. attention and resources on Colombia has led to the neglect of coca cultivation in those traditional coca-growing countries in the central Andes. To

“OVER THE PAST 25 YEARS AND MORE, THE WAR ON DRUGS CONDUCTED BY THE UNITED STATES AND ITS VARIOUS LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN ALLIES HAS SUCCEEDED REPEATEDLY IN SHIFTING COCA CULTIVATION FROM ONE AREA TO ANOTHER IN THE ANDES AND IN FORCING FREQUENT CHANGES IN SMUGGLING ROUTES.”

forestall a recurrence of the balloon effect pushing cultivation out of one country only to have it reappear in others, the Obama administration will have to seek to reestablish a workable relation with the government of President Evo Morales in Bolivia and find effective ways to combat the resurgence of Sendero Luminoso and coca cultivation in Alan Garcia’s Peru. Failure to do either will simply shift coca production once again back to Peru and Bolivia, thereby nullifying any real progress made in reducing coca cultivation in Colombia over the medium term.

In the 1980s, largely as a result of the formation of the U.S. government’s South Florida Task Force in 1982—headed by then-vice president G. H. W. Bush—the established Caribbean routes used by the Medellín and Cali cartels were essentially closed down by American law enforcement and military operations. They were quickly replaced in the 1980s and early 1990s with new routes that used Panama and Central America, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Corridor to reach Mexico and then cross from Mexico into the United



Courtesy of Jorge Villalpando

States. When the Mexican cartels took over from Medellín and Cali in the late 1990s, the Pacific Corridor became the principal smuggling route northwards from Colombia to the United States, although the Gulf route also remained active.

Since December 1, 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón, with Washington's active assistance since 2008 via the Merida Initiative, has waged an intense military campaign against Mexico's major drug cartels. Although not by any means successful in eliminating Mexico's key drug trafficking groups as of 2010, Calderón's militarization of the drug war has unquestionably made smuggling across the U.S.-Mexican border from Mexico more dangerous and expensive than in past years. As a result, some of the Mexican trafficking organizations have begun to move into Central America—especially Guatemala and Honduras—to take advantage of these much weaker states to conduct their smuggling operations.

There is also abundant evidence available indicating increased use of both Venezuelan and Ecuadorian territory by Colombian traffickers to replace the increasingly problematic Mexico routes. Venezuela is a jumping-off point for smuggling through the Caribbean to the east coast of the United States or across the Atlantic through West Africa into Europe. Venezuela also is used for drug flights into Honduras or Guatemala where the shipments are then transferred to trucks and transported by land across the Guatemalan-Mexican border northwards to the United States.

The balloon effects produced by the partial victories in the war on drugs on both drug cultivation and drug smuggling routes

are self-evident. Over the past 25 years and more, the war on drugs conducted by the United States and its various Latin American and Caribbean allies has succeeded repeatedly in shifting coca cultivation from one area to another in the Andes and in forcing frequent changes in smuggling routes. But it has proven unable to disrupt seriously, much less stop permanently, either production or trafficking in the hemisphere. Worst of all, the traffickers' constant, successful adaptations to law enforcement measures designed to end their activities have led to the progressive contamination of more and more countries in the region by the drug trade and its attendant criminality and violence.

Dispersion and Fragmentations of Criminal Drug Trafficking Organizations

The differential insertion of individual countries into the political economy of drug trafficking in the hemisphere has produced a variety of forms or types of intermediation between peasant growers of illicit crops and consumers. In Bolivia, the presence of peasant cooperatives in the countryside since the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement of 1952 produced coca grower associations and generally inhibited the rise of either criminal organizations or guerrilla movements as intermediaries, although the Bolivian military itself has on various occasions fulfilled this role. In Peru, the absence of strong grass roots associations among peasant growers opened the way for both elements of the country's military apparatus (Vladimiro Montesinos) and guerrilla organizations (Sendero Luminoso)

“THE “COCKROACH” EFFECT REFERS SPECIFICALLY TO THE DISPLACEMENT OF CRIMINAL NETWORKS FROM ONE CITY/ STATE/REGION TO ANOTHER WITHIN A GIVEN COUNTRY, OR FROM ONE COUNTRY TO ANOTHER IN SEARCH OF SAFER HAVENS AND MORE PLIABLE STATE AUTHORITIES.”

to perform the role of intermediaries or traffickers. In Colombia, the absence of both peasant organizations and military intermediaries paved the way for the rise of major criminal organizations such as the Medellín and Cali cartels to fill the role. The demise of the major cartels opened the way for illegal armed actors such as the FARC and the paramilitaries. In Mexico and Central America, elements of the military and/or police have sometimes performed the functions of intermediation in previous decades, but in the 1990s and 2000s these countries have followed the Colombian pattern of criminal intermediation owing to the absence of strong grower associations.

In terms of criminal organizations or criminal trafficking networks, Colombia and Mexico provide the two most important examples over the last 25 years. In Colombia, the rise and fall of Medellín and Cali (and subsequently the Norte del Valle cartel) vividly illustrate the perils and vulnerabilities of large, hierarchical criminal trafficking organizations, especially when they attempt to confront the state openly. Both major cartels in Colombia were hierarchically structured and proved to be vulnerable targets for Colombian and

international law enforcement agencies. In the wake of Medellín and Cali, Colombia witnessed a rapid fragmentation and dispersion of criminal networks that have proven far more difficult for law enforcement authorities to track down and dismantle than their larger and more notorious predecessors. Although there may be counter-tendencies leading to reconcentration among criminal trafficking organizations in Colombia today (e.g., los Rastrojos, las Aguilas Negras), the basic lesson to emerge from Colombia appears to be that smaller criminal networks are less vulnerable. From the Colombian state’s perspective, such organizations are less threatening because they do not have the capacity to threaten state security directly.

In Mexico, as in Colombia in the 1980s and early 1990s, cocaine profits appear to have energized the country’s major criminal networks and unleashed a wave of violence among criminal organizations that are continuing to try to strengthen and consolidate their control of key smuggling routes. Nonetheless, Mexico’s criminal trafficking groups do appear to be slowly following the Colombian pattern of dispersion and fragmentation, although the evidence is not yet conclusive. In 2000, the Tijuana cartel (Arrellano Felix family) and the Juárez cartel (Carrillo Fuentes family) were the two largest and most dominant drug trafficking organizations in Mexico. Since 2000, after the Vicente Fox administration first went after Tijuana and then Juárez, Mexico has seen the rise of at least five new major trafficking organizations and a host of smaller, lesser known groups: Sinaloa, Gulf, Familia Michoacana, Beltran-Leyva, and Zetas. This dispersion of criminal networks in Mexico may well represent the beginning

of the kind of fragmentation observed in Colombia in the 1990s. If it does, the trend would be warmly welcomed by Mexican governing authorities because it would portend a considerable diminution in the capacity of organized criminal networks in Mexico to directly challenge state authority and national security.

A key reason why some analysts do not accept the fragmentation thesis in contemporary Mexico relates directly to the emergence of a new criminal network model—the Sinaloa cartel. Unlike its predecessors and current rivals in Mexico, the Sinaloa cartel is less hierarchical and more federative in its organizational structure. Its principal leader, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán has forged a new type of “federation” that gives greater autonomy (and profits) to affiliated groups. To date, Sinaloa, also known as the Federation, seems to be winning the war against its rivals, although its fight against the Zetas (a paramilitary organization) is proving to be prolonged, costly, and bloody. It is conceivable that the Sinaloa model will prove more enduring—better for business—than other criminal trafficker organizational models in Mexico, but the jury is still out.

Under pressure from Mexican and U.S. law enforcement, Mexican trafficker organizations have, since the mid-2000s if not before, sought to move at least part of their smuggling operations from Mexico into neighboring countries. Guatemala and Honduras are currently targets for both Sinaloa and the Zetas. The upsurge in drug-related violence in both of these Central American nations is closely related to these shifts in operational bases. This trend, observable throughout the hemisphere, is sometimes labeled

the “cockroach” effect, because it is reminiscent of the scurrying of cockroaches out of a dirty kitchen into other places to avoid detection after a light has been turned on them. Closely linked to the “balloon” effect, the “cockroach” effect refers specifically to the displacement of criminal networks from one city/state/region to another within a given country, or from one country to another in search of safer havens and more pliable state authorities.

Failure of Political Reform or State Building

States determine the form or type of organized crime that can operate and flourish within a given national territory. Criminal organizations do not determine the type of state, although they certainly can deter or inhibit political reform efforts at all levels of a political system. Advanced capitalist democracies— from the United States to Europe to Japan— exhibit wide variations in the types of organized crime that they generate and/or tolerate. The United States, for example, has eliminated the Italian mafia model and seen it replaced by fragmented and widely dispersed domestic criminal organizations, many affiliated with immigrant communities. Europe is characterized by a similar evolution of organized crime groups affiliated with immigrant populations. Japan, in contrast, has coexisted with the Yakuza, a more corporate style criminal network. In China, state capitalism coexists with the Chinese triads. In Russia, the Putin government, in effect, subordinated and incorporated various elements of the Russian mafia as para-state organizations.

“RATHER THAN DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION, THE CONSEQUENCE OF IGNORING ORGANIZED CRIME AND ITS CORROSIVE EFFECTS MAY WELL BE INSTITUTIONAL DECAY OR DEMOCRATIC DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION.”

In Colombia, the paramilitary organizations, deeply involved in drug trafficking, were linked directly to both state institutions and to specific political parties. In Mexico, the formerly dominant PRI party developed almost tributary relations with organized crime groups. When the PRI's almost 71-year monopoly over political power was broken at the national level in 2000 by the victory of PAN presidential candidate Vicente Fox, the old lines of tribute/bribery broke down as well. The political change unleashed a wave of internecine violence among trafficking organizations as they struggled among themselves for control of cocaine transit through their country.

Transitions from authoritarian regimes to more open and democratic forms of governance in Latin America, as in Russia and Eastern Europe, are particularly problematic, because the old, authoritarian institutional controls collapse or are swept away but cannot be easily or quickly replaced by new, democratic forms of control, at least in the short term. Mexico is experiencing precisely such a transition. The old institutions—e.g., police, courts, prisons, intelligence agencies, parties and elections—no longer work. Indeed, they are patently dysfunctional. Nevertheless,

no new institutional mechanisms have arisen to replace them. Moreover, reform efforts can be, and often are, stymied or derailed entirely by institutional corruption and criminal violence intended to limit or undermine state authority and the rule of law.

Such observations do not constitute arguments against democratization. Rather they highlight challenges and obstacles along the road to democratization that are frequently overlooked or ignored altogether. Few democratic theorists have seriously examined the problems for democratic transitions that emanate from organized and entrenched criminal networks. In the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, such neglect may well imperil political stability and democracy itself. Rather than democratic consolidation, the consequence of ignoring organized crime and its corrosive effects may well be institutional decay or democratic de-institutionalization.

The Inflexibility and Ineffectiveness of Regional and International Drug Control Policies (Regulatory Failures)

Reflecting the hegemonic influence of the United States over international drug policy during the post-World War II period, the United Nations Organization of Drug and Crime Control (UNODC) and the Organization of American States' Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (OAS-CICAD) have both faithfully reproduced the U.S. prohibitionist regime at the multilateral level. The UN's approach to drug control (like that of the OAS) severely limits the flexibility of responses at the level of member-states

because it effectively rules out any possible experimentation with legalization and/or decriminalization. Both the UN and the OAS part from the assumption that all illicit drugs are “evil” and must be prohibited and suppressed. In practice, the unwavering prohibitionist strategy pursued by the UN, OAS, and the United States has dominated international discourse on drug control and prevented individual countries from experimenting with alternative approaches (or forced them to ignore or defy their UN treaty obligations regarding narcotics control).

For example, the UN, OAS, and the United States have, in effect, systematically rejected Bolivian President Evo Morales’ declared policy of fostering traditional and commercial uses of legally grown coca leaf while preventing the processing of coca leaf into cocaine in that country. Similarly, both the U.S. federal government and the UN condemned the November 2010 California ballot initiative that sought (and failed) to legalize marijuana cultivation and commercialization in that state. It is entirely possible that, had California’s Proposition 19 initiative on marijuana been approved by the state’s voters, it would have run afoul of both the United States’ federal statutes and its UN treaty obligations.

In practice, the UN prohibitionist inclination has meant that there is no international backing for options other than the current “War on Drugs,” no matter what collateral damage is incurred in the process. The 10-year UN (UNGASS) review of international drug control policies (1998-2008) predictably concluded that the prohibitionist UN policies currently in place were the best and only real strategic option available moving forward and generated

no significant alterations in international drug control policies and practices, despite evident and growing inconformity among some member states and many independent analysts.

The Failure of U.S. Drug Control Policies

While the United States has managed to stabilize demand for most illicit drugs at home, it most certainly has not eliminated American demand for illicit drugs or the profits associated with supplying the huge U.S. market. Demand control has routinely been underfunded by Washington while primary emphasis has almost automatically been accorded to expensive, but ultimately ineffective, supply-side control strategies. Analysis of the reasons behind the U.S. insistence on supply over demand control strategies lies beyond the scope of this essay.

The consequences of Washington’s strategic choices are, however, obvious. Washington has demanded that the countries of the region follow its lead in the war on drugs and has often sanctioned those nations that do not “fully cooperate.” U.S. insistence on such a policy approach has not only led to overall failure in the war on drugs over the last 25 years, it has been counterproductive for both U.S. and individual Latin American country interests. The price that Colombia has paid for its role in the war on drugs has been high in both blood and treasure. The price that Mexico is being asked to pay today is as high or higher. The high costs associated with failure have generated a reaction to the U.S. strategy both at home and abroad and produced a new debate over

DEMAND CONTROL HAS ROUTINELY BEEN UNDERFUNDED BY WASHINGTON WHILE PRIMARY EMPHASIS HAS ALMOST AUTOMATICALLY BEEN ACCORDED TO EXPENSIVE, BUT ULTIMATELY INEFFECTIVE, SUPPLY-SIDE CONTROL STRATEGIES.

alternatives to American prohibitionist approaches such as harm reduction, decriminalization, and legalization.

The Search for Alternatives: The Debate over Legalization

Some Latin American analysts had anticipated that passage of California's Proposition 19 in 2010, which would have legalized the cultivation, distribution, and possession of marijuana in the state, would have signaled the beginning of the end of the U.S.-led war on drugs and allow Mexico and other countries in the region to move away from the "prohibitionist" strategy that has generated so much drug-related violence throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. Many Latin American political leaders, however, openly oppose the legalization of marijuana and stridently argue against the legalization or

decriminalization of harder drugs.

Whether one was for or against Proposition 19, there were sound reasons to be skeptical of the real impact of marijuana legalization in California. First, even if the initiative had passed, there were likely to be U.S. federal government challenges that could delay implementation of the new law for years. Second, legalization of marijuana, if and when it occurs, will not address the issues—production, trafficking, and distribution—raised by harder drugs. Criminal gangs in Mexico and elsewhere in the region will most likely move away from marijuana to deeper involvement in the still-illegal drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines; organized crime will continue to flourish; and drug-related violence will continue unabated. In the long run, legalization or decriminalization of illicit drugs offer the only real solutions to drug-related crime and violence in Mexico and around the globe, even if addiction rates go up as they did with the end of U.S. alcohol prohibition. But in the short- and medium-run, Latin American countries will have to address their own seriously flawed institutions. Ending long-standing corrupt practices, undertaking police, judicial, prison and other key institutional reforms, and ensuring greater electoral accountability are changes that cannot wait for legalization to take place at some nebulous point in the future. Legalization of marijuana is no panacea. It will not eliminate the many other types of organized crime that operate with virtual impunity in Latin America and the Caribbean today.

IS THERE AN INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVE ON DRUGS? THE STRANGE PARADOXES OF DRUG COVERAGE IN THE NEWS

Of all the threats in the continent to the freedom, creativity and the space of journalism, drug traffickers—“narcos”—represent the most systematic, far-reaching and lethal threat. However, the news coverage, which focuses almost exclusively on what is popularly called “narco-trafficking,” is surrounded by strange paradoxes.



By
**Álvaro
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Few topics have received as much systematic, prominent attention in the last 20–30 years as drug trafficking. But at the same time, few issues have managed to remain so poorly understood as the phenomenon of illegal drugs, not only by the general public, but often by the journalists who cover it. This disconnect occurs because news coverage of drug trafficking is dominated by a series of paradoxes that have profound repercussions on the quality of the public debate about drugs, drug traffickers, and the pursuers of both.

Organized crime—especially in its most modern, sophisticated, and violent form—the trafficking of drugs—is perhaps the greatest threat confronting journalism in the Americas. Of all the threats in the continent to the freedom, creativity, and ability of journalists to practice their trade, drug traffickers—“narcos”—are the most systematic, far-reaching, and lethal. In a context of serious threats and escalating

violence, the news coverage of drugs, which focuses almost exclusively on what is popularly called “narco-trafficking,” is also surrounded by strange paradoxes.

The drug phenomenon can only be understood from a global perspective, but it is typically covered as an exclusively local issue. The news focuses on one element, the traffickers and their trafficking, but not on the system that they form, including drugs and their prohibition. Drug coverage focuses on a singular policy, the so-called “war on drugs,” and not on the diverse policies nor the rich, intense debate surrounding them. “Narco-trafficking,” the term that has popularized the activity of drug trafficking, is a social, economic, political, and cultural phenomenon, besides being a criminal one, but it is covered mainly as a police story. Clichés prevail in the news coverage and in the public debate about these highly complex topics. And what is most notorious about the broad academic research about drugs is its great disconnect with the worlds of journalism and policy. The result is a public debate that hardly reflects the broad knowledge acquired about illegal drugs and the

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complex systems that facilitate their production, trafficking, and consumption. Drug coverage lacks a critical and informed vision about the policies that have been employed for 100 years to combat drugs.

The information, of course, is not uniform and it would be arbitrary to label it as such. The quality and focuses of information vary greatly from country to country, region to region—due to intimidation by regimes of totalitarian terror imposed by criminal organizations. Freedom of the press is almost always the primary victim. Journalists write in-depth stories, and they do high-quality analyses and investigations and obtain remarkable interviews and data. But the information published on a day-to-day basis and its wide consumption by the public reflect those paradoxes. The strength or weakness of the journalistic work has profound repercussions not only for the content, but also for the vigor and depth of the public debate around illegal drugs and, in turn, the decisions that politicians make about these issues.

The Global Phenomenon of Drugs

Drug trafficking is a global phenomenon. To assume differently makes it impossible to understand and explain. Furthermore, it is a clandestine business for which the available data is, at best, tentative. The United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime and its annual World Drug Report provide the most widely disseminated information, but the data are still estimates.

If we look at the World Drug Report's annual map of drug consumption, production, and trafficking¹, we see that Mexico, Colombia, and other nations are

mere pieces in a vast international drug network. There is no country on earth that does not have demand for some of the illegal substances that fall under the categories of narcotics, hypnotics, stimulants, intoxicants or hallucinogens². The tentacles of illegal supply extend throughout the planet, with production nodes for certain drugs concentrated in specific regions (cocaine in the Andes, heroin in Afghanistan), and the cultivation or fabrication of other drugs are disseminated across dozens of countries (in the case of marijuana and amphetamines). The business in the last 100 years has shown a capacity for adaptation and agility that any naturalist would envy: how the mode of consumption evolves from one to another, from country to country; and the rhythm in which repressive campaigns against drugs concentrate in one region or country give lift to new routes, new markets, and new players. What happens in one country cannot be understood without knowing what is happening in the others.

Almost all the data on the business is modest: the consumers of drugs—the customers—range between 155 million and 250 million people (less than 6 percent of the world population between the ages of 15-64, for the highest figure), according to estimates from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The UNODC estimates "problematic users" (addicts) as between 16 million to 38 million people. The fields sown for drug cultivation are small compared to other crops, and with the exception of marijuana they are concentrated in a handful of countries: three Andean nations account for 158,800 hectares of coca cultivation; Afghanistan holds most of the world's 180,000 hectares of poppy fields; and 200,000–600,000

(1) UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*.

(2) Richard Davenport-Hines, *La búsqueda del olvido. Historia de las drogas desde 1500-2000*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 2003.

“THE DRUG PHENOMENON CAN ONLY BE UNDERSTOOD FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE, BUT IT IS TYPICALLY COVERED AS AN EXCLUSIVELY LOCAL ISSUE. THE NEWS FOCUSES ON ONE ELEMENT, THE TRAFFICKERS AND THEIR TRAFFICKING, BUT NOT ON THE SYSTEM THAT THEY FORM, INCLUDING DRUGS AND THEIR PROHIBITION.”

hectares of cannabis are planted around the world in open air, and increasingly indoors. The volume of the market is also impressive. Production for 2008 included 865 tons of cocaine, 7,700 tons of opium (650 tons of heroin), between 161 and 588 tons of amphetamines (demonstrating the uncertain range of the estimates), and 55–133 tons of ecstasy. Production of cannabis is estimated to total between 13,000 and 66,000 tons³. Compared to oil production—which rose to 3.82 billion tons in 2009⁴—and viewed in purely numeric terms, it also seems incredible that the violence in Mexico and Central America could be generated by the transit of no more than 140 tons of cocaine⁵.

The business itself, on the other hand, is the largest illegal industry in the world. With revenue for cocaine estimated at \$88 billion, and heroin estimated at \$55 billion, the total value of either of these two drugs is several times larger than any other illicit enterprise in the world, and bigger than a number of legitimate businesses as well. Estimates on the trafficking of natural products or human trafficking are nine

times smaller than cocaine. If the UNODC correctly valued the global business of drugs between 2003 and 2005 at \$320 billion, only 27 countries would have a GDP greater than this sum⁶. (Since then, the estimates have dropped significantly.)

The drug trade is highly efficient. It has systematically evaded every control put in its path. The consumer prices today are a fraction of what they were 25 years ago, despite the fact that the main market for drugs, the United States, has shrunk by half. Between 1982 and 2003, the price of cocaine dropped from \$700 to just over \$100 per gram in the United States. Heroin prices fell similarly, a decrease that has not been offset by the rising price of cocaine from 2006–2007. The drop occurred despite the fact that the number of U.S. users of cocaine fell from 10.5 million to 5.3 million between 1982 and 2008. It should be noted though, that new markets opened in Western Europe and South America during this time. Regarding cocaine, Mexican drug organizations are, in fact, fighting among themselves for a shrinking market north of the border.

In what other industry can you acquire primary material (coca leaf at a farm in Colombia, necessary to process a kilo of pure cocaine) at \$650 per kilo, ship the processed good (usually on a fast boat from some cove in the Pacific) at \$1,200 to \$1,500 per kilo, and then see the price shoot up to \$15,000 at the U.S.-Mexican border, and finally sell for \$100,000 to \$120,000 at retail prices in U.S. cities?

The business exhibits extraordinary adaptability and resilience. The case of cocaine is significant. Billions of dollars invested in the “war on drugs” have brought about the reduction of 50,000

(3) All data are taken from UNODC.

(4) British Petroleum, Statistical Review of World Energy, 2010, <http://www.bp.com/sectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=9023758&contentId=7044107>

(5) This is the amount that the UNODC estimates to circulate in the region from Colombia to the United States. (Of course, there are other drugs and crimes, especially in Mexico.) Op. Cit.

(6) Data from World Bank, current dollars, 2009. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2009+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc

hectares of coca cultivation in the Andes in the last 20 years. (It would be interesting to calculate how much this reduction has cost since the eradication started in Peru.) In the same period, seizures of cocaine have multiplied two and a half times. According to the UNODC, there were 100 fewer tons of cocaine available for consumption in 2008 than the almost 600 in 1990. In adjusted U.S. dollars, the U.S. market has decreased one quarter between 1988 and 2008. Despite this, more cocaine is produced today (865 tons in 2008, versus 774 in 1990), more cheaply, and is available in three times as many markets as it was 20 years ago. Opiates experienced something similar: in 2008, opium production (7,700 tons) was almost double that of 1990, and heroin rose from 562 tons in 1994 to 735 tons in 2008. So, despite the best efforts of governments, the decrease in cultivation and the increase in seizures have done little to affect what matters most—production. As a result, the production of drugs today is as prosperous if not more so than it was in the past.

This is the great paradox of the global antidrug strategy in force for the last several decades and has been commonplace for experts for years. Nevertheless, this paradox has only just started to take a more prominent place in the media and in the public debate on drugs.

How do you explain that a business whose principal market has been drastically reduced and whose prices have dropped for two decades can continue to produce—and sell—prosperously, and maintain profit margins that would be the envy of the most venturesome financial speculator? This is but one of the many great questions that journalists have barely explored,

yet it gets at the heart of paradoxes that characterize the news coverage of illegal drugs.

Global phenomenon, local coverage

Drugs and their trafficking are a global phenomenon. However, its coverage by journalists is conspicuously local.

The production, trafficking, and consumption of narcotics, the quasi-religious restrictions against them for over a century, (in Shanghai, in 1909, a handful of countries, with a North American Anglican bishop at the helm, decided to prohibit them), and the colossal industry built around them are all global. Drug trafficking cannot be understood without assuming as much, but the journalistic coverage of the topic is predominantly national. At best, there are bursts of international connections in the news: the descent of the Mexican Zetas into Central America; cocaine in Peru or the “paco” (crack) business in Argentina tied to a Mexican group; the Colombian connection in Guinea-Bissau. However, the flash of the local drug stories that make the front pages outshines those that focus on the global essence of the drug trade.

The global story of drugs is very old, but their prohibition and the resulting phenomenon of drug trafficking are very recent. The taste for “artificial paradises” and their consumption is as old as humanity itself. (There is evidence of medicinal and recreational use of opiates dating back to the Neolithic era.) While they have been the targets of local prohibitions in some instances in history (gin in England during the 18th century, for

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example), it was only in the 20th century that drugs were declared illegal and their production, distribution, and consumption criminalized on an international scale. The disastrous attempt by the United States to prohibit alcohol from 1920 to 1933 set off the criminalization. And, like Al Capone, the trafficking of alcohol was the first child of prohibition. The English, the modern era’s first drug traffickers, with their “opium clippers” (the “fast boats” of the 19th century) imposed opium consumption on the Chinese by means of two wars. While prohibition seems natural today, it has only been the established order for a brief period of time. It began 100 years ago and was only fully formalized between 1961 and 1988 with the three United Nations conventions on drugs and the institutions charged with overseeing their enforcement⁷.

The geography of drugs and the nationalities of the traffickers are as global as their history, peppered with celebrities: Al Capone and “Lucky” Luciano in the United States, Pablo Escobar in Colombia, Joaquin “el Chapo” Guzmán in Mexico. Trends in consumption come and go in waves. Coca was exported legally from

Peru to the United States, and Bayer, the fledgling German multinational, had it planted in Java until the beginning of the 20th century. African American dock workers first started using cocaine in the United States until it saw a resurgence of popularity, this time as a fashionable drug with white, middle-class Wall Street workers. In the 1980s cocaine reinvented itself yet again, this time as crack, infesting marginalized, black neighborhoods. The taste for opium, long attributed to the Chinese due to racist stereotypes in the United States and Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s, grew into the heroin epidemic of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. Today, chronic heroin consumption plagues nations like Russia. Opium has been trafficked by the “gomeros” of Sinaloa, armed groups in the Golden Triangle, and warlords in Afghanistan, amongst others. Long before the Colombians, Chileans controlled cocaine trafficking until the Pinochet dictatorship, as did Cubans. Mexicans are the Americas’ oldest smugglers, and in addition to Colombian cocaine, they provide the United States with marijuana (some estimate that this is their single biggest business) and locally produced heroin. The smuggling of opium from Mexico into the United States grew under the protection of the single party since the 1920s. Marijuana was also smuggled in large amounts until the Nixon Administration’s “Operation Intercept” in 1969 and the Mexican Army’s “Operation Condor” in the 1970s displaced part of the cultivation and business to Colombia. There, air fumigation of the marijuana plantations in the late 1970s moved the cultivation into the United States. Today, it is the United States’ most profitable crop, estimated at \$35 billion annually, and it competes with cheaper varieties from

(7) The three conventions are the Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1972), and the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988). The three are governed by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the International Narcotics Control Board, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Mexico and potent strains from hydroponic indoor cultures in Canada. Five years ago, West Africa did not figure into the global map of illicit drugs; today, it is a key route for Colombian cocaine to enter Europe. Much to its dismay and against all predictions until very recently, Costa Rica was included by the United States on its "dark list" of 20 leading countries for the production or transit of drugs in September 2010, as described by the Costa Rican daily *La Nación*. This was a result of Caribbean routes being displaced and moving into Central America.

Global geography, changing tastes in consumption and shifting national protagonists hardly enter the public debate on drugs, widely fed by local televised incidents of the "war on drugs." The "war" is in itself another global element, although the media and the politicians have attempted in vain to draw its results on a local scale for over 40 years. In the feature film of drugs, where mobility and adaptation are the stars, the public only sees the photographs of the supporting actors. Although a few, like "Chapo" Guzmán and Pablo Escobar for example, may be important just like their individual countries, they are but a few portraits in the gallery of illegal drugs.

Media in the continent speak little about the regional geography of drugs and rarely recognize that the Americas are the epicenter of the global drug trade. They are a center for drug production: Mexico, Paraguay, the United States, and Canada are among the main producers of marijuana; the Andean region is the world's only producer of cocaine; Mexico and Colombia produce heroin; and several countries manufacture amphetamines and ecstasy. For all they produce, the Americas

are also centers for drug consumption with close to a quarter of the world's marijuana users, more than 10 percent of opium users, almost half the cocaine users, and around 8 million users of ecstasy and amphetamines. Following the trend of production and consumption, the Americas are also a center for drug trafficking. This, what should be a base element of journalism's context for drug coverage, is often reduced, when it appears at all, to a few lines in reports about Mexico and the 28,000 who have died during Felipe Calderón's administration.

The lack of mutual coverage among countries in the Americas is stunning. Mexico is in the news often, but there are few investigations on drug trafficking's international connections, comparisons between countries, or reports on the nations that are becoming increasingly important in the international drug trade, like Argentina, Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, Venezuela, and countries in Central America. Media in each country report the problem as local and infrequently, and with hardly any depth or rigor about what is going on in the neighborhood.

Nor is there a serious debate about the statistics and the methodologies used to obtain data. The media ritually covers the UNODC reports for their countries, but a critical eye is rarely cast upon these statistics which are just estimates that are viewed skeptically by many experts. Few journalists utilize the statistics to create comparative regional portraits, analyze trends, or make forecasts, all of which would contribute to a more nuanced public debate on drugs. The numbers on the business dimensions of the global or local drug trade and the supposed fortunes of drug kingpins are reproduced without

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critical reflection. The information is not compared to data from skeptical experts, and audiences are not warned about its precarious nature. For example, between 2003 and 2005, the UNODC said the global market for drugs was \$320 billion; in 2009 its director, Antonio Maria Costa, put the cocaine trade at \$50 billion. Another study the following year estimated it at \$88 billion while yet another group led by the U.S. expert Peter Reuter estimated the cocaine trade at between \$8 billion and \$12 billion⁸. After calculating a fixed number for ecstasy users for several years, the UNODC has opted to express its findings in ranges since 2009. For example, the ODC estimates there are between 13.7 million and 52.9 million amphetamine users in the world⁹. With such data, any journalist should exercise the utmost caution. Like Winston Churchill said about the Kremlin, to estimate information about a clandestine business through seizures, arrests, and consumption surveys is like predicting the outcome of a dog fight taking place under a rug.

Journalism’s continued local perspective of a phenomenon that can only be explained on a global and regional scale is, perhaps, what most confounds an adequate comprehension of drug trafficking.

Covering drug trafficking, or covering drugs?

Journalism tends to focus on one single element (drug trafficking and traffickers) while only marginally referring to the wider system in which these elements exist (drugs in general and their prohibition). Generally speaking, the information deals with a piece, not with the set.

The more notorious part of the phenomenon is what gets the most coverage. Obviously, an extraordinary explosion of violence like what has occurred in Mexico over the last few years or the kind that characterizes Colombian traffickers commands a place of privilege in the media. It is not only because the rules of journalism reserve a distinguished place for extraordinary or violent acts, but rather because it deals with a topic of the greatest importance for societies that are then forced to contemplate, shocked, how a whirlpool of ever more degraded violence increasingly overtakes daily life. Part of journalism’s core function is to address these types of situations with special interest, and society avidly seeks whatever information it can find to throw light on the subject.

The public and journalists enter into a fatal attraction with the romance of drug trafficking, its characters, and the trappings of their extravagance. Few topics make as “sexy” headlines as glimpses into the lives of criminal characters shrouded in secrets and legends. Only a little becomes known, but it points to huge resources, ways of spending money, and modalities of crime, corruption and violence, which need no headline to be sensational. It is understandable that notoriety in the media is guaranteed to the stories about

(8) See declarations by Antonio Maria Costa, the news release about the World Drug Report 2009, and the report *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (2010), available at www.unodc.org.

(9) UNODC World Drug Report 2010.

characters like Tony Tormenta, the Mexican mob boss killed by the Mexican Army in November 2010; or to the Hello Kitty memorabilia belonging to the wife of Juan Carlos Abadía ("Chupeta"), discovered at their home during their arrest in São Paulo in August 2007. This is drug trafficking's hypnotic spell to which, inevitably, the media and society succumb.

Drug trafficking and its violence are the most visible part of the universe of illegal drugs. The problem is that these barely form the tip of the iceberg, and to concentrate only on them leads to "undesirable consequences," to borrow the UNODC's terminology regarding drug prohibition¹⁰.

Like all events that fall into the category of "extraordinary," the degraded violence associated with the drug trade captivates the attention of the media, which cover it as if it were an inevitable natural disaster like a hurricane or a tsunami. The devastation, the victims, and the catastrophe lead the news programs and the front pages. The context takes a back seat to the avalanche of destruction and death; repetition frequently replaces explanation. The news reports on assassinations, bombs, decapitations, massacres, and kidnappings, and their perpetrators and victims. Individual murders are so innumerable that they stop becoming news. Collective assassinations take their place, and once those become everyday occurrences, only the truly horrifying or those involving many deaths are deemed newsworthy. The front pages remain reserved for only the most savage or bizarre acts of violence in a race to capture audiences' attention, while the gross quantity of faceless victims grows, replacing individual stories. As in a natural

disaster, there are too many dead to do anything but count them, and the routine of violence installs itself in the headlines with the same force as it does over society.

The result is curious. Valuable, deep, and brave stories are published, of course, with excellent investigation that goes beyond the daily coverage, but the flash points of violence generally prevail in the news. This is especially true for Mexico as of late, and Colombia before it, when the local and foreign news media almost exclusively cover violence. For example, in the first 10 months of 2010, 30 of the 44 covers of the Mexican magazine *Proceso* were dedicated to drug violence and drug kingpins. ("Nacho" Coronel alone had three covers in one month.) In all likelihood, the total number of articles from the *New York Times* or the *Los Angeles Times* dedicated to the "war on drugs" would grab a similar proportion. The narrative of violence in the news is so prominent that the rest of the world has to sneak in the back door to get coverage. The days are filled with seized drug shipments; arrested or assassinated drug dealers; shootouts; atrocious executions; corrupt police and politicians; announcements of one drug network after another dismantled; all kinds of speculation about the drug cartels, their bosses and successors; and murder victims that accumulate in an anonymous pile. This is to be expected, given the rules of journalism, but in the short term the consequences are unusual. Despite daily reporting and big headlines, the depth of the coverage is inversely proportional to its quantity and prominence. What the public ends up learning about the drug trade is but the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon whose complexity barely becomes mere brushstrokes in the vast mural of information. The topic of illegal drugs is

(10) Since the failures of the current strategy against drugs have become more evident, the UNODC has accepted that this has led to "unintended consequences," the most notable of which is "the emergence of a large and violent illicit drug industry that has spared few countries on this earth" (A Century of International Drug Control, UNODC, 2009).

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reduced to the drug traffickers and dealers, essentially focusing on police efforts and the myths propagated by state offices. The topic of violence is concentrated into a handful of clichés repeated once and again until they become shared knowledge.

Covering drug trafficking is not covering drugs. Organized crime’s wars against and within the government, the corruption they create, and the mechanisms in which they pad the pockets of the authorities and impose themselves on local communities are but a few planets in the galaxy of drugs. But there are many other planets in this galaxy: the complex problem of drug use, the policies to address it and the current debate on the strategy, among other issues. To limit the coverage to drug traffickers and violence deprives the public of essential information to understand the phenomenon of drugs. (This, of course, is without addressing the limits of covering organized crime where access to sources is scarce and dangerous, and official versions and myths tend to dominate.)

Drug use in Latin America is a notable example of an important topic overlooked by the emphasis on drug traffickers. As repressive policies have displaced cocaine routes and demand for cocaine in the United States has diminished, rapid growth in cocaine use has not only taken place in Western Europe and Australia, but also in Latin America. With 2.7 million users, Latin America is now the third largest market in the world for cocaine and the most dynamic one. As Western Europe’s consumption has stabilized, Latin America’s is on the rise. Brazil, with close to a million users, and Argentina, which has the greatest rate of consumption in the world, are two particularly serious cases. Forms of crack, like “paco” are very popular in both countries. Historically, Latin America has not shown great rates of cocaine consumption, but this is changing rapidly. Research on the consumption of drugs in the region is weak. Coverage of drug consumption in the region is decidedly poor and rarely featured. When it is included in the news lineup it rarely has to do with trends in consumption or the big picture. The result? Even though consumption isn’t a major concern of the region’s governments or their publics, it should be one of the most important parts of the public debate. A silent rise in cocaine consumption has taken place in Mexico even as President Calderón’s “war on drugs” thunders from the front pages. Changes in the course of consumption, its deep repercussions for public health, the almost complete lack of educational and preventative public policies, the balance between national and international assistance and between security and prevention measures, and a long list of other topics not covered by the media are, as a result, absent from the public debate.

Covering one policy (the “war on drugs”) and not the rest

Two narratives have dominated the public debate on drugs in the Americas over the last several decades: prohibition and the “war on drugs.” These policies directly benefited from the media’s focus on the front-line strategy against the drug trade designed by the United States that has been, more or less, obediently implemented in every country in the region. Until recently, the media paid little attention to other policies against drugs or to the debate about them advancing in other parts of the world, and on the active changes in legislation happening both in Latin America and abroad.

This part of the world accepts as a natural phenomenon that a great many substances, due to various international conventions, are illegal. This illegality makes up the basic social assumptions of society, like poverty and inequality, when in reality it is only as “natural” as these other conditions. They come out of policy decisions, economic fluctuations, structural aspects of society, and other historical-social determinates. Prohibition is a very recent historical construction and has been the subject of analysis and criticism, which the journalism in Latin America reflects poorly. This is not to say, of course, that the media should mount a campaign against prohibition, but rather it should offer the public, as they do on other themes, the necessary context to understand and debate the general framework of the modern international treatment of the drug trade. In regards to discussion of prohibition, this context is almost completely absent from the coverage.

Furthermore, one of the effects of covering drug trafficking rather than drugs is that the information has concentrated on the most radical aspects of prohibition, the so-called “war against drugs.” Successive U.S. administrations have pushed this policy since President Richard Nixon declared the war in a 1971 speech, and President Ronald Reagan declared in the 1980s that drugs were a matter of national security. The result is a series of campaigns mounted from Washington on two basic principles: one, the flow of drugs into the United States can be contained by attacking the centers of production in the countries of cultivation and processing; and two, that drug use should be penalized. At the end of the 1970s, the war pursued marijuana in Mexico and later in Colombia. Afterwards, efforts focused on fighting the cultivation of coca in Peru and Bolivia in the 1980s. When coca moved to Colombia following this crackdown, Plan Colombia and the Andean Initiative were introduced at the end of the 1990s. Now that the axis of trafficking has moved to Mexico and Central America, Washington’s response was the Mérida Initiative. It is these campaigns and the adaptations of the traffickers that capture the attention of the media. Coverage abounds with drug seizures, hidden stashes with fantastic sums of money, the fall of kingpin after kingpin, and the supposed dismantling of drug networks. Extraditions of kingpins to the United States happen at the same pace as they are replaced and their organizations renamed.

According to the Mexican academic Luis Astorga, this has left the field open to the official storyline. “The perception and characterization of drug trafficking, the traffickers, and the drug users in the media has been and continues to be

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permeated by a uniform moral and law enforcement perspective that leaves little room for a plurality of foci. It does not maintain a critical, or at least a prudent, distance from the official discourse, as if it were the truth revealed, and it omits or ignores national and international academic studies on a subject they speak about daily.”¹¹

Concentrating the coverage on the traffic and traffickers, in fact, grants a disproportionate weight to the authorities, which are the only sources of easily accessible information and provide the dominant discourse. In this way official narratives influence the public perception of drugs, and largely reduce the topic to what policy should be used to combat drugs. As Astorga says, “Over the last several decades, the State has had a monopoly over the definition of drugs and drug trafficking. The academy, the media, the political opposition and civil society have not generated other discourses to compete with this. In other words, the trade and traffickers of drugs were exactly what the media said they were.”¹²

The lack of an independent narrative in the media about drugs is perhaps the most notable paradox in the news coverage of drugs. Not only has this absence facilitated the dominance of the official narrative, but also because in the face of the ever-growing disaster that is the “war on drugs” (which the media has started to acknowledge more openly in the last few years) the public debate on drug policy and its eventual alternatives demands a much more nuanced understanding than the black and white stories of “good cops” (or increasingly, corrupt ones) and romanticized bandits that have been told for decades. Does the public have all the information necessary to evaluate the policies against drugs and actively participate in a discussion on the development of a public policy that warrants the caliber and complexity of the problem? This is a question that editors and journalists should ask themselves as they reflect on the coverage they have produced over the years.

The continent of the “war on drugs” rarely debates “harm reduction,” an alternative policy whose name profoundly bothers many in U.S. government policy circles. It has not only been key to addressing drug abuse in Western Europe but has also begun to be applied in Latin America. In essence, harm reduction aims to see the drug user as a patient rather than a criminal, a subject for the public health sector and not incarceration. Needle exchange programs for addicts to prevent the spread of HIV, clinics that offer heroin substitute injections like methadone, and the controlled legalization of some drugs for personal use in countries like Switzerland, Germany, Portugal, and other European nations have caught the attention of administrations in Brazil and China but not that of the media.

(11) Luis Astorga, *Tráfico de drogas ilícitas y medios de comunicación*.

(12) *Ibid.*

In the last few years, countries from Mexico to Argentina have started to introduce national legislation that little by little aims to decriminalize drugs for use on a personal level. (Colombian president Alvaro Uribe, on the other hand, was the only one to criminalize drugs for personal use in 2010.) The Transnational Institute, led by Martin Helsma, keeps track of such changes in legislation.¹³ Even though media report, obviously, on the local legislative modifications and the debate around them, there is a scarcity of comparative reports and analyses of regional trends and the context in which these reforms take place. The assumption that drug prohibition and its legitimate daughter, the “war on drugs,” are natural policies leaves little room in the headlines for alternative approaches.

In September 2010, Russia assumed for the first time the leadership of a large UN agency when Yuri Fedotov, a diplomatic holdover from the Soviet era, replaced Antonio Maria Costa as the leader of the UNODC. The change took place during the Obama administration, which at least at face value said it would modify its antidrug policy and has avoided the expression, “war on drugs.” The policy to crack down on the consumer is not unique to the United States. Russia, China, and other governments are hardliners on prohibiting drugs. So what are the implications of a Russian at the helm of the UN’s principal drug authority? Was there an agreement with the U.S. that always exercised great influence there? Even though the responses to these global problems have direct implications for each individual country in Latin America, how many media outlets in the region regularly report on them?

In the United States, there is an ongoing

debate on antidrug policy, especially around marijuana. The U.S. consumes more marijuana than any other country, and the debate has led to the legalization of medical marijuana in 14 states. A proposal for the complete legalization of marijuana in California, Proposition 19, failed in the November 2010 elections but brought the issue to the public’s attention. A constant tension exists between federal laws that punish the consumption of drugs, in some cases through irrational means like mandatory sentences for crack, and state laws. Do the Latin American media take care in a regular, prominent way to cover these crucial debates on drug policy and how they affect those outside the borders of the nation that is the protagonist in the “war on drugs”? How has it happened, asked the director of the Drug Policy Alliance, Ethan Nadelman, that “one nation has so successfully promoted its own failed policies to the rest of the world?”¹⁴ These are questions that the media in the Americas has not attempted to answer, at least not in a systematic way, nor on their front pages.

Recently, there has been a change in the news coverage that, perhaps, moves beyond the anecdotal. Until Proposition 19 brought the subject to the U.S. public’s attention, the debate on antidrug policy and legalization was, to say the least, marginal in the Western Hemisphere’s media. Suffice it to recall the passing attention sparked in 2009 by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy. Led by three ex-presidents from Mexico, Brazil and Colombia, the commission attempted to highlight the failure of the “war on drugs,” and the immense costs their countries have paid in its pursuit. The commission started its work in March 2009 at a high-level

(13) Martin Helsma, *Drug Law Reform Trends in Latin America, 2009*, TNI. Ethan Nadelman, “Drugs,” *Foreign Policy*, September–October, 2007.

(14) Ethan Nadelman, “Drugs,” *Foreign Policy*, September–October, 2007.

“BUT, BEYOND ITS BLOODY FAÇADE, THE DRUG TRADE IS AN ECONOMIC PHENOMENON WITH LOGICS AND EXPLANATIONS BASED ON THE MARKET. THE TRADE CONFRONTS GOVERNMENTS AND SOCIETY AT LARGE WITH UNPRECEDENTED SECURITY CHALLENGES AND A TANGLED ENIGMA OF LEGAL AND ILLEGAL ECONOMICS, CLANDESTINE GROUPS AND POLITICAL POWER THAT ARE ALL ESSENTIAL TO DECIPHER.”

ministerial meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna, to evaluate a decade of the UN General Assembly Special Session, which in 1998 promised to eliminate or significantly reduce the consumption of drugs in the world by 2008. Despite the obvious failure of this promise and of the strategy that it has pursued, the meeting in Vienna and the entire year’s worth of outcomes and evaluations from academics, governments, and activists received little attention in the media in the Americas. A photo of Bolivian President Evo Morales defiantly chewing a wad of coca leaf and his rallying cry, “coca is not a drug” were part of the anecdotal coverage, which made little reference to the curious logic of the international control regime that equated coca leaf with cocaine, heroin, and opium on the same list of hazards in the UN conventions.

Several issues have won space recently in news coverage: the displacement of the drug trade’s axis to Mexico, a country

much more important than Colombia for the United States; Mexican President Felipe Calderón’s insistence on discussing current drug policy; the debate on Proposition 19; and the discussion about drug policy and some critical distance on the “war on drugs.” It remains to be seen whether or not this is a cyclical phenomenon or a long-term trend that incorporates this crucial element into news coverage. But there are increasingly more signs that the international debate is changing, and not necessarily in favor of the current strategies.

An economic, social, and cultural phenomenon, or a police story?

Media, thus, deals mainly with drug trafficking, not drugs. The first thing that springs to view is that drugs are covered like a police beat and rarely as the highly complex economic, social, and cultural topics that they are. From a media organizational perspective, the subject is housed in the crime sections that are by definition journalism’s “rapid deployment” forces, those that go out for the picture and the basic data, without analysis or context.

Drug traffickers are not only bandits, and their story should not be limited to the “cops and robbers” perspective presented across the media. When the violence intensifies, the coverage is frequently dominated by the body count syndrome, the unending tally that grows every day. But, beyond its bloody façade, the drug trade is an economic phenomenon with logics and explanations based on the market. The trade confronts governments and society at large with unprecedented

security challenges and a tangled enigma of legal and illegal economics, clandestine groups, and political power that are all essential to decipher. The media have made no small effort to investigate the links between the drug trade and politics, and the capacity of drug traders to infiltrate the authorities' security organizations. But the journalist's scalpel should not only conduct the autopsy of corruption but should also dissect the drug trade's body like one of the most sophisticated and adaptable businesses in world economic history. It should also cover the international regime and strategies that gave it life and continue to feed it.

Drug trafficking is a social phenomenon. The true protagonists are not only the handful of bosses who win fleeting notoriety until their capture or death, but the tens of thousands of marginalized youth whose situations drive them to become assassins, "mulas" (cocaine smugglers carrying latex capsules in their bellies), raspachines (harvesters of coca), and the long list of anonymous others that dot the drug trade's payroll. It is not just money behind the plot of the movie of organized crime, which drives its protagonists, supporting actors, and the immense legion of extras that compose the trade's armies, from specific social sectors and according to social logics asking to be told. Where is the rich sociology of the bandit in the news, the drug trafficker not only as the bad guy but a social actor? Why have the state of Sinaloa in Mexico and certain regions of Antioquia in Colombia been so prolific in producing drug bosses and assassins? These questions have been thoroughly explored at the academic level, but rarely in the press.

The drug trade is a vast cultural phenomenon with its own ideology and icons, saints, and mantras that feed a counterculture for a wide swath of social groups. The traffickers are not characters within the public's reach. They don't write memoirs or give many interviews. But they successfully compete with the official narrative with the help of alternative means of mass communication, like Mexico's forbidden "corridos" praising "Camelia la tejana" and the "bad herb," or the ever more popular "narco-novela" television series. Colombia has made these novelas like *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* and *El cartel de los sapos* an export industry. These alternatives produce their own socio-cultural discourse. The unceasing creativity of aliases—"Shorty," "Barbie," "Blue," "Lord of the Heavens," "Boss of Bosses," "el Coss"—is a subculture that without greater analysis captures the imagination of the public and the media. The criminal crusade is told as a Robin Hood story, celebrating a macho culture of easy money and plentiful beautiful women, along with the kitsch of luxury, golden revolvers, extravagant villas one day, plastic surgery the next, that blend between secrets and myth, generating legends of invincibility and power that influence wide sections of the population. Famous graves like Pablo Escobar's in the Montesacro Gardens of Itagüí, public-private altars to characters like Jesús Malverde or the cult of Santa Muerte in Mexico are cultural expressions of the drug trade that have thousands of loyal followers and often go unreported as bizarre anomalies.

The sociological and ethnographic aspects of the drug trade and its business character are a vein of information waiting for the attention of persistent and astute reporting.

“ONCE THESE CLICHÉS BECOME CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IT BECOMES VERY DIFFICULT TO HAVE A SERIOUS DEBATE ON DRUGS AND ANTIDRUG POLICY WITHOUT FALLING INTO A MORALIZING EXCHANGE THAT BLAMES ONE SIDE WHILE EXCULPATING THE OTHER.”

Violence itself is not properly questioned. There are interesting attempts that move beyond the macabre daily statistics. The maps and information on homicides related to the drug trade in Mexico produced by the Trans-border Institute of the University of San Diego in California are based on information from the daily Reforma that carefully compiles weekly statistics on “narco-executions,”¹⁵ as killings are called in Mexico. *Diario de Juárez’s* statistics on homicides go far beyond the simple daily register of victims. However, these are scarce pearls in the news coverage that rarely go beyond the body count. They periodically compare the numbers, but they rarely explore the deeper causes behind the violence.

“The social dynamic of the ‘war on drugs,’” as J.F. String called it in his blog *Hemispheric Brief*,¹⁶ asks for explanations that depart from the official response connecting the deaths to the drug trade and blames them on the war between cartels. If the skepticism and distance characteristic of journalism were consistently applied, contradictions would immediately appear in the dominant narrative. “No one knows how many are

dying, no one knows who is killing them and no one knows what role the drug trade has in these killings. There has been no investigation of the dead and so no one really knows whether they were criminals or why they died. There have been no interviews with heads of drug organizations and so no one really knows what they are thinking or what they are trying to accomplish. It is difficult to have a useful discussion without facts, but it seems to be very easy to make policy without facts.¹⁷ The article in *The Nation* by Charles Bowden of the University of New Mexico, author of a book on Ciudad Juárez, and Molly Molloy of New Mexico State University, should be required reading for journalists who cover the subject.

The result of assigning the drug trade beat to crime reporters is that society does not get access to an alternative narrative from that promoted by the authorities or imposed by the traffickers. The official narrative has made inroads in the media. The commander of Operation Conjunta Chihuahua, General Jorge Juárez Loera, bluntly summed up his view of the media coverage: “I would like to see reporters change their articles and instead of writing about the victim of the murder they should say, ‘one less criminal.’” The influence of drug traffickers on the public narrative was confirmed by Mexican writer and journalist Juan Villoro in his acclaimed article, “The Red Carpet of Drug Terror” in which he writes, “The drug trade has won cultural and media battles in a society that has protected itself from the problem by denying it: ‘assassins kill themselves.’”¹⁸

Where are the independent stories the media should offer the public? While the media leaves the field open to the official narrative and continues covering the

(15) See “Drug Violence in Mexico. Data and Analysis 2001-2009,” *Justice in Mexico Project, Transborder Institute of the University of San Diego* <http://justiceinmexico.org/resources-2/drug-violence/>

(16) <http://www.joshuaafrens-string.com/2010/10/drug-war-epistemology.html>

(17) Charles Bowden and Molly Molloy, “Who Is Behind the 25,000 Deaths In Mexico?” *The Nation*, July 23, 2010. The book by Bowden is *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy’s New Killing Fields*. Molloy maintains a virtual discussion list, <http://groups.google.com/group/frontera-list/topics?pli=1>

(18) Juan Villoro, “La alfombra roja del terror narco,” published in *Proceso*, Jan. 31, 2010.

subject as a crime story the drug trade will, as Villoro puts it, keep “striking twice: in the world of facts and in the news that rarely finds an opposing viewpoint.”¹⁹ In this way, the authorities and drug traffickers compete to impose their own narratives on society. The media landscape is their battlefield, and if journalism does not succeed in settling on a consistent narrative, the media will continue to be a fertile ground in the fight of other narratives to dominate the public debate. The example of how violence in Mexico is covered can be extended to other countries and situations. It’s the approach that is important when reporting: do the media still owe to society, and not just in Mexico, those explanations and questions that lie at the heart of “narco-violence”?

A complex topic, but clichés prevail

In the face of the complexity of the drug trade, clichés dominate the public’s knowledge. On both sides of the Rio Grande, explanations based on the conventional wisdom about the drug trade prevail.

There are obvious clichés. To the world, Colombia has been for years synonymous with cocaine and armed conflict. Mexico today is known for violence and drug cartel wars; Afghanistan for opium and Taliban terrorism; the United States, for consumption. Each country, depending on the moment, is tagged with one of the media’s labels used in the coverage of drugs. It’s possible to take heart that with time the media could balance its coverage to include other topics, though this implies ignoring how the news cycle operates, and that is beyond the focus of this article.

But there are other clichés that are truly important to the public, often turning it into a dialogue between the deaf. Media coverage can as easily reinforce or clear them up.

The first has to do with the different perspectives of the problem of drugs in the United States and the countries that traditionally produce them. As Francisco Thoumi²⁰ has suggested, “a moral model” prevails in the United States that “demonizes drugs and the individuals who advocate for drug legalization” while in the Andean countries the prevailing model is one that “demonizes the United States and its harsh policies.” The result is that both positions end up “exporting the responsibility for the production and consumption [and] both sides of the discussion end up believing their side is just and good, feeling like victims of the other.” This has contributed to the reinforcement of two almost symmetrical clichés, not only among wide sectors of public opinion on both ends of the continent but also among those who make policy. On one side, the “cliché of the gringo” prevails in many parts of Latin America. This blames the problem of drugs on the United States and its appetite for drugs. If it were not for this, so goes the cliché, countries like Colombia, Mexico, (or Peru and the Dominican Republic) would not suffer from drug violence and the cartels. However, as the United States doesn’t take care of its own drug consumption seriously, the problem in the south has no solution. The counterpart is the cliché of “down there” that widely prevails in North American public and political circles, attributing the problem to corrupt, weak or semi-failed states south of the Rio Grande where groups of traffickers prosper unimpeded. This

(19) Ibid.

(20) Francisco Thoumi, *El imperio de la droga. Narcotráfico, economía y sociedad en los Andes*, Planeta, Bogota, 2002.

“THE ACADEMIC DISCOURSE ON DRUGS IS USUALLY VERY CRITICAL OF THE CURRENT POLICIES AND THE RESULTS OF THE “WAR AGAINST DRUGS.” BUT IT DOESN’T CONSTANTLY AND PROMINENTLY FEED THE NEWS HOLE, THE HEADLINES AND THE JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVE.”

perspective promotes a hard-line approach that attacks the drug problem at the source, a strategy that has been employed with varying success in Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia and other countries.

A complementary cliché that the reality of the evolution of the drug business is erasing more every day is the division between producing and consuming countries, on which much current antidrug policy is based. Before, it was very clear who produced and who consumed drugs. Today, the biggest consumers are also the biggest producers. Take the United States for example, with marijuana and amphetamines. Canada has become a major marijuana and ecstasy exporter reaching all the way to Australia. Traditional producing countries in South America and Mexico have become vibrant consumer markets.

Once these clichés become conventional wisdom it is very difficult to have a serious debate on drugs and antidrug policy without falling into a moralizing exchange that blames one side while exculpating the other. In Latin America, it is not uncommon to detect at the heart of some arguments a

kind of hidden satisfaction with the actions of the drug traffickers that justifies them as some sort of “divine retribution” against the “gringos.” In North America there is often a sense of colonial superiority and the conviction of a besieged nation defending the borders of civilization against a backward and chaotic south.

However, the most notable effect of these clichés is that they confer on those that share them the intellectual tranquility necessary to avoid asking difficult questions. “What is so unique about the United States? Why does this great country have such a profound and persistent problem with drugs, a problem that has, sometimes inappropriately, come to dominate the world’s policy toward drugs?” This question asked by historian Richard Davenport-Hines²¹ hits on one of the foci of the problem. Thoumi poses similar questions on the other end of the problem: “Very few ask themselves: why is it that Colombia is the center of cocaine production?” And, he adds, why is the violence associated with the drug trade in Colombia so much greater than that of others suffering the same problem? Identical inquiries can be made about Mexico. Why is Mexico the only country besides Colombia to consolidate the production and trafficking of drugs? Why now? Why with record-breaking levels of violence?

Do the media ask these questions in their countries? Do they look for explanations, cases, examples, and experts—that is to say, news—to highlight and regularly cover these topics and put them on the public agenda with high-quality debate, analysis, and speech? Such questions and the difficult answers in terms of the responsibility that each society

(21) Richard Davenport-Hines, *op. cit.*

should assume as part of the broader drug phenomenon would, if they were an integral part of the public debate, undermine some of the clichés on which current antidrug policy rests. It is not strange, therefore, that the public and the politicians don't ask those questions if the media do not seem to care about them. Media play a huge role in contributing to those clichés that have (or don't have) a wide audience in society.

There are also clichés that can be called auxiliary, formulated with clear political intentions by high-ranking state employees who are pursuing specific goals. The current situation in Mexico offers two examples: Colombia's "success story," and the notion of "spillover" in Mexico.

Officials in Washington and Bogotá are presenting what has happened under President Álvaro Uribe's administration in Colombia as an example of the fact that "the war on drugs" does pay off, referring specifically to the need to strengthen it in Mexico with the Mérida initiative. This is a cliché because it rhetorically translates the advancements of the past eight years regarding security and against the armed groups as a success also in the fight against illegal drugs and trafficking. However, after a decade and almost \$7 billion of U.S. aid, despite the fact that the military budget has tripled and the military and police forces have been doubled to almost half a million men, the Andean nation continues to export about the same amount of cocaine that was exported when Plan Colombia began in 2000. The big Medellín and Cali cartels have disappeared, the paramilitaries of the AUC, to whom Washington attributed 45 percent of the trafficking, no longer exist as such after the demobilizations of 2003-

2006. The guerrillas, mainly the FARC, in whose territory much of the cultivation and processing of the drug takes place, have been seriously debilitated, and Colombian organizations have ceded their leadership—and a substantial part of the earnings—to Mexican groups. But the production and flow of Colombian cocaine to the United States remains intact in the hands of what the police now call "baby (or boutique) cartels."

The balance sheet of the "war against drugs" in Colombia is far from the success story of the "war against guerrillas" (which, in reality, is a lot less brilliant than its official version when contrasted with certain realities, like forced displacement of communities, the rapid flourishing of new armed groups, sustained human rights violations, and the violence that devastates some regions). The media outside Colombia sometimes translates the success in the war against guerrillas to the fight against drugs in Colombia, reinforcing the official U.S and Colombian discourse that would rather not see the black hole into which the antinarcotics aid has fallen. In the best scenario, if the cultivation of cocaine moves to Peru, and the Mexican traffickers completely replace the Colombians in the industrial and transportation chains toward the United States, the result will have been the same as always: to gain ground in one place while the problems moves somewhere else—the so-called "balloon effect."

The threat of a "spillover" of drug violence into the United States through the porous border with Mexico, through which drugs, illegal immigrants and all forms of terrorism could enter, has been promoted actively by conservative sectors and security forces in the U.S. border

FEARS OVER THE SPREAD OF MEXICAN VIOLENCE, THE TUNNELS, AND THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS WHO CARRY A FEW KILOS OF COCAINE OR MARIJUANA ON THEIR BACKS VEIL PROBLEMS THAT COULD GRAB MORE ATTENTION FROM THE U.S. MEDIA, LIKE GROWING CORRUPTION AMONG POLICE AND BORDER OFFICERS.

states and has been aired through U.S. media, television in particular. While billions of dollars are dedicated to build walls and fences, to install cameras and radar, to reinforce border patrols and send thousands of men from the National Guard, the U.S. media publish story after story about the permeability of the border and the risks that Mexico's violence could spill from Juárez, Tijuana, and Reynosa into the United States. Until now, evidence of such a contagion is scarce. Mexican violence stops at the Rio Grande. In some cities like Houston and Atlanta there are isolated armed clashes and contract killings that authorities have linked to drug trafficking and Mexican groups, but nothing close to the kidnappings, homicides, massacres, and explosions that rack México daily. El Paso continues to be one of the safest cities in the United States. As Tom Barry stated in an article in the *Boston Review*, "the notion that lawlessness is taking over the borderlands and that the border needs securing at all costs, has become a bipartisan assumption,"²² which also feeds hysteria against immigrants and the feeling of a "besieged nation" that is so useful to some politicians in the United States.

Fears over the spread of Mexican violence, the tunnels, and the illegal immigrants who carry a few kilos of cocaine or marijuana on their backs veil problems that could grab more attention from the U.S. media, like growing corruption among police and border officers, or the involvement of traffickers in normal trade. According to U.S. transportation statistics, every day in 2009, 12,000 trucks, 190,000 vehicles, 112,000 people, and 20 trains crossed the border from Mexico into the United States²³. Doesn't the impossibility of checking every vehicle and every person who crosses, and the possibility of corrupting the authorities who watch that traffic make the legal border at least as interesting as the illegal one for the traffickers? Which would be more profitable, to dig a tunnel, or to camouflage a few kilos of heroin in one of the 4.3 million containers that crossed from Mexico into the United States in 2009?

Do the media have part of the responsibility for the creation and reinforcement of these clichés, these repeated discourses that install themselves in people's conscience and hover over public debates, electoral decisions, and the "politically correct" lines that, when speaking about drugs, politicians feel they must not cross in order to keep their jobs? This is another "undesired consequence" of some of the paradoxes mentioned above. The information focuses on repeated shows of violence and the actions of traffickers and the authorities, instead of the deeper causes and the vast complexity of the illegal drug phenomenon. The result is that—like adhesive stickers—formulas based on labels and clichés are applied to entire nations and regions and are repeated time and again until they become common knowledge. They are the fog of

(22) Tom Barry, "At War in Texas," *Boston Review*, September–October, 2010, <http://bostonreview.net/BR35.5/barry.php>

(23) http://www.bts.gov/publications/national_transportation_statistics/#chapter_3

(24) Moises Naim, "Wasted," *Foreign Policy*, April 15, 2009

the “war on drugs,” and, at least in part, the winds that fade—or dissipate—they blow from the media.

The Academic World, the Reporting World

The last paradox in the journalistic coverage of drugs and trafficking is brief. The academic world has a long, distinguished tradition of investigating drugs and many of their aspects, such as consumption, addiction, production, cultivation, and native traditions, chemistry, and economics. The journalistic world, however, is greatly disconnected from that tradition.

Academics are quoted in the media, and the juiciest facts and most compelling data are extracted from specialized reports like those of the UNODC. But daily information has no systematic, constant space for the many experts who in each country are investigating drugs and drug trafficking. Their books aren’t read by journalists, nor are their conferences or debates reported. The academic discourse on drugs is usually very critical of the current policies and the results of the “war against drugs.” But it doesn’t constantly and prominently feed the news hole, the headlines and the journalistic narrative. The media don’t seem to have a memory of the history of traffickers, the intricacies of consumption or the changing tendencies of a business that jumps from one country to the next. But in most countries impacted by drugs there are academics who have studied these elements in great detail.

This disconnection between the reporting and the academic worlds

has a practical counterpoint: there is a similar disconnection between academic research and policy-makers. In the past few decades, political decision-making has flowed in an opposite direction from a great portion of academic production. Many politicians will admit, in private, the fissures and the lack of results of the current strategy against drugs. But, given voters’ inclinations and the prevailing clichés, they would prefer to continue sustaining it, happy to see the problem move out of their country to a neighboring one, at least temporarily. Moisés Naim, editor of *Foreign Policy* has said: “The Washington consensus on drugs rests on two widely shared beliefs. The first is that the war on drugs is a failure. The second is that it cannot be changed.”

As a result, the public ends up with the more anecdotal accounts about drugs, and the academics are reduced to giving some context only when time permits. With the growing skepticism of the media regarding President Calderón’s “war against drug trafficking” and the lack of results of the strategy that he has applied in collaboration with the United States to fight the problem, experts are summoned to speak (critically, almost always) about the lack of results, the improvisation, and the problems that the government and the military are facing. This is, of course, an important part of the public debate. But it doesn’t pay attention to the other paradoxes mentioned above. There is a scarcity of articles—and academic sources—dedicated to expanding the problem further than the history of cops and robbers, to discussing the economy of trafficking, its displacements, its global connections, or to critically question the official narrative surrounding deaths and violence. Consumption barely makes

an appearance on the media's daily agenda of concerns. In the United States, information for the past few years has been almost exclusively based on what happens in México. The organic links with what happens to the north, what happens with drugs once they cross the border, the circulation of money, the groups that benefit, the social and agricultural phenomenon of marijuana, and many other facets that would allow a complete understanding of the drug phenomenon are marginal in the news coverage. The news is Mexico, period. It's true that the news is Mexico. What's not true is that it's the end of the story.

The Journalistic Narrative on Drugs

That leaves this text where it started. Is there an independent journalistic narrative about illegal drugs? The answer seems to be no, at least as far as the media coverage's critical mass is concerned. The paradoxes that have dominated media coverage of drugs and drug trafficking have contributed historically, as Astorga argues, and not only in Mexico, to the fact that the dominant discourses in the field are, in general, those of the authorities, and in some circles, those of the traffickers. This has had profound repercussions on the quality of the public debate related to drugs, traffickers, and the policies of those who chase both illicit drugs and "narcos." This only makes the need for an independent journalistic narrative in this field more pressing. It would be a narrative that takes the necessary distance from the official storyline and that would manage to present to society the "story" of drugs in its entire complexity.

The Mexican case, just like Bowden and

Molloy state in their article, is, both a demonstration of the lack of that independent narrative, and an eloquent example of how the debate could move toward a more sophisticated news coverage that would see the phenomenon integrally:

We are told of a War on Drugs that has no observable effect on drug distribution, price or sales in the United States. We are told the Mexican Army is incorruptible, when the Mexican government's own human rights office has collected thousands of complaints that the army robs, kidnaps, steals, tortures, rapes and kills innocent citizens. We are told repeatedly that it is a war between cartels or that it is a war by the Mexican government against cartels, yet no evidence is presented to back up these claims. The evidence we do have is that the killings are not investigated, that the military suffers almost no casualties and that thousands of Mexicans have filed affidavits claiming abuse, often lethal, by the Mexican army (...)

No one asks or answers this question: How does such an escalation benefit the drug smuggling business which has not been diminished at all during the past three years of hyper-violence in Mexico? Each year, the death toll rises, each year there is no evidence of any disruption in the delivery of drugs to American consumers, each year the United States asserts its renewed support for this war. And each year, the basic claims about the war go unquestioned.²⁵

These are the myths of the "war against drug trafficking" in Mexico. They are very similar in their creation—and in the way they take root in public consciousness—to the myths that surround the global war

(25) Bowden and Molloy, *op. cit.*

against drugs and the national battles that are being waged, with great uproar and without much success, in other parts of the world. How do we change this? To ask questions that are uncomfortable and difficult to answer, to point to the contradictions, to question the paradoxes of the coverage, to expose the many answers and the many pieces of knowledge that already exist, and to put all of this in the public debate in a sustained and prominent manner. These are the elements that would form an independent journalistic narrative about the complex and dangerous topic of forbidden drugs. Simply put, that's doing good journalism.

MEXICO: THE NEW SPIRAL OF SILENCE

An Investigation by Fundación Mexicana de Periodismo de Investigación MEPI

The power of drugs has spread like a cancer in recent years to regions not previously touched, and today it reaches more than half of the country. As they advanced from city to city, the cartels created black holes of information on the map, obliging journalists to silence themselves in every town."

By
MEPI
Foundation (*)

Pachuca, Hidalgo State—The gleaming cross, silvery and tubular and some thirty feet high, and the large modern church painted in bright orange, are hard to miss. They loom over the low-rise houses and the rough paved streets of Tezontle colonia, a working-class barrio home to laborers and maids in the city of Pachuca, Hidalgo, located about an hour away from Mexico City.

The towering cross and the new church stand in stark contrast next to the original tattered one-story chapel built by local parishioners two decades ago. The new additions were built in 2009 thanks to the hefty donation of a local benefactor whose name appears on a metal plaque tucked away behind an interior wall. The plaque would seem to be an ordinary acknowledgement of someone's generosity if it didn't bear the name of a local man who left his hometown years ago to make something of himself: Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano.

Lazcano is none other than "El Lazca," the crime boss of the feared military-

trained drug gang known as Los Zetas. He is one of the most wanted drug traffickers in Mexico and the target of a U.S. Department of Justice \$5 million dollar reward for information leading to his arrest or conviction (www.justice.gov/dea/fugitives/houston/LAZCANO-LAZCANO.html).

His presence in Pachuca, and his generous gift to this church, has been widely known here, but it was not reported by the press until late October, when the Mexico City newspaper La Razón splashed the news on its front page, complete with pictures of the orange church and the plaque.

The reason for this silence can be best explained by what occurred in Pachuca on Valentine's Day 2010.

"You got a letter," his mother told him one evening after work. The journalist from Valle del Mezquital, a hamlet in the state of Hidalgo, opened the envelope and found out he was invited to a Valentine's Day party on a ranch, the Santa Inez, in Tepeji del Río, a nearby town. "There was going to be alcohol, women, and gifts for all the guests, everything for free," said the reporter, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution. Several reporters from various media outlets in the area also

(*) This article was originally published by MEPI Foundation in November 2010

IMPACT OF NARCO-VIOLENCE ON NEWS COVERAGE



SONORA	CHIHUAHUA	SINALOA	NUEVO LEÓN	TAMAULIPAS	SAN LUIS POTOSÍ
↑↓ From 519 police stories, of which 40% were about drug trafficking	↑↑ From 360 police stories, of which 33% were about drug trafficking	↓↓ From 860 police stories, of which 22% were about drug trafficking	↑↓ From 1,600 police stories, of which 9% were about drug trafficking	↑↓ From 1,506 police stories, of which 1% speak of Nuevo Laredo	↑ Of 1,641 police stories, of which 1% speak of drug trafficking

JALISCO	HIDALGO	MICHOACÁN	VERACRUZ	MORELOS
↑↓ Of 519 police stories, of which 40% were about drug trafficking	↑↓ Of 342 police stories, of which 12% were about drug trafficking	↑↓ Of 1,226 police stories, of which 9% were about drug trafficking	↑↓ Of 302 police stories, of which 6% are related to organized crime	↑↑ Of 253 police stories, of which 37% were about drug trafficking

Legend:
 ■ Stories linked with drug trafficking
 ■ Stories NOT linked with drug trafficking

received the same anonymous invitations.

He did not attend the party, but two friends told him what happened. A group of men welcomed and guided them to a large party room. Soon after their arrival, several women arrived in fancy cars. During the party “someone stopped the music and told those present that everything was for them: the women, the alcohol, the gifts,” said the reporter, who heard the story from two colleagues. “The only condition they were given was not mess with our business.” Soon after the party, reporting on drug-related violence in Hidalgo plummeted.

New Bosses, New Rules

It was the Zetas’ clear announcement of their arrival in their boss’ home state and their way of posting a warning to the local press: they were the new bosses, and there were new rules in town. Along with a decline in reporting about drug violence, nobody wrote about the Valentine’s Day party either.

The fact that the church, the plaque, and the party all went unreported, is an example of how the power of drug cartels has metastasized like a cancer taking over swaths of territory across Mexico, and silencing journalists along their path. In the northern, southern, and central regions of this large nation, the drug organizations have created black holes for news where little, or nothing, about incidents related to the brutal drug war makes it to the media.

Editorial decisions about what appears on the front pages of newspapers or the first minutes of television news programs

are today less dependent on basic newsworthiness, than on the whims of narcos who are not shy to express what they want printed or broadcast. The new bosses have crafted relations with the media with the help of unwritten, and sometimes even unspoken, agreements between traffickers, reporters, and editors.

That many news stories are not seeing the light of day is preventing Mexico from understanding how far and how deeply entrenched drug cartels have become throughout the country.

To measure these news black holes and understand the rules that have developed between drug cartels and the media, the Fundación Mexicana de Periodismo de Investigación (MEPI) reviewed six months of crime news reports in 13 regional newspapers published in Mexico’s most violent cities. MEPI also interviewed regional reporters who were promised anonymity.

Norma Moreno Case

In 1986, 24 years ago, the signs of today’s pervasive drug violence were only noticeable in faraway places like Matamoros, the Gulf border town where the Cartel del Golfo (Gulf Cartel) was born. Norma Moreno Figueroa was only 24 years old, but she wrote the most influential—and much despised—column in the local newspaper *El Popular*. Her propensity to report rumors and innuendo when writing about powerful local figures had earned her a few enemies. Her last encounter, according to fellow reporters, was a column that attacked Matamoros Mayor

STORIES PUBLISHED BY LOCAL MEDIA ABOUT DRUG TRAFFICKING COMPARED WITH EXECUTIONS

NUEVO LEÓN (EL NORTE)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	262	16	44	2
February	236	14	42	5
March	219	34	81	9
April	245	29	52	11
May	238	40	118	9
June	254	13	41	7

MORELIA (LA VOZ DE MICHOACÁN)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	188	21	67	5
February	173	17	41	4
March	210	22	68	1
April	183	21	60	4
May	179	14	85	0
June	187	11	61	3

HIDALGO (MILENIO)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	45	6	19	2
February	34	7	9	0
March	64	6	12	0
April	50	11	12	2
May	49	9	12	4
June	58	4	6	1

CULIACÁN (EL NOROESTE)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	48	16	27	12
February	63	16	23	8
March	70	19	29	8
April	133	46	29	32
May	169	48	21	33
June	190	23	11	20

MORELOS (EL DIARIO DE LOS MORELOS)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	30	6	10	5
February	34	4	9	3
March	21	14	15	8
April	17	21	9	14
May	16	15	8	8
June	41	34	6	14

VERACRUZ (EL DICTAMEN DE VERACRUZ)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	39	3	11	0
February	33	5	23	3
March	38	1	26	2
April	52	3	27	1
May	56	2	39	1
June	70	4	28	2

STORIES PUBLISHED BY LOCAL MEDIA ABOUT DRUG TRAFFICKING COMPARED WITH EXECUTIONS

C. D JUÁREZ (NORTE DIGITAL)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	n/a	n/a	280	0
February	58	16	226	21
March	47	23	299	28
April	40	15	248	22
May	60	27	329	31
June	36	38	260	26

SONORA (EL IMPARCIAL)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	38	38	53	12
February	48	37	36	15
March	55	39	34	14
April	72	35	35	8
May	46	37	34	11
June	50	24	21	9

SAN LUIS POTOSI (PULSO)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	95	0	2	0
February	285	1	4	1
March	323	0	5	0
April	291	0	4	0
May	348	2	6	0
June	295	1	4	0

GUADALAJRA (MURAL)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	178	26	11	5
February	156	10	24	0
March	210	18	26	5
April	209	20	27	6
May	193	14	39	0
June	193	25	28	5

NUEVO LAREDO (EL MAÑANA)

	Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking	Police stories that mention drug trafficking	Executions	Police stories that mention executions
January	259	5	2	0
February	n/a	n/a	41	0
March	271	5	83	0
April	268	0	81	0
May	288	2	59	0v
June	276	3	98	0

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- * Police stories that do NOT mention drug trafficking
- * Police stories that mention drug trafficking
- * Executions
- * Police stories that mention executions

Jesús Roberto Guerra Velasco, a relative of Cartel founder Juan Nepomuceno Guerra. The next day, July 7, 1986, shortly after 7 a.m., unknown assailants mowed down Moreno Figueroa and her editor, Ernesto Flores Torrijos, with automatic weapons. The crime was never solved.

The meaning of her death still resonates in the minds of local reporters. “That murder,” said a veteran reporter, “defined the limits of our job as journalists in Matamoros.” Rule number one: don’t publish the names of capos, said the reporter. The MEPI study found that Matamoros and other regions of the northern state of Tamaulipas which is still partly controlled by the Gulf Cartel, are veritable black holes for drug news—0 percent of violent incidents connected to drug trafficking appear in news pages. The only exceptions are found in the Nuevo Laredo newspaper, *El Mañana*, which ignores drug stories from its hometown—one of the border area’s most violent—but carries stories on drug-related violence in Laredo, Texas.

“Different cartels have different methods for controlling the media,” said a senior journalist from Sinaloa, another state ravaged by drug violence. The methods that are becoming the norm across the country are those that started emerging when Moreno Figueroa was murdered in Matamoros. The Gulf Cartel henchmen created these methods and they have become deadlier under the Zetas when this group worked as Gulf Cartel enforcers. After their split from their former bosses, the Zetas have wrestled away large swaths of territory and imposed a new media order in other cities in Central and Southern Mexico.

MEPI reviewed crime stories published

during the first half of 2010 in the following newspapers: *El Noroeste* (Culiacán), *El Norte* (Ciudad Juárez), *Norte* (Monterrey), *El Dictamen* (Veracruz), *Mural* (Guadalajara), *Pulso* (San Luis Potosí), *El Mañana* (Nuevo Laredo), *El Diario de Morelos* (Morelos), *El Imparcial* (Hermosillo), and the newspaper *Milenio*’s national and Hidalgo editions. The study measured stories that used words that are utilized to describe drug war incidents: “narcotráfico,” “comando armado,” “cuerno de chivo” (a popular nickname for AK-47 automatic rifles), and so on.

Government crime statistics for the same period were not available, thus MEPI gathered data on the number of gangland executions in each city during the months studied and found stark statistics: in 8 of the 13 cities studied, the media only reported 1 of every 10 drug-related acts of violence. In those where there were more stories, only 3 out of 10 were published. The newspapers’ crime pages were not empty, but filled with stories on minor crimes not related to the drug conflict. In the combative daily *Notiver*, in the city of Veracruz, which is also under the aegis of the Zetas, the newspaper focused on stories on home burglaries, pedestrians hit by cars, or family violence. “We have become publicists, and only cover organized crime through official communiqués,” explained one of *Notiver*’s top editors.

The Zetas’ Story

The Zetas were started by a handful of soldiers from the Mexican army’s special forces unit. They were army deserters who joined the Gulf Cartel in 1999 and

improved the group's military training. They introduced psychological operations and other forms of combat expertise. Among the cartels, the Zetas employ some of the most violent methods. They were the first to decapitate their victims and leave their heads nearby, and because they understand the role of propaganda, they use the mainstream media effectively to gain and maintain total control over a territory. Their methods are beginning to influence how other drug cartels treat the media.

"The journalists could help multiply the force of delivery of their (the drug traffickers') message," said Eduardo Guerrero, a drug trafficking expert who works for Lantia Asociados in Mexico City. For the Zetas, especially, journalists serve as good informants, since they have access to high places with their press credentials.

"For the narcos, it's very important to communicate their message to their enemies and to society at large," Guerrero said. According to him, traffickers have multiple techniques for sending messages. One way is in the manner in which they kill the victim—cut-off hands means the victim was a thief, for example. They also leave messages on pieces of cardboard left lying next to the bodies. And then there are the large banners called narcomantas they hang from bridges and highway overpasses. Some of the traffickers also post their messages on YouTube and in blogs. "But the media and national television are the most efficient way of sending a message," added Guerrero.

The Valentine's Day party for journalists in Hidalgo, also served another purpose. It may have been a sly attempt at registering the faces of some of the key reporters in

their territory—and identifying those who may be easy targets for collaboration. In Ciudad Juárez, a veteran crime reporter explained how the Juárez Cartel used to work the same way with the local media. "There used to be about 20 radio, TV, and newspaper reporters here who worked for the narcos. [Today] it's too dangerous to take their money," he said. The city is being fought over by rival organizations and violence has spiked, with Juárez making up 20 percent of all the country's execution-style murders.

The Worst Drug Cartel Restrictions

Today, the territories controlled by the Zetas and the Cartel del Golfo are the ones that suffer the worst drug cartel restrictions, according to the MEPI analysis. The news media in those states, which comprise about one third of the country, publish or broadcast reports on only a maximum of 5 percent of all drug trafficking related violence. Even editors in the beleaguered city of Ciudad Juárez pity their colleagues: "The censorship there is 100 percent," said one editor.

Taumalipas state, in northeastern Mexico, is the place where both the Zetas and the Cartel del Golfo have flexed their muscles to stymie the free flow of information. Eight journalists from various cities in this state, including Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Victoria, and Matamoros gathered for a private discussion last May and compared notes. All said both gangs had perfected their control of the media and even made periodic meetings with reporters and editors where they handed out edicts and instructions on how they should treat special stories. Both drug groups appear

to be in competition as to how far they can push the limits, said the reporters. "I look forward to the day when I can be a journalist again" said one. Another reporter complained that even reporting on traffic accidents can run the risk of violence if those involved are cartel members.

In the state of Coahuila, where the cartels are fighting for control, the Zetas have pushed the envelope. The local cartel representative began demanding that the chief editor of a local newspaper bring him a draft of the front page every night so he could put a red pencil to the stories he did not want printed, according to a Mexico City editor who knew about the case.

Different Manners to Control the Media

Last July, when drug cartel henchmen kidnapped three local journalists and a national television correspondent working for Televisa, in Torreón, Coahuila, the Mexican and international press went into a frenzy, out of concern that the four would be killed by their captors. In Sinaloa, however, a journalist told MEPI that when he learned that the kidnappers belonged to the Sinaloa Cartel, he knew the four men would walk free unharmed. It is not that there are good and bad cartels, he said. Only there are different manners to control the media. Murdering journalists is not the norm for the Sinaloa Cartel, said the reporter.

The Sinaloa Cartel has controlled its region in the northwestern part of the country for 30 years reaching a détente with the local news media. There were a few murders of journalists in the 1970s, but since then

the group has gone on to dominate one of the country's most prosperous marijuana producing regions and lucrative cocaine and heroin trafficking networks. The cartel is considered the richest group in the country. Its leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, is listed among the richest individuals in Mexico, according to Forbes. The Sinaloa press has reached a détente with the cartel—a non-aggression pact in which the media has tacitly agreed not to publish the names of cartel leaders, nor logistical details connected to cartel operations, according to a former official from the Attorney General's office.

Together with this non-aggression pact, it helps that "Cartel leader Chapo Guzmán, has not crossed the line of killing journalists," said one reporter. Along the limits of this détente and perhaps because of it, in the MEPI investigation El Noroeste, one of the principal dailies in Culiacán, the capital city of the state of Sinaloa, had one of the highest percentages of news coverage related to drug trafficking, publishing 3 out of 10 stories.

Attention to the Situation of Journalists in Provincial Cities

In 2010, a wave of murders and disappearances of journalists in Mexican states most affected by drug trafficking caught the nation's attention, including the national media. Before 2010, few national newspapers reported extensively on the disappearance or murders of journalists in the rest of the country. The interest arrived 20 years too late. In 1986, the Mexican Association of Newspaper Editors AME, published a list of journalists murdered since 1971 and requested that the

government at the time protect journalists from criminals and powerful people. Currently, about 30 provincial journalists have disappeared or been murdered since December 2006. One question that has arisen from the recent murders is why the press and other national institutions in Mexico City have failed to pay attention to the situation of journalists in provincial cities?

"There is an arrogance from Mexico City toward our cities," said Alfredo Quijano, director of El Norte of Ciudad Juárez, who pointed out that there were few effective independent networks linking journalists in the capital city and the states and provincial cities. The kidnapping of journalists in Torreón, Coahuila, last July pushed the Mexican national press to react and say "basta." But provincial journalists are quick to point out that the main reason there was nationwide media indignation was because one of the kidnapped journalists worked for the national Televisa network. While it is difficult to prove the truth in this assertion, Quijano did point out that more foreign journalists have come to Juárez than journalists from Mexico City.

The violent wave against the media has arrived as Mexico's state and national media confront a serious financial crisis. Small and large news outlets have felt the pinch, and many national newspapers have reduced the number of correspondents, widening the gap of information between the capital city and the provinces. Mexico's

provincial media has experienced the worst of it. Local advertising has shrunk, and many local news outlets have come to depend more and more on local government advertising. In Veracruz, for example, many news outlets depend on the state government largesse, but this dependency leads to a shrinking number of stories on drug trafficking violence, because the Government of Veracruz does not want to give the image of their cities as controlled by drug trafficking.

In Ciudad Juárez, Quijano said his newspaper lost 70 percent of its advertising. "We had to cut the police and crime section from two pages to one page. We also cut some reporting and editorial jobs, but we are surviving."

The lack of critical reporting has prevented journalists from seeing how the influence of drug trafficking organizations advanced state by state, and few journalists put together the statistics that show how the media across the country was being silenced. The black holes on drug news moved across Mexico as the nation ignored the problem until earlier this year.

"We let the problem spread," said one journalist in Veracruz. "Nobody from the major cities took the time or effort to report about the problems in the provinces." Then he added: "Many accused the state-based media of being cowards and going silent; but how could they blame us, if they don't know reality as we do."

THE DRUG WAR IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: METAPHORS AND PARADOXES

To establish the seriousness of the events that are happening in Mexico, and the state's response to those events and the structural conditions in which they developed, we must make quantitative and qualitative comparisons with other nations that recently have faced significant levels of violence. Like a hurricane, violence and insecurity in Mexico and Central America have multiple causes.



By
**Samuel
González
Ruiz ***

Violence in Mexico and Central America has increased both in frequency and intensity in the last eight years. In Mexico, the levels of violence are the highest since the Cristero War, a conflict rooted in religion that raged across the country from 1926 to 1929.

In Central America, such violence hasn't been seen since the civil wars of the 1980s that caused hundreds of thousands of deaths as groups with communist and liberal ideologies fought for control of the state, especially in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Yet the presence of organized crime is not a new condition in Mexico. What is new however, has been the incorporation of techniques normally utilized in low-intensity conflicts. At times they acquire elements of terrorist violence that are carried out by criminal groups in several regions. The government's response has been inadequate during the period 2002–2010.

Executions, beheadings, dismemberments, attacks with fragmentation grenades and car bombs, and raids to execute police have become part of the daily routine in states like Chihuahua, Baja California, Guerrero, Michoacán, Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas. A less intense version of this reality is also present in Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco.

Amid these circumstances, which are unprecedented in contemporary Mexico, and due to the direct association with violence generated by organized crime in other countries of the continent, several voices in the media have referred to the "Colombianization" of Mexico and now, Central America. However, to label the phenomenon this way requires a deeper evaluation.

To understand the gravity of the events that are occurring in the country requires quantitative and qualitative comparisons with other countries that, for various reasons, have also faced significant levels of violence in recent years. We must also understand the response by the state, and the structural conditions in which such responses occur.

(*) Samuel González Ruiz is a former Mexican chief of prosecutors against organized crime and is currently an international consultant.

From my point of view, the process is similar to a hurricane whose winds accelerate due to specific atmospheric conditions of pressure and temperature.

Like a hurricane, violence and insecurity in Mexico and Central America have multiple causes. In 2006-2007, when we made predictions about the increase of violence in Mexico, Carlos Flores and I developed a classification system, to distinguish between the different types of events, and we presented it to Mexican university students at Yale University (May 2007).

We created nine separate categories of violence related to organized crime:

- deadly violence;
- physical violence;
- deadly violence against rivals;
- deadly violence against third parties;
- deadly violence against journalists and employees charged with enforcing the law;
- violence against politicians;
- use of weapons of medium destruction;
- generalized intimidatory deadly violence; and
- deadly terrorist violence. (See Fig.1.)

LEVELS OF VIOLENCE IN MEXICO

Levels of violence in Mexico	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	1988	1987	1986	1985	1984		
9 Deadly terrorist violence		X ₁											X ₂													
8 Generalized intimidatory deadly violence	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆	X ₇	X ₈	X ₉									X ₁₀			X ₁₁							
7 Use of weapons of medium destruction	X ₁₂	X ₁₃	X ₁₄	X ₁₅	X ₁₆		X ₁₇	X ₁₈		X ₁₉	X ₂₀		X ₂₁		X ₂₂											
6 Violence against politicians	X ₂₃	X ₂₄	X ₂₅	X ₂₆			X ₂₇	X ₂₈	X ₂₉			X ₁	X ₃₀		X ₃₁	X ₃₂										
5 Deadly violence against journalists and employees charged with enforcing the law	X ₃₃	X ₃₄	X ₃₅	X ₃₆	X ₃₇	X ₃₈	X ₃₉	X ₄₀	X ₄₁	X ₄₂	X ₄₃	X ₄₄	X ₁	X ₄₅	X ₄₆	X ₄₇					X ₄₈	X ₄₉				
4 Deadly violence against third parties		X ₅₀	X ₅₁	X ₅₂	X ₅₃	X ₅₄	X ₅₅	X ₅₆	X ₅₇	X ₅₈	X ₅₉	X ₆₀	X ₆₁	X ₆₂	X ₆₃	X ₆₄	X ₆₅	X ₆₆	X ₆₇	X ₆₈	X ₆₉	X ₇₀	X ₇₁	X ₇₂	X ₇₃	X ₇₄
3 Deadly violence against rivals		X ₅₈	X ₅₉	X ₆₀	X ₆₁	X ₆₂	X ₆₃	X ₆₄	X ₆₅	X ₆₆	X ₆₇	X ₆₈	X ₆₉	X ₇₀	X ₇₁	X ₇₂	X ₇₃	X ₇₄	X ₇₅	X ₇₆	X ₇₇	X ₇₈	X ₇₉	X ₈₀	X ₈₁	
2 Physical violence	X ₈₂	X ₈₃	X ₈₄	X ₈₅	X ₈₆	X ₈₇	X ₈₈	X ₈₉	X ₉₀	X ₉₁	X ₉₂	X ₉₃	X ₉₄	X ₉₅	X ₉₆	X ₉₇	X ₉₈	X ₉₉	X ₁₀₀	X ₁₀₁	X ₁₀₂	X ₁₀₃	X ₁₀₄	X ₁₀₅	X ₁₀₆	
1 Deadly violence	X ₁₀₇	X ₁₀₈	X ₁₀₉	X ₁₁₀	X ₁₁₁	X ₁₁₂	X ₁₁₃	X ₁₁₄	X ₁₁₅	X ₁₁₆	X ₁₁₇	X ₁₁₈	X ₁₁₉	X ₁₂₀	X ₁₂₁	X ₁₂₂	X ₁₂₃	X ₁₂₄	X ₁₂₅	X ₁₂₆	X ₁₂₇	X ₁₂₈	X ₁₂₉	X ₁₃₀	X ₁₃₁	

As an analyst and a former federal anti-drug prosecutor, I can remember many of the acts of violence that happened in Mexico between 1989 and 1999. But the level of violence has become so excessively high that it's impossible for me to remember the acts of violence that have happened in the last three months.

What is driving this hurricane of violence?

First, the origin lies in the increase of drug consumption in the United States in the 1980s, when, for example, consumption of cocaine jumped from 40 tons to 400 tons a year. These estimates by U.S. authorities have varied over time. The debate about whether the demand creates supply, or whether the supply creates the demand, has a new focus today. We know that Pablo Escobar, chief of the Medellín Cartel, devised a way to popularize drug consumption in the United States, from the elites to the poor inhabitants of large urban centers, through the creation of "crack," a smokable form of cocaine that can be sold more cheaply. This resulted in a so-called crack epidemic that caused thousands of deaths by overdose. It also explains part of the increase in crime in the United States from the 1980s to the 1990s.

Today, it is estimated that the United States consumes around 300 tons of cocaine a year. European and Asian markets have also grown significantly, according to reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

The closure by U.S. authorities of trade routes through Florida for Colombian cocaine gave a comparative advantage to Mexican criminal organizations that in the early 1990s were able to establish a virtual

monopoly on trafficking routes through Mexico. This development and the increase in trade between Mexico and the United States facilitated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) made it possible for the Mexican drug traffickers to control the transport of drugs through Mexico to the United States.

Consumption of heroin and marijuana in the United States remains more or less stable. The portion produced by Mexico represents approximately US\$10 billion for Mexico when sold at retail prices in the United States.

The market changed significantly in the 1990s with the introduction of designer drugs, such as methamphetamines, ecstasy, and others. Those of us who worked in the Attorney General's Office in the 1990s can remember when Barry McCaffrey, the U.S. Drug Czar, correctly predicted that designer drugs would be the main problem of the future. We recall that in the time of President Vicente Fox, Mexico imported four times more Ephedrine than was consumed in the country, despite the protests of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the international community. We also remember the police and prosecutors in the 1990s who grew rich as a result of corruption and infiltration.

The unification of illegal markets and the militarization of criminal organizations

In Mexico, the basic problem is no longer exclusively drug trafficking. Los Zetas established highly developed control of the territory in the places where they worked. They represent the use of a military-style

strategy for controlling territory, in which they charge for each one of the illegal services that they control. Many of them were originally members of the Mexican Army's Special Forces Airmobile Group (GAFE) who deserted to join criminal organizations.

It is known that Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who assumed leadership of the Gulf Cartel after Juan García Abrego was captured in the late 1990s, convinced the soldiers who were inside the Attorney General's office (PGR) that they should work with the cartel as an armed branch. It is said that "there is no worse enemy than someone who has been a friend or family," and that is exactly what happened. The bodyguards with military training learned how to work as professional assassins and imposed their rule on those whom they controlled.

The model they imposed was to establish control of all types of criminal activity, town by town, city by city, and state by state. In some regions they employed the strategy of killing within seven days everyone who controlled all criminal activities: retail drug dealing, extortion, prostitution, human trafficking, the sale of stolen goods, and piracy. Afterward, they would "negotiate" with subordinates by proposing two options: you either work with us, or die.

Carlos Flores created a table documenting the number of army deserters, who numbered in the tens of thousands in the period from 2001 to 2006:

DESERTIONS OF MILITARY PERSONNEL 2001–2006

SECURITY INSTITUTIONS IN CRISIS

Rank	Number of Deserters
Colonels	1
Lieutenant colonels	9
Commanders	38
First captains	50
Second captains	49
Lieutenants	459
Sub-lieutenants	782
First sergeants	354
Second sergeants	2,239
Corporals	9,919
Privates	109,318
Total	123,218

Desertion of military personnel in the current administration (July 31, 2009): 31,202

Average number of military personnel deployed in drug-control operations every month: 45,000

Source: Secretariat of National Defense's disclosure of information in response to public request number 1 of March 13, 2007.

In several parts of Mexico, Los Zetas called on the public to organize as local "franchises." This was done, for example, in some parts of Zacatecas state.

Currently, Los Zetas control the route of migrants to the United States, especially those Central Americans who travel on the railroad known as the "Train of Death" or "The Beast" that leaves from Chiapas heading north. The National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH) has documented thousands of kidnappings of Central

Americans. In their vulnerable position as migrants, they cannot report the authorities who are extorting them and who are linked to organized crime. Using thousands of complaints, the CNDH and other civil organizations and institutions have documented that the Mexican government knew about the situation and did nothing to prevent it. The tragedy of San Fernando Tamaulipas, in which 72 migrants were killed solely to prove who controlled the migration route, is a crime against humanity.

Article 7 of the Statute of the International Criminal Court designates as "Crimes Against Humanity" any act of murder, extermination, torture, and others such as enslavement, rape, and sexual abuse, when these represent a widespread systematic attack directed against a civilian population, with knowledge about the execution of those acts. This international measure affirms that an attack against a civilian population is understood as a pattern of conduct that involves the multiple committing of acts against the population, as part of a policy by a state or organization to commit such acts or to promote that policy.

The value of the trafficking of migrants through Mexico has been estimated at US\$5 billion.

"La Familia" of Michoacán state is an organization that formed in reaction to Los Zetas. It united the traditionally small producers of marijuana in that state. They added a religious component and social services. Their expansion into other illicit markets, such as the cocaine and methamphetamines trade, or the expansion of kidnapping and extortion is a consequence of this capitalist, economic, criminal logic.

To be clear, drug traffickers did have contact with military forces before 2000. This has been documented in books by Luis Astorga. In January 2010, *Proceso* magazine disclosed the statements made by Vicente Carrillo Leyva, heir to the Juárez cartel, before prosecutors working for the Assistant Attorney General for Special Investigations and Organized Crime (SIEDO). He spoke of the contacts his father had with military officials who have already been tried in military and civil trials. The remarkable part of that report is that none of the business or financial contacts went to trial. This supports what the government maintains: that drug traffickers are businessmen.

Caring for the garden in Mexico and the United States

Mexican politicians and public officials who want to demonstrate their patriotism in front of U.S. authorities like to pose these questions: Why don't we speak of American cartels? Why do we only speak of Mexican, Colombian, or Jamaican organizations but never of the American ones? There is even speculation about a so-called "magic trailer" full of cocaine that has disappeared on the border because the U.S. authorities can't find it.

These questions demonstrate a lack of knowledge about how authorities work in the United States and other countries with similarly strong governments and liberal democracies.

First of all, U.S. criminal organizations, like the Mafia in the 1990s, were, in fact, prosecuted under the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations

“ARTICLE 7 OF THE STATUTE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT DESIGNATES AS “CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY” ANY ACT OF MURDER, EXTERMINATION, TORTURE, AND OTHERS SUCH AS ENSLAVEMENT, RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE, WHEN THESE REPRESENT A WIDESPREAD SYSTEMATIC ATTACK DIRECTED AGAINST A CIVILIAN POPULATION, WITH KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EXECUTION OF THOSE ACTS.”

(RICO) Act that was enacted in 1970. Similarly, criminal charges have, in fact, been made against U.S. organizations, as represented by the case of the American gangster who trafficked heroin in military airplanes that transported supplies in the Vietnam War. The United States’ antidrug strategy is like having a garden, but trimming it constantly without letting it grow out of control.

Mexico and Central America, with the exception of Costa Rica, are like a neglected garden where the grass has become bushes, the bushes have become trees, and the roots of the trees are spreading under the foundation, threatening to destroy the house.

On the other hand, we also hear Mexican officials complain about the money from drug sales that encourages corruption in Mexico, and about the arms that flow from the U.S. to Mexico. However, nothing is done against money laundering. Nor



Photo from iStockphoto

THE UNITED STATES' ANTI-DRUG STRATEGY IS LIKE HAVING A GARDEN, BUT TRIMMING IT CONSTANTLY WITHOUT LETTING IT GROW OUT OF CONTROL. MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF COSTA RICA, ARE LIKE A NEGLECTED GARDEN WHERE THE GRASS HAS BECOME BUSHES, THE BUSHES HAVE BECOME TREES, AND THE ROOTS OF THE TREES ARE SPREADING UNDER THE FOUNDATION, THREATENING TO DESTROY THE HOUSE.

is anything done to dismantle criminal enterprises, or to end the arms flow to Mexico. The officials try to shift the blame while at the same time, they take advantage of the criminal activity.

Metaphor for the war that generated a war

The paradigm of a war on drugs and drug trafficking used by the Mexican government has been its biggest mistake, because drugs and drug trafficking have always existed and will continue to exist. Drugs are found in the United States, Canada, Europe, and almost every country in the world, but those societies have not exploded with the violence that Mexico is experiencing despite the fact that their drug markets are more valuable than Mexico's. In those countries, the criminal policy model

represents a model for the regulation of illegal markets, in order to minimize the damage on society.

On his recent visit to Mexico to receive an honorary doctorate from the National Institute for Penal Sciences, Professor Luigi Ferrajoli of Italy pointed out that the war on drugs had been one of the most determining factors in the explosion of violence in the country. First, he said, to use the expression "war" legitimizes the groups that are in "combat" for control of territory and that have no remorse for killing. Second, he added, because it incites security forces to use bellicose strategies that don't take into account the international standards for the use of force.

On one occasion before several prosecutors, a collaborating witness declared that in 1992, Ramón Arellano Felix had planned the murder of rival Chapo Guzmán on a chalkboard, brainwashing his hired assassins with the warning that Guzmán was a danger to the country. This is the kind of legitimizing power that "war" holds. For that reason, since 2007, our team consisting of Ernesto Mendieta, Gleb Zingerman, and Edgardo Buscaglia, has worked on projects that were compiled in the book *The Reason Behind Force and the Force of Reason: on the Legitimate Use of Violence* (*La razón de la fuerza y la fuerza de la razón: sobre el uso legítimo de la violencia*). The book demonstrates that the rulings by human rights courts do not distinguish between civilians and the military in the standards that should be applied to the functions of public security.

Judging from their actions, Mexico's organized crime groups are unfamiliar

“TO USE THE EXPRESSION “WAR” LEGITIMIZES THE GROUPS THAT ARE IN “COMBAT” FOR CONTROL OF TERRITORY AND THAT HAVE NO REMORSE FOR KILLING. SECOND, HE ADDED, BECAUSE IT INCITES SECURITY FORCES TO USE BELLICOSE STRATEGIES THAT DON’T TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE USE OF FORCE.”

with the regulations of humanitarian law treaties that are valid even in internal conflicts. For example, an Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which relates to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts, states: “All persons who do not take a direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities, whether or not their liberty has been restricted, are entitled to respect for their person, honor and convictions and religious practices. They shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction. It is prohibited to order that there shall be no survivors.”

The second statement explicitly prohibits, at any time and place, attempts against one’s life, in particular homicide, torture, and mutilation, the taking of hostages and acts of terrorism, slavery, and the slave trade in any forms. It establishes that children will be provided the care and help they need. Once these issues reach the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Mexico will receive its sentence.

The feudalization of Mexico

The arrival of democracy in the country, first through the election of opposition mayors and then governors generated the alternation of parties in power. In the book *Public Security in Mexico (Seguridad Pública en México)*, we mentioned this as a serious problem for public safety. In 2000, the rise to power of the National Action Party generated an alternation in the presidency, but not a transition. No laws were enacted to transform the country, not in politics, in security, in the management of justice, nor in the fight against corruption.

One of the processes that have increased insecurity and violence in the country is the thesis that organized crime should only be combated by the federal government, not by the states.

This thesis formed part of the negotiations in the reform of public security and justice in 2008.

The problem is that many governors, who didn’t understand the concept or use of this law against organized crime, maintained that they had no reason to investigate common law crimes committed by members of organized crime. Constitutional reform remained incomplete without measuring the consequences, and today no one knows for sure what the Constitution says.

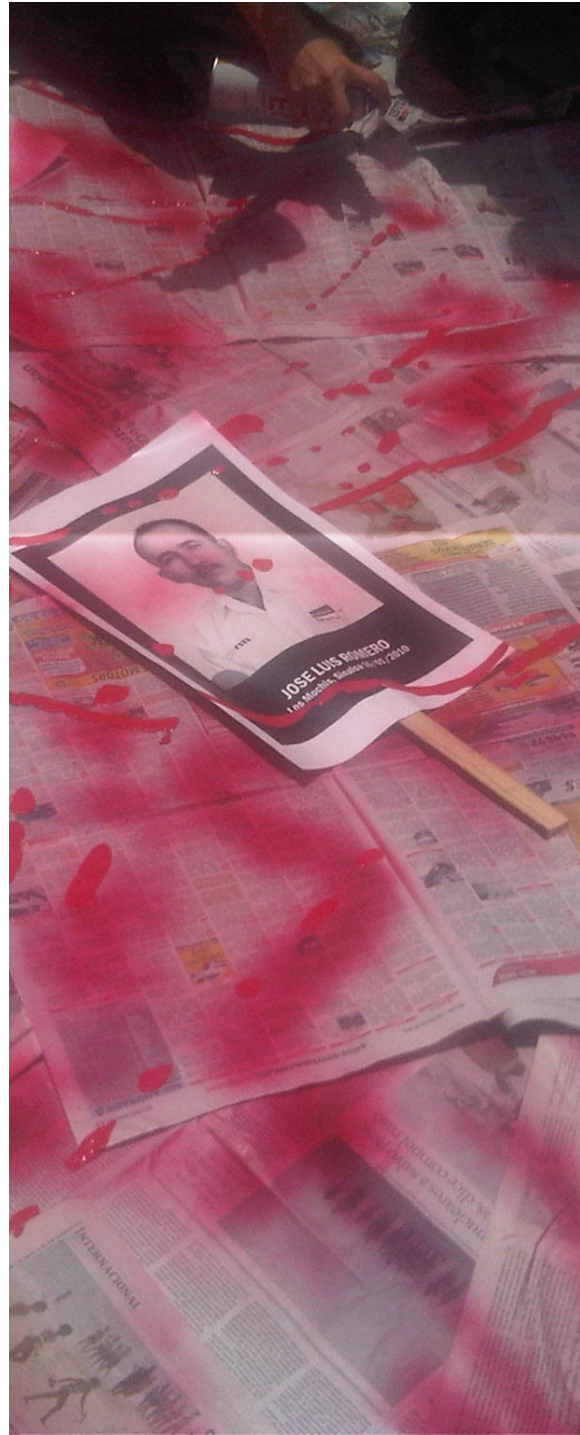
The rush to reform negotiations, without understanding the consequences, generated a framework that serves to highlight its irresponsibility. During the negotiations, Deputy Andrés Lozano explained to PAN senators how it would not be possible to determine the

“ONE OF THE PROCESSES THAT HAVE INCREASED INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE COUNTRY IS THE THESIS THAT ORGANIZED CRIME SHOULD ONLY BE COMBATED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, NOT BY THE STATES. THIS THESIS FORMED PART OF THE NEGOTIATIONS IN THE REFORM OF PUBLIC SECURITY AND JUSTICE IN 2008.”

existence of federal organized crime and extraordinary organized crime. The reality is that currently the two frameworks function in both the federal and state realms.

However, those governors who want to justify their incapacity in this area do so by abdicating their constitutional responsibilities and delegating them to the Federation. It can be shown that the governors who didn't use this strategy have been able to contend with the crisis of violence in the country. Those who used it, such as in the case of Chihuahua state, committed grave errors in their processes of reforming codes of criminal procedure and their practical application. Inefficiencies were created, crime increased, and those states exploded.

The Mexican government currently tries to demonstrate to the United States that only the Institutional Revolutionary Party has links to the narcotics trade. However, the known cases indicate that all parties, without exception, have documented connections to drug trafficking.



Courtesy of Jorge Villalpando

“ACTS COMMITTED BY CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THESE CASES ARE, WITHOUT DOUBT, TERRORIST ACTS, BECAUSE THEY SEEK TO GENERATE FEAR WITHIN THE POPULATION SO THAT THE GOVERNMENT, OR OTHER INSTITUTIONS, WOULD ACT OR FAIL TO ACT IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE LAW.”

The state of the state

Along with Carlos Flores, we have pointed out that organized crime does not create the model of government. Rather, it is the model of government that creates the type of organized crime that affects a society. In addition, it is the weakness of the state that is the cause of the extremely violent organized crime that we have. But that weakness also is reflected in other elements as well.

It is reflected by politicians who are involved in electoral fraud and illegally financed campaigns (documented in rulings by the Electoral Court of the Federal Judicial Police), and by the businessmen who fight each other in court over the lack of regulations to generate economic competitiveness. It is also reflected in the fact that in Mexico taxes are collected on less than 10 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). Alicia Barcenas, ECLAC Executive Secretary, has called the country a de facto paradise of fiscal corruption and mismanagement.

Terrorist acts committed by non-terrorist groups

This is the paradoxical thesis that the Mexican government defends since September 16, 2008, when grenades were used against the civilian population in a public plaza in Morelia. Edgardo Buscaglia correctly identified these acts as terrorism, speaking on Carmen Aristegui's program on CNN en Español.

Acts committed by criminal organizations in these cases are, without doubt, terrorist acts, because they seek to generate fear within the population so that the Government, or other institutions, would act or fail to act in compliance with the law.

Consequently, both the criminal organization and its members should be included in the lists of terrorist groups that are registered by the United Nations Security Council. The effect would be that the organization's operations in the world, and especially its commercial transactions and property, would be subject to scrutiny by all members of the United Nations, for their classification as terrorist entities. This categorization would allow for the confiscation of their property, which is what would ultimately limit their broad economic capacities to continue committing crimes. The use of force alone has already proven, as in the case of the massacres to which we have referred, that it will not generate conditions of security, peace, and tranquility in society.

Casino politics

The major problem in Mexico and Central America is that political campaigns are financed with illegal monies. The

“MEXICAN POLITICS IS NOT BASED ON REGULATIONS THAT DISTRIBUTE POWER DEMOCRATICALLY, BUT ON RULES OF WINNING AND WINNING, EVEN AT THE COST OF RECEIVING ILLEGAL MONEY. THIS IS WHY ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE COUNTRY HAS SUCH STRENGTH.”

government contributes approximately US\$70 million to presidential campaigns, but their cost can total USD\$ 400 million or more.

People must ask themselves where the funding for these resources originates. The answer is: from corruption, and from illegal contributions by business and organized crime. This happens not only in Mexico, but in several parts of Central America.

In the United States, Barack Obama spent US\$ 700 million on his presidential campaign. The difference is that the Mexican economy is less than 4 percent of the United States' gross domestic product. This means the cost of a campaign in Mexico is more than 20 times than what is proportionately spent in the United States.

In addition, the United States has solid institutions to fight any violation of the regulations governing election financing. Neither Mexico nor Central America can depend on such institutions, and as a result, those countries have been infiltrated by crime which, on occasion, determines public policies.

We should recall that in Mexico, some see politics as “casino politics,” in which everything is placed on the table, like in a card game where one can win or lose everything. There are no cooperative games constructed that allow everyone to win something.

Across the world, political parties win and lose elections as part of the nature of the democratic game. The rule is that the loser of an election can seek to win the next elections. However, the destructive messages in Mexico categorize the enemy as a danger, leading to attempts to eliminate the enemy.

If 2 million people engage in the destruction of the government, they will destroy the country. It is not popular knowledge that the Mexican Revolution was conducted by slightly more than 100,000 men, but they caused more than a million deaths. The National Defense Secretariat (SEDENA) estimates that more than 500,000 men work directly or indirectly in trafficking. Imagine if they decided to start a war.

For such reasons, Mexican politics is not based on regulations that distribute power democratically, but on rules of winning and winning, even at the cost of receiving illegal money. This is why organized crime in the country has such strength.

The “business logic” of drug trafficking

Some advisors to the Mexican Government maintain that drug traffickers are businessmen but fail to recognize that they receive economic benefits or other material benefits from their illegal activities, as

EL GOBIERNO MEXICANO HA COMETIDO ERRORES COMO EL NO Luchar CONTRA LA CORRUPCIÓN Y LA INFILTRACIÓN DE LA DELINCUENCIA ORGANIZADA EN LOS GOBIERNOS. ESTO TAMBIÉN ES PRODUCTO DE LA DEBILIDAD ESTATAL, COMO EL NO COMBATIR AL LAVADO DE DINERO Y DESMONTAR LAS EMPRESAS FINANCIERAS Y LAS CORPORACIONES QUE SOPORTAN LA ACTIVIDAD CRIMINAL Y SON SU RAZÓN DE SER.

noted in the Palermo Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. These advisors question how it is possible that “businessmen,” in order to develop their enterprises, are involved in illegal activities and risk everything in order to wage war against their rivals. Such behavior, they agree, violates business logic, which demands processes of equilibrium, based on Adam Smith’s “invisible hand of the market.”

We should remember that even those businessmen who are not involved in prima facie illegal activities have created the current financial crisis that created the present recession. Let’s imagine the significance of the crisis for control of illegal markets.

The strategy that is not a strategy

In the war against drug trafficking in Mexico, only the military component of the strategy was planned. It was not understood that there are other subsystems that require support to reach their goals: public security and social development, investment, and transformation of institutions. This led to many errors being committed.

The Mexican government has made errors such as not fighting against corruption and the infiltration of organized crime inside the government. This also is the product of the weakness of the state, such as failing to combat money laundering and to dismantle the businesses and corporations that exist to finance criminal activity.

Additionally, local strategies have not been implemented in municipalities that lack the necessary resources to promote social change. The changes that have occurred in Colombia would have been inconceivable if, at the same time that the central government was working with the security forces, municipalities had not advanced in social policies and techniques that involved defusing one of their principal problems: young people who had joined criminal gangs because they lacked other opportunities.

The struggle to recover Mexico should be done neighborhood by neighborhood, municipality by municipality, state by state. The adoption of policies to end this situation of violence requires elements of democratic consensus on a least four points, applied at the three levels of government—federal, state, and municipal.

1. Strengthening the State’s functional

- capacity to confront violent groups
2. Adjustment of the regulatory framework to specifically address organized crime and/or terrorism
 3. Dismantling of the structure of corruption that enables the operation and survival of this type of crime; and
 4. Attacks on the illegal proceeds of these organizations and their money laundering techniques, which should be accompanied by a supportive and broad social movement, like in Italy and Ireland.

Needless to say, all of these measures, especially the last two, require all the political will from the highest levels of public decision-making, and that this translates into support and backing for the officials responsible for implementing these policies. It is important to underscore that in many countries there is a true threshold of violence that often serves as the catalyst of definitive measures to begin to reduce its indexes.

The consequences

It should be noted that international experiences demonstrate that violence associated with organized crime can be diminished. In that sense, the cases of Colombia, the United States, South Africa, Italy and Ireland, are all significant. None of these countries has been able to eradicate the transnational drug market nor organized crime, phenomena that appear to have a concomitant existence in contemporary society. Such a claim might appear utopian in itself. However, those countries have managed to lower their rates of violence to the point where they are no longer the principal reason for social

unrest. Nor do they represent a deliberate risk to national security.

The measures applied by these countries were successful not only because of their comprehensive nature, but also because they were able to secure the political support from the highest levels of public decision-making. This aspect cannot be overemphasized. It involves—in the context of effective democracy to which we aspire—the degree of tolerance that our society is willing to concede to criminal violence.

In Ireland, the assassination of journalist Verónica Guerin in 1996 at the hands of organized crime was enough for society to lose its patience. Her death launched a direct war against organized crime because of a comprehensive government policy supported by the highest levels of government and its citizens. This happened even in a society that had lived in a situation of social anxiety due to continual terrorist acts, since the first half of the last century.

Therefore, we recognize that state weakness is what provokes the current situation. We affirm without a doubt that to strengthen the state is a priority that requires not just police control, but a political agreement toward a transition that involves rules for a peaceful existence in the country. Such an agreement would include:

- a) respect for regulations concerning the financing of political campaigns, without the political system forcing politicians to participate in the illegal funding of campaigns;
- b) respect for regulations concerning economic competition between economic actors;

- c) regulations concerning the financing of states and municipalities that would allow them to fulfill their constitutional functions;
- d) campaigns against corruption and infiltration of public institutions, and prosecution of businesspeople who break the rules;
- e) independent judicial and prosecutorial powers;
- f) efficient municipal, state, and federal police who do not replicate political corruption; and
- g) a fiscal pact that grants resources to strengthen the State.

In summary, these are the elements that will allow us to go from alternation to transition. They can also be suggested as applicable in Guatemala and other Central American countries, and they are a prerequisite for subduing the hurricane.

A criminal enterprise of “shared risk”

At the beginning of the 1990s, the payment made to Mexican drug organizations was US\$3,500 a kilo of cocaine, then it became a percentage of the shipment. First it was 35 percent of the shipment; then in 1993 it became 50 percent, explained Carlos Resendez Bertoluci, a witness in the case of Juan García Abrego in Houston, Texas.

The system of redistributing risk that Colombians used to transport cocaine through Mexico is called *apuntes*. A Colombian trafficker explained the system to me. He survived being executed after a .22-caliber bullet that was shot at him ricocheted and killed another man. At the end of the 1990s, the Juárez cartel executed people utilizing techniques from the dirty war. Compared to those days, the violence has intensified and includes beheadings and car bombs.

The same collaborator told me that he had once transported a shipment of 600 kilos in a “joint venture” that involved many partners. The same concept of shared risk was similar to how the entrepreneurs of Seville’s House of Trade operated in the 16th to 18th centuries, and to Dutch trading and shipping in the Orient.

Of the 600 kilos, 250 belonged to the Colombians. Another 250 kilos of the same shipment belonged to the Juárez cartel, which at the time was working with the Sinaloa cartel, forming part of a larger federation of Mexican criminal organizations, separate from the Arellano Felix organization. If the shipment were intercepted on the high seas, the Colombians would assume the risk.

The remaining 100 kilos (of the 600 total) were reserved for the person who had made the contacts and secured the deal. He received the 100 kilos on credit, at a price of \$1,000 per kilo. Later, he sold the drugs for \$5,000 per kilo, or \$500,000 total. His profits were \$400,000 from the deal.

He had made the trip in 36 hours in a motorboat with a motor typically used by fishermen. Asked why he hadn’t transported the shipment through Mexico and sold the drugs on the border he stated, “The Mexicans control the territory. If you try you get death or jail.” This is the effective implementation of a rule that established a territorial control, which did not exist in the 1980s and was set up in the 1990s.

Violence in Mexico, an act that had been anticipated

In his book *Socio-political Aspects of Drug Trafficking (Aspectos Sociopolíticos del Narcotráfico, INACIPE, 1992)*, Professor Marcos Kaplan predicted exactly what would happen in Mexico and Central America. At the time, he was called an alarmist.

Following the same line of argument, Ernesto López Portillo and I wrote the book *Public Security in Mexico: Problems, Perspectives, and Proposals ("Seguridad Pública en Mexico: Problemas, perspectivas y propuestas," UNAM, 1995)*. We pointed out that the country would face severe threats due to the political change and the corruption among the police and prosecutors. Rereading the book today reiterates how little Mexico has advanced and how much remains to be changed. Ernesto Zedillo's administration, especially the Specialized Unit against Organized Crime (UEDO), broadened the horizons of the application of the law. The arrival of Vicente Fox was marked by democratic optimism, but halfway through his term, it became clear that he didn't know how to construct a country of laws. Since 2007, the analyses and reflections provided by Edgardo Buscaglia, Carlos Flores, and myself, made on CNN en Español with Carmen Aristegui and on the radio, have predicted that violence would arrive in Mexico with unusual strength.

coverage of drug trafficking and organized crime in Latin America and the caribbean



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