

Comments on “The Violence of Traffic,” *Crime, Insecurity, Fear in Mexico: Ethnographic and Policy Approaches*, Columbia University, New York, November 13, 2009

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In the prologue I recently wrote for the English language edition of “País de Plomo: Crónicas de Guerra en Colombia” by former *Semana* and *El Tiempo* journalist, Juanita León, I noted the central role that journalists play in shaping the circulation of information that in turn shapes the tenor of debate in the “public sphere,” and the noxious effect that violence can have on this process. This is what Alfredo Corchado refers to in his paper for this panel, “Controlling the Message” as the “chilling effect on coverage” that results in “self censorship” by journalists. Journalistic self-censorship in turn has a dramatic impact on society at large, as “citizens do not get the full story” and “even law enforcement agencies” who like everyone else rely heavily on the information collected by investigative journalists and the public debates such information are intended to prompt, “do not get the information they need to make critical decisions.”

In the Colombian case, were it not for the work of journalists like Juanita León, the details of Colombia’s ever evolving war and the testimonies and experiences of the often forgotten Colombians who suffer it might disappear leaving few traces. No wonder journalism is considered both the noblest and most dangerous of Colombian professions. Or as Germán Arciniegas noted in the late 1940s during another period when the flow of information was also increasingly truncated by violence, “Freedom of the press makes democracy a reality ... the preservation of our democracy depends on this freedom.”¹

The survival of democracy and freedom of expression in Mexico and Colombia have been hard-pressed in recent years. As Corchado notes, more than 55 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000 and dozens more have disappeared. Moreover, as journalists in Mexico are threatened by what Corchado calls “spies” for the cartel who pose as journalists – a macabre form of “embedded” journalism – who track and pursue legitimate journalists to dissuade them from digging deeper into the violent business of drug trafficking and its connections with Mexican institutions and authorities, the effect is also “chilling.” The uncertainty of who is a real journalist and who is not and who “journalists” may work for can become “an excuse for not investigating” killings – either of journalists or anyone else. Corchado points to a final important issue in his presentation that has also had a significant impact on news reporting about events in Mexico and on the public’s access to information at large. Fearing for the security of their correspondents, “makes news organizations reluctant to send reporters [in the U.S.] across the border” so that even as the major news organizations focus on “far off wars” the big war occurring right next door and, indeed, right in the United States (because that border has always been permeable and more imagined than real), “the war next door receives sporadic if any coverage.”

In Colombia too, a place obviously physically much more distant than Mexico to the United States, but where drug trafficking and the violence that is central to its survival has long shaped the lived reality of many citizens, the local war has given way to a focus on “far off wars.” With scant exceptions, foreign correspondents rarely venture outside the confines of the capital city, Bogotá, relying instead on contacts in the diplomatic community or on press releases and interviews issued by government sources for the

“investigative” news they print or broadcast.ⁱⁱ This didn’t used to matter as much because Colombians looked to their local journalists, renowned internationally for their refusal to be censored despite the risk to their lives during even the worst years of drug cartel intimidation to keep them informed about what was happening in their country. But in recent years local journalists too have ventured far less into the interior zones where the war is most in evidence and hardest to grasp. It’s not that newspaper and magazine directors outright forbid certain kinds of travel, veteran journalists insist, or that overt censorship is practiced, but that the absence of security details and budget cutbacks in travel implicitly impede journalists from taking the risks that first hand reporting from war-torn areas requires. The toll this cutback has had on the quality of information available to the public and on the possibilities for informed public debate in Colombia, is palpable. As newspapers limit themselves to publishing what information they can obtain from official sources alternative or critical versions of the news become increasingly hard to come by.

Perhaps precisely because of the value placed on the news, and the influence and power journalists have historically been thought to wield over politics, they have been along with trade unionists and human rights defenders, among the sectors of society most frequently targeted for violent elimination since the mid-1980s. The *Committee to Protect Journalists*, for instance, considered Colombia in 2001 – “by far the most dangerous country in Latin America for journalists,” and in a 2008 report the same organization counted 40 journalists killed between January 1992 and January 2009, making Colombia the fourth deadliest country for journalists during that period after Iraq (137), Algeria (60) and Russia (49).ⁱⁱⁱ Sadly, Corchado’s suggestion that the toll of

murdered journalists in Mexico numbers 55 between 2000 and 2009 means that Colombia may have ceded its dubious place of “honor.”

The conclusions of Corchado’s presentation are clear: at the very moment when the need for public engagement and debate about the rising toll of violence and its connection with drug trafficking is most needed, the sources of information, its quality, veracity and depth, have become most compromised. To “silence reporters” is in effect not a concern only of that particular sector of society, but indeed, a lethal blow to the very existence of a viable “public sphere.”

The focus of Rihan Yeh’s paper entitled “Two Traffickers in Public” explores a related though distinct aspect of what constitutes “public knowledge” and how claims to the proximity of information and its veracity can shape both the “public” and public debate. Yeh focuses on two individuals engaged over a six hour period in an exchange about what starts out as a pot boiler reconstruction of the “history” Mexican drug trafficking, specifically the ascendance of “el Señor de los Cielos” (Amado Carrillo Fuentes) over the cocaine trade in the aftermath of Colombian Pablo Escobar’s demise. The exchange takes place in an internet chat room where “El Mazatleco VIP” from Mazatlan, Sinaloa begins a thread that then devolves into a discursive duel of sorts with another poster named “Denali Pilot.” The two engage in what Yeh calls “evidential” or “evidentiary” strategies to “secure the “truth” of discourse,” in a public forum where Yeh interprets the objective as the suggestion that both subjects are “somehow connected to drug-trafficking.” Yeh concludes that (to summarize crudely) in the process of the exchange, “Denali Pilot” emerges as the true insider with first hand knowledge of the

drug trafficking business by virtue of his ability to describe the social rituals and spaces of trafficking, while the person who initiated the thread with a certain bluster, Mazatlan VIP, is ultimately revealed as an “imposter,” a drug trafficker wannabe whose initial postings regurgitate excerpts from Wikipedia rather than first hand knowledge of the drug trade. This is the tension, Yeh suggests between “*lo que supe*” (what I knew, first hand) and “*lo que todos saben*” (what everyone supposedly knows and is public knowledge.)

This essay gestures towards several intriguing questions, but at times seems to operate on the premise that somehow drug trafficking is “extraordinary” – at least for the individuals engaged in this internet chat -- and that the climate it creates in places where it has permeated society, the economy, politics and even cultural rituals (Carnaval, beauty queen contests, sociability at the local Walmart) for more than two or three decades (sometimes longer - let’s remember that cross border heroin and marijuana deals were happening as far back as the 1930s) does not in fundamental ways – even unconsciously perhaps – determine what can be said, by whom, where, and how. At one point Yeh notes “this small and privileged public of traffic does not conceive of itself as separate from a general public,” or “put another way” Yeh says, “there is no contradiction between criminality and citizenship.” (2) And? Why would those who live the experience of drug trafficking and violence as an everyday norm consider there to be a contradiction? Why would the public of traffic conceive of itself as separate from a general public or think there is a contradiction between criminality and citizenship if it effectively has redefined in subtle and less subtle ways the contours of citizenship and how it can be performed in particular places? I am not suggesting that drug trafficking defines lived reality in ALL of Mexico, but it certainly does in those places where

traffickers ARE the law and trafficking is THE business that defines a local economy and society. If we were to consider these questions in a non-Mexican contest, we might ask whether John Gotti or the people of the New Jersey who welcomed his policing efforts to rid their neighborhood of crackheads, pushers and prostitutes, conceive of themselves not as citizens? Though Gotti and the organization he represents are evidently “outside the law,” would this illegality be seen as a contradiction among citizens who felt the Mob as opposed to the legitimately constituted authorities guaranteed their neighborhoods were protected by law breakers? At a fundamental level, and perhaps my opinion is shaped by my own experience of living and working in Medellín, it is sometimes difficult for those who don’t inhabit places where drug trafficking has insidiously, over a long period of time, reshaped the contours of public expression and the conception of citizenship in fundamental ways, to realize that what seems “extraordinary” to others is taken for granted and even unquestioned by those who live within the “Republic of Traffic.” What seems abnormal to outsiders (because it is abnormal) is eventually not even questioned (certainly not publicly) by those whose lives are lived within the constraints imposed by the reality of drug trafficking and violence. Perhaps only a chat room can provide the anonymity and “safe” space to discuss such questions as who is in charge, what the rules of the trade might be, and who is loyal to whom – a kind of exploratory frame of reference or map that may be crucial to ensuring survival for those outside the inner circle of local power, but whose well being and even livelihoods, may nonetheless depend on the “Violence of Traffic.”

Much of the exchange between “Denali Pilot” (which refers, as I did not know until my husband informed me, to Mount McKinley in Alaska and bush pilots who fly

Cesna planes – the very planes most commonly associated with drug trafficking) and “VIP” (for short), is deconstructed by Yeh as a duel, a power – where knowledge is power – struggle. The various “moves” the two chat room participants make are interpreted from the perspective of something akin to a war of position – statements become signs of “abasement” or “deference” or “evidential authority.” Yeh concludes that “the public of lo que todos saben, a public that here appears as not just a figment of discourse but as a social space that unifies into a coherent whole such disparate sites of interaction as an Internet chat forum and the streets of Mazatlan,” ensures that the “world of traffic emerges clearly as an evidentially privileged public of hearsay, close to the events of common interest, but still very much part and parcel of the larger community of those who overhear their doings.” This reminds me of “celebrity watcher” blogs, chat rooms where ordinary people obsess about the truth of this or that rumor having to do with Brad Pitt, Jennifer Aniston or Angelina Jolie. The ordinary non-celebrity public can follow millimetrically the lives and travails of Hollywood celebrities they have never met and whose actions are unlikely to ever have any consequences on non-celebrity voyeurs’ daily lives. The difference is that in the Mexican case, what the invisible powers that be do or do not do, has very real and palpable effects on the lives of those who “chat” about them, and the presence of these exchanges on the internet in the guise of dueling narratives are poignant reminders of the lethal consequences of squelching through the threat of omnipresent violence, the possibility of other more “serious” venues or sources of “information” for making sense of life in a narco-society. Perhaps the celebrity watcher analogy would more appropriately be replaced by the “Kremlin Watch” that both Soviet citizens and international analysts engaged in continually during the height of the

Cold War to try and figure out how to avoid setting off the landmines that a single misplaced word could trigger in a world dominated by the limited circulation of reliable information and yet the excruciating reality of death.

ⁱ Germán Arciniegas, “Journalism in Colombia.” *Quarterly Journal of Inter-American Relations*, copy of article found in *Eduardo Santos Calderón Archive*, Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, MSS 563, Correspondencia Personajes, Caja 1, Carpeta 4, fs. 90,91.

ⁱⁱ Scott Wilson of *The Washington Post*’s coverage of war-torn towns in Antioquia and other parts of Colombia up through 2003 constituted one of these scant exceptions.

ⁱⁱⁱ FAIR Study: Human Rights Coverage Serving Washington’s Needs, Steve Rendall, Daniel Ward, Tess Hall, *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, February 3, 2009.