

A COLLAPSE OF CYBER-UTOPIANISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO: THE FISSURES OF ONLINE CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND POWER'S PERVERSE USE OF THE NET

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Abstract: This article considers a new media scenario in contemporary Mexico, which has propelled and transformed the notion of citizen journalism. Especially in the last years of the Felipe Calderón administration and the first ones of Enrique Peña Nieto's, citizen journalism acquired a significant relevance. Ordinary citizens, in order to mitigate the information vacuum and misinformation regarding the wave of death and destruction unleashed during the so-called War on Drugs, decided to report episodes of violence that were occurring across the country. While some information shared by citizen journalists on blogs and microblogs were valuable for their fellow citizens, a darker side of this type of reporting is equally noteworthy as, in some occasions, it has contributed to the circulation of narco-propaganda. However, this is not the only way in which failures of the notion of cyber-utopianism have been exposed. For instance, criminal networks, as well as local and national political forces and authorities, have taken advantage of digital technologies to put into practice effective strategies of surveillance against dissenting voices and of control of the flows of information.

Key Words: Mexico, Citizen journalism, Sousveillance, Bot Farms, Cyber dystopia.

Citizens have been able to avail themselves of communication technologies of the Internet era to perform citizenship in new political ways and actively participate in the flow of information. The Internet has become a highly prolific medium through which civilians have been able to produce and spread their own narratives and, in this way, to publicly counter hegemonic narratives on issues that affect them. In other words, the possibilities of increasingly affordable digital gadgets and the massive dissemination potential of the net in general and social media networks have transformed the user from a mere passive consumer into a potential producer of all types of content that can be shared immediately and on a global scale.

The Zapatistas, the indigenous rebel group in the highlands of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, were pioneers in adapting the Internet as an essential political tool in their struggle against the Mexican state beginning New Year's Eve of 1993, just a few hours before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico, and Canada took effect. Juanita Darling contends that the Zapatistas succeeded at evading the Mexican state's attempts for limiting press coverage of the uprising by offering interviews to independent Mexican and foreign journalists as well as by releasing *communiqués*, both in Spanish and English, through fax and email. The Internet, in particular, would not only allow the Zapatistas to reach but also to maintain a permanent communication with a large audience of sympathizers and people who were engaged in similar political struggles, both in Mexico and all over the world, with the hope of creating "national and transnational advocacy networks" (Darling 121, 127): "Through their own media, the Zapatistas actively participated in redefining the public debate [The] readers of Internet messages unabridged by gatekeepers formed an imagined community that challenged the dominant view of the revolution and the government, redefining the nation contested in the rebellion" (125-26).¹

According to Zeynep Tufekci, the Zapatistas' "global visibility, outreach, and organizing efforts arguably mark the beginning of the [...] wave of post-internet networked protests" which have taken place all over the world, especially since the last days of 2010 (109). Subsequently, about one year after Facebook rolled out the Arabic version of its platform, the massive protests in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia in support of the 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi marked the beginning of the so-called Tunisian Revolution. This popular protest not only soon unleashed the popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in what is known as the Arab Spring, but also inspired other major social movements elsewhere, such as the *Indignados* in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in New York's Zuccotti Park, and the democratic protests in Hong Kong.² The main grievances of citizens all over the world were economic justice and anti-austerity measures, failure of political representation and political systems, global justice, and rights of people. As Rosana Reguillo emphasizes, all the protest movements, despite the particularities of each, shared a feeling of "dissatisfaction over the order of the things that they perceive[d] as intolerable" (*Paisajes* 53).

Almost two decades after the Zapatistas' uprising, Mexico was part of this global trend. The movement #YoSoy132 (I am 132) originated on May 11, 2012 on the campus of the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, where Enrique Peña Nieto —at that time, the PRI candidate for the upcoming general elections— was scheduled to speak. The insensitive justification that Peña Nieto gave to the brutal police repression in the nearby city of San Salvador de Atenco in 2006 when he was the governor of the State of Mexico provoked an irate reaction on the part of dozens of students who attended the event.³ Many of them recorded their protest against the candidate with their cell phones and uploaded the videos onto social media, while several

1. Darling adopts Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community, in which Anderson conceives that the members of a nation "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion" (qtd. in Darling 6). Similarly, Darling underscores that the Zapatistas, and all those across Mexico and in other countries who decidedly supported their cause, shaped an imaginary community, as if they inhabited "different neighborhoods of the same community of resistance" (122).

2. Bouazizi self-immolated in response to the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation that some municipal officials inflicted on him. The massive protests began in the aftermath of Bouazizi's incident, while he was interned in a hospital, and intensified starting on January 4, 2011, when he finally died. Ten days later, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power for 23 years, stepped down as the president of Tunisia. The success of the protests in Tunisia triggered similar anti-government movements in many other Arab countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Sudan, or Iranian Khuzestan. In Libya (Muammar Gaddafi), Egypt (Hosni Mubarak), and Yemen (Ali Abdullah Saleh), rulers were also deposed.

3. This operation, authorized by Peña Nieto, resulted in the death of two high school students, 200 people arrested, and almost thirty young women raped.

Mexican mainstream media outlets echoed the reaction of Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, the PRI national president, who stated that the protesters were not students of that university but people interested in disrupting the campaign event. The students' reaction against Coldwell's misleading comments resulted in 131 students appearing in a video in which they individually identified themselves and showed their University ID cards ("Cómo nace"). The video was published on YouTube and quickly went viral. Right away, college students from other Mexican universities and civilians in general used the hashtag #YoSoy132 to join that protest. Mainly on Twitter, they wanted to state that, symbolically, they were the 132nd student. In turn, spontaneous action by students was the catalyst for a protest movement through which, in the following months, many Mexicans objected, both online and in the streets, against three primary dynamics that permeated Mexican politics: the manipulation and the lack of democratization of the mainstream media; the possible return of the PRI to power with Peña Nieto as candidate; and the systemic corruption in the functioning of the country (Reguillo, *Paisajes* 54).⁴ On the one hand, social media became an invaluable organizational tool that allowed the protesters to maintain contact with each other and inform the bulk of society of the activities and the events that they organized. On the other hand, those outlets enabled civilians to counter the authorities' media control through the undertaking of diverse practices of citizen journalism, such as live streaming or the massive dissemination of their recorded meetings, acts of protest, and even police repression; the facilitation of the exchange of ideas and the creation of discussion forums where any individual could participate; and the sharing of blog entries, posts, and articles that challenged power's attempts of misinformation.

The practice of citizen journalism in 21st century Mexico has gone far beyond #YoSoy132. There have been many other situations and contexts in which ordinary civilians have spontaneously become reporters and often, using their own smartphones, have photographed or recorded events which, due to their public interest, have been shared on diverse social media outlets. In this regard, I view ordinary people's efforts to mitigate the information vacuum that prevailed during the first years of the War on Drugs to represent the most remarkable exercise of citizen journalism in contemporary Mexico. In the first part of this article, I examine the so-called *narcoblogs* and warning networks, which have been the main two practices of citizen journalism that flourished as a response to the lack of reliable information in traditional media about the wave of violence unleashed since the end of 2006, when the Felipe Calderón administration initiated an alleged crusade against the main criminal organizations that have operated in the country for decades.⁵ However, in the second part of the article, I argue that the euphoria initially surrounding this case of sousveillance —a concept that I describe in more detail below— has abated over time. While laudatory, popular initiatives in citizen journalism have not always solved the persisting deficit of information about the War on Drugs. Besides the fissures that seem to accompany this kind of counter-narrative, I also focus on the capacity of power from above to collapse the cyber-utopianism that online citizen journalism embodies. In other words, I argue that different events have shown that the Internet and social media have also turned into indispensable tools for the state apparatus and organized crime. They have engaged in different practices of digital surveillance to curtail and eliminate dissenting voices, as well as to fashion their own propaganda to maximize control over the flows of information and, therefore, impose their influence on public opinion. Thus, cyberspace has become a critical site for the dissemination of competing narratives as well as for the implementation of practices of scrutiny between citizens and the authorities and organized crime.

4. Two of the most iconic acts of protest carried out by the movement #YoSoy132 took place in the Televisa headquarters and the Estela de Luz, which, in the eyes of the protesters, symbolized the systemic corruption of the political power in the country. On June 13, 2012, hundreds of people gathered in the proximities of Mexico's main TV channel and made use of projected images and a horn to display a five-minute video on the walls of the building. The video began with the rhetoric question "What do they manipulate behind these walls?" and had as one of its slogans the subversive sentence "Now we are those who tell the news" (Reguillo, *Paisajes* 81). Similarly, the very controversial Estela de Luz, which was commissioned by the former president Felipe Calderón to commemorate the bicentenary of Mexico's independence and the centenary of the Mexican Revolution, was also the scenario chosen to hold meetings, discussions, and speeches.

5. The militarization of Mexico intensified during the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) and continued under the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-). The War on Drugs has been a resounding failure. While the undertaking of a questionable kingpin strategy resulted in some well-known Mexican drug traffickers being captured (Pérez Ricart), organized crime groups, far from being extinguished, still operate. In fact, the crime groups have expanded geographically and have infiltrated other parts of the country sowing immense levels of spectacular violence.

The dramatic transformations in the dispersal of information occurred following the arrival of the Internet ushered in profound changes in the news ecosystem, which C. W. Anderson defines as “the entire ensemble of individuals, organizations, and technologies within a particular geographic community or around a particular issue, engaged in journalistic production and, indeed, in journalistic consumption” (412). Irremediably, journalism is no longer what it had been conceived until the end of the 20th century. Put another way, current times have given rise to new concepts of journalism. Mark Deuze, for instance, adopts Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity and coins the term “liquid journalism” to refer to a kind of journalism which has entered into a spiral fixated of immediacy and celerity, and which is both cause and effect of the contemporary liquid modern society.⁶ To Anu Kantola, liquid journalism is also characterized by not being exclusively limited to professional reporters and the newsrooms of conventional media outlets, but rather for being open to new actors, namely citizens, who, disinterestedly or not, can avail themselves of the enormous possibilities of the new communication technologies at their disposal to somehow get involved in the processes of the public circulation of information: “Journalism, as a profession, cannot control the public sphere in the way it used to in the age of mass media and mass audiences. Journalists are losing their monopoly on public voice, and many other people claim their right to use their voice in public life” (434).

An abundant academic output has resulted in a wide variety of approaches to the phenomenon of citizen journalism, which has not ceased to evolve and which, instead of being clearly defined, remains somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, definitions by the likes of Jay Rosen are broad: “When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that’s citizen journalism” (Rosen).⁷ On the contrary, some critics, such as Ansgard Heinrich, take a much narrower approach by making a distinction between who they consider to be citizen journalists and other kinds of news-deliverers. According to Heinrich, the term citizen journalism exclusively refers to a particular type of information node in the contemporary sphere of networked journalism. To her, the key factor is the intentionality on the part of the individual: a citizen journalist is not an ordinary person who happens to witness a newsworthy event and makes it public by themselves, but someone who is “concerned with a *continuing* coverage of issues they are interested in and they choose various methods to provide such coverage” (138, *italics* in original). In this regard, Heinrich stresses that people who become citizen journalists do so because they often disagree with the coverage provided by traditional media organizations. Such discontent encourages them to take action and demonstrate that they “are capable of delivering different perspectives —or another layer of information— to stories” (Heinrich 141).

Clearly, the Internet has empowered dissenting individuals as they no longer depend entirely on the mainstream media outlets and their filters to reach a large audience, a dynamic that poses significant repercussions on public opinion. At present, individuals are able to exercise absolute control over the process of production and diffusion of their own messages through their websites and their personal or collective accounts in different social media outlets. These citizens are paradigmatic examples of the new subjectivities that, according to Jodi Dean, have resulted from the network society. Dean’s argument essentially reproduces the view of Hardt and Negri, who point out that current times have witnessed the crisis of the mediating social institutions —the nuclear family, the prison, the school, the union, and the local church— and, therefore, the inevitable passage from the disciplinary society to the society of control:

6. As Bauman emphasizes, “journalists today are confronted by a readership of ‘zappers,’ picking a sentence apart in bits and pieces, consuming not so much ideas, interpretations, arguments and analyses, as (in the currently fashionable terms) ‘sound bites’ [...] They will be in fact eliminated at the earliest stage of their message’s travel if what they produce were not ‘headline-worthy’ stuff” (Deuze 676).

7. Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis take a similar tact but are among those scholars who alternatively use terms such as “participatory journalism” or “user-generated content” instead of citizen journalism to refer to this reality: “The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires” (9). This definition encompasses remarkably diverse practices by ordinary citizens, which range from the sharing of a video recording that shows a supposed newsworthy event to a blog entry commenting on a topical subject or an opinion given in the course of a live television debate which is open to the participation of the audience.

Hardt and Negri argue that the old political subject —the citizen-subject of an autonomous political sphere, the disciplined subject of civil society, the liberal subject willing to vote in public and then return home to his private domesticity — can no longer serve as a presupposition of theory or action [...] In their place, we find fluid, hybrid, and mobile subjectivities who are undisciplined, who have not internalized specific norms and constraints, and who can now only be controlled. (76)

The remarkable emergence in Mexico of ordinary civilians acting as amateur journalists in the context of the War on Drugs lends credence to the idea that these actors do not come onto the scene by chance, but instead frequently as a result of an adverse situation. The shock experienced by many Mexicans to the deluge of violence in select cities and towns became even more disconcerting due to the lack of information regarding these events in traditional media outlets. Insufficient coverage was especially apparent at the local level, since civilians could barely find explanations or even references in the press to the crimes that had occurred where they lived. This lack of informative transparency has been due to the actions of criminals and corrupt authorities who have exerted meticulous and comprehensive control over information by combining media blackouts with misinformation. Thus, while reporters were silenced or forced to collaborate with criminal networks, ordinary people committed themselves to replacing professional journalists in order to inform others about what was actually happening.⁸ These generally anonymous citizen journalists embody what Stephen Cooper calls the Fifth Estate, “a watcher of the watchdog” (14):

[Whereas] the metaphor of watchdog has long been popular as shorthand for the structural role of the free press in a representative democracy (13) [...] bloggers do have the power to identify factual inaccuracies in mainstream reporting, second-guess the news judgment of mainstream editors, argue for different interpretations of fact than those offered in mainstream stories, or draw attention to stories they feel have been insufficiently covered. (14)

This work of monitoring the content published by mainstream media outlets illustrates the essence of *sousveillance*. Coined by Steve Mann, *sousveillance* refers to a spatial and directional dynamic that opposes surveillance. Surveillance, as suggested by the French prefix *sur-*, means to watch from above in a figurative scale of power relations and is conducted by those who possess the greater political power. *Sousveillance*, with the French prefix *sous-*, means the opposite: a “watchful experience from below” (Mann and Ferenbok 22) that is practiced by those at the margins of power. Therefore, *sousveillance* acts as “a balancing force” (26), which suggests that Foucault’s interpretation of the Panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham “is no longer sufficient” (26) to describe contemporary power relationships mediated by networked, wearable gadgets capable of broadcasting what we see (24). Within the Panopticon, the watcher sees the body of the prisoner, but the latter cannot see the former because they are even unable to see a shadow. Unlike the asymmetrical gazing between guards and prisoners in the Panopticon, which results in an institutionally disciplined or docile body, the power politics of *sousveillance* underscores that ordinary people “can and will not only look back, but in doing so potentially drive social and political change” (24).

Despite citizen journalism did not originate when ordinary people began to have access to the Internet but some time before, current media technology makes the exercise of *sousveillance* “more effective” (Mann and Ferenbok 31).⁹ Citizen journalists have mostly employed blogs and,

8. More than 150 media professionals were killed in Mexico between 2000 and 2022 possibly due to their profession (“Periodistas asesinados”). However, the assassinations of journalists is just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. In 2020, for instance, at least one reporter was somehow attacked every thirteen hours in Mexico (*Distorsión* 41). Such statistics explain why Mexico is considered as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. In fact, Mexico was ranked 128 in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index created by Reporters Without Borders. The following excerpt from the Index report concisely reiterates dynamics of violence against journalists: “Journalists who cover sensitive political stories or crime, especially at the local level, are warned, threatened and then often gunned down in cold blood. Others are abducted and never seen again, or they flee to other parts of the country or abroad as the only way to ensure their survival” (“Mexico”).

9. As Jessica Roberts puts it, the case often identified as the earliest example of citizen journalism is George Holliday’s recording of Los Angeles police officers beating Rodney King in 1991 (3). Roberts describes how this citizen “recorded the video with his home video camera and gave the tape to local news station KTLA, which aired an edited version of the tape” (3). Unlike citizen journalists in current times, by submitting his recording to a professional news organization, Holliday allowed it to maintain its “gatekeeping role, deciding when and how to broadcast the video, in what context, and even what parts of it were shown” (3).

more recently, microblogs, such as Twitter and Facebook. Mary Garden affirms that the conceptualization of the notion of blog in general has also become “more complicated and less clear” as long as this communicative tool has evolved and has been used for different purposes over time (484). In the specific case of the blogs which are created and edited by citizen journalists, she underscores that they, although they may not strictly follow traditional journalistic routines and conventions, “perform the very same social function” usually associated with institutionalized media since they have “a clear intention to collect, analyze, interpret or comment on current events to wide audiences” (Garden 492). Since diverse *sousveillance* practices may result in different forms of citizen journalism and blogging, it is remarkable that the constant episodes of violence associated with the War on Drugs, as well as the insufficient coverage that local and national mainstream media outlets gave to them in the first years of this security crisis, caused ordinary Mexican civilians to engage in two different but complementary types of online reporting: *narcoblogs* and the warning networks.

Citizens Reporting Violence

According to Andrés Monroy-Hernández and Luis Daniel Palacios, the first blogs highlighting the activities of organized crime groups in Mexico were published in the years prior to the beginning of the War on Drugs (83). Such sites would become widespread after 2008 with 33 blogs focusing on the criminal networks during the early 2010s (83). While Dean points out that blogs, in general and not specific to Mexico, had reached a saturation point by then and had already turned into “displaced mediators” (29), Monroy-Hernández and Palacios observe that “the surge in violence since 2006, combined with the silencing of journalists and increased Internet penetration in Mexico, created the perfect trifecta for the popularization” (84) of *narcoblogs*. These websites published analytical or opinionated discussions about the conflict and became especially popular with the postings of articles featuring original video recordings and photographs of arrests and explicit violence or consequences of violence, such as interrogations, shootings, beheadings, dismembered bodies, torture sessions, murders, military operations, and mass graves. The publication or posting of these videos and images, which revealed the extreme violence that has involved members of criminal organizations, the military, law enforcement officers, politicians, and innocent civilians, transformed the blogs into a kind of a digital surrogate of the sensationalistic *nota roja* (red page), a very popular and firmly established journalistic genre in Mexico that depicts stories of crime and accidents in a spectacular way.¹⁰

Most of the images and videos published in the blogs would have never been disseminated by conventional media due to their harshness. Of all the websites, *Blog del Narco* attained extraordinary notoriety to the point that it was the most emblematic of the *narcoblog* phenomenon during its period of activity from March 2, 2010 to April 30, 2013. The blog’s supposed editor was a woman known as Lucy, who would eventually introduce herself as a journalist in her late twenties from an undisclosed city in northern Mexico and who collaborated with a friend who specialized in informatics. Her anonymity, akin to the hidden identities of most of the citizen journalists in the War on Drugs, illustrates the ghostly existence of actual people who are forced to use fictitious names to protect themselves. Despite Lucy’s alleged background as a reporter, her circumstances were not typical for a journalist who edits a personal blog as a supplement to their professional activity. Rather, in *Blog del Narco*, Lucy acted as a citizen, or better, as an ordinary civilian who deviated from journalism’s conventions and made use of her knowledge on reporting to shape an online news site which published what, on many occasions, was not

10. Amalendu Misra tells that, within Mexican society, there is both an “appetite for gruesome images of death” and the “public’s obsession in following death closely” (25). His view reminds us of a famous quotation by the Mexican poet Carlos Pellicer, which is cited by Carlos Monsiváis in the chronicle he writes about the *nota roja* in *Los mil y un velorios* (“The Thousand and One Visitations”): “The Mexican people have two obsessions: the taste for death and the love for flowers” (192). John Dickie’s documentary *El diablo y la nota roja* (“The Devil and the Red Page”) features eloquent testimonies that evidence the demand for this kind of journalism by large sections of the Mexican population. Despite its popularity, Monsiváis considers that the *nota roja* has become a declining genre due to the violence caused by the War on Drugs: “[Drug trafficking] radically modifies the meaning of the ‘nota roja’ and, almost daily, expands the ‘nota roja’ to eight columns. The singularity of the criminals and the crimes has disappeared, and the massification of the murder also results in massive dehumanization” (13).

disseminated by traditional media sources. In 2012, Lucy published the bilingual book *Dying for the Truth. Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War*, where she reviews some of the most shocking episodes of violence covered in the blog during its first year of existence. In the book's introduction, Lucy stresses that her life, as well as that of her friend's, changed the day they decided to leave behind their "indifference" (3) and, secretly, run their blog in order to rectify information blackouts and mitigate the generalized silence among a large swath of the Mexican press:

We just wanted to post unfiltered, uncensored news about the government's war with the *narcogangsters*, about the shootouts, decapitations, and other bloody acts taking place on a daily basis. These were events that print journalists and TV news anchors in Mexico should have been reporting to citizens, but their voices had largely been silenced. Unable to manage the cartels, politicians were finding it much easier to manage the local and national media. Because of censorship, threats, and assassinations, publishers, editors, writers, journalists, cameramen, news anchors, and anyone involved in mainstream media were downplaying the crisis engulfing the nation. As a journalist, you couldn't say that two children — eight and ten years old — had been executed and found in a box, because it wasn't allowed. (3)

Monroy-Hernández and Palacios counted an average of 216 posts per month in the blog (86). This signals the high degree of Lucy's commitment to the cause of publicizing information. In this regard, Monroy-Hernández and Palacios underscore that *Blog del Narco* "quickly acquired a reputation for providing exclusive content, most notably gruesome execution videos," and that "the site's popularity skyrocketed" as those videos went viral (87).¹¹ The site's popularity also contributed to the consistent mentions of the blog across social media and the focused media coverage by mainstream media that Lucy received from the outset of the site's publication.¹² Despite Lucy being the key figure of *Blog del Narco*, she availed herself of collaborations with other anonymous source providers, who, with varying frequency and sometimes motivated by obscured reasons, provided Lucy with relevant information and images to publish on her website:

The promise of anonymity spurred people from all walks of life to send us eyewitness accounts of atrocities, as well as pictures snapped on their mobile phones, so that we could circulate material unavailable elsewhere. We received information from soldiers, police officers, mothers, businessmen, students, workers, journalists, even cartel gunmen (3).

Lucy ensures that she published everything that came into her possession, regardless of the explicit brutality of the images, and the fact that, in many cases, she suspected that members of criminal groups had sent them for propaganda purposes, as discussed later in this article. Indeed, Lucy defends her website from criticism of sensationalism and unnecessary gore by arguing that she never published such dreadful images for "the shock value" but in order to show the undistorted reality of the wave of violence in Mexico and to facilitate the victims' identification and location by their kin (5). Though violence has not ceased in Mexico and the number of homicides and forced disappearances is currently even higher than it was at the beginning of the War on Drugs,¹³ the phenomenon of the *narcoblogs* has lost momentum in recent years. The origin of these blogs, the identities, the intentions of the administrators, and even the possible links between them remain unclear.¹⁴ In turn, distrust towards this form of citizen journalism has been sown among critics over time. For instance, whereas Monroy-Hernández and Palacios, in 2014, stressed

11. As an indication of the site's spike in popularity, in 2012, the blog recorded an average of 25 million monthly hits and was ranked among the 100 most-visited websites in Mexico by Alexa's search rankings (Dying 5).

12. For example, on April 9, 2013, a few days after the publication of the blog's last posts, the television channel *Al Jazeera* broadcasted excerpts of an interview that they had previously held by phone and where her voice was intentionally distorted ("Rise").

13. Although it is impossible to ascertain completely accurate figures in a war-like scenario, more than 350,000 people have been killed and more than 100,000 people remain disappeared so far coinciding with the military action against the cartels (Pardo Veiras and Arredondo, Nochebuena).

14. El Blog del Narco (www.elblogdelnarco.com) garnered more attention with the sudden cessation of Blog del Narco. There are some striking coincidences between El Blog del Narco, which is also edited anonymously, and Lucy's Blog del Narco: they not only share the same alleged informative endeavor and impartiality, the blogs' names are nearly identical, they both have the same banner at the top of their respective sites, and they began to report almost simultaneously. In its origin, El Blog del Narco operated through several web domains, which were administered by an individual who used the pseudonym "Historiador." Monroy-Hernández and Palacios emphasize that Lucy and Historiador, at the beginning of the 2010s, "frequently reference[d] one another in their posts and interact[ed] in the comments sections of other sites" (85). Monroy-Hernández and Palacios mention that Historiador even claimed that Blog del Narco had plagiarized the name of his blog (85).

that Lucy's *Blog del Narco* had served as "an invaluable outlet for disseminating information" (81) in a context where reliable information was difficult to obtain and even considered that this blog "helps us understand a shift in what constitutes a news organization" (86), more recent criticism of *narcoblogs*, such as that of Emily Hind in 2018, makes a less favorable analysis of this phenomenon in general.

Hind focuses on the ambiguous essence of *Blog del Narco* and does so by figuratively describing some of this blog's most defining characteristics as tactics of contestatory piracy and complacent tourism. Regarding its pirate-like dimension, Hind points out that, despite *Blog del Narco* "claims to give the information that other media will not transmit" (114), it actually "copied a significant portion of its stories from mainstream sources" (114). That is, while Lucy's action might appear noble at first, she is inevitably presented by Hind as a polemical figure that takes advantage of professional journalists' work. In fact, some Mexican journalists waged a smear campaign against Lucy and, in addition to claiming that her blog was secretly controlled by criminal groups, they publicly accused her of deliberately plagiarizing pieces of information previously published by mainstream media outlets.¹⁵ Besides practices of piracy, Hind denies placing citizen journalists at the same level as professional journalists, so that she sees the former's reporting as a kind of tourism which, under no circumstances, can be compared to the job that professional reporters normally do. She points out that Lucy's "[h]ome blogging ducks the dangerous reporting from the field that professional journalists undertake" (119). This argument, which insinuates that Lucy reported without taking the risks of professional reporters on the front lines, is dubious. In reality, even though many professional journalists have been especially exposed to violence due to their coverage of violence related to the War on Drugs, it is also true that some bloggers and Lucy herself have also been victimized for publishing what some criminal networks wanted to keep hidden. In other words, risks have more to do with the content of the information that a reporter, whether professional or amateur, publishes than with the fact of reporting on the streets where events occur.

Parallel to the rise of *narcoblogs* since 2010, the distinctive features of microblogs fostered the emergence of another form of citizen journalism which likewise sought to mitigate the near-complete news blackout related to the War on Drugs. The inherent immediacy of Facebook and Twitter allowed for the formation of warning networks through which civilians themselves reported in real time the incidents that were occurring in their municipalities. The objective of these alerts was to prevent citizens from transiting through a specific area where a shooting or any other act of violence was taking place at that moment. The preferential option of Twitter for both informing and being informed of a violent event can be explained by the fact that this platform does not limit the interactions to the users' list of contacts or friends but rather facilitates the communication among people who, despite not necessarily knowing each other, have common interests. In order to make this system of alerts more efficient and ensure that the targeted public of those alerts did not miss critical information, the civilians who somehow got involved in the warning networks normally made use of determined hashtags. Examples of the hashtags employed in diverse Mexican cities are #mtyfollow in Monterrey, #reynosafollow in Reynosa, #saltillo in Saltillo, and #verafollow in Veracruz. The analysis of a large number of tweets published with these hashtags led researchers to conclude that this phenomenon was mostly driven by what they call "social media curators" (Monroy-Hernández et al. 1443). That is, these citizens, unlike Lucy, positioned themselves as intermediaries by simply passing on or adding comments, interpretations, and updates to alerts and information previously posted by others (1444). These social media curators were actually a small group of generally anonymous individuals who, due to their constant dedication to this information sharing practice, had a large audience and

15. The unknown editor(s) of *El Blog del Narco* acknowledges their status as "pirates." Nevertheless, when they compared themselves with the professional reporters who work for Mexican media, they praise their own independence: "We may be pirates, but never pawns or slaves. We are free and we express ourselves as such. We do not serve any kind of external interest nor are we at the feet of anyone. No one pays us for publishing or not publishing anything. We do not work under pressure or threat, and we do not sell our services to the highest bidder" ("Acerca").

contributed a sizable amount of content related to incredibly violent events in their municipalities (1443).

However, the apparent good that emerges from the phenomenon of the warning networks can also be called into question. For instance, Monroy-Hernández and others point out that, “[a]lthough there is certainly a fair amount of altruism in these people’s participation,” they had the impression that the curators were, “in a way, competing with each other for attention” (1449). Some curators openly told these researchers about the issue of “tweet theft” (1449), which evinces “the lack of trust and cooperation among curators” (1449). Along with a competition for notoriety, Twitter penetration in Mexico is another factor to consider. Only 2.2% of Mexicans used Twitter regularly by 2010 (Islas). Such a low percentage would suggest that the effect of the alerts was actually low, although two factors must be taken into account: first, the adoption of Twitter would presumably be higher in those cities with an active warning network; second, the Twitter users who usually became informed by following their city’s most popular curators and hashtag would also spread the alerts among their social media circles by means of other social media networks, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Finally, it is noteworthy that the employment of hashtags soon became distorted and, thus, their usefulness was considerably diminished. Such a misuse of hashtags was largely due to their deliberate addition in tweets that were not related to violence but to other events in those cities.

Social Media and Ethics

As noted above, the practices of citizen journalism exerted by means of the *narcoblogs* and the warning networks have sparked an ethical debate. However, the discussion around the flows of information during this period cannot be limited to the analysis of the rightfulness of those who were somehow committed to telling what was happening. Indeed, the focus must also be put on how political actors and the criminal networks have perversely made use of the Internet to weaken the efficiency of, or directly block, the informative endeavor of the professional and citizen journalists; an effort that has been insufficient to curtail the deluge of death and destruction in which the country has been immersed since the moment in which the Mexican state allegedly decided to eradicate the so-called cartels. Put another way, the adversities that professional and amateur reporters have faced during the War on Drugs prove that any glib and uncritical celebration of the democratic potential of the Internet is unrealistic.

In this regard, whereas theorists such as Manuel Castells, Jan van Dijk, and Scott Lash praise the communicational possibilities of the network society, others are highly skeptical about the actual democratic impact of the new scenario. For instance, Bauman openly criticizes those who conceive of “World Wide Web surfing as a new and more effective form of political engagement, and of the accelerated connection to the Internet and rising speed of surfing as advances in democracy” (Deuze 674). Indeed, Bauman underlines that “[the] powerful flow of information is not a confluent of the river of democracy, but an insatiable intake intercepting its contents and channeling them away into magnificently huge, yet stale and stagnant artificial lakes” (674). “The more powerful that flow is,” Bauman concludes, “the greater the threat of the riverbed drying up” (674). To Evgeny Morozov, cyber-utopianism, as he coins the “naïve belief” that endows the Internet with “nearly magical qualities” to favor the oppressed rather than the oppressor (xiii), actually stems from a “selective and, at times, incorrect readings of history” (xii):

Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how tearfully

dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become. Instead, most cyber-utopians stuck to a populist account of how technology empowers the people, who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel, mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever new tool comes along next year. (The *people*, it must be noted, really liked to hear such theories.) Paradoxically, in their refusal to see the downside of the new digital environment, cyber-utopians ended up belittling the role of the Internet, refusing to see that it penetrates and reshapes all walks of political life, not just the ones conducive to democratization. (xiv, *italics* in original)

States' employment of digital technology to surveille has effectively resulted in a new epoch, what Bauman deems a post-panopticon era of liquid surveillance. The new forms of control have no obvious connection with imprisonment and the traditional architecture of walls and windows has turned virtual. In 2017, a joint investigation conducted by The Citizen Lab of the University of Toronto and the non-governmental organizations Article 19, R3D, and Social TIC would reveal that since 2011, during the Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto administrations, several agencies of the Mexican government, such as The Attorney General of the Republic and various governmental intelligence services, had employed the spyware Pegasus to surveille some of Mexico's most prominent human rights lawyers, journalists, and anti-corruption activists.¹⁶ This software, sold by the Israeli cyberarms manufacturer NSO Group to the Mexican government to, in theory, investigate organized crime groups and terrorists, infiltrates the smartphones of the targets right after they unknowingly click on a link included in an apparently harmless text message.¹⁷

Needless to say, surveillance during the War on Drugs has hardly been limited to the Mexican government's illicit use of Pegasus against professionals who, due to different reasons, were on the frontline of the national political agenda and were inconvenient actors in the eyes of the federal authorities. Indeed, surveillance by not so sophisticated but equally effective means has been a fundamental pillar in the strategies of control that, at a local level, corrupt governments, public officials, and organized crime groups have carried out against the dissenting voices of reporters, environmental and human rights activists, community leaders, and citizen journalists. These undisciplined spies, exercisers of sousveillance, have suffered digital insecurity since they have been constantly monitored to know who they are, what they do, what information they have, and who their contacts are. That is, surveillance against them has not been necessarily a preventive practice undertaken to discipline them but, rather, power's response to counter a previous sousveillance. At a local level, this surveillance is unlikely to be as silent and invisible as the one put into practice by the Mexican government through Pegasus, which was intended to get as much information as possible from the monitored subjects without leaving any trace. On the contrary, in local scenarios different types of traces are purposely left as a general rule to, somehow, let the undisciplined subject know that they are being surveilled. Such a strategy aims to instill fear in the monitored individual, who, at that point, must opt for self-censorship or for continuing to publicly act as a dissenting voice even though they assume that such a rebellious attitude would likely turn them into victims of violence. On some occasions, there are no such warnings, and digital surveillance is just the prelude of the exercise of actual violence, which may take the form of threats, intimidations, cyberattacks, physical attacks, material thefts, tortures, or even assassinations.

16. The investigators detected the sending of up to 88 text messages with the malicious link to a large number of individuals, such as the influential journalists Carlos Loret de Mola and Carmen Aristegui; two colleagues and the widow of the assassinated reporter Javier Valdez Cárdenas; the members of the GIEI, the interdisciplinary group of independent investigators of the Ayotzinapa case; Claudio X. González, the director of the non-profit civil organization Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad (Mexicans Against Corruption and Impunity); and the human rights defenders Karla Michael Salas and David Peña, who were the legal representatives of the victims of the Narvarte case.

17. The use of this kind of software did not cease following the change in the federal government, since it has been disclosed that the Attorney General of Mexico (FGR, Fiscalía General de la República) signed at least four contracts in 2019 and 2020, during the López Obrador administration, with a total value of 5,6 million US dollars with the Mexican firm Neolinx to acquire a series of programs that allow for the geolocation of cell phones and data analysis on a massive-scale (Gallegos). Research conducted by Citizen Lab concluded that the phones of two journalists and a human rights activist were infected between 2019 and 2021 with Pegasus (Solomon).

The case of Lucy, by her own account, exemplifies the diverse forms through which violence has been systematically exercised against citizen journalists as well as community leaders and activists. In *Dying for the Truth*, Lucy reveals that, shortly before the completion of her book, two of her collaborators, young people who used to provide her with information about violent acts committed by criminal groups, were disemboweled and hung off a bridge in the northern state of Tamaulipas: “Large handwritten signs, known as *narcobanners*, next to their bodies mentioned our blog, and stated that this was what happened to Internet snitches. The message concluded with a warning that we were next” (1). Lucy also tells the case of an executed journalist who regularly shared information with *Blog del Narco*: “The assassins left keyboards, a mouse, and other computer parts strewn across her body, as well as a sign that mentioned our blog again” (1). In fact, despite the extreme security measures that they took to escape the digital surveillance to which they were subjected —she claims that her blog suffered “hundreds of cyberattacks” (3)—, Lucy would feel compelled to flee and disappear, to the point that her whereabouts have remained unknown since mid-2013.

In addition to the surveillance measures undertaken to obtain critical information and/or silence dissenting individuals, some political actors and organized crime groups have also taken advantage of social media to carry out ethically objectionable propaganda practices of a different nature. Whereas the former, as shall be shown later, has tried to control the public opinion regarding political issues even through dishonest communication strategies, the latter’s appropriation of social media has tended to exhibit power to multiple audiences. As Howard Campbell notes, those audiences include rival cartels, opponents and allies within law enforcement, the military and the government, potentially disloyal cartel members, the general public, and even the U.S. government (64). According to Campbell, the so-called narco-propaganda is “a political or quasi-political discourse;” “a form of psychological warfare and terrorism” which is “designed to intimidate, dehumanize, and dominate” (64). In this regard, Robert Gómez stresses that, in this “new dimension of warfare,” where digital videos have become critical “instruments of war” (190) and the social media are “a platform for the display of power” (200), the spectacles of violence created and publicized by criminal groups have become “a means of social control in Mexico” (190).

On the one hand, some criminal groups have tended to make use of social media to show off their lifestyle by sharing videos of shootings and posing with impressive military equipment and eye-catching luxury goods, such as jewelry and high-powered cars. This kind of practice illustrates that, as Sarah Womer and Robert Bunker put it, “cartels advertise themselves as a culture, a religion, and a way of life” (86). Even though usually they hide their faces to make it difficult to identify them, this clear exercise of self-representation contributes to the mythification of the criminal groups. Similar to their traditional representations in fictional works and even some journalistic publications, the criminal groups portray themselves in social media as organizations formed by determined, fearless, and successful individuals.

On the other hand, the criminal groups have taken advantage of the lack of censorship on some digital media, such as the *narcoblogs* and YouTube, to provide the widest dissemination possible of both explicit and implicit messages. The video recording of spoken statements by masked individuals is a common practice among the explicit messages. As Campbell points out, in a kind of communication he refers to as narco-videos, “the drug-trafficking groups announce themselves as the new power, the emerging quasi-state body to be respected and feared” (68) in a determined region. Many times, these declarations are preceded or followed by sessions of interrogations and torture which

culminate with the prisoners being strangled, shot in the head, stabbed in the heart, or beheaded.¹⁸ In addition to these low-quality recordings with a degraded aesthetic, the criminal groups have also circulated digitally other types of explicit messages which are not digital in their original form. For instance, as the brief statements that Lucy mentioned above, sicarios have written on poster boards beside the corpses of the people they have just assassinated in order to justify their killings and/or threaten other individuals who could be related to them. On some occasions, those messages have been written on the victims' t-shirts or even on their own skin. Similarly, the so-called *narco-mantas* (narco-banners), painted signs placed in public and visible spaces such as bridges, have become a recurring medium to transmit explicit messages containing criticisms or threats against the authorities, law enforcement, journalists, or rival groups.

Social media have also become criminals' preferred way to transmit implicit messages. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of the episodes of violence and terror is that, frequently, the victims' bodies, which have been subjected to extreme brutality and inhumanity, have become messages themselves. An abundant expressive violence has produced encrypted but, at the same time, unequivocal messages that have made the addition of any explicit statement by the perpetrators unnecessary. As Reguillo explains, the expressive violence, unlike utilitarian violence, is an intended "exhibition of a total and unquestionable power which makes use of the most brutal and at the same time sophisticated forms of violence over a body, which is already deprived of its humanity" ("La narcomáquina"). Examples of expressive violence are massive killings, amputations, dismembered bodies thrown on avenues, severed heads left in public places or displaying a degraded representation, and bodies hung by ropes from bridges. These spectacles of violence, Campbell adds, are not "just brutal and excessive but stylized," since they are "calculated for maximum propagandistic impact in struggles over territory, drug markets, and control of particular cartels" (66).

As was the case with the surveillance measures, the more sophisticated propaganda practices carried out by the political elites in social media do not resemble the ones undertaken by criminal groups that generally operate at a local level. The case of the so-called *peñabots* is, without doubt, the clearest and most striking example regarding political power's use of the cyberspace to try to decisively influence Mexican public opinion through morally reprehensible strategies. The term *peñabot* began to circulate at the beginning of the 2012 Mexican presidential campaign, when a large number of suspicious Twitter accounts were detected for exponentially increasing the list of followers of the official account of the then-candidate Enrique Peña Nieto overnight and, additionally, were dedicated to continuously praising him and his candidacy for the presidency of Mexico. Far from being a stand-alone event, there is evidence that the *peñabots* were deployed several times during the Peña Nieto administration (2012-2018). In those moments, the *peñabots* did not simply limit themselves to massively liking or retweeting tweets previously posted on the official Twitter accounts of the president and other government officials, but also shared favorable news and messages about Peña Nieto and, more importantly, actively countered oppositional tweets and hashtags that had become trending topics in Mexico and, therefore, damaged his public image.

The emergence of the *peñabots* decisively contributed to the popularization of the social bots, which are fully, or semi-automated, user-accounts designed to imitate human online-behavior and which, for some time, have been recurrently but not exclusively used for political manipulation and disinformation in many countries (Assenmacher et al. 1). This specific role explains that, in cases such as the *peñabots*, some critics opt for employing the term political bots

18. Campbell emphasizes that, in the course of interrogations and torture sessions, the prisoners "provide self-incriminating answers about their drug-trafficking activities, murders they have committed, or other acts deemed negative by those who have captured them" (69). "They reveal information," Campbell adds, "about the cartel they supposedly work for and divulge the names of police-men, politicians, and military officials supposedly on cartel payrolls" (69).

instead of the more generic term social bots. In 2016, while serving ten years in prison for charges related to hacking during Colombia's 2014 presidential election, the Colombian hacker Andrés Sepúlveda would acknowledge that he led a team of hackers who worked for the Peña Nieto presidential campaign in 2012, which he considers as "one of the dirtiest Latin American campaigns in recent memory" (Robertson et al.).¹⁹ Sepúlveda confesses that, besides installing spyware in opposition offices to access critical information and steal campaign strategies, he "manipulated social media to create false waves of enthusiasm and derision." That is, he coordinated what is popularly known as a *granja de bots* (a bot farm), where, for instance, an army of 30,000 automatic posters were able to create trends on Twitter. The automated bots simply completed the "less nuanced work," whereas he also managed thousands of fake social media profiles that he used to "shape discussions around topics such as Peña Nieto's plan to end drug violence, priming the social media pump with views that real users would mimic." Behind those political trolls (humans who use fake accounts) there were generally young students who needed extra income, with each of them in charge of dozens of Twitter and Facebook accounts (Peinado et al.).

However, as Luis Daniel puts it, the notion of *peñabots* not only applied to an automated software that required no human intervention or to low-wage workers paid to operate multiple social media accounts. It also referred to genuine supporters who mindlessly supported the PRI leader by putting their personal accounts at his service (Daniel). This was confirmed by Aurelio Nuño, a marketing director of the Peña Nieto presidential campaign, just a few hours after a video that went viral showed how dozens of people, gathered in a large room and carrying their laptops and cell phones, were being directed by some coordinators of the Peña Nieto campaign to "tweet in coordination with the explicit goal of drowning out" anti-EPN²⁰ hashtags that had posed major repercussions on Twitter right before the beginning of a decisive electoral debate on the verge of the general elections that Peña Nieto would finally win (Daniel). The video shows how one of the coordinators of Peña Nieto's active supporters warned them that they were going through "a time of crisis" because there were two negative hashtags that they had to "overturn immediately:" "Please, follow your coordinators' instructions. You all have to start tweeting, all together, the hashtag #EsMomentoDeMexico and retweeting the candidate's tweet" ("Lárgate").

The *peñabots* were simply the starting point of a practice that, despite the parties' denial, has become widespread in Mexican politics. Digital experts detected that the candidates who were running for the presidency in the 2018 general election also followed similar strategies to seek votes in a country where social media use is ubiquitous. According to the consulting firm Metrics Mexico, over 18% of Twitter content in Mexico over the previous weeks to that general election was created by bots and influencers (Peinado et al.). However, bots and trolls were not the only available tools to influence public opinion. The parties realized that generating fake news and advertising features on websites allegedly devoted to news were even more effective manipulation techniques. Be that as it may, it definitively became difficult to tell the difference between authentic and fake political discourse on social media.²¹

To what extent such information pollution is effective and can be crucial to determine the outcome of an election? Certainly, the resounding triumph of López Obrador, the clear favorite in the surveys prior to the 2018 election, evinces that the impact of manipulation practices through social media on public opinion is limited. Actually, according to the National Electoral Institute, López Obrador only devoted 4% of his campaign budget to propaganda on the Internet,

19. Sepúlveda, who told his story to a group of reporters of *Bloomberg's Businessweek* to convince the public that he is rehabilitated and to gather support for a reduced sentence, led a transnational team of hackers who worked on presidential elections in several Latin American countries, such as Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Venezuela (Robertson et al.).

20. EPN is the acronym of Enrique Peña Nieto.

21. In response, more than sixty Mexican media outlets, universities, and ONGs carried out the initiative Verificado 2018 — #QuieroQueVerifiquen (We want you to verify) —, which basically consisted on these organizations encouraging citizens to send them news or stories that were on social media for their verification.

whereas his rivals at least spent a quarter of their budgets on this purpose (“Luna de miel”). To Gabriela Warkentin de la Mora, López Obrador’s successful monopolization of the political debate on social media during the electoral campaign was due to the fact that his supporters put into practice “very efficient strategies” that went beyond “the overwhelming of bots and trolls” (Warkentin de la Mora):

López Obrador’s followers and advocates inhabit the digital spaces more organically than the other candidates’. This is due to the fact that, in general, they (López Obrador’s) have been part of these spaces of expression for more time given their condition of opposers to previous regimes, but also because many of them have used the conversation networks beyond the electoral contest. They are well-known neighbors: scholars, activists, artists, etc. (and their communities), whereas the PRI tribe has never been able to transcend its own sphere of conversation in an environment that looks suspiciously horizontal for them. (Warkentin de la Mora)

Aware of this factor, which worked in favor of his interests, López Obrador expressed his “gratitude to the blessed social media” during his first public speech right after winning that general election. In fact, López Obrador made of “*las benditas redes sociales*” one of the mottos of his administration: “Our people are more politized than ever before. They are very intelligent, so sharp that they do not allow to be manipulated. They have the capacity of discerning, they have their own criteria, and these virtues have relied on the blessed social media” (“#ConferenciaPresidente”). López Obrador’s initial glorification of social media was not only intended to highlight the triumph of his legion of committed supporters over armies of bots and trolls that mechanically disseminated fake news or systematically praised his political opponents and attacked his public image. He also presented the social media outlets as a powerful tool to counter the most influential conventional media outlets, which, in his view, openly support his political enemies. While López Obrador has brought front-and-center dozens of alleged independent *youtuberos* who are actually aligned with him, some national radio stations, television channels, and journals have been targeted by the president, who, during *las mañaneras*, the daily press conference he offers early in the mornings of the weekdays, has accused the dissenting media companies and journalists of being “conservative,” “misbehaved,” “conceited,” “deceitful,” and “journalism’s underworld” (Turati and Garza).

This crusade has made López Obrador double his bet on social media. A report by the data analyst company StreamCharts shows that his official YouTube channel, which broadcasted more than 208 hours of audiovisual content in the first trimester of 2023, had the sixth largest audience among streamers in Spanish. López Obrador’s preference for YouTube is not only a matter of reaching a larger audience but rather of completely controlling the messages he disseminates, since the content he produces is free from the interference of the different types of filters that conventional media impose. However, López Obrador’s relationship with Facebook and Twitter has not been so idyllic. At least, this is what can be deduced from his own public statements over the years. López Obrador, who was very critical when Twitter suspended Donald Trump’s account, has publicly demanded Elon Musk to “clean up” a platform that, in his view, “is taken by those who manage bot farms:” “[Twitter] is a fundamental, very important information tool, but has been under the control of conservative forces and mafia’s economic power” (“Disputa”). Similarly, in his first post on Threads, the social media site created by Mark Zuckerberg in mid 2023 to compete with X (Twitter), López Obrador wished that this new social media “does not opt for profit nor allow the use of bots” (“AMLO”). “It would be great to have a mechanism, a filter that prevents information

manipulation and makes authenticity come true in communication,” he added. López Obrador’s demand would be completely laudable if it were not for the fact that his administration has also been denounced for making use of bots. Some reports by Signa Lab, the Laboratory of Technological Innovation and Interdisciplinary Applied Studies of the Universidad Jesuita of Guadalajara, Mexico, concluded that the network of social media accounts that supports López Obrador has taken advantage of bot farms to boost his popularity as well as to inhibit and drown his political adversaries (Chávez, Reza). In fact, in December 2021, Twitter announced the elimination of a total of 276 non-verified accounts which worked as masked propaganda tools in favor of the administration of López Obrador (Ruiz-Healy).

A Digital Dystopia

In conclusion, the perverse use that Mexican authorities and criminal groups, whether jointly or separately, have made of the newest communication technologies and media throughout the War on Drugs reinforce a widespread view which demystifies the alleged democratic essence of cyberspace, since it has instead turned into a medium that has enabled innovative and very effective practices of surveillance and manipulation either against the bulk of the society or specific dissenting voices. Regardless, such a negative outlook runs parallel to the diverse practices of citizen journalism, which anonymous civilians have carried out to report episodes of violence that many times have gone unnoticed in conventional media outlets. These two types of practices, the dystopian and the utopian, have coexisted like two sides of a coin. They do not necessarily nullify each other. Instead, they are the outcomes of different actors and their opposed interests. Whereas a relatively minimum number of civilians have decided to combat the informative vacuum by themselves and let people know what was actually happening in their communities and in other parts of the country, local and national authorities, as well as groups of organized crime, have basically put into practice new strategies to consolidate their power.

It is complicated to measure the effectiveness and consequences of the apparently selfless labor undertaken by the citizen journalists. A very simplistic approach to this phenomenon would conclude that the real strength of citizen journalism has been minimum and unimportant, since such a laudable civil response against uncontrolled violence has proved to be ultimately ineffective in curbing the death and destruction that unfolds in many parts of the country since the end of 2006. However, it is undoubted that the endeavor of a small number of people provided their fellow citizens with relevant and helpful information and raised awareness of the extreme seriousness of the events among a population which has historically consumed cultural objects and even journalistic articles that have systematically banalized the illicit activities of organized crime groups and the authorities’ direct implications in those activities. In fact, the great popularity achieved by Lucy’s *Blog del Narco* proves that, at least at the beginning of the 2010s, citizen journalism had momentum and enough social clout to somehow obstruct the criminal networks all over Mexico, as evidenced by the fact that many citizen journalists were victimized for publishing what those groups intended to keep silent.

Many cases have shown that, in addition to the proverbial big fish eating the small ones, the substantial power that digital gadgets and social media potentially give to ordinary civilians practicing citizen journalism is not unlimited but conditioned by the will of those more powerful actors that those civilians want to expose. Authorities and organized crime have not only made constant use of technology to surveil and silence citizen and professional journalists but have also taken advantage of the same or even more sophisticated tools to

disseminate their own propaganda and, subsequently, consolidate their authority. That is to say, contemporary Mexico has been a kind of digital dystopia where the weak have been empowered on an illusory level, but only insofar as actual power has allowed it.

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