

Special Issue: Forum on “The Border in the Classroom: Approaches to Border Studies”
Edited by Benita Heiskanen and Andrae Marak

Review: *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* by the Fugitive Reporters of *Blog del Narco*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-936239-57-3

Narco-Blogging as an Epistemological Conundrum

By

Benita Heiskanen, Ph.D.
 Collegium Researcher at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies
 University of Turku, Finland

During the height of the so-called “drug war” waged in the U.S.-Mexico border region since 2006, members of the media became frequent targets of violence and were forced to operate under intense censorship demands. In response to the mainstream media’s predicament, some bloggers began reporting incidents related to the violence ravaging in Mexico over the Internet. *El Blog del Narco* [the *Narco Blog*] was one such effort, founded in March 2010 by an anonymous computer scientist and a journalist in an unidentified location in Mexico. The anonymous contributions—complete with photographs and video clips—originated from crime-scene witnesses, soldiers, police officers, businessmen, students, workers, journalists, and cartel gunmen. The blogs contain events related to the turf wars between cartels, with graphic images of tortured crime victims as well as videos containing the interrogations or confessions of members of rival cartels. In 2013, in an effort to cross over to an English-speaking audience, the founders published a bilingual book, *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside Mexico’s Violent Drug War*, by the Fugitive Reporters of *Blog del Narco*, published by Feral House in the United States.¹ Their mission was to post unfiltered and

¹ *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* by the Fugitive Reporters of *Blog del Narco*/*Muriendo por la verdad: Clandestinos dentro de la violenta narcoguerra mexicana* de los periodistas fugitivos de blog del narco (Port Townsend, WA, 2013).

uncensored news related to the violence to put a halt to what they describe as the “glamorization of drug kingpins by Mexican children, young adults, and the entertainment industry.”²

Narco-blogging immediately raised controversies, including a series of questions regarding the practice of representing real-life events of violence over the Internet. On the one hand, the representations revealed many of the issues that official discourses sought to repress but which nevertheless had major societal impact. On the other hand, criminal organizations provided materials for the blogs and could thus use the site for their own agendas. The graphic visual images, often shot on-location with cell phone cameras in real-time, seemed particularly disconcerting. The bloggers justified publishing images of violent crime victims because “[t]he images,” they argued, “are far more damning than anything we can say about them.”³ While they also made a claim that the images enabled the possibility that families might recognize and claim the body of their missing relatives (something they frequently failed to do through official channels), the images of loved ones circulating online were likely to cause distress to the mourners. For the subscribers, the blogs provided a forum to comment on ongoing events and visual representations of them, thus enabling the readers to contribute their own version of the “word on the street” to the discussion. Given the complex issues entangled in these blogs, their significance is also important on broader knowledge production processes, evidenced by the frequent attempts of governmental entities and media outlets to shut down or restrict access to *Blog del Narco* and other similar sites.

For the purposes of the “Border in the Classroom” forum, let us consider what ramifications such viral or visual representations of violence might have within a transborder context. Even as the Mexican and the U.S. media operate under entirely different assumptions about the publishing of crime scene materials, as soon as they are distributed over the Internet, they transcend any national conjectures and must be dealt with in a global framework. How, then, might we respond to challenges related to knowledge production processes about violence that transcend national

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 9.

boundaries? This includes such questions as: What are the ethical implications of looking at or looking away from violent images? Are there times when it is necessary to either look or look away? What is the relationship between looking or looking away and action? Beyond questions of appropriateness, decency, or moral standards within any one nation, is it possible to establish any principles with which to operate in a non-place-based framework? As the materials are freely available online to anybody, representations of violence are necessarily a global, rather than a national, phenomenon, prompting more questions without easy answers.

Without a doubt, the severity of the crisis in Mexico hits home after seeing the shocking crime scene images, complete with decapitated bodies, mutilated body parts, and remains of corpses, often accompanied by signs, flyers, or banners explaining the rationale of the murders. While they serve as a gruesome wake-up call, it is obvious that these representations could also be used to reify violent impulses, as there is no way to control what might be done with them. The problem is twofold. For one, as violence theorists Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim point out, it has to do with the relationship between violence and action: “how does one speak about violence without replicating and perpetuating it?”⁴ On the other hand, Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, who write about the visual ethics of violence, problematize the motives of a person choosing not to look: “Do we look away to protect the integrity of the subject photographed, or to protect ourselves? Does not looking absolve us from complicity, or is the ostensibly respectful act of averting one’s eyes in fact to deny responsibility and foreclose knowledge?”⁵ Visual theorist Frank Möller, in turn, goes as far as to argue that not looking is not an option, for “people in pain have to be represented visually if one does not wish to depoliticize their suffering and the conditions from which it emerged.”⁶ The relationship between looking at and looking away from violence, then, underscores the various parties tangled up in the epistemological conundrum: the perpetrators

⁴ Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, “General Introduction: Theorizing Violence in the Twenty-first Century,” in *On Violence*, eds. Lawrence, Bruce B. and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.

⁵ Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, “Introduction,” in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, eds. Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012), xv.

⁶ Frank Möller, “Associates in Crime and Guilt,” in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, 17.

of crime, the victims of violence, the blogs' contributors, the bloggers, the subscribers, and the readers alike.

On May 16, 2013, the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom reported that one of the founders of *El Blog del Narco* was reported missing and the other had been forced to go into exile in Spain.⁷ Online readers were sympathetic to the bloggers' plight, with a number of comments touching upon the global complicity of the existing state-of-affairs in Mexico: "Just how grim do things have to get before we admit that drug prohibition is not only futile and expensive, but is actually making matters worse? Are 100,000 dead and 'missing Mexicans' --many killed by corrupt or incompetent government forces--not enough? Must there be similar carnage in Europe or America before we wake up?"⁸ Alongside the *Blog del Narco*, some other anonymous bloggers in Mexico have been identified and killed because of their activities. While it is too soon to tell whether these incidents will impact *narco*-blogging in a major way—as well as what the consequences of that might be—evidently such activities for the past three years have been critical to both popular and academic knowledge processes. These informal communication networks—as opposed to more traditional academic sources, such as "official" records, documents, and archives—demonstrate the various intersecting scales at which the "drug war" operates, is experienced and represented, and the various consequences that it has in and out of the classroom, beyond national boundaries.

⁷ Rory Carroll, "Blog del Narco: Author Who Chronicled Mexico's Drugs Was Forced to Flee," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/16/blog-del-narco-mexico-drug-war>.

⁸ Ibid., posted by TerribleLyricist, May 16, 2013, 5:56 pm.