

Culture&Society

Blog del Narco and the Future of Citizen Journalism

Andrés Monroy-Hernández and Luis Daniel Palacios

Reliable information is difficult to obtain in conflict zones, where communication network outages, concern for journalists' safety, and intense political struggles compromise traditional news sources. In the context of the Mexican drug war, the anonymous Blog del Narco has served as an invaluable outlet for disseminating information about the conflict.¹ Soon after launching in March 2010, the blog became one of the fifty most visited sites in Mexico.² The blog is well known for publishing articles about arrests, violent clashes, and executions involving members of rival drug cartels, the military, and law enforcement officers. These articles often include gruesome videos and photos not found on mainstream media. To this day, the blog's administrators have remained anonymous, although one apparently published a book about the blog under the pseudonym "Lucy." Shortly after the book's publication in 2013, the blog stopped posting new articles, and "Lucy" reported being forced to flee the country due to personal safety concerns.

Here, we examine Blog del Narco to better understand the information ecosystem in the Mexican drug war and, more broadly, to study how networked technologies are both challenging and augmenting traditional news journalism

Andrés Monroy-Hernández

is a researcher at Microsoft Research and an affiliate faculty at the University of Washington. Dr. Monroy-Hernández is the creator of the Scratch Online Community, a website where people learn to program, and of Sana, a mobile healthcare system for the developing world.

Luis Daniel Palacios

is a Research Fellow at the Governance Lab and a Junior Research Scientist at New York University. At the Gov-Lab he leads the development of the Open Data 500 project.

practices. Beyond the particulars of the Mexican context, the case of Blog del Narco helps us understand a shift in what constitutes a news organization. We begin examining these issues by analyzing the blog's cadence and topics using a corpus of text data from all of its articles. We then problematize the narrative around this anonymous news organization by examining issues of provenance, attribution, identity, and community. We end by arguing that, rather than thinking of the website as an individual actor, we must think of it as a transmediated networked entity with

officials alike try to control how and what information becomes public, the violence has spread to the newsroom. Journalists have been intimidated and executed, transforming Mexico into one of the most dangerous countries for reporters.⁵ According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, fifty-six journalists and media workers have been killed in Mexico since 2006.⁶ Attacks on the media often come in the form of murders, kidnappings, intimidation, and other forms of violence, such as throwing grenades at media headquarters.^{7, 8} This violence has

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closer relationships to other websites and to mainstream media than previously understood.

The Nature of Mexico's Information Ecosystem Today.

Mexico has been witness to a conflict between law enforcement officials and drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) for several decades now. It was not until President Calderón took office in 2006, however, that the conflict became a full-scale war, claiming over sixty thousand casualties by the end of his presidency.³ Immediately after taking office, Calderón launched large military operations targeted at dismantling the DTOs, which led to the splintering of groups and increased violence as the DTOs began battling each other over control of drug trafficking routes.⁴

As drug cartels and law enforcement

effectively censored news reporting in some parts of the country, particularly in the northern border cities where violence is the worst. After the murder of a second journalist in Ciudad Juárez, for example, a local newspaper opted for self-censorship, addressing cartels directly with the headline "What Do You Want From Us?" to discern what they could and could not publish.⁹ Similarly, the assassination of several journalists in the state of Veracruz has prompted massive protests. Such censorship has inspired citizens to use different social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to report and curate the news—and to simply stay informed. Twitter, for example, has been widely used by civic media "curators" to report on risky situations in near real-time.¹¹ According to one of its creators, Blog del Narco emerged

as part of these citizen media efforts to address information blackouts.¹² Based on interviews with Mexican social media users that we have conducted in the past, as well as others' observations, it seems that people gravitated toward

"brands" of reporting sites. Unlike an individual civic media curator on Twitter, a branded site tries to emulate a specialized and more traditional news outlet. Although Blog del Narco perhaps enjoyed the most success during

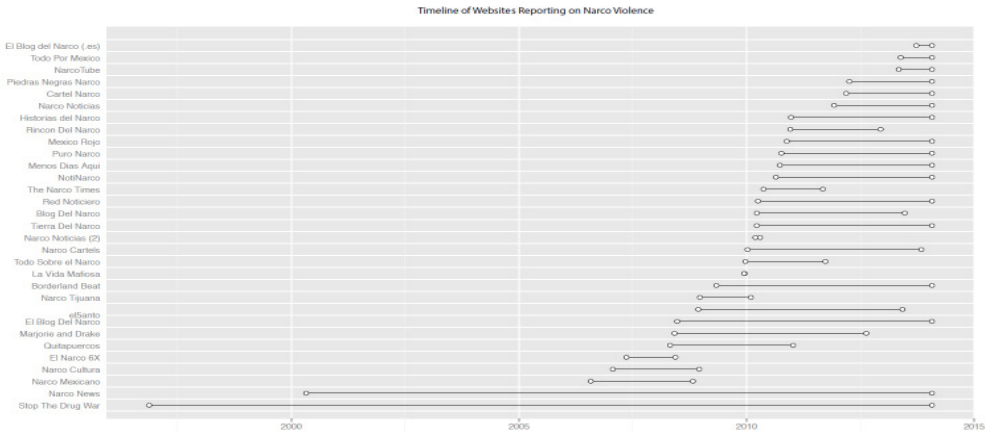


Figure 1 Websites devoted to reporting narco violence

social media for various reasons: to circumvent the centralized control that characterizes broadcast media; to publish anonymously or pseudonymously; and to reduce personal risk by diffusing responsibility among many people rather than one journalist in an article's byline.^{13, 14}

Prior to the escalation of violence in 2006, only a few websites featured news and reports about cartel activity (see Figure 1). NarcoNews and NarcoMexicano, for example, have been active since 2000 and 2006, respectively. Researchers have documented how Mexican drug cartel members may have used the Internet and social network sites such as MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook as early as 2005, if not earlier.¹⁵ Since 2008, however, we observe a particular rise in different

its heyday, we have identified thirty-two other websites performing a similar reporting function—seventeen of which are currently active. While early sites like NotiNarco and NarcoMexicano consisted solely of blogs, newer outlets often include Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts.

Information Vacuum and Blog del Narco.

Although precursors of Blog del Narco existed, the use of the *web* for reporting on the Mexican drug war only became widespread after 2008. Several decades before Blog del Narco emerged in 2010, critical information pertaining to drug smugglers was disseminated through a genre of folk music called *narcocorridos*, or drug ballads. The genre gained popularity on both sides of the border since at least

the 1980s.¹⁶ More recently, a number of local governments have censored the genre and banned its reproduction in mainstream media, possibly contributing to both its online and offline pop-

net; and elblogdelnarco.info) were registered on 26 May 2008, while Lucy's "Blog del Narco" (blogdelnarco.com) remained unregistered until two years later. The public records for all of the

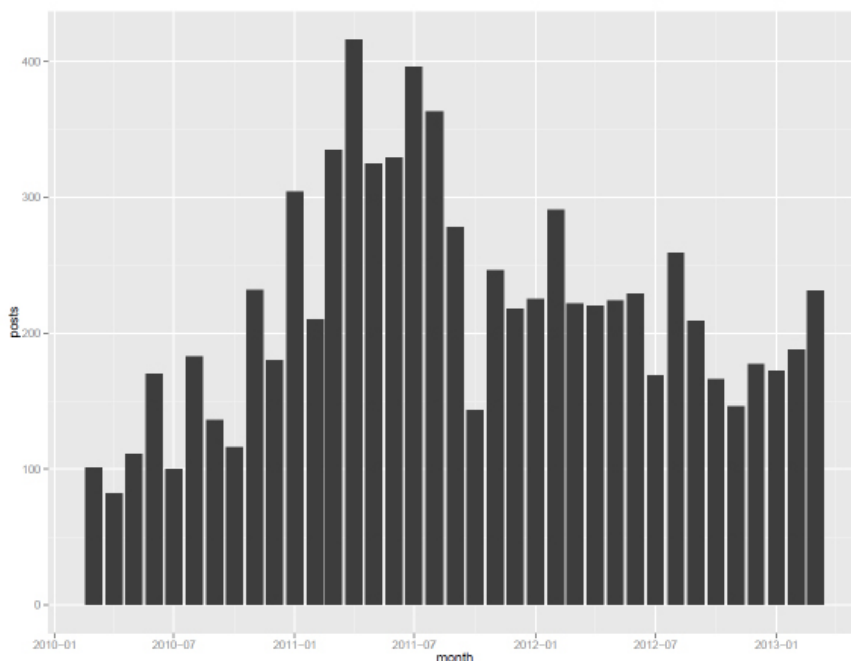


Figure 2 New articles published in Blog del Narco

ularity. Simultaneously, a new genre called "movimiento alterado," or "sick movement," has gained a significant number of fans. 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 of websites like Blog del Narco.

Today, the origins and ownership of Blog del Narco remain an enigma. According to Internet domain name records, domain names with the memorable moniker "El Blog del Narco" (elblogdelnarco.com; elblogdelnarco.net;

"El Blog del Narco" domains share the same email address and physical address in Monterrey, Mexico—a city that experienced a surge in drug-related violence around the same time.

At the time of writing, all of the aforementioned domains—as well as mundonarco.com—redirect their web traffic to elblogdelnarco.info, a website hosted on Google's Blogger platform. Coincidentally, the first blog post of a separate Blogger website with a similar name, elblogdelnarco.blogspot.com (which stopped posting regularly after September 2010), also dates back to

26 May 2008. The last post on the Blogspot site, written by a user named “Historiador,” mentions the creation

of its content, a consistent presence on social media, and presumably some luck.

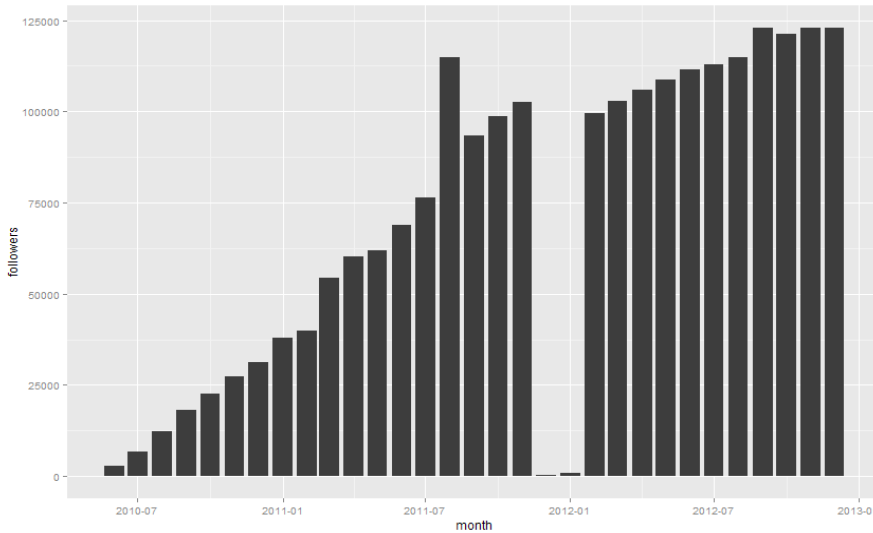


Figure 3 Total number of Twitter followers of Blog del Narco at @InfoNarco

of *elblogdelnarco.com*. This suggests that one person might own all of these domains. Also at the time of writing, *elblogdelnarco.info*—unlike Lucy’s *blogdelnarco.com*—is currently active, as is its Twitter account (@MundoNarco) with over one hundred thousand followers. Lucy and Historiador, the administrators of each of these sites, frequently reference one another in their posts and interact in the comments sections of other sites. At one point Historiador even claimed “Blog del Narco” had stolen the name of his blog.¹⁷

Evidently, the general “Blog del Narco” phenomenon goes beyond one individual website and represents an entire ecosystem of websites. The success of Blog del Narco was likely attributable to early media attention to some

Methodology. To gather data on the blog, we downloaded all publicly available articles (8,102 in total) from Blog del Narco using a web scraping script.¹⁸ We ran the script in multiple sessions over the course of 2013, allowing us to retrieve articles from the very first (posted 2 March 2010) through the last day we scrapped (30 March 2013). We also collected publicly available information from the Blog del Narco Twitter account (@InfoNarco) using snapshots from the Internet archive.¹⁹ In addition, we extracted the main topics from the corpus of data using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling.²⁰ Finally, we used simple regular expressions to determine the frequency of certain keywords that emerged from the topic modeling.

Blogging at the Pace and Style of the Narco Violence.

To observe the cadence of the blog, we plotted the number of articles per month (see Figure 2). We found that the blog published an average of 216 articles per month. During the spring and summer of 2011, however, this number almost doubled. This surge occurred during a period with a particularly high incidence of homicide, suggesting that perhaps the blog's activity was an indicator of the level of violence in the country.²¹

We were also interested in how the blog's popularity might have changed over time. Although we do not have access to the blog's visit logs, we could measure its popularity through its Twitter account. Its follower base grew steadily throughout 2010 and 2011, with a particular spike in August 2011 (see Figure 3). Again, this coincided with an increase of violence in the country. The loss of followers at the end of 2011 is likely attributable to a new partnership that resulted in a brief change in Twitter handle name (@notirex). This explains the drop in followers of the @InfoNarco account. We verified this data using both Twitter "firehose" data and archive.org, and it is almost certainly not due to collection error.

To identify the main topics discussed in Blog del Narco, we used the aforementioned automated topic detection mechanism (LDA). We identified the following most common topics:

1. Shootouts and violent attacks, i.e. the article entitled: "Grenade attack in Tamaulipas kills two, hurts three" ("Granadazo en Tamaulipas deja dos muertos y tres heridos").
2. Executions and discovery of corpses,

i.e. the article entitled: "19 bodies found in a narco-mine in Hidalgo" ("Encuentran 19 cuerpos en narcomina de Hidalgo").

3. Arrests or drug busts, i.e. the article entitled: "Another hit to Los Zetas: Jesus Enrique Rejon Aguilar, aka El Mamito, is captured" ("Otro golpe para los zetas: capturan a Jesús Enrique Rejón Aguilar, alias El Mamito").

4. Analytical or opinionated discussions about the war, i.e. reports about cartels, their leaders, geopolitics of the war, and even discussions about narco-culture with titles like "Coming Soon: Music on the Blog."

Among these themes, "Execution/ Found Bodies" is the blog's most prevalent at 42 percent (see Table 1). The gruesome nature of posts in this category generates substantial controversy, since many people find such blunt treatment of violence either insensitive or conducive to an inappropriate fascination for crime.

Category	Articles
Shootout/ Attack	24.70%
Execution/ Found Bodies	41.86%
Arrest/ Drug Bust	10.07%
Other	23.38%

Table 1 Frequency of topic discussion

We also looked at the most frequent two-word terms, or bi-grams (see Table 2), and found that terms similar to the topical categories appear. This search reveals that the main actors in the war are the Mexican army, organized crime, armed groups, and federal, state, and municipal police forces. We

Bi-gram (English Translation)	Frequency
<i>años edad</i> (years old)	1,884
<i>servicio medico</i> (medical service)	1,452
<i>médico forense</i> (medical examiner/coroner)	1,440
<i>nuevo león</i> (Mexican state of Nuevo León)	1,426
<i>elementos policía</i> (police elements)	1,415
<i>ejército mexicano</i> (Mexican army)	1,350
<i>policía federal</i> (federal police)	1,290
<i>seguridad pública</i> (public safety)	1,181
<i>policía municipal</i> (municipal police)	1,125
<i>ministerio public</i> (public ministry)	1,037

Table 2 Top ten most frequent bi-grams

also observe frequent mention of ages—often between twenty-five and thirty-five years—presumably those of individuals killed. Lastly, the articles mention the “United States” as a frequent actor. Mexican politicians are not keen to challenge the status quo with regard to drug policies in the United States, and Mexican media often reflect this bias. Blog del Narco did not demonstrate the same deference, instead publishing articles critical of the United States.

Based on the topic modeling, we performed a simple keyword search for several terms that emerged as particularly salient. We found that 67 percent of articles (5,419) mention deaths, 46 percent (3,739) mention shootouts or attacks, 26.5 percent (2,147) mention arrests, and 9 percent (753) mention a “narco” message (often in the form of banners hung in public spaces).

Attribution and Provenance.

Blog del Narco has been involved in numerous controversies. In September

2010, another blogger accused Blog del Narco of plagiarism and revealed the administrator’s supposed real identity. Other journalists have raised the possibility that some of the content in Blog del Narco is actually appropriated from local news media.

More work is needed to compare the content of every single Blog del Narco post against available online content. Whatever the findings may be, one way of thinking about Blog del Narco is that it became both a receptacle for exclusive news akin to Wikileaks and a news aggregator akin to Huffington Post. These two roles might explain part of the success of the website as the go-to destination for information about the Mexican drug war. Blog del Narco quickly acquired a reputation for providing exclusive content, most notably gruesome execution videos. As these videos went viral, the site’s popularity skyrocketed. Despite the particular climate of violence in Mexico, mainstream journalistic media did not

typically address such topics. The site's content allowed both those affected by violence and those who take an interest in violence to virtually congregate around the posts to discuss the events. Mexico has a long tradition of crime-focused tabloids that concentrate on shocking content; Blog del Narco may represent a digital extension of this type of journalism.

A Community-Building Space.

Unlike previous blogs of its kind, Blog del Narco made significant efforts to engage its viewers and played an impor-

that characterizes their daily life.²⁴

Unfortunately there is no log of the reader comments, chats, or discussions on Blog del Narco today. Many of the currently active narco "brands" do, however, host similar spaces for users to participate in discussions. Further empirical analysis on comments is necessary to ascertain the characteristics of these communities, but based on the comments reviewed from these sites, we have observed that participants sometimes seek support in coping with the brutal violence that is so graphically

Despite the particular climate of violence in Mexico, mainstream journalistic media did not typically address such topics.

tant role in forming an active online community. Besides providing a comment section on all posts, the site also included a chat window that was present wherever a user navigated on the site, and a message board or forum for users to participate in threaded discussions. Previous research on online communities has suggested that these types of features help support a sense of community; we further speculate that these features may help users feel safer engaging in conversations about sensitive topics.²³ In the comments section of the website, as well as in chat rooms and discussion forums, people interacted in real time to discuss a wide variety of issues extending even beyond the drug war. In essence, Blog del Narco became a social space, or what American sociologist Ray Oldenburg would call a "third place," for Mexican citizens to come together and discuss the violence

displayed in the articles and so present in their lives offline. Many participants discuss the drug trafficker lifestyle, insult or praise rival or allied cartel members, express dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Mexico, or comment on the morbidity of execution videos, among other vicious and often inhumane comments.

Indeed a distinctive aspect of the blog is the notoriously abrasive and often crass nature of user comments. Furthermore, the comments are written with a Spanish vernacular often associated with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This may suggest that interest in narco-culture tends to be high in disadvantaged communities with low levels of education and few opportunities for social mobility, which drug cartels can exploit. More work needs to be done to assess the involvement of actual narcotraffickers in comment threads

and online communities, since we can conjecture that cartel members do have a significant presence in social media.²⁵ In some cases, cartel members have been engaged in lengthy flame wars; in one particular instance a cartel member even announced the upcoming execution of a security official.²⁶

Conclusions. The case of Blog del Narco highlights different developments in digital media that will continue to transform mainstream news media. The narrative cannot be reduced to a story about such websites simply replacing traditional journalism. In fact, sites like Blog del Narco might actually help spread and popularize content that traditional media already produces. At the same time, Blog del Narco serves as a destination for anonymous leakers and bloggers to broadcast private information otherwise ignored by traditional media.

Blog del Narco exercised more risk than traditional journalistic venues. By posting sensitive information and favoring speed and speculation over accuracy, the blog's administrators adopted a model different from traditional media sources. The inclusion of a real time chat widget on the blog's front page was also unique. This enabled synchronous communication and transformed the blog into a destination to "hang out" rather than just to acquire information.

Blog del Narco in particular illuminates two issues related to the future of news journalism. The first issue regards changing notions of what constitutes a news organization. For example, the Wikileaks case has prompted some scholars to recognize an emergent

"networked fourth estate" in which a loosely connected group of individuals plays the role of the traditional media organization, akin to how a network of online editors has effectively replaced institutions like Encyclopedia Britannica. In this case, a group of bloggers and "leakers" providing exclusive content has essentially filled the void left by traditional news media in Mexico. The second issue regards the effect of digital social media on traditional news media. Some evidence suggests that both satellite news and social media served crucial roles in encouraging protestors to demonstrate in Egypt, while other scholars have argued that the bonds provided by social media are insufficient for enabling offline collective action.^{27, 28} We believe that Blog del Narco gives us an opportunity to explore these questions.

As armed conflict continues in Mexico, the press will be increasingly critical for informing citizens so they can make important decisions. As we have explained, however, centralized media are more prone to outside censorship, control, or other challenges. We would therefore argue that the same protections that currently apply to journalists across the world, with support from international organizations, should extend to the space of online citizen media. For example, UN Resolution 1738—which explicitly protects journalists and media workers from being targeted by armed forces—and Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which focuses on freedom of expression—could be extended to explicitly mention the role of online citizen media. This is particularly relevant to the case of Mexico,

where President Peña Nieto submitted a telecommunications law to the senate in April 2014 that included a new provision allowing the government to turn off digital infrastructure—a “kill switch”—in the name of “national security.” Mexican citizens responded to the law with indignation, protests, and eventually demanded its modification.

The government claimed that it wrote the law in collaboration with international organizations, suggesting that these existing international protections have not yet been fully absorbed.²⁹ As part of ending the violent conflict in Mexico, there must be safe spaces where citizens can aggregate, archive, and share information.³⁰

NOTES

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