

Remarks by Karla Zabłudovsky, Reporter of the New York Times' Mexico City Bureau, at the policy forum "Understanding Mexico's Epidemic of Violence: Telling Stories with New Media, Technology, and Big Data", Cato Institute, March 12, 2013.

THANK YOU FOR THE INTRODUCTION ... AND THANK YOU TO THOSE WHO HAVE MADE THEIR WAY HERE OR ARE WATCHING ONLINE.

(1) OPENING ANECDOTE

This past Sunday night, locals in Reynosa, Tamaulipas – near the US-Mexico border -- were going about their business.... There were people walking around in public areas.... while others were enjoying Sunday night films in the local cinema.

And just like that, a shootout began at 7:30, or so it seems.

Apparently, those walking around ran for cover, terrified.

Supposedly, those in the theater were asked to remain there until 11 at night.

Allegedly, when the gun powder settled, there were 40 dead on the ground.

Now, as a journalist, of course, I hate using words like apparently, supposedly and allegedly.... But 12 hours after the shootout, this was still all I had to go by.... Tweets posted overnight, a 15-minute YouTube video of the shootout was floating around, and some photographs of burned cars.... None of these reports were verifiable, though.

On Monday morning, I called the Tamaulipas Police Department to inquire about the supposed shootout and was told that they would not give out any information or confirm anything, officially or unofficially.

I checked local papers and couldn't find anything even mentioning the shootout. The local paper did have a story on the Harlem Shake, though.

Finally, by Monday afternoon, the State Attorney's office released a vague statement, saying there was a shootout, two collateral victims and 7 detainees. No explanation and certainly no final body count.

(2) THIS IS NOW THE NORM

More and more, this is becoming the norm in many parts of Mexico. Unconfirmed information flows from Twitter, Facebook and blogs are increasingly replacing official news sources in the first critical hours, and sometimes well beyond that.

And it is no surprise why. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, **48 journalists have been killed or disappeared in Mexico since December 2006.**

In an attempt to curb this assault of journalists, newspapers have toned down or eliminated their coverage of drug-related violence.

1. A study by the Fundacion Mepi, an independent investigative journalism center, found, for example, that El Mañana newspaper, based in Nuevo Laredo, published **three stories related to drug trafficking in June 2010. That month, 98 people were killed in cartel-related murders.**
2. Just yesterday, the Saltillo-based newspaper El Zocalo announced in an editorial that it would “By virtue that there are no guarantees of security in the full exercise of journalism, the Editorial Council of the Zocalo newspapers has decided to abstain from publishing all information related to organized crime.”

To fill this information vacuum, journalists and citizens alike have taken to social media.

(3) BACK TO REYNOSA

The latest Reynosa shooting is a great example of how news begins to spread online in the absence of formal or official sources:

Using the hashtag #ReynosaFollow, information began flowing as the shootout was apparently happening.

1. One of the first Tweets was sent by @LuisDaniel12, and read... **“Something serious went down in Reynosa. Apparently dozens dead. Looking for more info”**
2. Then there was @Andalalucha, who wrote... **“Twitter is an amazing source 4 following things as they unfold, but one feels totally useless when gun battle is happening.”**
3. @Baboonmd later Tweeted... **“Clean up of bodies and burned vehicles is hastily carried out by armed civilian/ an official body count will never be known”**

Perhaps.

What I have found reporting in Mexico during the past year and a half is that, more often than not, you hit a brick wall.... Information is hard to come by.... Verified data even more so.

(4) THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

Like #ReynosaFollow in Tamaulipas, there is a small, online army that has made it its mission to supply a constant stream of updates on security situations in different parts of the country.

There is #VerFollow, in Veracruz...

There is #MtyFollow in Monterrey...

There is #Acafollow for Acapulco...

There are also numerous regional blogs and a fairly regular stream of YouTube videos showing shootouts or roadblocks.

Who the people feeding violence-related social media are or why they do what they do is anyone's guess.... What is true is that they've formed a growing community of informants that is trying to document sporadic acts of violence as they happen.

The problem is that it is hard to verify any of these reports, precisely because of what makes Twitter -- and Facebook and YouTube -- so attractive in the first place.

Anonymity means that it is nearly impossible to verify who the sources are, if they are -- indeed -- at the scene where they claim to be reporting from, and finally, what their agenda is.

(5) 1ST DOWNFALL of SOCIAL MEDIA

Take the audio that was leaked last month by a San Luis Potosi state newspaper, in Central Mexico.... Supposedly, it is the voice of the governor's spokesperson, **urging his staff to create anonymous social media profiles in order to harass journalists publishing information critical of the administration.**

It begs the questions:

How do you know who is who online?

What is their objective?

How much of the information out there is real?

(6) 2ND DOWNFALL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Or, take the Facebook Page **Valor por Tamaulipas**, with nearly 180,000 likes and a constant stream of updates on security matters in the state.

Who administers this page? There are rumors that the Navy feeds into it. Not to say that this is a bad thing, but if you don't know where your information is coming from, you don't know why it's being thrown your way.

Last month, hundreds of flyers were handed out in several cities in Tamaulipas, offering a \$45,000 dollar reward for information on the page's administrator.

(7) 3RD DOWNFALL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Which brings us to another problem of reporting on the drug war through social media.

→ What happens when those supplying it do not have proper online security checkpoints in place?

The most popular blogger in Tamaulipas in 2011 was, by far, La Nena de Laredo. She was also, it is believed, the editor of the local paper Primera Hora. La Nena used to post updates on the **blog Nuevo Laredo en Vivo** often. By september, her decapitated body was found along with a note:

“Nuevo Laredo en Vivo and Social Networks. I am La Nena de Laredo and I am here because of my reports and y yours.”

How many journalists and citizen reporters are even remotely trained in online security?

How many, for example, VPN in when they post sensitive information?

Given the current security situation in Mexico, there are notable risks to actively participating in social media.

(8) FINAL REMARKS

This isn't to say that Twitter and Facebook aren't important tools, because they are.... They exert pressure on the government to reveal events that would otherwise remain concealed.... They increase transparency from the ground up... And when their information flow is real AND happens in real-time, they may even save lives.... They are, by and large, incredibly valuable.

In fact, in some parts of the country, they are **now** the ONLY source of information.

Users just need to be safe. Local reporters, especially, would benefit greatly from training.... They are the most visible and the ones who are more frequently targeted by criminals....

As important as safety is **veracity**. Journalists need to assess and vet the content of social media just like they would any source.

Citizen reporters are not protecting the reputation of their news organizations. Often, they are trying to protect themselves and their friends....

But many journalists, myself included, wrestle with what to Tweet or post on Facebook.... With few exceptions, I chose not to Tweet or retweet information that is unverified. It spreads panic and, ultimately, puts your credibility on the line.

One of the biggest draws of social media – ANONYMITY – is also the best reason to approach these news sources with healthy caution.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.