

Spectatorship and visual evidence of violence in Mexico: When the right to information becomes exploitation

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ABSTRACT

This work reviews the availability of information and visual material depicting episodes of violence in Mexico published in the media and on the Internet. The discussion addresses the publication of explicit images in some Mexican and international newspapers. At the same time, the informative duty of some websites dedicated to publishing news and explicit visual material about the ongoing drug trafficking conflict is also questioned. The issue of exploitation and right to information is raised through the examples of newspapers and websites. It is argued that by reporting the conflict explicitly, media and audiences engage in a commodification of news and images, and consequently, in an exploitation practice. The constant availability of news and visual material transformed the drug conflict and associated issues into mediated entertainment. The conflict has reached a rationalization in different segments of Mexican society, while other forms of social aggression and exclusion are overshadowed. The article also deals with the ways a spectator may respond and the opposing forces at work when viewing visual material portraying events of violence.

KEYWORDS: Exploitation, right to information, mediated violence, explicit visual material, spectatorship

SPECTATORSHIP AND VISUAL EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE IN MEXICO: WHEN THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION BECOMES EXPLOITATION

At dawn, a dead person hanging from a bridge is found. At that moment, the incident is captured and reproduced; the visual testimony will transcend its location and spread a message. This particular incident took place on a street where thousands of people walk every day in the third most populated city in Mexico. It was just one more of a growing number of shocking incidents of violence that affect many of the country's towns and cities. From the front page of newspapers to websites dedicated to reporting news about drug trafficking and related criminal violence, a toxic cloud of visual evidence portraying explicit scenes is available to anyone, either directly or indirectly.

The battlefield for the criminal organizations (cartels) dedicated to drug trafficking and related criminal activities in Mexico has no boundaries. These cartels are at war with each other and are battling security forces to control routes, cities, and regions in order to expand their power and dominions. The violent acts stemming from this conflict have produced an infamous graphic archive of violence circulating the media and Internet. One way to construct meaning about the world in which we live is through media-generated images, which are used to reflect the reality from the political and social spheres. Facts and images make sense when they are placed in a meaningful context (Gamson et al. 1992: 374-5). Nevertheless, how do we make sense of reality when violent acts are the message? How many messages are embedded in pictures and videos of executed people?

In this article, I review the availability of information and visual material of the criminal violence in Mexico in the media and on the Internet and reflect on the publication of explicit images depicting violent episodes in some Mexican, Latin American, and European newspapers (printed and *online* versions). Accordingly, the informative duty of some websites dedicated to publishing news and videos about crime and violence is also questioned. Considering the circulation and availability of the visual material and reports in the cases presented, I also discuss the right to information or exploitation of violence debate. It is argued that with the permanent status of the drug trafficking conflict and the constant stream of news and visual content reporting on violence in Mexico, the conflict has become mediated entertainment. Specifically, the argument considers that exploitation is carried out by the audience consuming the reports and violent visual material, and the media and websites reporting the conflict explicitly. The availability and circulation of stories, pictures, and videos about the conflict has produced a commodification of these elements. Finally, I consider possible ways a spectator may respond and the opposing forces at work when viewing visual material portraying events of violence.

1. SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONFLICT

A maze of alliances, break-ups, treasons inside the Mexican drug cartels and armed disputes against security forces have perpetuated violence in many Mexican regions and cities; the violence has also affected other countries in Central America and the southern part of the United States where the cartels have established a presence, rendering a continental problem. Furthermore, some cartels are linked with activities of human trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping.

The political and social spheres have been under permanent siege. In Mexico, violence is measured by the number of dead bodies. Thousands of casualties are the result of the violence related to criminal acts, and the death toll rises every day ¹. Since 2006, the conflict has been labelled as "war"; however, because public violence between cartels started in the early 2000s, its exposition in the Mexican media has persisted and, at some points, has taken all the attention. On the social part, the conflict has many consequences: executed civilians, the recruitment of youths in drug trade activities such as *sicarios* (hired killer), an increase in drug users, displaced citizens, human rights violations², and the assassination of journalists, human rights advocates, politicians, and security forces personnel. In this dramatic scenario, violent acts have profound consequences for those who directly, or indirectly, have suffered insecurity or violence.

In the political sphere, the incapacity of the Mexican government to provide effective security measures implicates the political system. The cases of corruption³ and involvement of politicians, high ranked members of the Mexican army, and police officers with the drug cartels have discredited national institutions. A high number of desertions of security forces joining the cartels increase the difficulty to control the conflict. The legal system suffers threats from crime organizations and impunity becomes a routine for the committed crimes. The main challenge for the authorities is to weaken the criminals' capacity to corrupt the political, legal, and economic systems.

In 2012, after the presidential election, a "new" security strategy was implemented by the elected government. Nevertheless, the monthly average of executed persons has remained the same ⁴. Moreover, a new problem has surfaced: armed groups of civilians have taken control of their communities to defend themselves from the criminal organizations, showing little regard for the local authorities. The debates on security, the number of victims, and the modes of execution have taken centre stage; as a result, attention has

1 The number of crime casualties considered by the Mexican government, social organizations and media is in dispute. Over the period 2006-2012 the number ranges of 45,000 to 80,000. See: López, Rafael (1 December 2012), 'Las ejecuciones del sexenio 2006-2012' in *MilenioDiario* <http://edomex.milenio.com/cdb/doc/noticias2011/7d97ccec10baf5f29e3d096cff54a3ea> Accessed: 26 February 2013.

2 In some cases the security operations caused human rights abuses. See: Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/americas/mexico> Accessed: 29 February 2013.

3 See for example: 'Former Mexican governor Villanueva sentenced in the US' on BBC News Latin America & Caribbean. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-23108864> Accessed: 15 September 2013.

4 See: Mendoza Hernández, Enrique (May 19 2013), '5 meses, 8 mil 049 ejecuciones' in *Semanario Zeta* <http://www.zetatijuana.com/ZETA/reportajes/5-meses-8-mil-049-ejecuciones/> Accessed: 1 June 2013.

shifted to other forms of violence affecting Mexican society. However, violence entails more than physical abuse of another human being. Social violence implies moral, aesthetic, and experiential aspects (Kleinman 2000). Unfortunately, Mexican authorities have not considered all the implications of the conflict, since minimal attention has been paid to the social and psychological distress caused by all kinds of violence.

The normalization of the conflict has reached a rationalization in different segments of Mexican society with an acceptance of the violence, as another common factor in their daily routine, and with the recognition of aspects related to the *narco-culture*. In this context, the relation between violence and subjectivity is creating new models of social coexistence, when younger generations in different regions of Mexico consider the *narco* as a possibility or reference for their future ⁵. Hence, it is necessary to consider the outcome when violence and its cultural representation are legitimated.

Children's television series, videogames and movies are means through which violence acquires a glamorous status and is considered as a part of the habitual mediated experience (Wilson et al. 2002). This situation consolidates the cultural violence phenomena including its social justification (Galtung 1990). Part of the symbolic sphere of the social life is materialized and portrayed when violence is experienced in ideologies, signs, or even language, validating these cultural practices. A new *narco-terminology* ⁶ has been added to the daily lexicon in Colombia or Mexico. Narco-cultural expressions have become fashionable in popular culture. As an example, an audience follows a specific genre of music describing narco-lifestyles, honouring arrested or assassinated drug lords. As another example, new narratives in some Latin American and even European productions of TV shows are soap operas⁷ presenting stories about drug cartels and their leaders as the protagonists.

In perspective, the conflict has brought the Mexican society, government, and media to their limit. The spiral of violence has dictated the informative duty of the Mexican media. In a hostile environment, the communicative work conveys even more risks, responsibilities, and opportunities. Unfortunately, although some of the media are directly affected by the conflict, others have capitalized on it.

2. REPORTING ON DAILY HORROR: THIS IS FOR REAL, ISN'T IT?

We are living in an era in which death and suffering have become a spectacle. The *horreur-réalité* is here (Marzano 2010). In fact, it has always been here, or out there; however, it now circulates freely on the media or the Internet, even in *high definition*.

5 See: Gómez, Natalia (17 January 2013), 'Adolescentes aspiran a ser narcos: encuesta' en El Universal, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/896038.html> Accessed: 16 May 2013.

6 See: Ellinwood, Ken (28 October 2009), 'Grim glossary of the narco-world' Los Angeles Times-World <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-narco-glossary28-2009oct28,0,1009690.story> Accessed: 22 April 2013.

7 See: Ortiz Uribe, Mónica (26 May 2011), 'Narco' Culture Becoming Popular North of the Border' Fronteras. <http://www.fronterasdesk.org/news/2011/may/26/narco-culture-becoming-popular-northborder/> Accessed: 23 May 2013.

The study of mediated violence is addressed by various academic fields. In communication studies, different theories try to explain the consequences of audience watching fictional or real violence in media. The behavioural effects and desensitization theories, for instance, consider the direct influence between mediated violence and its effects on the receiver. On the contrary, cultivation theory and audience reception research are open to subject's interpretation of violent content, rejecting the causal relation between content and behaviour (Carter and Weaver 2003: 10-3). The analysis of this topic includes modes of representation (Penalva 2002), the ways the audience relates to this kind of content (Fernández et al. 2008), the use and gratification of violent genres of media violence (Kremer and Godbold 2005) and the relation between violent content in mass media and different types of violence (Jensen 2002). In cultural studies, audience's understanding of content in mass media programs has been a central topic. The response of the audience to media's content is not linear or predictable. Audiences (readers, viewers or listeners) react to the stimulus in their own ways; any kind of material in the media is polysemic (Hall 1980), even an image depicting suffering or disgrace. Fixed meanings have different understandings; however, the context on the reproduction and interpretation remains decisive.

War photography, for instance, was the medium that motivated discussions about violence in the media. The debate addressed the ethical responsibility and significance of doing war photography, and the negative effects (anaesthetic) of open spectatorship (Sontag 1973, 2005). In this sense, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (2007) argue that singular images from photojournalism become cultural icons when common recognition becomes a veneration exercise. Complex emotional responses occur within this recognition. These icons represent and make coherent a possible collective identity owing to the individual connotations of obligation and power. However, certain iconic images' "sacred status" makes it easier to construct a mass-mediated collective memory. Has the visual aspect of violence in Mexico developed an iconic status? It is not just about one picture, but rather, the sum of the daily tragedies just meters away, there on the newspaper stands, or at home through television and computer screens. Every image is connected by the nature of the conflict, culminating in a visual recollection of the tragedies exposed every day to Mexican society.

The popularization of personal communication devices for photos and videos opened the floodgates, allowing into the public sphere the production and availability of all kinds of visual material. The Internet became the new "virtual" gallery for the "real" world. Jean Baudrillard (2002) considers that the development of the *hyper-real* starts when the image's original meaning is transformed. The image, then, offers the reality in a deep blameless sense, moving toward a second phase where a *malignant* account of the reality is presented. In the next phase, the pretention is to disguise the spectator, playing with the appearance of the reality. Finally, we are confronted with the simulacrum of what is happening in the "real world."

Popular images reproduced by large-scale corporations may imply the promotion of certain ideology reinforcing dominant narratives (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 2). The use of iconic images in mass media implies a struggle in the creation of knowledge and distribution of messages, which began when grotesque visions became commonplace in many regions of Mexico; the cartels decided to leave messages on the streets full of blood and dismay. The *hyper-violence* became more than a simulacrum. The horror path was wide open when the cartels recorded the execution of members of the rival gang and uploaded them to the Internet for public consumption. The violent act is itself a communicative element, while the visual evidence reminds one of the perpetrator's clear and straightforward intentions: *fear us; we have the power to do this*. In this conflict, although the message's specific recipients are the rival gang, the message is also aimed at security forces as well as the final receptor, society. For the cartels, violence is a means to an end, a form of social control⁸. The public exposition of a dead body is an iconic message, and a consequence. As a final display of power, this is the *hyper-horror* for public consumption.

When the conflict started, the reports and images generated by the media presented it; with some exceptions, mostly all Mexican media followed ethical guidelines avoiding explicit images. Nevertheless, the conflict reached a new level when the cartels, the government, and the civilians took part as producers of visual content themselves. The Mexican government tried to regain the support of the public opinion with a massive media campaign showing how national security forces were involved in different operations. In addition, with the development of the conflict, civilians shared their experiences on the Internet⁹.

The availability of all kinds of visual discourses is a characteristic of this conflict; the spectator of this "war" has limited time to react to contradictory images circulating in the media. The number of executed people has increased at a constant rate since 2006, reaching a peak in 2010 with almost 12,000 casualties documented by the media and social organizations only in that year. The Mexican government felt uncomfortable with the situation, claiming the information and depiction of violence were creating "social paranoia" and an exaltation of violence. In 2011, more than 700 media, including the main national conglomerates, signed a pact¹⁰ to apply common guidelines stipulating the presentation of news related to the conflict. Thus, the media had two options: present news related to the conflict and other crimes with dreadful images or avoid sensationalism and give a different informative approach to the news. A debate ensued whether or not the pact implied restrictions to the free press enforcing censorship¹¹. But censorship was

8 I consider that criminal violence could be included in the collective and organized violence category along with terrorism. See: Roberta Senechal de la Roche (1996), 'Collective Violence as Social Control', *Sociological Forum*, 11(1):97-128.

9 In YouTube there are dozens of videos related to the conflict uploaded by civilians. See, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6inHI90Vw8> Accessed: 21 March 2012.

10 See: "Mexico media agree drug war reporting guidelines" on BBC News Latin America & Caribbean <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-12855300> Accessed: 15 April 2012.

11 See: Greenslade, Roy (March 25 2011), "Mexican media sign drug reporting pact", *The Guardian* <http://www.guardian>.

already imposed on the media; during these years of violence, many journalists were killed during the conflict, while others continued to live under the permanent threats from the cartels due to the denunciation of their activities.

Nowadays, the massive distribution of information and images represents a challenge to the spectator (Campbell 2003:72). Images in mass media are not neutral (Gamson et al, 1992, Hariman and Lucaites 2007); an ideological filter frame the image in the process of production. The continuous reproduction of visual commonplaces incorporates them into the daily routine. Thus, the spectator's experience is influenced by a complex interaction of contrasting forces.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF SPECTATORSHIP: A COMPROMISED SITUATION

Being a spectator of human distress is a daring experience. The suffering of others depicted in images not only poses a challenge; it also demands an action from the spectator; one who looks is obliged to take action. The media use images of suffering to create an emotional and moral reaction; they are presented to appeal and, ultimately, to commercialize the image of the victims. Locally and globally, the mediated experience of suffering conveys a double risk: its commodification and the thinning out and distortion of the cultural representation of the disgrace (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996: 1). At this time, the mediatisation of violence creates an inauthentic social experience: witnessing at a distance. The flow of images does not appeal anymore to the subject's mobilization of solidarity; instead, the process of remote visual consumption takes place without moral responsibilities (Kleinman op cit.: 232).

Nevertheless, responding as a spectator is no easy task; the implications of being one and the ways to respond deserve careful attention. The agency of the visual material depicting violence or suffering, the spectator's own circumstances, and its engagement with this kind of material are the focus of much debate.

When Susan Sontag (2003) brings back Virginia Woolf's commitment to condemn the horrors of war using photographs to denounce and raise awareness about the misery and human suffering as a consequence of violence, the experience and responsibility of witnessing human pain captured in an image, the state of affairs seems one-sided. Being a spectator of suffering or disgrace should be a definitive *raison d'être* to reject the violent act and the issues involved. Yet, images are open to interpretation; objectivity is out of the question. The visual and emotional impact of an image of pain is relative to the spectator and the context of the image. The reaction and position of the subject, then, implies a duality within the exercise of being a spectator.

Thus, the looking-not-looking dilemma affects our spectatorship experience when two understandings collide¹² (Möller 2009). On the one hand, viewing images depicting

co.uk/media/greenslade/2011/mar/25/press-freedom-mexico Accessed: 15 April 2012.

12 Frank Möller (2009) takes the arguments of Stephen Eisenman and Horst Bredekamp to discuss the issue.

human pain prolongs the victimization of the subject and may create complicity that fosters an exploitation stance. In this case, the exploitation implies that either the use or consumption of images and information is used to obtain a benefit compromising a third person's dignity and subjectivity. Nevertheless, not every image depicting tragedies seeks to exploit the persons affected in the image. The context of the situation provides alternatives to the viewer. On the other hand, not looking at the image also poses a problem; given our position as spectators, we are obligated morally to respond. In a culture dominated by images, the individual can exert political influence when the act of viewing is transferred to the collective sphere. Therefore, the not-looking stance would diminish the political participation of the individual (ibid.: 781-3). While not looking seems to facilitate the non-viewer's position, it may still imply complicity when the acts transcend along with the images that have been purposely produced, as in the Abu Ghraib photographs (Möller 2012: 21). The exploitation stance arises when the photos or videos have been intentionally produced to expose a human in extreme or humiliating situations, as in the Mexican case.

The debate shifts to the agency of the images with arguments that condemn war photography (or violent content in mass media) and its potential action to aestheticise and desensitize the spectator's experience. This argument suggests that some characteristics of the photography would divert the viewer's attention from the disgrace depicted. Hence, the aesthetics of the picture¹³ may distract the spectator. Engaging with the images this way, then, would lead to the spectator's depoliticisation or desensitisation (Möller 2009: 783). Desensitization, in this context, refers to the acceptance of certain content in the media reports; it implies changes in emotional response when repeated exposure—in this case of explicit visual material—creates a negative response with diminished reactions in emotional, even physical, aspects (Krahe et al. 2011). Depoliticisation involves a lack of participation or interest to exercise political rights within a democratic framework. However, there is no causality between spectatorship and further reaction to images of suffering; the same image can be interpreted contradictorily, and may lead either to a politicisation or depoliticisation stance depending on the subject's perception. In that sense, the subject finds a possibility to exercise political power within a collective experience (Möller 2009: 783). This kind of situation happened in Mexico when civilians made public demonstrations against violence and the crime problem. However, people have withdrawn from their political and social activities as a result of the constant criminality.

According to François Debrix (2006), in order to make acceptable the unacceptable—regarding how war as a mediated spectacle is presented to the viewers—the sublime spectatorship is created¹⁴. Sublime spectatorship gives the subject an ideological shield (or sunglasses) to move through shocking images and transcend the initial painful expe-

¹³ See, for example, a Mexican photographer working with graphic images. Peinado, Mari Luz (11 May 2012), 'Rosario, notario de los muertos mexicanos' Periscopio Chilango Blogs Internacional, El País. <http://blogs.elpais.com/periscopio-chilango/2012/05/rosalio-fotografo-nota-roja-notario-de-los-muertos-mexicanos.html> Accessed: 9 May 2013

¹⁴ Debrix applies this concept to the United States military interventions.

rience. This exercise needs a main co-protagonist: "*the other*." The enemy and villain work as the antagonist of the play; *the other* will die and suffer while the protagonist reaches hero status; moreover, the images of the enemy suffering or dying are justified, since this condition has been framed as such to the spectator. Finally, the spectator accepting the political message behind the exercise signifies the end of this mediated play.

Witnessing violent or sensitive content in the media normalizes or trivializes the issue, which results in compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999). The acceptance of diverse content, due to the simplistic and repetitive way it is presented in the media, increases an individual perspective by considering it routine. When the media fail to report the incident as a multidimensional tragedy, violence and suffering become commonplace. The disgrace finds in the receptor a justification or acceptance of the portrayal. In short, different issues compromise the significance of being a spectator; the relation between the media's content and the audience's reception is critical when explicit or sensitive images have an informative association.

4. RIGHT TO INFORMATION OR EXPLOITATION

Concerning the right to information and exploitation controversy, first, some newspapers from Mexico, Latin America, and Europe and the type of images published in their printed and *online* versions are commented on. Afterward, cases concerning websites that publish news, images, and videos about crime and violence are discussed. Images understood as narratives both reveal and conceal something¹⁵ concurrently (Campbell 2003: 73). In Mexico, violence has been the hegemonic narrative in all these years of conflict. One of the most critical issues is the way the conflict has been presented to society; the informative approach is aligned with the editorial and ethical guidelines of the specific medium.

In the case of newspapers, the reports and explicit violence of the pictures show two sides. In the Mexican case, the general practice of newspapers with national coverage is not to include photos of executed people, or to blur the photos to protect the victims' anonymity; images of situations that do not reveal or compromise those involved in the report complement the reports¹⁶ of drug trafficking or violence. In contrast, newspapers that include explicit pictures have regional or local coverage. These newspapers are part of bigger media enterprises¹⁷ but target a specific audience (tabloid-style oriented for a

15 An example of this is the way Western media select images depicting casualties of the US and allies in recent military interventions (Debrix 2006).

16 El Universal group represents a contradictory example. The El Universal newspaper claims to have an ethical treatment of all the news of violence. However, the tabloid El Gráfico, distributed in Mexico City, is part of the El Universal group and shows explicit pictures in their front page. For the criteria See: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/pie/criteriosanteviolencia.html>.

17 One example is La Prensa with a daily edition of 250,000 units in Mexico City owned by Organización Editorial Mexicana. This group runs one TV channel, 24 radio stations, 44 websites and 70 newspapers; many of these newspapers

low-income audience). In the printed version, the front page features the daily tragedy, but the level of graphic violence varies. The *online* version offers the same content. The types of photos included in the reports of violence do not consider the integrity or dignity of those involved in the event. The rawness of the event and the inclusion of the visual evidence are more important than the anonymity of the victim involved in the tragedy.

In the global context, technology and the cultural power of the media offer a dark side of the right-to-information concern; images of violence are appropriated to feed commercialism in the global market (Kleinman op cit.: 226). The conflict in Mexico has also attracted the attention of the international media. The event mentioned at the beginning of this article was just one more violent episode that still plagues Mexican society. The story of the person executed in this event probably triggered the extensive media coverage and availability of images on the Internet. I realized that this particular event was also included in the *online* version of newspapers in Spain, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Chile. In Spain, for example, the *online* version of *El País*, *El ABC*, *El Mundo*, and even regional newspapers, such as the *El Diario Vasco* or *El Norte de Castilla*, included a photo of the event¹⁸. While the photos in these newspapers are different, all photos show the same angle of the crime scene, with the hanging body as the main reference. In the Nicaraguan newspaper, a close up is accompanied by other pictures showing clearly the face of the person executed¹⁹.

Consider the following questions: Would these newspapers publish the same kinds of photos in their local context? Does the distance with the Mexican context (or other armed conflicts or tragedies) allow these newspapers to engage in this kind of journalism? Since when do the “leading” newspapers in Spain include photos of people executed in their news coverage? The trend continues and spreads like wildfire. In another shocking episode of executions in Mexico, the *online* version of the Daily Mail in the United Kingdom also offers photos of the event²⁰. It seems that the tendency of the international mass media is to offer yellow press images to attract attention, having a permissive coverage with the publication of visual content with conflicts from abroad.

As Sontag explains, photography and death have kept company ever since the invention of the former (2002: 6). However, when reporting violent conflicts, certain social

include explicit pictures in their content.

See: <http://www.oem.com.mx/laprensa/estaticas/quienessomos.aspx>.

18 For some of the reports, see: ‘Aparece muerta la líder de una banda criminal mexicana que se fugó hace cuatro días’ (31 December 2010), *El País*. http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2010/12/31/actualidad/1293750009_850215.html ‘Hallan ahorcada a una Mexicana líder de una banda de secuestradores’ (1 January 2011), *El ABC*.

<http://www.abc.es/20110101/internacional/abci-secuestradora-ahorcada-mexico-201012312321.html>

‘La Pelirroja sufre la venganza de las bandas mexicanas’ (2 January 2011), *El Diario Vasco*

<http://www.diariovasco.com/v/20110102/mundo/pelirroja-sufre-venganza-bandas-20110102.html>

‘La jefa de una banda mejicana de secuestradores aparece ahorcada’ (2 January 2011), *El Norte de Castilla* <http://www.elnortedecastilla.es/v/20110102/mundo/jefa-banda-mejicana-secuestradores-20110102.html> All links accessed: 22 May 2013.

19 See: ‘“La Pelirroja” fue “rescatada” para matarla’ (3 January 2011), *El Nuevo Diario* <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/nacionales/91575> Accessed: 22 May 2013.

20 See: ‘Horror as nine bodies found hanged from bridge and 14 heads decapitated and dumped along U.S. border in Mexico’ (5 May 2012), *Daily Mail Online* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2139876/Mexico-drug-war-9-bodies-hanged-bridge-14-decapitated-heads-found.html>

Accessed: 22 May 2013.

or political contexts are not presented, giving to the audience a biased or incomplete view of the conflict in question (Penalva 2002: 405). The decision to publish information on war, violence, or tragedies stays with the medium, journalist, or photographer; nevertheless, the audience receiving this kind of information also has a responsibility.

The second case is related to one of the most discussed issues in the media dealing with the news reports of violence in Mexico. Since 2010, there has been a proliferation of websites dedicated to compiling stories or information about drug lords, cartels, and violence. These websites' argument is clear and simple: "it is better to show how terrible things are rather than to live in ignorance"²¹. Initially, the content of these websites was information submitted by civilians and reports that were not published in mainstream media. Nevertheless, the criminal organizations recorded the executions of members of the rival cartel and uploaded them on other websites²². When the videos were banned, the perpetrators sent them as exclusive footage to these "narco information" websites, making them available without warning or restriction. The "informative" duty that these websites claim to perform is open to debate²³. However, the videos on these websites are not used to incriminate the perpetrator, nor are they used as evidence to denounce the crime. The number and versions of these sites seem to have increased in the last years, now with English language versions.

The informative duty that these websites claim to offer is misleading, when the photos and videos of executions are the main content of the reports; a contextualization or editorial reflection of the content is not offered. Covering this kind of information is probably the biggest responsibility in the communication process. Compiling news and reports about the narco-violence or other sensationalist events does not promote the informative agenda, nor does it better inform Mexican society of the problem. Does my right to information include the depiction of human savagery? The publication of visual material depicting violence, without any restrictions, has only benefited the cartels' horror propaganda, making these websites a communicative platform²⁴ and serving as the perfect stage for the cartels to showcase their threats and brutality. In the case of Mexican newspapers showing graphic pictures every day, the message is clear. The reproduction of visual material containing explicit content has a primary path: exploitation. In their *online* version²⁵, reports from the printed version and pictures have open access. Even the local newspapers and websites with narco-information could not be considered mainstream media; their audience is massive²⁶.

21 This opinion is taken from an interview with a person running one of the most visited websites: www.blogdelnarco.com. For the interview see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVcJ8WrjUBM Accessed: 28 May 2013.

22 Youtube was the first website where one cartel uploaded the executions; the videos were blocked after many hours. This situation happened many times when other cartel retaliated with more videos.

23 For example, see: Manuel Mora y Araujo (21 August 2010), 'El blog del narco' in *Un Mundo Hiperconectado* http://www.perfil.com/contenidos/2010/08/21/noticia_0032.html Accessed: 29 May 2013.

24 The reports are not contextualized; the content (pictures and videos) depicting extreme violent acts only contain a written warning of "real explicit".

25 See for example: <http://www.oem.com.mx/laprensa/justicia.aspx>

26 According to media reports the most visited website www.blogdelnarco.com gets between 3 and 5 million visitors monthly. See: <http://www.hispanicallyspeakingnews.com/authors/elblogdelnarco/> Accessed: 15 April 2013.

When Michela Marzano (2010: 34) reviewed the diffusion of diverse violent material on the Internet, she asks herself if it is really necessary to show all this. The subject still decides whether or not to look at the reports with graphic pictures, but what happens to the dignity of those who have been executed, whether or not a part of criminal activities, when the visual material is published for public consumption? In this regard, the right to information is clearly abused and exalts violence. Marzano, then, poses the ultimate question: Is being informed the main purpose of citizens who look at this material?

As previously mentioned, one way to relate to the conflict and its visual sphere is via its consumption; it is necessary, though, to differentiate people who relate to the conflict in accordance with their own experiences within the environment. The experience diverges for one who lives in a city affected by the conflict and has been involved in a violent situation, and for another who follows the conflict through the media. In both circumstances the majority of people reject the violence. However, living in a city or region where the presence of the organized crime is considerable, the context facilitates toleration, even trivialization of it, as seen in the videos uploaded by civilians.

Media logic is characterized by the presence of sensational content and dramatic pictures of the social reality (Hamelink 2011:32). In the Mexican context, media logic gives more attention to the spectacular and brutal stories of the conflict. The permanency of the conflict may have altered the compassion fatigue condition, when fading compassion yields to rising mercilessness. In experiencing the conflict this way, the spectatorship proposed by Debrix makes sense; when the protagonist and antagonist do battle, the images of it are accepted.

5. CONCLUSION

The vicious circle, it seems, is complete. The final way to engage with the conflict's violence and its visual legacy is to consume it. Red-yellow "journalism" is eager to show and do whatever it takes to sell; such journalists are followed by a bloodthirsty audience eager to buy a front page with dead bodies or to watch videos of real executions. The violent acts continue as well as the availability of the material; when some violence is accepted and tolerated, consumption signifies the trivialization of violence. The institutionalization of this practice in journalism is a fact in the cases commented on; publishing news and explicit visual material is raw exploitation. The gallery of this conflict has enough material to fill dozens of disgraceful albums. This is sadist guilt profitable for the implicated, when vulture journalism and vile spectatorship are mutual.

In this conflict, violence is measured by the number of dead bodies, which are only statistics. Their faces, names, and personal stories have been covered by stains of blood. These people are then forgotten when the next violent episode brandishes the front page.

The headlines and pictures will be consumed as if it were just another new object offered in the marketplace. The spiral of images and tragedies has devoured the human condition; the person's dignity has been forgotten by some part of the media and audience. The privacy of the human beings who have been executed as part of the conflict (even if they were part of the cartels), or in other disgraceful situations, are not respected with the publication of these visual materials. Grief-stricken families are not considered when their relatives are exposed without consent in public photos.

Complicity¹ between the spectator and the executor is clear in the cases presented. The right to information is only a pretext for exploitation; all the crimes documented by images or video and circulated for public access are evidence. The complicity of a desensitizing stance, where the objectification of a human being portrayed in distress takes place. On the Internet, easy access to an array of visual material depicting the conflict's violence and the diffusion of reports is overwhelming. When the commodification of violence in different social aspects is tolerated, it becomes ordinary, as with the newspapers depicting explicit images. The everyday violence becomes routine, not only in images, but in social practices and structures and, at that moment, the damage is done. The executions and security strategy have centred on the debate about the conflict, and other forms of social aggression and exclusion prevalent in the Mexican society are overshadowed. The subjectivity that the violence and narco-culture creates will infiltrate the social fabric in those communities more affected by this situation. As a result of the permanent status of the conflict, practices from the "narco-world" have impacted the social and cultural fields, finding in the popular culture a wider window for exposition of their expressions.

What measures should be taken to break this vicious circle? For instance, as a reminder of the consequences of war, Sontag (2003: 83) suggests an alternative: "Let the atrocious images haunt us". As already stated, the images are now available in cover pages or websites, not haunting, but finding new spectators. How long will take for the Mexican society to overcome the violence, and to forget those atrocious images and videos which have become ordinary products of consumption? The strategy of mass media as well as the attitude of the audience toward those kinds of explicit visual material has only reinforced the cultural violence. In contrast, Sharon Sliwinski reviewing Sontag's diverse arguments on photography proposes another approach. When someone is confronted with an image of distress, the empathy with the other must be preserved. Sliwinski (2004:154) suggests finding adequacy between image and content: the aim of the viewer is to alleviate the suffering depicted.

Images operate on different levels simultaneously. They may prolong the subject's victimization; yet, at the same time, they can give back the human condition to an objectified subject (Möller 2009: 787). In photojournalism, positive examples of the commitment against violence and its exploitation are seen in Alfredo Jaar's refusing to capitalize on

1 See: Bredekamp, Horst (May 28 2004), 'Wir sind befremdete Komplizen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Quoted in Möller 2012:20.

the despair of Rwanda's tragedy (ibid.: 788-93), Jonathan Torgovnik's presenting the tragedy of raped women and their children in the same conflict (Möller 2010), Sebastiao Salgado's raising awareness of social exclusion, and Don McCullin's portraying famine in Biafra (Campbell 2003). The photographers' intention was to preserve the dignity of those who were suffering or dying in front of their camera.

One of the most dreadful episodes of this conflict was the murder of 72 immigrants from different countries of Central America². This case prompted a different way to deal with the conflict. Many Mexican journalists alongside social organizations honoured those immigrants, following their path back to their hometowns and families. The work of the groups 72 *inmigrantes*³ or Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity⁴ intends to remember the victims' personal stories behind the official death toll, while keeping in mind the sorrow of those who have lost relatives in this conflict. These groups have the merit to fight the violence and its legacy trying to recover the *human condition* in the middle of this cruelty.

While it is true that the media must inform what is happening, publishing images depicting humans in tragic situations requires a considerate presentation. Particularly in Mexico, after so many years of violence and executions, the media must contribute something other than a daily report of it. In other words, a more constructive argument demonstrating the "reality" using graphic images is required. The civil society has the opportunity to take an initial step to overcome the violence and its visual horror. By looking at dramatic events, the spectator has the capacity to keep the dignity of the victims and to decrease the tragic legacy of violence.

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2 They tried to reach the Mexico-USA border See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/world/americas/mexican-drug-leader-salvador-alfonso-martinez-escobedo-arrested.html?_r=0 Accessed: 26 May 2013.

3 See: <http://72migrantes.com/>

4 After the assassination of his son, the poet Javier Sicilia founded the Movement. Their activities include "caravanas" (peace caravans) to the most violent cities in Mexico and reunions with the victims' families. See: <http://movimiento-porlapaz.mx/>

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