

Research connects drug war violence in Mexico with desensitization in social media

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Amid times of crisis, citizens often turn to social media as a method to share information, make observations and vent. But as a Georgia Tech professor's research into social media use amid the Mexican drug war shows, posts can reveal growing numbness, or desensitization, during times of protracted violence and stress.

Munmun De Choudhury, formerly of Microsoft Research and now an assistant professor in the School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech, led the research. Her team's paper, "'Narco' Emotions: Affect and Desensitization in Social Media during the Mexican Drug War," will be presented at CHI 2014, the leading conference on human-computer interaction. The presentation of the paper, which also earned Best Paper honors, comes soon after the capture of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, considered to be the world's most powerful drug lord, in Mexico.

The researchers declined to infer an actual causal relationship between drug war violence and social media numbness. But De Choudhury said the results do show a significant correlation between exposure to violence due to the ongoing urban warfare in Mexico and anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms gleaned from social media.

"General psychological research has demonstrated that prolonged exposure to violence, whether directly or word of mouth or through media reports, can have lasting and detrimental impacts including emotional numbness or desensitization," said De Choudhury. "And our research finds that this holds true with social media. Strong

psychological markers of desensitization followed rises of violence in the Mexican drug war."

For the research, the team focused on four cities: Monterrey, Reynosa, Saltillo and Veracruz. The team used official homicide statistics as well as unofficial data from social media and a prominent "narco" blog to establish patterns of ongoing violence in those cities. Using Twitter's Firehouse stream, they gathered all Spanish-language postings with hashtagged mentions of these cities, disregarding retweets and non-drug related posts.

The team employed data from Twitter, because of that medium's considerable use in Mexico. At the time of the research, about 35 percent of Mexicans were online, of which 82 percent used social media. Of the Mexican [social media](#) users, 58 percent used Twitter.

"In Mexico, Twitter has acted as a unique platform allowing affected people to express their emotions, be it their frustrations or grievances or anger, about their circumstances as well as feelings of terror," De Choudhury said. "This not only expands the narrative of how citizens are dealing with the drug war, but our findings can also help researchers build theories about socio-psychological responses to crises."

After a period of chronic exposure to drug-related violence, the researchers found lowered affective responses in Twitter posts of citizens experiencing the [violence](#). While the number of posts may have remained stable or increased, the levels of negative affect, which measures the level of displeasure of an emotion, decreased significantly.

More information: "'Narco' Emotions: Affect and Desensitization in Social Media during the Mexican Drug War," research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/?id=208580

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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