Carnegie Mellon's Paul Eiss analyzes how social media shaped the 'drug war' in Mexico
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The recent arrest of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán has thrown an international media spotlight on Mexican drug cartels and the acts of violence associated with them. What is less talked about, however, is how over the past decade increased access to the Internet, cellphones and other digital media have drastically changed the landscape of the so-called "drug war" in Mexico.

In a new article published in *Latin American Perspectives*, Carnegie Mellon University's Paul Eiss examines how both sides of the drug war—the cartel operatives as well as government and security forces—have used and responded to digital and social media. Eiss, associate professor of anthropology and history in the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences, explores the nature and implications of what he calls the "narcomedia," forms of digital messaging that have become central elements of, and even motivations for, the horrific acts of violence that have become commonplace in Mexico.

In Mexico, "narcomensajes" or narcomessages, are handwritten signs left by drug traffickers, often accompanied by gruesomely disfigured human remains. They have been used by traffickers, like Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel, since 2006, and typically are interpreted as ways for rival groups to "settle the score" or claim territory. From the moment of their first emergence, the narcomensajes and "narcovideos" were clearly intended for digital reproduction and transmission to YouTube and other platforms, thus bypassing the control of traditional media in a time when more and more Mexicans were using the Internet. Access to the Internet among Mexicans increased from 5 percent of the population in 2000 to 33 percent in 2010. Credit: Paul Eiss, Carnegie Mellon University

Eiss traces the emergence and spread of the narcomedia throughout Mexico and uses a 2008 episode from Yucatan to illustrate how the use of diverse kinds of narcomessaging politicized the battle between the cartels and the government. He shows how in some cases the tactics of the
narcomedia seem to have been adopted by government and security forces as well. For instance in 2009 security forces killed another cartel leader, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, and disseminated images of his symbolically desecrated body.

Attempts by the government and media companies to restrict the circulation of the narcomessages in mainstream media have caused a crisis in the news media as newspapers and journalists have been subjected to an unprecedented level of physical attacks by traffickers as well as police and security forces.

"I call my analysis of the narcomedia a 'reader's guide,' because it is meant to provide a different way to read the narcomedia, and by extension, episodes of drug war-related violence in Mexico," said Eiss, who also directs CMU's Center for the Arts in Society (CAS).

"Against depictions of the drug war in black and white, as a fight of good guys against bad guys, the narcomedia reveal the conflict to be painted in shades of gray—leaving many observers asking 'Who is who'? Against rosy depictions of the social media as an engine of progressive social change, the narcomedia show them used just as powerfully as a tactic of violence.

"At the same time though, in a climate of censorship and open physical assaults on the press, the narcomedia—or the blogs that mine them for information unavailable in the mainstream media —paradoxically also offer an increasingly important resource for the Mexican public as it seeks information and critical perspective on the conflict, and ways to respond," Eiss said.

CAS is a research center in the Dietrich College and College of Fine Arts that explores the role of the arts in society. Eiss was inspired to investigate the Mexican drug cartel's use of Internet and digital media in part by the center's Media Initiative, which is focused in part on the role that new media—digital, networked, computer-mediated and social media—now play in social life, cultural politics and political mobilizations.

"I like to think that this project, like those supported by the center's Media Initiative, engages contemporary issues in new ways even as it draws deeply on the longstanding core concerns and methodologies of the humanities," Eiss said.

More information: To read the full paper, “The Narcomedia: A Reader's Guide,” visit http://lap.sagepub.com/content/41/2/78.abstract

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