

## Introduction to Chapter 5

This chapter studies the journalistic representation of violence in Ciudad Juárez. It focuses on the ways femicides are portrayed in the news, reflecting on how the rhetoric of newspapers is itself a factor that misinterprets or neutralizes those deadly events. By relating what is said and what is omitted from news to political and cultural contexts, the analysis emphasizes the role played by the press in the exacerbation of a climate of border violence. Because violence is understood as a meaningful phenomenon that can only be read by taking into account the economy and the political forces that operate in Ciudad Juárez, the press is considered a key instrument of these forces. Therefore, it is possible to talk about a violent journalism as it can be considered a medium that reproduces the border's violent culture.

This chapter argues then that the press is responsible for the frequent implementation of a politics of “not-knowing” in the media, which undermines the central role it plays regarding the strengthening of democracy and toward preventing the emergence of a state of terror in contemporary Mexico. The press's usefulness in helping the general public to cope with the impact of other crises (that is, economic or public health) contrasts sharply with its more passive attitude toward the origins, manifestation, and consequences of gender-based violence. Unfortunately, the public has been led to believe that a solution is impossible. This position is echoed in the skepticism of the authorities themselves, who, alluding to the presence of the drug cartels and the amount of illegal weapons that freely circulate in most border cities, assume that any systematic effort to combat the causes of public insecurity and violence is a lost cause. Unlike the low-budget movies studied in chapter 4 by María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, in which the intervention of a police hero solves the femicides with ease, the pessimistic view reiterated in the press contributes to the propagation of an image of terror that, according to chapter 3 by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, is also present in border television.

## Over Their Dead Bodies

### *Reading the Newspapers on Gender Violence*

IGNACIO CORONA

To transfer an event into a news story is not the same as simply reproducing what happened. To transform an event into news is also to alter it, to digest it, to mutilate it.

—Ciro Marcondes Filho

NEWS COVERAGE about the U.S.–Mexico border has practically exploded in the past two decades. Primarily providing accounts of recent socioeconomic patterns in the region—especially the boom of the *maquiladora* industry, increased migration, and the new transnational dynamic brought about by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—this coverage has often been clustered around certain object-themes that invariably include crime and violence.<sup>1</sup> Stories of corruption and brutality are prominently displayed on the front-page of local newspapers, competing with the press's defining elements of social reality: politics and the economy. A cursory search for news about the border may indicate that a great deal has been built on negatives—pollution, the vice industry, illicit activities, crime, drug trafficking, which add to the historical stigmatization and anxiety about the limits of the nation-state and its population.<sup>2</sup> The analysis of this journalistic discourse reveals the conjunction of meanings and social processes that reproduce a “violence-obsessed culture.”

Hence, more than a preferred journalistic object-theme, violence actually becomes the dominant narrative of contemporary Mexican reality and—more acutely—that of the Borderlands. As with all readings of particular features of social life, such a journalistic emphasis conveys ontological presumptions without disclosing their complicity in the representational

process of violence. This chapter's main line of inquiry explores precisely this process that produces a "violent journalism" inasmuch as it depicts (in both fact and opinion) and produces (in its discursive formalization) a more violent reality. By examining such an internal formalization of a violent reality along Mexico's northern border, a first line of inquiry focuses on the press coverage of the several hundreds of women murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. The analysis is based on a follow-up of a local newspaper, *El Diario*, during 2004 and 2005, which is systematically compared with other Mexican newspapers from the region, such as *La Crónica* (of Tijuana, Baja California Norte), or from the center of the country, such as *El Informador* (of Guadalajara) and *Reforma, La Jornada*, or *El Universal* (all of Mexico City).<sup>3</sup>

A second line of inquiry addresses the press's epistemic function regarding the interplay between factuality and nonfactuality in the production of violence as a journalistic object-theme. It examines how the demand for information in constructing the typical object of journalistic attention is defied by the inability to balance "the factual" and "the contextual." This explains why the news coverage spreads a discursive network over the "factual gap" of the events—the "not-knowing." The public yearning for news necessarily generates first- and second-degree journalistic texts—more than a mere platitude, indeed in the media there is no such thing as a "vacuum of information."

An editorial politics of "not-knowing" then responds to such a demand by transferring the documented facts about particular events to the background and replacing them with "news" about social or intergroup conflicts, which may be related to or in some cases generated by the occurrence of the primary events. Such a politics infuses media "noise" to fill the void created by the public relevance or impact of events for which there is not enough proven or sanctioned information. To engage these different levels of journalistic discourse and the institutional modes of inquiry in which they are produced, it is necessary to expand the object of analysis from the basic news reports (first-degree) to op-ed columns, editorials, chronicles, published interviews, and readers' letters (second-degree) to approach their cultural underpinnings and the politics involved—that is, the analysis of the tensions that shape the "not-knowing."

## Femicide and the Economic Boom on the Border

At a juncture of greater independence and economic competition, border newspapers have had to rely more on their own sources of financing and commercial strategies as they increasingly depend on the income provided by publicity rather than by the number of subscriptions. For decades the municipal, state, and federal levels of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional-dominated government supported a wide array of newspapers throughout the country with a steady influx of resources, most often in the form of paid publicity. In that predictable world a hegemonic perspective with its national and regional schemes coincided with a traditional organization of the news.

The typical "serious" press used to secure the front page for economic or political issues, or for occurrences of national relevance, reserving the interior pages of the widely read *policíaca* (public security) section for information dealing with *la nota roja* (crime news). The emergence of a new national "finanscape" (Appadurai)—in which selling newspapers actually matters—may explain the selective dosages of frontal sensationalism in a large sector of the contemporary press. The local press invariably converts the discovery of female corpses into headlines that do not disguise but underscore the commodification of women. The market value of sensationalist *notas rojas* explains the "industrialization" that follows the murders for newspapers entangled in diverse commercial competition, most important with the audiovisual media. Sales of newspapers increase when the headlines refer to a violent (preferably local) event; if they come accompanied by catchy headlines and graphic pictures on the front page, they are considered more attractive to the reader.

The media impact of news reports about the femicides has triggered complaints from local economic groups who argue that these stories represent "bad publicity" for the city and involve a high economic cost as a potential deterrent to investments (Ciudad Juárez itself provides 40 percent of Chihuahua's GDP).<sup>4</sup> And yet economic data does not back such complaints. Data from the last *sexenio* (the six-year-long presidential election cycle) reveals that the city attracted 57.7 percent of all foreign and national investment to the state of Chihuahua. A total of 245 new industries were established with a complete investment of more than three billion dollars

and a generation of more than sixty-five thousand new jobs. The Dow Jones Corporation magazine, *América economía*, placed Ciudad Juárez among the twenty top cities for investment in Latin America (Pineda Jaimes, "Los mitos").

If anything might scare away investment and the arrival of more *maquiladoras*, it is the "unfriendly" economic atmosphere (the *high* costs of production in the locality; the difference in salaries relative to another country, such as China; the presence of unions; and so on) or increased public insecurity. Violent and nonviolent crimes committed in the city jumped from 129,000 in 1997 to 260,000 in 2003 (*ibid.*). But the "bad publicity" brought about by media attention to the femicides, as has been argued, has not kept business away. On the issue of security, investors and the local population may agree. In a poll conducted on September 30, 2003, among nine thousand participant adults, 33 percent estimated that the worst element of Ciudad Juárez was public insecurity; 30.7 percent delinquency; 5.7 percent public services; and 5.6 percent corruption (*ibid.*). The absence of the femicides among these categories—perhaps expelled from public consciousness as a sort of defense mechanism—is an issue that requires further research.

Correlations between the economy and gender violence, however, are difficult to deny. Recent changes in the economy of Ciudad Juárez, in both its legal and underground manifestations, have occurred alongside the increase in femicides. Such an increase coincided with the moving of operations to the city of one of Sinaloa's drug cartels, headed by Amado Carrillo Fuentes (aka "The Lord of the Skies") in 1993, with its consequent impact on the local economy. It also coincided with the implementation of international policies of commercial integration, such as NAFTA. The murders of women appear eerily inscribed in the local newspapers along with news about economic growth and social change in a momentous time for Ciudad Juárez's economy—a city that concentrates a fifth of all *maquila* jobs (250,000) available in the country. As a drawback of NAFTA, these murders disturb the political optimism of economic prospects with the ghosts of a dark collective reality, the roots of which are mostly unexplored by the media, which typically offer little more than a voyeuristic approach to the themes of violence and death along the border.

This apparently contradictory reality that found its way onto the front

page of all local newspapers may explain the double editorial strategy regarding the continuous reports of more female corpses: "showing" (reaping the benefits of their sensationalist appeal) and "hiding" (immediately withdrawing them from the public eye). This symbolic transfer of information to the black box of the authorities' desks for their supposed investigation amounts to a second disappearance of the bodies, given the endemic corruption in the country's criminal justice system. This may explain, then, the contrast between the prominence achieved by the news reports about discovered bodies and the depth and duration of the journalistic coverage for each new case. Archival research demonstrates that the threshold for these news reports rapidly diminishes not only in the newspaper but in the other news media as well. The journalist Sam Quinones ("Dead Women," 152) has estimated that on average each case lasts only three days. Such a short duration not only responds to the fast turnaround dynamics that control journalistic production, but also suggests that it may reflect local readers' desires to place the news about the discovery of yet one more body securely in the past by quickly excluding it from the surface of the "real." This could be interpreted as a normalization of a symbolic social crisis engendered by the flagrant transgression of the traditional norms of collective coexistence that male homicides (as in mafia-style executions) do not provoke, unless they fit the category of *magnicidios* (assassination of an important person).

Because a corpse or its partial remains take time in being identified, many bodies are accounted for only as "unknown." For the purposes of surpassing the *nota roja*, the typical journalistic treatment of the murders does not provide enough elements for rational discourse, for collective memory, or for avoiding a discourse of victimization. The lack of information does not even allow fulfilling all the requirements of the traditional structure of the news report. Its collapse in many of the hundreds of killed women represents, from an epistemological perspective, a collection of newspaper cutouts that are like fragments of a large puzzle oscillating between failed documents and the possibility of a clue. As Heyman and Campbell (207) have observed on the information gathered so far: "The best data were mislaid and destroyed by the Juárez police. So after one of the worst cases of femicide in world history, we are left with speculation—powerful politicians or rich businessmen did it, satanic killers did it, a deranged gringo did it, the police did it, copycats did it,

all Juárez men hate women, Juárez is a 'city of fear,' and so on—but few answers." In effect, many a hypothesis have been elaborated in relation to the murders, those motivated by organ trafficking, organized crime, networks of human smuggling, production of snuff videos, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the fundamental questions remain unanswered. And yet every single column or news report keeps on building on the cumulative emotional impact rather than on the informational value of the news. The informative void is filled up by the emergence of a public space of dispute of meaning and politics. Because an erotic or sexual element has been mentioned in more than a third of the cases, speculations linked to moral values abound, for instance, regarding the motivations for the killings. News stories about the femicides provide lurid details to grab the attention of readers. In more abstract terms this informational void is the space of articulation of both individual subjectivity and group interest, in which reason, interest, desire, and emotions somehow inscribe themselves.

In analyzing a journalistic discourse of violence, it is important to point out the connection between the reported event, the emotion it generates, and the accompanying circuits of cultural production and consumption. All news media, in their capacity for constructing reality through the use of images, have the power to evoke emotional reactions in the public. In due time these reactions become familiarized by the population and create a certain habitus. The repetitive representational model of violence as a unit or object-theme stimulates generalized forms of recognition of reality.<sup>6</sup> As the scholar Rosa Nívea Pedroso (142) has explained in her study of the Brazilian sensationalist press: "By repeating the same enunciation in each section, a cult to the magnitude of violence in society (and to the judicial power of journalism) is created."<sup>7</sup>

At the same time such a model exacerbates social tensions and increases a collective psychosis by alarming the citizenry, while offering few rational alternatives for coping with "the imminent danger." These are some of the narratives that instill in the public feelings of dread and anguish. Yet at the emotional level, the readers (and the TV spectators) look daily for their adrenaline rush as an addictive effect: seeking to be frightened and reassured of their fears one more time. That is why, from an economic standpoint, the news media cannot simply ignore this

vicious circle of supply and demand, which explains the vivid accounts of violence and public insecurity in the local and national news.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the void of information, paired with the persistence of the object-theme (violence), triggers an ambivalent reaction of further anxiety, anger, and frustration, but one that may also produce skepticism and disinterest as defense mechanisms.

### The Textual Codification of Violence: The Journalistic Format

It is pertinent to cautiously address the closing of the epistemic gap between action and representation in approaching the problematic that underlies the theme of re-presentation of violence in the media. The underlying proposition is that the exercise of violence—with physical violence as the prototypical model—can be transferred to other means of performance or expression. Likewise, it can be subjected to a process of instrumental logic. Representational strategies employed through the use of language and image allow the exercise of symbolic violence to be consistently codified by the imprint of an author seeking to deliver said violence to a given target, thus conflating action and representation. However, this intentional fallacy has to be abandoned in favor of a more decentered formulation to focus not on how violence is enforced by individuals, groups, or institutions and felt by victims, but rather on how it is textualized in a given discourse, represented as a general theme and "communicated" through different means of expression, such as the journalistic format.

Violence becomes codified in various ways in the newspaper, including a selective focus on violence as a privileged object-theme; an emphasis on its textual representational strategies; the peculiarities of its discourse that assign and attribute specific roles to certain actors while omitting reference to others; and the subtraction of context. Ciudad Juárez's *El Diario* has a daily circulation of more than twenty-five thousand copies and boasts the largest readership in the city as well as an office in El Paso, Texas. It is one of the most influential dailies in the northern region, along with Monterrey's *El Norte* and Hermosillo's *El Imparcial*. After the PRI lost the state elections, through its editorials

and news selection the newspaper became an ardent critic of the “*panista*” (of the PAN, Partido Acción Nacional, party) administration led by Francisco Barrio, whose government directed the first investigations into the femicides in the early 1990s.

Founded in 1985, *El Diario* is considered a “serious” or “quality” newspaper—another expression media analysts use to differentiate more professional newspapers, those that follow the rules of the professional press, from the mass market (“*popular*”) or sensationalist ones.<sup>9</sup> This newspaper is a good example of how the traditional dependency on governmental sponsorship has been transformed by economic pressures that require that the printed press increase profitability and competitiveness and rely more on the sale of advertisement space. Such a combination of political interests and economic conditions is reflected by the ideologies put into practice in its coverage of the femicides. Its front page invariably prefers to make a visual impact. It includes a prominent headline in bold, just slightly smaller than the very name of the newspaper, *El Diario*, which is usually accompanied by a subheadline and two smaller headlines also in bold within single-line borders. Behind the headlines in bold that announce the execution of another violent act in the city, there is a logic of reiteration and spectacular violence that seeks to compete in terms of its effects with the audiovisual media.

Like other “visual-oriented” newspapers, introductory paragraphs are limited to four or five news reports. Size reflects their value in the informational hierarchy of the newspaper. Infographic material is abundant: the larger photograph in color is linked to the main headline and five or six smaller photographs reinforce the content of the subheadlines and the leading stories of the other sections. Graphic and formatting devices—such as color framings, letters, and symbols, and so on—are also used, including a triptych header to introduce other news in smaller print, but also accompanied by photographs. All of this material is organized in a six-column vertical pattern. The frequent focus on crime news and recurrence to sensationalist headlines as the main news for the day—such as “Minor Decapitated and Raped,” “Minor Was Not Raped: Autopsy,” and “Assassin Confesses”—with the support of attention-grabbing graphic layouts and infographic elements like color photography make the dividing line between “the serious” and “the sensationalist” press a very fine one.<sup>10</sup>

For the commercial press everywhere there is a tendency to lean on police statements as a source for headlines. In fact, violent crimes are one of the three staples of commercial news, along with sports news and stories from the world of entertainment. Repetition of the informative unit “violence and crime” is considerable in the pages of *El Diario*. One of the three main headlines of the printed version of the paper is systematically taken from the *nota roja* section in intervals of frequency usually no greater than four days. By contrast, the most widely read newspaper in Mexico’s second largest city (Guadalajara), *El Informador*, a conservative daily, consistently chooses a headline from national or international politics and economy and very rarely one that deals with a security issue or from the *nota roja*.<sup>11</sup> As a pro-business daily, *El Informador* seeks to project an atmosphere of apparent stability and control. The choice of headline is the direct result, then, of specific editorial criteria, marketing strategies, and ideologies, in which a way of framing reality and foregrounding or minimizing violence is constructed as a distinctive event in the life of the community.

Newspapers transmit a sense or order of reality and hence are creators of meaning; they are not an arbitrary collection of facts, names, and numbers. By supporting their claims, views, and inferences on a diversity of discourses (that is, academic, scientific, political, economic, legal, religious, and so on), newspapers are subsidiaries of the different fields of knowledge, disciplines, and cultural practices. They bring together and disseminate information from these fields, but always through a given ideological lens that privileges some discourses over others. Since newspapers define what public interest is from a selection of certain object-themes, the focus on crime and violence invariably relegates other topics and views of reality to the back pages. These “other realities” are subordinated to the predominant perception of a violent reality and the encoding of an entire narrative of violence for social consumption. Hence the institution of journalism, to which society turns for (neutral and objective) information, is also—in a sort of Foucauldian interpretation—part of a scheme that provides a view of a reality characterized by violence.

All possible news items produced in a city the size of Ciudad Juárez—the fourth largest urban population in Mexico—are subsumed or disappear under such crime headings as “More Picaderos [Drug Selling Sites] Found,” “Picaderos’ Taken Care of for \$40,000,” “Two More Assassinated.

Now 4 in Two Days; Left in Apartment Complex," "Student of Rapists Rescued," and "Minor Escapes Assault on Luis Olague [Street]."<sup>12</sup> It is then possible to state that crime advantageously competes with news from politics, culture, and economy as a fundamental social force. To that extent, the police reports appear as a primary purveyor of information about society. This choice is part of the phenomenon of violent journalism in its manipulation and selection of social reality.

Journalism is supposed to provide a "natural, self-evident, or realistic" frame for the assimilation of events, and this is represented by the structure of the news (the seminal "truth-effect" device).<sup>13</sup> The textual format is not only a way of arranging the information but, more important, it is a mode of reasoning. The generic convention of writing a news report about crime then follows a set of preestablished inquiries condensed in journalism's five basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? and How? It is a conventional practice, but also a hegemonic one from a cultural point of view. It is rather influential in the social construction of reality by revealing what the "news" is, but also by homogenizing the heterogeneous, effecting exclusions, promoting and suppressing social actors, agents, and views, while advancing programs and agendas. Indeed, news events are constructed. That is why the analysis of the structure of its discourse continues to be important inasmuch as it makes inferable an entire universe of meaning and some of the ideological conflicts newspapers reveal.<sup>14</sup>

A case in point is the apparently simple question of "what happened?" — the departure point of the journalistic narrative — which requires complex negotiations of agency and story plot making as can be seen in the following two examples:

### Example 1

*February 18, 2003*

#### Three Bodies Found in Ciudad Juárez

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, CHIHUAHUA (*SUN*) The remains of three bodies, who are assured to be women, were found yesterday in the area known as "Cerro del Cristo Negro" in the northwest sector of the border area where the cadavers of two other women were found at the end of last year.

This area is near the neighborhood "Lomas de Poleo," where in the spring of 1994 the bodies of nine young girls were found, crimes that were attributed at that time to the gang "Los Rebeldes" and to the Egyptian Abdul Latif Sharif.

The three bodies were found within a radius of approximately 100 meters from each other and, according to reports, two were decomposed; one of them still had on a brown colored skirt and black blouse and the other was nude.

A third body was found almost totally cleaned of its flesh, was nude and only had on a pair of white socks. The woman and the girl that found them say that they were playing in that area trying to find lost objects, when amongst the mountains of rocks and earth they discovered the remains of what has been confirmed as assassinated women.<sup>15</sup>

### Example 2

*April 12, 2004*

#### Woman Strangled in Ciudad Juárez

It was confirmed in a police report that a newspaper delivery person transiting the area observed when the suspect struggled with the now slain woman.

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, CHIHUAHUA (*REFORMA*) In the early hours of yesterday morning a woman was strangled in the street only a few meters from a newspaper delivery person who didn't intervene despite the fact that the body was abandoned in a busy avenue along the border. With this homicide the total number of victims this year comes to 17, of which according to the Combined Department of Investigation of the Murder of Women, only four were murdered according to a sexually abusive pattern. According to the Municipal Police, the events took place around 4:00 a.m. at the corner of Argentina Street and Hermanos Escobar Avenue in the neighborhood Colonias de Hidalgo, situated in the north of the city. In the report the agents stated on record that a newspaper delivery person that was passing through the area observed when someone, that he assures he could not identify in the darkness, was forcing himself on a woman. He also indicated that the witness avoided the immediate area until he arrived to the other side of the block and called the emergency telephone system 060 and reported only that he had seen a person on the ground.

Rescue personnel that arrived on the scene commented that the woman did not have on underwear and that the sport pants that she wore were raised up to her thighs. Flor Mireya Aguilar Casas, Deputy Chief of Justice in the Zona Norte, informed the newspaper that the victim was strangled by hand and dragged several meters, which caused scarring on her forehead and elbows. "After the post-mortem examination they are chemically analyzing the samples of fluids taken from the body of the victim in order to determine if there had been a rape or other sexual contact before her death, but we cannot speculate," said Aguilar Casas.<sup>16</sup>

The different scenarios constructed by the journalistic report on the femicides are embedded in a patriarchal narrative articulated by a sort of "syntax of blame and guilt" (to use the literary critic Susan Wells's terms). This effect is increased by the typical reference to a violent sexual act prior to the killing. In both examples this is alluded to by the focus on the nude or seminude condition of the victims. Typically there is an instrumental desire to assign responsibility for the murders on specific individuals. This concentrated, apparently factual, and noncontextualized journalistic narrative deflects any blame from society (the readers): the guilty one is a criminal or psychopath Other: the Egyptian Sharif or the gang "Los Rebeldes" in the first example or the unidentified (shad-owy) man in the second.

By this rhetorical procedure social violence becomes subtly invisible. The rest of the community becomes, like the bystander in Example 2, a neutral observer or witness (almost a voyeur), or like the woman and the girl in Example 1, the "accidental" discoverers of crimes committed. In their chance encounter with death, the two females already know what occurred, because "they confirm the corpses they have found are assassinated women." Such a prior knowledge of human remains previously found in that area predates and surely is at odds with the naturalness and innocence of their play. They reflect the same innocence of society (who knows but pretends not to), by playing scavenger games at the place where others discard the "evidence" of their deadly "games." This last sentence—constructed on a contrast between chance and destiny, innocence and evil, life and death—is not different in its rhetorical strategy from apparently neutral constructions, which clearly reflect a specific way of framing reality.

In the journalistic discourse on the femicide, even the ambiguous

nature of language contributes to this effect: the hundreds of women killed in the city become merely "Las muertas de Juárez," ("The dead women of Juárez"). Such an ambiguous expression refers to femicide as almost a natural occurrence and therefore dissipates direct responsibility while saving the readers of more troubling expressions with an emphasis on action and agency. Moreover, as all "natural cycles," the murders end up implicitly transformed into a repetitive event (the news is also the old news and the foretold news: a new corpse will appear tomorrow). The opposite procedure contributes to placing violence at the center of journalistic discourse. When it becomes the noun or referential object—gaining an actantial value as a grammar subject: "la violencia se cobra dos nuevas víctimas" ("the violence takes two new victims" [Imbert, 89])—it problematically refers to violence as an abstract force beyond human agency.

These discursive strategies appear without ground (in Derrida's terms)—that is, without an unquestioned point of departure for the interpretation beyond discourse itself. The origin of this deadly form of violence remains mostly indecipherable (ethnic revenge, patriarchal punishment, execution-style murders, satanic rituals, and so on). The frequent absence of identification and lack of progress in the investigation of many other cases confirm the "simulacrum" or "quasi-fictional" character of the "real" account of news reports. Because the typical journalistic report focuses on action and characters, the lack of information generates a void of knowledge in reference to, among other essential elements, the identity of the killer and often of the victim. The imperative is that of telling the story, any story, even sketchy details for "filling-in-the-blanks" because there is a public commitment to the act of telling. To somehow provide some information, some might resort to construct what Daniel Boorstin—the early theorist of simulation—has called "pseudo-events" (indirect information by reproduction of informal polls or interviews).

Besides disseminating disinformation and (a paranoid) anxiety, the effect is a "story of terrible deaths . . . a story of nobody having learned anything, a story of stupid repetition" (Wells, 190–91). Such stories are discontinuous, fragmented, shorn from their context, uprooted, which "will not organize public discourse [and which] will refer it to some impossible other place" (ibid., 166). Indeed, notorious structural defects in the production of news leads to confusion of the reader: information

placed without context; consultation of predictable sources of information, but omission of many more; limited information to serve a demand to produce “something,” be it speculation or rumor; abundance of press releases and lack of firsthand research; and poor selection of sources and experts. The implicit “inverted pyramid” organization of facts forces little evocation of the real-world context (Schudson, 185). It aspires to contain the violent act in discrete units (and avoids the context for the most part) in a simplified causal relation.

The world of violence, according to this perspective, is a world of linear logic with segments of social behavior necessarily identified in terms of clear-cut motives and causes; agents and victims; means, times, and spaces. When all of this information is available, the typical structure of the news report is considered successful and journalism’s fundamental mission—the accurate transmission of information—is (self-)fulfilled. In their pursuit of objectivity and unambiguous causal relations, the reporter and the newspaper editors may reproduce a vision of social reality that refuses to examine the roots of the problem and the basic structures of patriarchal society and its relationship to the economy, the use of urban space, political power and class privilege, the role of the authorities, the professional preparation of the security forces—all of which are important in the string of unsolved femicides.

It is then necessary to incorporate further contextualization or an interpretative layer, which would require journalists to do more independent research, to test a hypothesis, interview more community members (using primary sources rather than citing others or, moreover, pirating news reports), look for the new instead of picking it up from official reports, and so on. Despite the accumulation and presentation of facts, fragmentary data, or incomplete reports—as if those pieces of information spoke for themselves—that continue to populate the newspapers, the institutional norms of journalism do not advocate blending fact and opinion, leaving the interpretation part (if any) to the commentators, editorialists, or the readers themselves. This proposition is hidden behind the newspapers’ internal division of the narration of the events: editorials and opinions on one side and gathering and description of facts on the other.

Nevertheless, such a division of intellectual labor does not consider that describing is also interpreting and that the selective use of anecdotal

information also requires a certain analytical discerning, just like contextual information or abstract data. This problem arises when newspapers use certain rhetorical strategies that approach the social by reporting the individual (that is, the specific example) oblivious to the (statistical) implications of a broader panorama. This is the case, for instance, when they seem to be more interested in highlighting information about women being killed. Likewise, when newspapers publish the official statistics of 410 cases of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez from 1993 to 2005, they may go as far as quoting independent sources that might even duplicate that number, but consistently fail to compare it with statistics nationwide and therefore may hint at false conclusions.

As critical as the murder of women in Ciudad Juárez is, in a recent report by the organization Justicia para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters) the figures of femicides in other areas appear as even more alarming based on purely quantitative terms: 1,500 in Chiapas in the past five years; 900 in Veracruz from 2000 to 2004; 112 in Baja California from 2002 to 2004; and 39 in Quintana Roo from January to September 2004.<sup>17</sup> This information casts an indirect light on the ways the press has contributed to territorialize the problem and keep it in spatial contention in a false seclusion (or focalization). And yet this is clearly a phenomenon that surpasses municipal boundaries and that requires other types of conceptualization and intervention, not as a problem confined to any given city but as a much larger national problem. By the same token, sensationalist news about the femicides that extend a mantle of victimization over women and women’s struggles may also obscure or belittle the many strides and undeniable general advances of women in northern Mexico that are so profoundly changing this society.

### The Crisis of Truth and the Politics of “Not-Knowing”

The unconvincing official statements made about public security and the ambiguity and incompleteness of the information disseminated by the news media acquire a more profound historical resonance in the long-standing crisis of the “regimes of truth” in Mexican society. This crisis, which consequently accentuates the social relevance of rumor, cannot



be the responsibility of institutions themselves but of the cultural and political system as a whole, as the very reading public itself is not exempt from this phenomenon. So the theoretical question about to what extent the distrust of the justice system indirectly affects the credibility of the press as a disseminator of the official information and as a social mediator is not an idle one. If consumption of printed news is an indicator of credibility and relevancy of the press, then we might have a problem.

Despite the high number of newspapers—Mexico City itself is the city with the most newspapers in the world, with twenty-four dailies—their readership is small and it has continued to decrease nationwide even more.<sup>18</sup> Some politicians cynically observed that this fact was one of the reasons that explain the diminished censorship toward the press since the Salinas de Gortari administration (1988–94). This negative tendency cannot be explained by increased access to the Internet, because computer usage is still low in the country. It could be attributed, instead, to simple economic reasons in terms of the population's declining purchasing power as well as to the unrivaled importance acquired by radio and TV news.

For a Mexican society that seemingly lives beyond “the age of truth”—if there ever was one—the press might mirror some of the problems of credibility faced by the justice system. Fully aware of the many errors in the administration of justice, in the series of contradictions and omissions in judicial proceedings, most of the press does not investigate, or it does so inconclusively, without copies of documents or reproduction of speeches or deliberations. Regarding the femicides, the information made public is far from complete. In many cases the only legal and factual certainty is the “evidence” provided by a dead body. There are doubts about everything else: the identity of the deceased, whether the accused (if any) were the true perpetrator(s), the motives, the evidence provided by “contaminated” crime sites, the process of prosecution, and so on.

There are contexts implied, but not explored or made explicit. The gaps of information are, as discussed earlier, filled up by the media by serving as a vehicle for political, economic, and cultural disputes over the dead bodies. In the resultant simulacrum, some provisional information is disseminated only to follow the trace of its effects throughout a well-known “roadmap” of public opinion. Following a common procedure to register it, the reporters inquire with specific social actors their reaction to

recently published news, statements, or pieces of information. Then they proceed to interview opposite parties and, if pressed into it, a neutral or authorized opinion, subtly blending facts with opinions in the delimitation of the “real” by creating a sample of social agents and a field to represent “social reality.” This procedure illuminates the fact that journalism is not only built upon hard data, but also on opinions, beliefs, and myths.

This is not the typical view of an institution based on Enlightenment ideals—that is, essentially monologic, accountable to norms of rational discourse, and committed to universal notions of truth. As such, it was a cultural practice associated with the narratives of institutions, practices, movements, identifications, and modes of affect and desire broadly defined as “modernity”—which in turn originates the specific audiences served by (the political, social, cultural, economic coverage of) the newspaper. Indeed, the press has always been associated with a more traditional “regime of truth” and modern logic (search for, simplification, and dissemination of the information) tied to a network of interest in and commitments to the legal pillars of modern society. The primary function of its narrative is supposed to render a succinct report of (primarily current) facts or events classified, organized, and judged in terms of interest, actuality, or relevance for the general public.

The news report is expected to be as accurate and unbiased as possible. Personal opinions are contained in specific sections within the newspaper's internal structure in which commentators, editorialists, reviewers, chroniclers, and so on respond to the need to insert a subjective dimension to the medium. However, similarly to the discourse of human rights, if everything else is relative, something is required to remain as the immutable record of change.<sup>19</sup> The entire conversation regarding a postmodern view of journalism and the impossibility of providing objective notions of truth hits home regarding the aforementioned politics of “not-knowing.”<sup>20</sup> In the journalistic coverage of the Ciudad Juárez murders extending more than a decade into the past, most of the information disclosed to the public is fragmentary and nuclear, which reflects the state of affairs of public information. Some columnists translate such “not-knowing” as informative obscurantism and establish a link with the destruction of societal fabric.<sup>21</sup> An investigative stance is thus demanded of the press. Informing by reproducing the official bulletins—as if data and facts were isolated from interpretative contexts—does not suffice.

It is in this panorama that Jean Baudrillard's meditations ("The Perfect Crime") about the disappearance of truth amounts to the journalistic "politics of not-knowing," which more than substituting the "factual" merely seems to modulate it. However, the issue is not demanding that the press represent the nonrepresentational—the gaps of information—within the imperative of constructing a discourse of "the Real" that believes in its own transparency, but of giving consistency to a discourse that finds difficulty serving the basic purpose of informing.<sup>22</sup> Mexican society is then submerged in a state of not-knowing. This could be exemplified by one of the testimonies gathered by Sam Quinones ("Dead Women," 152), for whom "the perfect murder is, it turns out, unusually easy to commit, especially when the victim is no one important, an anonymous figure, and Juárez has enough of those. All of which leaves Sandra's people up on Capulin Street with a lifetime of wondering ahead of them. 'What we'd like is to know something,' says her aunt, María de Jesús Vásquez, pleading, holding out her hands. 'We don't know anything.'"

While the most evident consequence of those gaps is a collective public frustration and a sense of powerlessness in those affected by violence, the most pervasive effect of the journalistic simulacrum is the weakening of political actions by civil society itself. The politics of not-knowing also make evident the failure of the government's intelligence systems and the corruption of the judicial system. Efficacy of the governmental institutions and the presence of a critical press are among the essential elements of a modern nation-state. And it is precisely the lack of a reliable justice system that constitutes one of Mexico's most difficult obstacles to its development. Officials are not prosecuted for past crimes; bankers and politicians do not serve jail time, except in a very small number of cases. There is not enough accountability and legal responsibility. This clearly sends a signal to the rest of society of a potential or actual crisis of the State that may involve a void of power attempted to be filled up by alternative (namely illegitimate) sources of power.

Unlike the wanton murder, the targeted assassination, or the proven crimes of a serial murderer, the reiterative killing of women suggests a political reading, as it defies the legal and political bases of society. As the historian Achille Mbembe (11–12) has stated, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, one's decision to kill or to

allow another to live constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power." The killings are then inscribed in a different order of power that challenges the foundations of society and redefines sovereignty. The state as such may indeed be surpassed: reiteration represents the power of proliferation and the rupture of social composition. In this sort of para-state, necropolitics and narcopolitics are opposed to politics, antijustice to justice, crime to public security, fear to peace, and "illegitimate" violence will only add to "legitimate" forms of violence.

Amid these oppositional and cumulative processes, some news media are also responsible for contributing to generate the idea of another Mexico, an obscure and lawless land that coexists and manifests itself on the country's violent surface. In this "México oscuro," terror and social paralysis are increasingly inhibiting social and political action aimed to lessen crime, corruption, and impunity. Notwithstanding, and against many odds, the news media will continue to have an important role in reversing this trend by supporting the dissemination of accurate information and crucial contextual analysis, and by doing so, supporting the demand for social justice and accountability in Mexican society.

## Notes

*Epigraph:* Marcondes Filho, 8.

1. See "Las fronteras del país se convierten en zonas de alto riesgo para la mujer" (The borders of the country are converted into high-risk zones for women), *El Diario de Yucatán*, Mérida, September 18, 2005.
2. Similarly, in the United States the border has implicitly been represented as "a repository for fears about racial mixing, cultural purity, moral decadence, economic decline, and political threat; hence lurid accounts of violence, drugs, and illegal smuggling pervade journalistic representations of the border" (Heyman and Campbell, 206).
3. The analysis focuses mostly on the *textual* elements. Although it takes into account some varieties of *graphic* information (such as typographies, headings, and the semi-otic placing of the textual elements), it does not focus on *infographic* elements (such as graphics, cartoons, or photographs), despite its relevance for scanning-type reading or limited-reading competency.
4. An alternative publicity campaign has sought to counterattack the city's bad reputation as a lawless place. Sponsored by the city and state governments, the Juárez es

mejor publicity campaign has been placed in the national media and on the Internet. This campaign, trying to "conceal the city's violent reality with an aura of communal harmony" (in Verónica Zebadúa's words) and very prominent in the Mexican printed and electronic media, has already been cancelled. The Web site is no longer available after about two years of existence. Notwithstanding, some publications still refer to this campaign, see Zebadúa's article for the Hemispheric Institute, available online at [http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/2\\_2/pdf/zebadua.pdf](http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/journal/2_2/pdf/zebadua.pdf).

5. Patricia Ravelo and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba have identified more than thirty hypotheses mentioned in the judicial investigations. See Ravelo Blancas and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba.

6. As in his study of the culture of violence in Spain, the scholar Gérard Imbert (203) has claimed: "To the imaginary of insecurity . . . the media responds with an imagery of violence in which the imaginary is confused with the real. Behind the imaginary of insecurity hides an imaginary of violence . . . a fear of being afraid of death" ("Al imaginario de la inseguridad . . . los medios responden con una imaginaria de la violencia en la que lo imaginario se confunde con lo real. Tras el imaginario de la inseguridad se esconde un imaginario de la violencia . . . un miedo a tener miedo de la muerte").

7. "Al repetir el mismo enunciado en cada edición, se realiza el culto a la magnitud de la violencia en la sociedad y al poder justiciero del periodismo."

8. Some psychologists have even advised their anguish-laden patients in major Mexican cities to stop watching the TV news as a way to avoid adding more stress to their lives. Similarly, a few years ago the government took the facile decision of ordering off the air programs of "reality TV" focused on urban violence and crime from the two competing commercial TV networks (Televisa and TV Azteca), as if by doing so, these phenomena might ipso facto disappear.

9. Imbert (66) has described two contrasting processes of visualization or occultation (*visibilización/invisibilización*) in the press regarding the fascination with the images of violence. Depending on the acceptance of any of these two strategies, the newspaper can be categorized either as "sensationalist" (*popular*) or as "serious" (*de referencia*).

10. "Minor Decapitated and Raped" (Degüellan y violan a menor), September 17, 2005, *El Diario*; "Minor Was Not Raped: Autopsy" (Menor no fue violada: Autopsia), September 18, 2005, *El Diario*; and "Assassin Confesses" (Confiesa el asesino), September 21, 2005, *El Diario*.

11. *El Informador* is the most widely read daily in the city but, like other newspapers in Mexico, it does not reveal its daily publication figures because of an internal policy. As of 2005, its daily circulation is nonetheless estimated to be more than sixty-five thousand. The fact that a newspaper is not willing to disclose information about itself seems inconsistent with its societal role as an instrument of public information. Guadalajara, like Ciudad Juárez, has also been affected by the increase of delinquency and insecurity derived from drug trafficking since the late 1970s, when several drug cartels moved to the city and began to establish contact with local politicians and entrepreneurs. Murders, as a result of the ineffable "score-settling" (*ajustes de cuentas*) among rival groups, are not an uncommon occurrence. However, the issue of violent crimes or hid-

den violence does not appear as a consistent method to boost sales in the case of this newspaper. Likewise, a 1989 study from G. Fregoso Peralta of a sample of editorials of this newspaper from 1987 to 1988 reveals that the issue of security was not even among the top ten topics. Public services and works (23.5 percent), followed by electoral politics (13.6 percent), education and culture (13.0 percent), agriculture (11.6 percent), economy (10.3 percent), ecology (9.9 percent), and governmental politics (8.4 percent) were the top categories. As the indexes of violence and insecurity in the city have notoriously increased, to the nineties and the present decade as well, the thematic categories might have possibly changed.

12. "More Picaderos [Drug Selling Sites] Found" (Descubren otros picaderos), *El Diario*, April 10, 2005; "Picaderos' Taken Care of for \$40,000" (Cuidan por 40 md "picaderos"), *El Diario*, April 11, 2005; "Two More Assassinated. Now 4 in Two Days; Left in Apartment Complex" (Asesinan otros dos [sic]. Van 4 en dos días; los dejan en residencial), *El Diario*, October 21, 2005; "Student of Rapists Rescued" (Rescatan a estudiante de violadores), *El Diario*, June 10, 2005; and "Minor Escapes Assault on Luis Olague [Street]" (Escapa menor de agresión en la Luis Olague), *El Diario*, September 22, 2005.

13. With his "zero degree writing" notion, the semiologist Roland Barthes was implicitly paying homage to the cult of objectivity and neutrality surrounding journalism since at least the interwar period. However, as Imbert (83) has claimed: "The will to objectivity does not exempt one from the manipulation of message" (La voluntad de la objetividad no exime de la manipulación del mensaje).

14. However, such a semiotic analysis does not allow making inferences on how newspapers are really read. Complementary ethnographic, sociological, and interdisciplinary reception studies may offer indexes regarding both the process of readership (individual construction of meaning) and the influence newspapers have among readers by themselves and/or in combination with other media and formal or informal sources of information.

15. "Three Bodies Found in Ciudad Juárez," *La Crónica*, February 18, 2003. Available online at <http://www.lacronica.com/buscar/traernotanew.asp?NumNota=208453>.

16. "Woman Strangled in Ciudad Juárez," *Frontera.com*, April 12, 2004. Accessed at <http://www.frontera.info/buscar/traernotanew.asp?NumNota=291488> (unfortunately this URL is no longer available).

17. For more information, see the report "Mexicanas asesinadas" by the organization Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, available online at <http://www.nodo50.org/pchiapas/mexico/noticias/mujerz.htm>.

18. This decline seems to occur elsewhere. As reported by the *New York Times Book Review*, daily readership for newspapers "dropped from 52.6 percent of adults in 1990 to 37.5 percent in 2000, but the drop is much steeper in the 20-to-49-year-old cohort, a generation that is, and as it ages will remain, much more comfortable with electronic media in general and the Web in particular than the current elderly are" (Posner, 8).

19. According to the philosopher Renata Salecl (*Spoils of Freedom*, 112): "In today's 'postmodern' world, where universality has been challenged in almost all areas of social life, human rights maintain the status of something unquestionable and sacred. They stand as the last remnant of the Enlightenment to retain its universal character. When,

for example, governments or opposition parties all over the world try to legitimize their politics, they invoke the universal rights of man. Human rights thus function as a normative imperative that is beyond politics and law." However, the modern presumption of universality in the defense of an ethical commitment to Truth and to truth-telling does not take into account the particular interpretations of Truth in the practice of journalism. From this standpoint critical views of the media are precisely based on their distancing from that goal and becoming partial in their account to specific interest groups, and/or by lack of commitment to an "objective" truth. The construction of reality from a given standpoint—unlike an absolute standpoint—hampers the neutrality and objectivity of the universal (ideological) tenets of the press. And yet, for all the differences between the modern and postmodern accounts of the press, there is an unavoidable ethical link: one that ties the newspaper to a general notion of Truth; and another one that ties the (postmodern) proliferation and democratization of media sources and communication technologies (that is, the Internet) to a more concrete (and therefore unstable and relativistic) notion of truth.

20. This notion differs from the liminal concept of "nonknowledge"—the consciousness of the absence of consciousness—that the French writer Georges Bataille (*Unfinished System*, 115) theorized as inbetween the concepts of "understanding" (connaissance) and "knowledge" (savoir) and experienced as the "persistent uneasiness of one who searches for knowledge" in a crucial point.

21. This sort of apocalyptic pronouncement finds echo, for instance, in a 2005 analysis of violence by the journalist Mauricio Merino in *El Universal*: "Disgracefully, we don't even have a completed diagnostic about the reality of our situation. Our information is fragmented and confused: serial assassinations that nobody manages to explain, like those that continue to occur in Ciudad Juárez; constant homicides between gangs and corrupt police officers, that apparently reveal the settling of scores or internal wars for the conquest of the drug market; kidnappings of fairly famous and fairly wealthy people; robbery of all types; drug trade with hands full; and a long, anguished and interminable list of assault, rape and murder that little by little becomes part of our daily life." ("Por desgracia, ni siquiera tenemos un diagnóstico acabado y completo sobre la situación en la que realmente estamos. Nuestra información es fragmentada y confusa: asesinatos en serie que nadie logra explicarse, como los que siguen ocurriendo en Ciudad Juárez; homicidios constantes entre bandas de delincuentes y policías corruptos, que aparentemente revelan ajustes de cuentas o guerras internas por la conquista de los mercados del narcotráfico; secuestros de personas más o menos famosas y más o menos acaudaladas; robos de toda índole; comercio de drogas a manos llenas; y una larga, angustiosa e interminable lista de asaltos, violaciones y asesinatos que poco a poco se va volviendo parte de nuestra vida cotidiana.")

Besides the informational demands, Merino adds that it is also necessary "to cut out the corruption that kills, literally, the police force, public officials and judges. We must, in the end, responsibly define the true causes of fear that we Mexicans feel for just living in our home country" (atajar la corrupción que mata, literalmente, a la policía, a los ministerios públicos y a los jueces. Tiene, en fin, que definir con responsabilidad

las reales causas del miedo que sentimos los mexicanos por el solo hecho de vivir en nuestro país).

22. Clearly, facts will not reveal a transparent reality but will be an epistemic gain over the brute events of the everyday, the chaos and disorder of "the Real" (or what may seem as a chaotic reality).

# **GENDER VIOLENCE AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER**

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Edited by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona

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