

THE RISE OF ATROCITY PROPAGANDA: REFLECTIONS ON A CHANGING WORLD

A Review Essay by James P. Farwell

Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy, Second Edition. Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (eds). New York: Routledge, 2020.

The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (eds). London: SAGE, 2020.

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Introduction

This year, two landmark books were published on the topics of public diplomacy and propaganda. They come at a time in which nations recognise that the use of information and soft power—non-kinetic means of influence—are taking centre stage in the global competition for influencing target publics. Public diplomacy and propaganda provide two complementary, well-used sets of tools for gaining influence. Today this is essential, as engagement and conflict take place more often than not in battle spaces occupied by civilians as well as combatants. This evolution is increasingly relegating armed force to the role of supporting a Strategic Communications narrative.

Routledge Handbooks has continued its contribution to the discourse on public diplomacy with a collection of essays, the *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, Second Edition. SAGE Reference has published its own collection of essays, *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*. Both illuminate these distinct but related topics. Combined, they provide vigorous actionable insights. Treating the books as complementary is interesting, as both public diplomacy and propaganda seek to influence public attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy

This volume of essays examines diverse aspects of public diplomacy and takes a look at how various nations have employed it in the modern era. The quality or usefulness of the essays is somewhat uneven, but the ones that stand out make the book worth reading. Public diplomacy, observe editors Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, is a key tool through which international actors advance their ends. The book's essays describe actions different nations have taken to boost their image and to assert influence among foreign audiences. Public diplomacy embraces building relationships, engagement with publics and civic organisations, citizen and corporate diplomacy, nation branding, and persuasion. Persuasion is a key to success in this arena. It requires credibility and policies that build trust. Success in public diplomacy means that you will have support when you need it.

President George H.W. Bush's ability to assemble a broad coalition to wage the 1991 war in Iraq well illustrates adept public diplomacy. I had the opportunity a few years before his passing to visit with General Brent Scowcroft, who served as 41's former National Security Adviser. I asked what he thought was

Bush's greatest strength. Scowcroft answered reflectively. Bush, he reported, understood that at the point you needed friends, you already had to have them. He recounted one afternoon sitting in the Oval Office with the President, who turned to him and asked: 'Who should we call today?' Scowcroft wondered what he wanted to achieve. Bush shrugged and said, more or less, 'doesn't matter who, we're just staying in touch'. He didn't need a problem to solve. His agenda was building friendship and trust. It paid off during Desert Storm. Bush was a gifted diplomat and his record is a testament, I think, to what adroit public diplomacy can achieve.

The topic of public diplomacy is too large for a single theory or geographic model, and its applications are diverse. The Routledge book describes key practices defining the concept. Here are a few of the stand-outs that merit close attention.

Patricia Goff notes that notions of 'cultural diplomacy' are elusive, as the lines that separate it from terms such as 'propaganda', 'public diplomacy', and 'soft power' blur, and different governments view the notion differently. Goff feels cultural diplomacy is more effective when not associated with the state. Thus, the BBC's distancing itself from the British government made it more credible. Goff makes an important point in arguing that such diplomacy can have a huge impact on shaping attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

Although some associate cultural diplomacy with the visual arts, literature, and classical music, she argues that popular culture—films, TV, popular music—matter more. Goff treats these as forms of public diplomacy, but both public diplomacy and propaganda are types of Strategic Communication that seek to influence opinions and shape behaviour in order to achieve a desired effect or end-state; distinguishing between the two is arguably the sort of head-of-the-needle debate better suited for students of Thomas Aquinas. What's important is to recognise and understand the impact.

The first leader to recognise the power of film in shaping attitudes was Vladimir Lenin. He put films on train boxcars and shuttled them around Russia to drum up support. During World War Two, John Ford turned President Franklin Roosevelt's speech extolling the 'Four Freedoms', defining core American values, into powerful films that endorsed Roosevelt's effort to anchor preserving *freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear* as a unifying mantra.

Luigi di Martino focuses on ‘listening’. He characterises this as a core activity in public diplomacy, reframed to distinguish it from propaganda, and used to implement or adjust strategy. He describes types of listening—apophatic, active, tactical, background, surreptitious. It’s academically interesting, although operationally listening to what other states, societies, and cultures believe, say, and do is common sense. Di Martino has codified elements of the notion.

Other sections of the book include descriptions of arts diplomacy, its use in public diplomacy and persuasion, citizen diplomacy, and corporate diplomacy. This second edition also delves into what nations in different areas of the world (Africa, Latin America, the Arab World) do to promote branding and to raise a positive image profile. Recounting what each does lies beyond the scope of this commentary. Each nation has its own idiosyncrasies.

The *Routledge Handbook* is a good introduction to public diplomacy. Still, streamlining content to make room for greater in-depth analysis, questioning what works, what doesn’t, and why—as well as what we can learn from public diplomacy—would allow this book, and its fine experts, to provide more and deeper insights.

The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda

The Sage collection of essays on propaganda is comprehensive and this book is important. Most of the essays are top-tier. They describe well how propaganda has been defined and employed since the mid-19th century. The handbook offers insights into how different nations, cultures, and political movements (including those that employ political violence) exploit propaganda.

While no one disputes the value of astute public diplomacy, propaganda today carries a negative connotation. It was not always so. Propaganda’s original meaning was current in the era of Pope Gregory XV, who in 1622 founded the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fidei [Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith]. A negative connotation became attached to the word during and shortly after World War I, associating ‘propaganda’ with spreading lies to shape behaviour. Actually, ‘propaganda’ in the original sense of the word can propound worthy or evil ideas, depending on who’s communicating, how, and for what ends.¹

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1 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion & Power* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

The editors of the SAGE volume call propaganda ‘weaponised advocacy’. They identify five criteria that qualify communication as propaganda. First, it requires institutional backing, whether from a state or from a terrorist group seeking to establish a state. Second, it solicits action from the masses. Third, it doesn’t ask for informed belief or usually employ rational appeal; it uses emotive content and rejects non-emotive forms of persuasion. Fourth, story trumps truth. In the editors’ minds, propaganda is false—a distinction not everyone accepts in comparing it to influence operations or Strategic Communications. Fifth, it exploits fear and the notion of an existential threat, a declaration that seems exaggerated. It might do that but does not need to.

The editors see target audiences as willing accomplices to their own persuasion and view propaganda as ‘psychological resources to affirm and reinforce the conviction of those who construct it’.²

If Strategic Communications comprises ‘everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’ then public diplomacy and propaganda can be thought of as subsets of strategic communications, with actions defined as one or the other falling somewhere on a continuum between persuasion and coercion.

I define ‘public diplomacy’ as the use of personal interaction between state diplomats with other diplomats or officials, cultural action (e.g. film, tv, books, food, dance, music), corporate and individual action to promote actions consistent with a national agenda, and ‘propaganda’ as words, deeds, images, and symbols that aim to mould or shape public opinion to influence attitudes and opinions, in the interest of influencing behaviour to achieve a defined objective or, in military parlance, end-state.

Among the many outstanding essays in the SAGE book, I found two particularly thought-provoking, which have prompted me to consider the rise of ‘atrocious propaganda’ in the 21st century.

Neville Bolt explains the Anarchist origins of ‘Propaganda of the Deed’, analysing the use of violence in an attempt to overthrow the state apparatus in a number of countries throughout Europe, and in Russia and the US. It was communication without speech—shock doctrine.

² Paul Baines, Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (London: SAGE, 2020), p. xxvi/612; Kindle Loc. 477/21842.

Bolt recounts the successful assassinations of fifteen leaders of nation states between 1880 and 1914 motivated by the desire to bring down the hierarchical state, which the Anarchists saw as a threat to the sovereignty of self-organising communities. The idea was to goad the state into using excessive means of reprisal and thus undermine its own moral legitimacy.

The Anarchists believed that the deed, and not the mere word, was the most direct path to undermining what they saw as corrupt power. They believed the construct of the state was evil and they wanted to destroy it. Their passion was persuasive to the other revolutionaries and to sympathetic members of the intelligentsia. The Russian anarchist, and later Bolshevik, Vera Zasulich was acquitted after she confessed to shooting and seriously wounding the governor of St Petersburg, because the jury believed she acted in pursuit of an honourable cause.

Bolt insightfully points out that the tensions between Anarchists and Communists and their failure to exert a unified vision across a spectrum of leftist political tendencies—from the pacific to the messianic—restricted the historical influence of Propaganda of the Deed. The establishment, which controlled the gates to mass communication, naturally denounced the violence and won the information war.

Emily Robertson's concise description of Australian and British 'atrocious propaganda' shows how these two states spared no effort to dehumanise the Germans and to depict them as bestial in order to inspire enlistments. As soon as it was discovered, the propaganda was denounced for its lies and lurid appeal to confirmation bias. Allied propaganda drew upon the ideological grammar established during the religious wars in Europe between Protestants and Catholics. Politicians and the media frequently discussed German atrocities.

The Allies portrayed their own efforts as a 'just war' against a ruthless and militaristic enemy that raped women and put children to the bayonet. Propaganda tales talked about a Corpse Conversion Factory that turned the bodies of dead German soldiers into soap. Germany's Zeppelin attacks on cities and their sinking of British passenger vessels accorded some factual basis for these lies. The strategy worked. Hatred of 'the Hun' unleashed mass protests and riots in the US against naturalised Germans. It helped tilt American opinion; the population was relatively equally divided between citizens of Anglo and German descent and the US could have entered the war on behalf of either side.³

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³ Control of money and the media made the difference. The US in that era was dominated by an East Coast elite that was pro-British. The Midwest had large numbers of citizens descended from Germans.

The British came out on top, thanks to east-coast, pro-British elites who dominated money, power, and media.

Morality ran through Allied propaganda in both World Wars. That notion remains pivotal in modern information warfare. Seizing and maintaining control of the ‘moral high ground’ is essential in influencing global attitudes, where every living room is a battlefield in the struggle to win support and demonise enemies in seeking dominant influence.

The essays in these two formidable volumes set me to thinking about different kinds of political violence and the difference between those who own up to their violent actions and those who don’t. Those who openly admit to and even brag about their violent acts, do so for differing reasons. We can only guess at the reasons of those who stay silent.

I delve into the ways in which political violence has evolved in the modern day. Given a central platform in the culture of political challengers ISIS and the Mexican drug cartels, the use of political violence blurs the lines between cultural expression and coercion. In contrast to cultural diplomacy as described by Goff, the drug cartels glorify the coercive violence they use to dominate as a way of life, creating a top-down narco culture that is the persuasive arm of their campaign.

To understand what is unique about violence as ‘atrocious propaganda’, we must first differentiate it from other types of political violence. While the following terms are used variously in different contexts, for the purposes of this essay I use them as defined here.

- ‘Political violence’ is *the deliberate use of aggressive or lethal acts to attain political goals*. Under the broad category of political violence, we can include such subcategories as acts of war, war crimes, terrorism, propaganda of the deed, atrocity crimes, and atrocity propaganda.
- ‘Atrocity crimes’ are defined in international law as falling into the categories of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. ‘Crimes against humanity’ include a number of subcategories such as extermination, deportation, torture, and rape, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.⁴

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⁴ *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* (New York: United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2014), p. 1–2.

- ‘Terrorism’ is defined by NATO as ‘The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.’⁵ While ‘acts of terror’ are not necessarily political, ‘terrorism’ is. In some cases, violent acts are not claimed by their perpetrators.
- ‘Atrocity propaganda’ is political violence that is also explicitly a media event.

Over the past two centuries political violence has been used by different groups with different motivations. While the assassinations committed by the Anarchists may have been shocking acts of terror, what differentiates the 19th-century Propaganda of the Deed from terrorism and atrocity crimes is that the Anarchists never targeted civilian populations, only representatives of the state they sought to destroy.

During the First World War, propaganda was used assertively by Britain and Australia to recruit armies in the interest of winning what they deemed an existential conflict. The Allies alleged German atrocities and built a communication campaign around these stories to recruit soldiers and sailors. They knew they were perpetrating lies but concluded that the public interest in enlarging the armed forces outweighed the virtues of truth. They made no apologies, because they believed this was done with honourable intent. After the war, the lies were exposed, triggering a fierce backlash. People felt that the propaganda had perpetrated a political fraud. That was the last time for many decades that propagators took pride in their information warfare strategy. While states employed propaganda about the atrocities committed by their enemies to rally support, state challengers like ISIS and the cartels brag about the atrocities they themselves commit.

Twenty years later, attitudes among states still did not permit openly acknowledging mass cruelties and the killing of non-combatants. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin ruthlessly carried out genocide during the Second World War, but rather than publicising such actions for propaganda they took pains to conceal them. On the other hand, both leaders publicised intra-party massacres—Hitler’s destruction of Röhm and the Sturmabteilung and Stalin’s Great Purge of 1936–38. Stalin

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5 NATO International Military Staff, ‘[NATO’s Military Concept for Defence Against Terrorism](#)’, 19 August 2016

also recommended at the Tehran and Yalta conferences killing 50,000 German officers to ‘send a message’, and at Yalta Roosevelt was ready to drink a toast to that idea. At the same time Hitler concealed the Holocaust and numerous other mass killings; Stalin concealed the Katyn Forest massacre of Polish military officers and the murder of Ukrainian nationalists.

One concludes that each leader was operating on the basis of some internal calculation, judging which of his acts of political violence would be applauded and which would prompt global condemnation; while mass murder and genocide served their political purposes, they tried to conceal them. This inhibition seems to have held true for the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the late 1970s.

While acts of war such as the US bombings of large cities in Germany and Japan using conventional weapons and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did target civilian populations, media downplayed the harm done to non-combatants.

Attitudes seem to have undergone a drastic shift in the 1990s, when the Interahamwe Hutus in Rwanda glorified the atrocities they perpetrated against the Tutsis, in order to normalise ethnic hatred and to incite other Hutus to join in the murders.⁶ This is arguably the first modern example of a dominant political force using atrocity propaganda—in the new sense of purposely exhibiting their own hideous deeds—to support their seizure of power.

One might expect that in the 21st century, no one would glorify atrocities, even if they did commit them. For a state to be seen as legitimate it must accept its ‘Responsibility to Protect’ its own citizens, and for a global power that responsibility extends to the citizens of other states if their own states are committing violence against them. For example, Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria has used chemical weapons against his own people but has denied doing so.⁷

The US and China both exert enormous resources towards giving their policies and actions credibility and legitimacy. China’s concept of the Three Warfares—legal warfare, media warfare, and psychological warfare—is premised on operating from the moral high ground. A detailed discussion of that lies elsewhere, but any assessment of Western or Chinese policies must take into account their success in holding that moral high ground.

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⁶ Farwell, *Persuasion & Power*. The Rwanda episode is discussed in the book with more detail about the use of radio by the Hutus to try and exterminate the Tutsis. For that reason, I skim over it here.

⁷ ‘Assad denies use of chemical weapons’, *BBC*, 13 April 2017.

In this century, atrocities are again proudly exploited for political gain by violent Islamic extremists and by Mexican drug cartels. The rationale for their actions differs but the goal is the same: seizure of power. ISIS is motivated by an appetite for political power embodied in a Caliphate, justifying its actions through its interpretation of Islam. The cartels are more transactional. They have a broadly defined culture, and while their profits reportedly reach \$39 billion a year, a key aspect of their ambition is the seizure of political power.⁸ Their actions extend well beyond high-intensity crime. Like ISIS, the cartels are public about committing atrocities and take pride in publicising them as political acts.

The power of ISIS' communication strategy: public violence and social media

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or ISIS) adopted the tactics of atrocity propaganda; and they took pains to confirm reports that they committed murder and rape. Atrocity has defined and glorified ISIS' efforts to establish a modern caliphate.

ISIS employs atrocity propaganda for confluent purposes. In June 2014, ISIS violence in Mosul intimidated civilians and caused an Iraqi army, although made formidable at the time the US withdrew its forces in 2012, to turn tail. Ill-judged, partisan politics by the Shia-led central government drove out competent military leaders and hollowed out the Iraq army's capabilities.

That paved the way for the ISIS incursion, which many feared might topple the central government. Atrocities perpetrated by ISIS helped quell opposition. But as Graeme Wood powerfully argued in a piece published by *Atlantic* magazine,⁹ ISIS atrocities were rooted in an interpretation of Islam, whose *takfiri* doctrine justifies purifying the world through the commission of murder, with Muslim 'apostates' singled out for death. In the ISIS world, the Caliphate commands obedience. Graeme's lengthy analysis merits close reading.

An aspect of revolutionary thought that can be traced back to the French Revolution is also in play here, namely the felt need to destroy the old order and all its manifestations to clear the field for the construction of a pure new society, uncorrupted by the evils that called forth the revolution in the first place. Salafist

⁸ Patrick Radden Keefe, "Cocaine Incorporated," *New York Times Magazine*, June 15, 2012.

⁹ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *Atlantic*, March 2015. Wood is not one of the essayists in the book on propaganda.

Muslims desire to reconstruct the pure *ummah* of the first generation—the companions of the Prophet; ISIS places this desire in an apocalyptic context and looks on what has become of Muslim society as corrupt and in need of cleansing.

Let's take a look at ISIS propaganda—it is multi-dimensional, addressing audiences across the Muslim world, in the former Soviet Union, and in the West with different products in different languages. At its height, ISIS used social media to intimidate its enemies with images of gore, beheadings, and executions.¹⁰ Often leveraging the opportunities provided better than Western governments could,¹¹ ISIS employed social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to build support among potential recruits by sharing the experiences of ISIS fighters and supporters,¹² and to communicate with young people online.¹³ One cannot separate ISIS' positive appeals to potential recruits from its atrocity communication. It employed an integrated approach in an 'effort to be both loved and feared'.¹⁴ Some propaganda images depicted fearsome warriors capable of unspeakable atrocities, while others portrayed a softer, humanistic side showing foot soldiers eating *Snickers* candy bars and cuddling kittens.¹⁵ (In Somalia, al-Shabaab employed similar tactics.) Propaganda designed for home audiences showed positive scenes of community building and good governance in action—countless images of schools, markets, housing, cleaning up corruption.

ISIS stands apart among Islamic violent extremists for its skilful use of media. It advertises its Arabic-language *Twitter* feed, *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*,¹⁶ to keep both members and recruits abreast of current activity. ISIS supporters put out an Arabic language Twitter hashtag, #theFridayofSupportingISIS.¹⁷ It used this connection to mobilise supporters around the world, to wave the group's flag

10 Maya Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists', *Global Post*, 26 June 2014; Michel Weiss and Hassan Weiss, *Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), Kindle Loc. 105/4871; Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger: *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015).

11 Anne Speckard and Molly Ellenberg, 'ISIS and the Militant Jihad on Instagram', *Homeland Security Today*, 21 July 2020. ISIS has used Instagram adroitly, and praises its 'superior use' of social media.

12 Ahmet Yiğitalp, 'ISIS Religious and Extremist Propaganda on Social Media: Twitter', *Small Wars Journal*, 22 October 2020.

13 Makenzi Taylor, 'ISIS Recruitment of Youth via Social Media', *Global Affairs Review*, February 2020; Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists'; Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), p. 15–22. The platforms Atwan identifies include Muslimbook—a closely guarded version of Facebook—KiK, WhatsApp, Nasher.me, and Manbar.me.

14 Gebeily, 'How ISIL is Gaming the World's Journalists'; Thomas Molony, 'Social media warfare and Kenya's conflict with Al Shabaab: A Right to Know?', *African Affairs (Oxford)*, April 2019.

15 Vice News, 'Beheadings, Snickers and a Couple of Kittens', *GOOGLE +*, 18 June 2014.

16 Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.

17 Lydia Smith, 'Islamists Terrorize the Public in 140 Characters', *International Business Times*, 24 June 2011.

in public, to film themselves, and to upload clips on social media platforms.¹⁸ Facebook became aggressive in taking down ISIS posts in 2015.¹⁹ Still, even in 2020, ISIS has found ways to evade detection on the platform.²⁰ Twitter initially proved frustratingly tolerant but finally got going.²¹ At one point ISIS social media activity averaged 200,000 uploads per day.²² ISIS spread a ‘seductive narrative and employed powerful iconography’²³ and is using it to recruit, radicalise, and successfully raise operational funds, all of which undermine Western states’ efforts to contain these groups.²⁴

ISIS’ social media was, at its apex, ‘responsible for inspiring thousands of men from all over the world to join the group’.²⁵ Foreign terrorist organisations used social media to persuade US citizens to travel abroad to engage in terrorist activity,²⁶ at least 100 travelled to Iraq and Syria.²⁷ ISIS accelerated recruitment by allowing communication with foreign fighters engaged in battle. This enabled recruits to learn what the experience on the ground was like—or what they wanted people to believe it is like.²⁸ Recruits gained access to facilitators, who explained how they could get to Syria and Iraq.²⁹ Through this approach and others, over 20,000 Westerners from Europe, and also from Afghanistan, Syria, Tunisia, and other places have flocked to fight for ISIS.³⁰

Foreign Policy Institute expert Clint Watts argues that while ISIS’ social media helps provide a window into what is going on in Syria, where poor security renders media coverage sparing, ISIS did not care that they were visible to the enemy.³¹ Its members ‘want to communicate back to their families that they are

18 J.M. Berger, ‘How ISIS Games Twitter’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 16 June 2014.

19 Lisa Daftari, ‘Facebook Purges Pages Offering Priceless ISIS Plunder For Sale’, 11 June 2015.

20 Gordon Corera, ‘ISIS “Still Evading Detection on Facebook”, report says’, *BBC*, 13 July 2020.

21 Alanna Petroff, ‘Hundreds of ISIS Social Media Accounts Shut Down’, *CNN Money*, 15 February 2015.

22 John Greenberg, ‘Does the Islamic State Post 90,000 Social Media Messages Each Day?’, *Politifact Poynter Institute*, 19 February 2015; Berger, ‘The Evolution of Terrorist Propaganda: The Paris Attack and Social Media’, *Brookings*, 27 January 2015.

23 Gebeily, ‘How ISIL is Gaming the World’s Journalists’.

24 Barack Obama interview with ABC News chief anchor George Stephanopoulos in Arlette Saenz, ‘President Obama Vows to “Completely Decapitate” ISIS Operations’, *ABC News*, 13 November 2015. The President said, ‘From the start our goal has been first to contain, and we have contained them.’ He acknowledged that more needs to be done to “completely decapitate” their operations.

25 Ian Black, Rania Abouzeid, Mark Tran, Shiraz Maher, Roger Tooth, and Martin Chulov, ‘The Terrifying Rise of ISIS: \$2bn in Loot, Online Killings, and an Army on the Run’, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014.

26 Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, ‘Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts’, *The New York Times*, 26 September 2015.

27 Justin O. Smith, ‘The War Keeps Coming Home’, *The Counter Jihad Report*, 18 July 2015.

28 Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Digital Caliphate*.

29 Rukmini Callimachi, ‘ISIS and the Lonely Young American’, *The New York Times*, 27 June 2015.

30 Smith, ‘The War Keeps Coming Home’.

31 Clint Watts of the Foreign Policy Institute interviewed by Scott Simon, ‘ISIS Runs A Dark Media Campaign On Social Media’, *National Public Radio*, 6 September 2014.

participating³². Undeterred, ISIS continues to call for so-called homegrown supporters to commit acts of violence within the United States.³³ Epitomising these calls to action are the July 2015 attack that killed four US Marines in the state of Tennessee and the December 2015 mass shooting at the Inland Regional Center, a non-profit for people with disabilities and their families in San Bernardino, California. In the past few years, Kurdish and American troops have inflicted serious military setbacks to ISIS, although by projecting strength and gaining visibility it is determined to make a comeback.³⁴

Perhaps ISIS has seen its best days. But as Yogi Berra said, 'It ain't over until it's over.'³⁵ The jihadist group remains a threat, is stocked with cash, and may—no one really knows—still have at least 10,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, and perhaps more.³⁶ The underlying political and social dynamics that gave rise to it, and its appeal to Muslims by touting its ambition to establish a new caliphate, may well see the emergence of successor groups. The tactics ISIS uses are cutting edge and complex. It currently employs sign-up menus to gain personal data about new users³⁷ that mimic some of the most advanced social media services available, such as Thunderclap,³⁸ used by the Barack Obama Campaign in 2010.³⁹ They use these platforms to create an 'explosion of simultaneous tweets big enough to send a ripple across Twitter's 140-million-strong user base'.⁴⁰

In response, the West has been aggressive in shutting down sites, cracking down on recruitment, and employing counter-propaganda in alliance with Arab partners and especially the Iraqi government. The Shi'ite majority in Iraq doesn't like ISIS. ISIS doesn't share or accept their culture, values, hopes, and dreams; its appeal is to Sunnis, a minority in Iraq, but one whose interests

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32 Ibid. (emphasis added).

33 Ibid.; Statement of FBI Director Christopher Wray before House Homeland Committee, 'Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland', 30 October 2019.

34 Ashish Kumar Sen, 'ISIS Determined to Make a Comeback—How Can it Be Stopped?', *US Institute of Peace*, 13 August 2020; Sajad Jiyad, 'ISIS is Making a Comeback, and Iraq's Central Government May Not Be Able to Handle It', *Business Insider*, 7 June 2020. Apparently ISIS is replicating its tactics in 2012–13, moving skilled fighters into Iraq from Syria. All this is transpiring as President Donald J. Trump has ordered a further drawdown of already thin US forces in that part of the region. Not surprisingly, military leaders are expressing caution as they try to slow the withdrawal.

35 '20 Great Yogi Berra Quotes', *Authentic Manhood*, 24 September 2015.

36 Edith Lederer, 'Over 10,000 Islamic State Fighters Active in Iraq, Syria as Attacks "Significantly" Increase: UN', *Military Times/Associated Press*, 25 August 2020; 'IS "Caliphate" Defeated But Jihadist Group Remains a Threat', *BBC*, 23 March 2019.

37 Berger, 'How ISIS Games Twitter'.

38 THUNDERCLAP, <https://www.thunderclap.it/>. This link is no longer available.

39 Amina Elahi, *How Social Media Strategy Influences Political Campaigns*, 5 September 2013.

40 Jeff Bercofici, 'Thunderclap, a New Tool For Amplifying Your Tweet Into a Sonic Boom', *Forbes*, 31 May 2012.

the Iraqi government must address to create a stable future. Under Saddam Hussain, Baath Party membership had been a prerequisite. While many joined for ideological reasons, many others joined only to advance their careers. When the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority blocked all Baathists from public sector employment in 2003, they also effectively denied many Iraqi Sunnis future prospects for their families. While ISIS and the evils it perpetrates must be eradicated, Sunnis must be given a path forward in Iraq.

A US State Department campaign entitled ‘Think Again Turn Away’ tried to win over the hearts and minds of ISIS members. It denounced ISIS as a dead end that would leave recruits dead or widowed. It tried to engage adversaries in social media. It backfired. A *Time* magazine analysis concluded it was ‘not only ineffective, but also provides jihadists with a stage to voice their arguments—regularly engaging in petty disputes with fighters and supporters of groups like IS [...], al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab’.⁴¹ One ISIS loyalist countered charges of ISIS brutality with the message: ‘REMEMBER HOW YOU AMERICA ARRESTED AND HUMILIATED OUR BROTHERS IN IRAQ AND HUMILIATED THEM IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY!!’ [original in caps]. The State Department felt that it was appealing to ‘moderates’ but was in fact giving ISIS a platform from which to undercut its campaign.

The key lesson here is that a campaign to discredit an adversary must take all audiences into consideration. Westerners condemn ISIS genocide, but for ISIS the violence is justified as a response to wrongs perpetrated against Islam. Those who commit public violence tend to do so in the name of a moral cause.

The Responsibility to Protect

The concept of humanitarian intervention was developed in 2001 by the ad hoc International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in response to the mass atrocities committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. At the World Summit in 2005 UN member states unanimously adopted the idea that nations have a moral ‘responsibility to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity’.⁴² When atrocities are being committed against a population, a nation that happens to be in a position to intervene is faced with a choice between protecting the

41 Rita Katz, ‘The State Department’s Twitter War with ISIS is Embarrassing’, *Time*, 16 September 2014.

42 The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, ‘Responsibility to Protect’, Global Centre For the Responsibility to Protect, ‘What is R2P?’.

victims or refraining from action. What consequences might flow from the decision taken? These are thorny questions with no easy answers. International responses have often been found wanting.

The failure to call out the Nazis, who tried at the end to conceal their horrific genocide, and the failure to bomb the railroad tracks that brought Jews to the camps, stand out as a great moral dereliction by the Allies. I am not a holocaust expert and recognise there are many who would argue that nothing would have stopped the Nazis from carrying out their genocide, the core of which took place over a period of one year. In March 1942, 75–80% of all victims were alive. By February 1943, only 20–25% were. Could focused information warfare during that year exposing the Nazis' heinous campaign of genocide combined with bombing train tracks that carried victims to the death camps have exerted a chilling effect? Perhaps not. A series of essays collected in 2000 identified a host of military reasons that bombing the camps didn't seem practical. The Allies lacked today's precision bombing capability. Bombing the camps might have killed lots of victims and it isn't clear whether the camps were the right target, as opposed to the trains. We cannot be certain about what should have been done; history does not reveal its alternatives.

The Nazis represented a determined force of evil; they were not easily deterred. However, their efforts to destroy evidence of their crimes suggests, to me at least, the possibility that a focused campaign of strategic communications exposing Hitler's diabolical plan to the world, combined with intense *bombing* might have deterred him. Were he not concerned about exposure, why not carry out the genocide in public? No one tried, so we'll never know. I agree with the stinging assessment offered by Pope Francis in denouncing the Allied failure to bomb the railway routes that took Jews—as well as Christians, the Roma, and homosexuals—to their death. 'Tell me,' the Pope said, 'why didn't they bomb' those railroad routes? Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has echoed these sentiments. Were there risks to pilots? Would an intensive track bombing campaign have diverted vital resources from tasks important to defeat the Nazis? Yes. But the Allies had an overriding moral imperative to take all measures to stop the genocide. They had a responsibility to protect. The failure was egregious.

We have grown no wiser several generations on. In 1994 President Bill Clinton shunned urgent pleas from his wife Hillary and others to stop genocide in

Rwanda, which he could easily have done.⁴³ He later excused himself, stating that this failure to act was his greatest mistake as President. As Secretary of State to President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton championed the notion of a Responsibility to Protect. In 2011 she took decisive action to prod the US and NATO to intervene in eastern Libya. However, the political debacle that followed, and still plagues Libya today, shows the pitfalls of failing to devise, execute, and stick with a coherent strategy to avoid the collapse of a state. It's not clear who was responsible for that, but subsequent events have created not stability but an on-going civil war in that nation.

The Secretary of State arguably paid a stiff price for Muammar al-Gaddafi's murder. Among President Vladimir Putin's motives for meddling in the 2016 US Presidential election was a deep personal hostility toward Mrs Clinton over Libya. Russia had abstained from a United Nations resolution authorising intervention there but had made clear that under no circumstances should any action be taken to overthrow Gaddafi's regime. Clinton's callous remark after his murder—'we came, we saw, he died'⁴⁴—helped to seal Putin's hatred and determination to discredit her.⁴⁵

At heart a moralist, not a practitioner of realpolitik, in 2013 President Barack Obama warned the Bashar Assad regime in Syria that using chemical weapons against civilians would cross a red line. Assad used them but instead of punishing him, Obama demurred. His failure to make the warning stick and, at best, his ambiguity in engagements with Putin, inspired the Russian leader to conclude that he could seize Crimea without repercussions. It also further complicated the conflict in Syria. One lesson with regard to asserting a moral responsibility to stop atrocities is that taking action to do so requires careful strategic thinking and a backbone of steel.

The need to stop atrocities raises vital questions. Actions have consequences. So does inaction. Just south of the US border Mexico's drug war is also challenging our understanding of the responsibility to protect. The public use of political violence as atrocity propaganda by the drug cartels has taken on new dimensions.

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43 See: Farwell, *Persuasion & Power* (Washington: Georgetown U. Press, 2012) and the sources it cites.

44 Corbett Daly, 'Clinton on Qaddafi: "We came, we saw, he died"', *CBS News*, 20 October 2011.

45 It is evident that, like most people, it did not cross Putin's mind. Putin never considered the possibility that Donald J. Trump would win the 2016 election.

The Mexico Drug War⁴⁶

Understanding why and how cartels employ atrocity propaganda requires understanding the war. The war is about power and ideology, money and greed. It's a war over turf among the cartels. Estimates of the profits the trade generated vary, but all agree they are huge. The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) long ago was estimating profits for Mexican and Colombian traffickers between \$8,3–\$24,9 billion per year. The US Justice Department has placed it as high as \$39 billion in the US alone.⁴⁷ Citing the National Drug Intelligence Center, *Global Security* puts the revenues at between \$17 billion and \$38.3 billion annually.⁴⁸

Mexican cartels are also engaged in a war of ideas. They are fighting to establish their ideology, territorial control, and power over the Mexican state. The order of battle among the cartels has shifted, as leaders are killed or sent to prison, competitors seize territory, cartels splinter, and new leaders emerge. The Sinaloa cartel was perceived during the 1980s and into the 21st century as the most important. Led by Trevino Morales, the now displaced Los Zetas, drawn from Mexican army special operations personnel, used terror as its calling card.⁴⁹ As the Zetas influence diminished, in its place the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has emerged among the most powerful cartels. It controls the movement of over a third of all drugs consumed in the US.⁵⁰

The violence has destabilised Mexico. It has created, as James McCune and Elsa Kania have observed, 'a culture of impunity and lawlessness' that pervades many Mexican communities, where police are intimidated and powerless and the media has censored itself.⁵¹ Cartels use *narcomantas*, *narcovideos*, *narcomensajes*, and *narcocorridos*, political pardons, and religious imagery to intimidate, frighten, romanticise, and warn.

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46 The research for this section draws on work that the author, Darby Arakalian, and Antoine Nouvet did in connection with the SecDev Foundation, and that Ms Arakalian and the author have done together on the topic for other venues.

47 Patrick Radden Keefe, 'Cocaine Incorporated', *New York Times Magazine*, 15 June 2012.

48 'Mexican Drug War', *Global Security.org*, 2019; George Friedman, 'Mexico and the Failed State Revisited', *Stratfor*, 6 April 2010; Malcom Beith, *The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord*, (New York: Grove Press, 2010), p. 78. These numbers are earlier dates but similar to current statistics.

49 Melissa del Bosque, 'The Fall of Los Zetas: How FBI Narcos Took on Mexico's Most Violent Drug Cartel', *Mirror*, 28 November 2018.

50 Kevin Sieff, 'Mexico's Jalisco New Generation Cartel Blazes a Bloody Trail in Rise to Power', *Washington Post*, 11 July 2020.

51 James McCune and Elsa Kania, 'Turf War and the Mexican Government's Strategy', in *The War on Mexican Cartels*, Harvard Institute of Politics, September 2012; Beith, *The Last Narco*; Grillo, *El Narco*; Ricardo C. Ainslie, *The Fight to Save Juarez*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

They define an ideology and support cartel efforts to seize political power, effectively establishing a ‘state within a state’ in parts of Mexico.

The formation of a new culture and state in Mexico stems from a constant battle between the Mexican government and the political and ideological warfare the narcos employ in order to attain legitimacy. As María Mendez notes,⁵² the cartels seek legitimacy by introducing ideas, beliefs, myths, and values that align with their tactics.⁵³ The narcos are constantly renegotiating their role in society and assert their identity by any means they can find.

The creation of a narco culture and a narco state emanates from deeply rooted alienation, discrimination, and the rejection of a lower, poorer class in Mexico. Facing failure from governments and systems that violate impersonal trust,⁵⁴ the rise of the narco and narco culture is more than a phenomenon, it is a reaction to the impunity of the privileged and disenfranchisement of the poor. Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, a Mexican graduate student from the King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, argues that this extensive identity and complex movement can be tied directly to social inequality and the incessant need to have reparations. Sapiña argues that narcos are a consequence of such inequality. She says: ‘Oppression by the higher classes and a complicit government with ties to the cartels that legitimises them, the narco becomes a consequence of a complicit society. The narco ideology is based in a constant search, or even crusade, for economic, cultural, and ideological reparations.’⁵⁵

Arguing that this need by some cartel members for reparations comes directly from their absolute disassociation from Mexican society due to their pariah status, Sapiña says there is an ‘if you can’t stop them, join them’ mentality that gives some cartels a pass in order to manage the broader cartel problem. She observes:

Mexican governments in the past have decided which cartels to affiliate themselves to in order to control the others.

52 María Méndez, ‘Drogas, Pobreza y Derechos Humanos: El Impacto Social Del Narcotráfico’ [Drugs, Poverty, and Human rights: The Social Impact of Drug Trafficking], (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2009).

53 Translation by Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, King’s Centre for Strategic Communications, King’s College London.

54 Structured and functional, impersonal trust describes the connection between individuals and the institutions and systems that are meant to represent them; it is this trust from which they gain legitimacy. Francesca Granelli, *Trust, Politics and Revolution: A European History* (London: IB Tauris, 2019).

55 Author’s interview with Fernanda Sapiña Pérez, 22 November 2020.

Politicians and even the army are involved in narco-trafficking; it becomes a society in the complete scheme for corruption. The famous narco phrase “*plata o plomo*” (silver or lead) is not as nuanced as people might think; it explicitly states that, even if an individual does not seek or desire to be corrupted, you have to affiliate or die. Sometimes it is no longer a question of choice, but of survival.

Greed may drive cartels, but what has made them effective is their ability to recruit and mobilise younger, alienated Mexicans through messaging what the cartels offer that the state does not: social mobility, hope, opportunity, and prosperity. It is a type of atrocity propaganda given the Draconian quid pro quo that the mobilised youth must submit to. Thus, Sapiña further observes, ‘It is tragic, but this is the new Mexican Dream’.

Cartels articulate a story defining themselves, rooted in the romantic 19th-century image of a bandit preying upon the rich and a national history in which wealthy Mexicans and foreign investors have controlled much of the economy.⁵⁶ Cartel ballads and music videos stem directly from the Mexican folk tradition of romanticising revolutionary heroes, except that today’s songs glorify drug lords.⁵⁷

The songs [*narcocorridos*], videos, social media, and messages communicated through signs and banners [*narcomantas*] present a populist patina that celebrates the humble origins of cartel leaders and their exploits. Scholar Ricardo Ainslie points out that their strategic communications has shifted the terrain ‘for a political left long accustomed to an adversary defined as the nation’s elites and long accustomed to viewing itself as a movement that defended the downtrodden’.⁵⁸

The narratives help define a specific culture that is attractive to teenagers and younger people whom the cartels vigorously recruit. It is manifest in the attire: garish cowboy hats, ostrich-skin boots, loud sneakers, brightly coloured baseball hats, tight dresses, gaudy jewellery, lavish homes, fast cars, alcohol, and a glamorous life that offers the best food, most beautiful women, and most compelling action.

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56 Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012), Kindle loc. 418/5194.

57 Ibid.

58 Ainslie, *The Fight to Save Juarez*, Kindle Loc. 4206/6219.

In short, the cartels offer a way of life that actualises a macho identity and a sense of pride to which recruits have no other means of access.⁵⁹

Writing in *Milenio*, Tijuana author Heriberto Yépez has accurately observed that the cartels evolved from being an economy to embodying an ideology that saturates society. The term narco, ‘drug trafficker’ [*el narco*] and ‘drug life’ [*lo narco*] conflate. Yépez argues that narco used to be an adjective that described one aspect of Mexican culture. Now it *is* culture: ‘narco and culture are synonyms’.⁶⁰ The cartels offer meaning and concrete opportunity that directly influence norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and behaviour.

Forms of Cartel Strategic Communications

Strategic communications are ‘words, deeds, images or symbols to mold and shape public opinion, influence it, and to shape behavior in order to achieve desired effects or end-states’.⁶¹ The cartels tend to conduct their strategic communications through:

- *narcomantas* [message banners]
- *narcomensajes* [murder victims as messages]
- *narconideos* [music videos]
- pardons of key state officials involved in narcotrafficking (for example, General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda)
- creation of religious deities as alternatives to existing ones

These strategies, described in more detail below, serve overlapping goals:

- intimidate competitors and the state
- threaten police and officials who do not cooperate
- project dominance and confidence
- establish legitimacy among the people, even in the face of grotesque violence
- show machismo

59 Grillo, *El Narco*, Kindle Loc. 3641/6409.

60 Quoted by Josh Kun, ‘Death Battle’, *The American Prospect*, 5 January 2012.

61 Farwell, *Persuasion & Power*, p. xviii–xix.

- recruit foot soldiers
- hold sway over the government and over the state as a whole
- exercise extreme power over the state and almost absolute exertion of control over the governance of the country
- demonstrate a connection to spirituality
- legitimisation of goals through powerful and culturally relevant imagery

The brutal violence of their methods is similar to the terrorist tactics more familiar in the Middle East. As journalist Antonio Sampaio has aptly noted, violence itself serves as a message through which ‘small and large groups negotiate their positions in an overcrowded criminal space. Brutal violence is used to communicate warnings, threats, and territorial claims’.⁶² Strategic messaging provides a different dimension to cartel efforts to seize power while articulating its own set of social norms that define expectations for their behaviour.

Narcomantas

Narcomantas are simple posters or banners hung in public spaces, perhaps off a pedestrian bridge over a busy downtown thoroughway. Cartel groups often install them before sunrise, so Mexicans see them during their morning commutes. *Narcomantas* are becoming more sophisticated. Once hand-written and poorly spelled, banners are now more commonly machine-printed.

Cartels often install *narcomantas* simultaneously in various locations to achieve greater reach and penetration of a message. In September 2013, the Gulf Cartel hung thirty *narcomantas* in 25 municipalities bearing the same message.⁶³ They post in high-traffic areas and in symbolic locations such as government buildings, and almost always sign them.

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62 Antonio Sampaio, ‘Mexican Cartels: Crime or Terrorism?’, *kingsofwar.org*, 30 June 2012. This article is no longer available.

63 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 12 September 2013. The material posted during this period has now largely been removed and has not been accessible since spring of 2014.



Figure 1. One of thirty Gulf Cartel *narcomantas* hung on 11 September 2013.⁶⁴

Cartels use *narcomantas* strategically and tactically to build support, inoculate against criticism, and discredit competitor cartels. In September 2013, a Gulf Cartel *narcomanta* attacked Los Zetas cartel while pledging respect for the state and families (see Figure 1):

Thank you to the people of Zacatecas state for enduring the war we've waged as of late against the scum Zetas cartel [...] likewise, our respect to the state authorities and your sacred families [...] we are all together in this against the Zetas.

There, the goals were to establish legitimacy by communicating social responsibility, calculated restraint, and shared burden with the government, while threatening a rival and intimidating the state through co-optation. The mass distribution demonstrated organisation and strength. Seeking legitimacy goes hand-in-hand with cartel efforts to seize political power that

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⁶⁴ Photo posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 12 September 2013.

challenges both the state and rival cartels and affords them freedom to operate while arguing that their actions benefit the population and are designed to achieve goals beyond merely enriching themselves. It may be empty propaganda, but the cartels seem actually to believe what they say.

Narcomantas are also used to counter-message. On 27 July 2013 an alleged Zetas ‘renegade’ faction put up a banner declaring that it rejected ‘previous Zetas *narcomantas* that attempt to say that the Zetas are united [...] in fact, they are in disarray’.⁶⁵

The Mexican government takes down *narcomantas* quickly,⁶⁶ especially when they denounce police corruption, involvement in extortion, and kidnapping for profit.⁶⁷

Narcomensajes

Often laid over or near the body of a murder victim, a *narcomensaje*—a narco message—is a post-script note to a violent event. It is usually a shorter, simpler message than a *narcomanta*, written on cardboard, paper, or cloth, in cyberspace, or perhaps painted onto a vehicle. *Narcomensajes* provide clues that give meaning to what may seem like senseless acts. Like *narcomantas*, their goal is to intimidate the public or to pressure authorities to change policies.⁶⁸ They may also provide an explanation for the carnage, such as ‘this is what happens when you work with such and such rival cartel’.⁶⁹ *Narcomensajes* reportedly first appeared in August of 2005. Today they are ubiquitous.⁷⁰

Although associated with physical banners, a *narcomensaje* may be sent digitally. A Gulf Cartel unit based in San Luis de Potosí e-mailed and posted on-line a photo and message to the online narco news blog, *Tierra del Narco* stating that it was ‘cleaning up the plaza of Zetas like this guy’ (*Figure 3*. below).⁷¹

65 Post by website administrator, *Historia del Narco*, 27 July 2013.

66 ‘Ejército retira narcomantas en Torreón; mantiene en reserva su contenido’ [Army withdraws narcomantas in Torreón; keeps its content in reserve], *Proceso*, 24 July 2013.

67 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, October 2013.

68 Sampaio, ‘Mexican Cartels: Crime or Terrorism?’.

69 Story reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 18 September 2013.

70 Anabel Hernandez, *Narcoland*, (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 218.

71 Reported on *Tierra del Narco*, 2 July 2013.



Figure 2. An unsigned *narcomensaje* found on 18 September 2013, along with two blanketed bodies.⁷²



Digital narcomensajes:

Figure 3. Digital narco message e-mailed to a narco news blog on 2 July 2013, by CDG (left).⁷³

Figure 4. Photo of *narcomensaje* (right) that was distributed by the Knights Templar via their Facebook fan page on 15 September 2013.⁷⁴ These posts have since been removed.

Figure 5: An unsigned *narcomensaje*. This *narcomensaje* was issued on 15 October 2014 in Cancun to the CERESO Director.

⁷² Photo posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 18 September 2013.

⁷³ Photo posted by *Tierra del Narco* on 2 July 2013.

⁷⁴ Photo is from a screenshot of the original *narcomensaje* on the *Knights Templar Facebook page* taken by the author in September 2013. The page is no longer available.

The Knights Templar cartel uploaded one on its Facebook page warning all ‘who may snitch to Los Viagras’—a rival group—‘are hereby warned that they will pay the consequences’ (Figure 4).⁷⁵

Narcomensajes are the most frequently used form of narco-communiqué, possibly due to their comparatively low production value and the high volume of murders that cartels claim to commit. Who composes them? *Narcomensajes* are often issued by ‘unknown’ authors. Authors whose identity and affiliation are intentionally or unintentionally obscured wrote nearly 40% of *narcomensajes* compared to 13% of *narcomantas* and 15% of *narcovideos*. And, 26% of those whose authors were identified refer to smaller actors in the narco war, rather than to major cartels. Still, one must avoid hasty generalisation. This 26% may include communiqués between individuals who are members of larger cartels but do not bother to indicate affiliation due to the intimate nature of such communiqués.⁷⁶ For example, one *narcomensaje*⁷⁷ signed by ‘El Chino’ states to the head of a *Centro de Readaptación Social* (CERESO, a local prison) in Cancun: ‘You have 24 hours to let out that mutt ‘El Pipo’ from jail or you will pay the consequences. This is the first warning, the second will be personal.’ (Figure 5. below). Such a communiqué might involve a larger narco cartel, but the meaning would be understood only by an inside observer. In any event, the relative intimacy of *narcomensajes* is remarkable and chilling.

Narcovideos

Narcovideos are video communiqués. They vary in content, style, and purpose. Some are quickly made movies—produced in two weeks—packed with muscular men toting big guns, narco-fashion, pick-up trucks with big engines, voluptuous women, and lots of violence. Reportedly cartel leaders love watching them. Other videos depict executions, oratory lectures by cartel units or leaders, and the filming of goodwill gestures such as the delivery of aid to natural calamity victims or the distribution of Christmas gifts to the poor. They are relatively recent in vintage. Anabel Hernandez gives an indication, dating one of the first *narcovideos* to only December 2005.⁷⁸

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75 A screenshot of the original *narcomensaje* was taken by the author on 15 September 2013.

76 SecDev Foundation research, 2015-2020

77 Reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 20 October 2013.

78 Hernandez, *Narcoland*, p. 218.



Figure 6: A snuff video—a *narcovideo* beheading and communiqué by the Zetas Cartel. It was posted online on 3 August 2013 but has since been removed.⁷⁹

An infamous form of such communiqués is the ‘snuff’ video, arguably, if one wants to be picky, a technically inaccurate term as the murders occur off-screen. In these, cartels force rivals or opponents to confess crimes, disclose names of rivals, or denounce corrupt officials. Victims may be submitted to humiliation, pain, or death as retribution.⁸⁰

The impact is possibly heightened by leaving the climax to the viewer’s imagination. Most of the videos in the June–December 2013 period featured interrogation of captives, surrounded by heavily armed men with physical violence occurring off screen.

Narcovideos may serve as public announcements. Prior to June 2013, two new groups, *Los Aliados* and *Pueblo Unido Contra la Delincuencia* (PUCD), made announcements that they would ‘hunt down’ the *Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* and the Zetas, respectively.⁸¹ ‘This will be the first time you hear of our name’, declares a seated PUCD spokesperson surrounded by two dozen heavily armed men. He declares war on the Zetas and personally warns the Governor of Tabasco to ‘clean up his act’ to bring an end to the violence (*Figure 7*. below).⁸² PUCD and Aliados also figure in the *narcomantas* and *narcomensajes* from June–December 2013. *Narcovideos* of this sort provide particularly useful source material for identifying the origins and motives of new actors in the conflict.

79 Photos are screenshots taken by the authors of the *narcovideo* posted on *El Blog del Narco*, 3 August 2013.

80 Narcovideo reported on *El Blog del Narco*, 3 August 2013.

81 PUCD video, *YouTube*, 15 May 2013; Los Aliados video, *YouTube*, 26 March 2013.

82 PUCD video, *YouTube*, 15 May 2013.



Figures 7. and 8. 'Public Announcements' *narcovideos*. Los Aliados (left) and PCUD (right) making 'public announcements' to Mexicans in 2013 and issuing statements to government authorities and rivals via videos posted on YouTube.⁸³

Narcovideos may serve as propaganda. In September 2013 the Gulf Cartel filmed a montage of themselves delivering aid to hurricane victims, while in December 2013 they filmed their delivery of Christmas gifts.⁸⁴

Narcovideos almost always originate in digital form and are disseminated through cyberspace. This may help them to gain greater circulation but makes identifying their provenance and 'newness' more difficult. Since viewers re-circulate them freely as 'new material' even on dedicated narco news sites, verifying their provenance requires careful research. For example, in August 2013, *Blog del Narco* released over 40 videos of 'interrogations, executions, and shoot outs'.⁸⁵ Yet the post failed to state which videos had been released previously. This study's examination revealed that fully 90% of those viewed had been released weeks, months, and even years earlier.

In another instance, a *narcovideo* showing the Zetas beheading a young woman who allegedly worked for the Gulf Cartel was circulated as part of a list in October 2013, prompting a news-making denunciation by the Prime Minister of Great Britain.⁸⁶ In actual fact, the video was at least five months old, having originally been released sometime prior to June 2013.⁸⁷ The recycling of *narcovideos* occurs often, making it difficult for journalists and researchers to determine what 'news' is.⁸⁸

83 Photos are screenshots taken by the authors of the 3 August 2013 *narcovideo* posted online on YouTube.
84 Gulf Cartel video of hurricane aid delivery, YouTube, 22 September 2014; Gulf Cartel video of Christmas goodwill, YouTube, 27 December 2013.

85 The authors manually reviewed the content published on *El Blog del Narco* on 3 August 2013.

86 'Elimina Facebook video de decapitación de una mujer en México' [Facebook deletes video of beheading of a woman in Mexico], *Proceso*, 26 October 2013. The same *narcovideo* was published among the over 40 videos released on 3 August 2013, on *El Blog del Narco*.

87 At least one version of this *narcovideo* was reported as early as 30 April 2013, on the narco news blog [Mexico Rojo](#).

88 For example, a *narcovideo* of Zetas executing four female operatives of the Gulf Cartel that was released by *El Blog del Narco* as new on 15 October 2013, had come out as early as 5 June 2013.

Like some *narcomensajes*, some *narcovideos* are anonymous. Anonymity in *narcomensajes* appears to be more consistently deliberate, rather than the product of censorship or incomplete reporting. A video from August 2013 showed a walkie-talkie discussion between a cartel lieutenant called Diablo and his gunmen.⁸⁹ Evidently the video was created for a tailored audience, with the producers seeing no need to provide context or identification for a broader Mexican public.⁹⁰

Political Pardons of ‘Untouchable’ Heads of State

Direct government affiliation can be seen in cases such as that of the ex-Secretary of National Defence, Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, who was arrested by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) on charges of narco trafficking upon his arrival in Los Angeles on 16 October 2020. Identified as ‘El Padrino’, he stands accused of trafficking heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines, and marijuana, and of multiple violations of human rights. A career military man, he was appointed

Secretary General of the Secretariat of National Defence of Mexico as soon as Enrique Peña Nieto took office as President of Mexico at the end of 2012. In 2020, he was exposed as ‘El Padrino’ or ‘Zepeda’ in material acquired by the DEA; this led to an uproar and a confrontation between the DEA and the Mexican government.⁹¹ After issuing a stern warning that jeopardised the DEA’s presence in Mexico, the government has dropped the charges against him.⁹² This complicity leads to a clear testing of the power and authority the Mexican state has over the subversive narco state. This is where political leverage becomes a form of strategic communications—the narcos have demonstrated that they have more power and more money and will protect their own. Government officials become subservient both to their own desire for personal gain and to the demands of the narcos, which is made clear through Cienfuegos Zepeda’s release.

89 A video posted on *El Blog del Narco* on 20 October 2013 was actually released earlier, with the earliest version of this video identified by the authors released on 6 August 2013 on YouTube.

90 A similar video shows the assassination of an apparent citizen blogger associated with the news platform *Valor Por Tamaulipas*—a social media page that crowd-sources information for citizens on situations of danger—shot at point black range by a masked executioner in army fatigues after announcing to viewers that ‘this is the price you’ll pay for working with *Valor Por Tamaulipas*’. (an image of this video is found in Section VI). The video’s apparent goal is to arouse fear in general, rather than fear specific to a cartel.

91 Background information from BBC News Mundo: ‘[Salvador Cienfuegos: Quién Es El General Mexicano Acusado De 4 Cargos De Narcotráfico En EE.UU.](#)’, [Salvador Cienfuegos: Who is the Mexican General Accused of 4 counts of Drug Trafficking in the US?], *BBC News Mundo*, 16 October 2020.

92 Background information from Alan Feuer and Natalie Kitoreff. ‘[¿Cómo Logró México Que Estados Unidos Retirara Las Acusaciones Al Exsecretario De Defensa Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda?](#)’, [How did Mexico get the United States to drop the accusations against former Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda?], *The New York Times*, 18 November 2020.

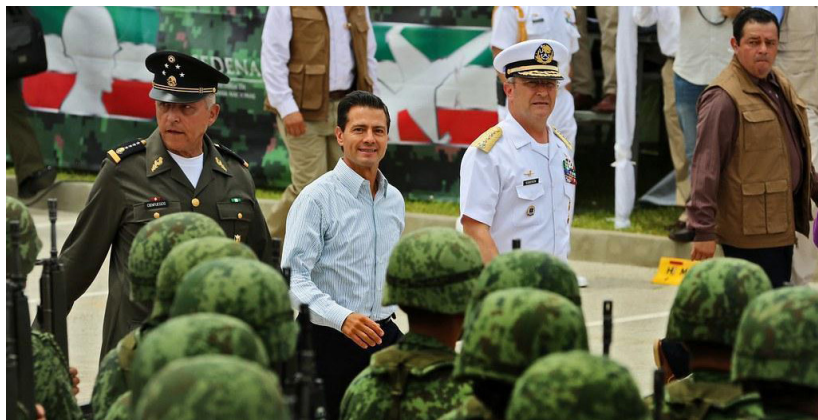


Figure 9. (From left to right) ex-Secretary of Defence Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda and Mexican ex-President Enrique Peña Nieto at the inauguration of the Mazatlán Military Hospital on the 29 August 2016.⁹³

Creating Religious Deities as Alternatives to Existing Ones

To continue fuelling their social legitimisation and to assert further their cultural affluence as a state within a state, narcos rely on the creation of culturally relevant stories and narratives that fall into the paradigm of the counter-value ideology they have created. The saints, Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte are two key figures that represent and even romanticise the narco narrative. The story of Jesús Malverde, possibly a fictional figure, followed the paradigm of the 19th-century bandit in Sinaloa as a Robin Hood figure who sided with the poor against the rich.

The folklore surrounding him sheds light into understanding the actions and romanticisation of cartel behaviour. Malverde was reborn in the people's consciousness in the 20th century as an uncanonised 'saint' who performed miracles for those in desperate situations. The adoption of Malverde as the patron saint of the narcos in 1980 exemplifies asymmetrical power relationships with the government and a 'pursuit of miracles to escape the status quo'.⁹⁴ The reverence of Malverde displayed by cartels suggests a strategy through which they seek legitimacy for their actions, and to position themselves as a populist opposition to the government.

93 Image Credits: Creative Commons.

94 Gerardo Gómez Michel and Jungwon Park, 'The Cult of Jesús Malverde: Crime and Sanctity as Elements of a Heterogeneous Modernity', *Latin American Perspectives* Volume 41 No 2 (2014): 202–14



Figure 10. A shrine to Jesús Malverde in Culiacán, México.⁹⁵

Comparatively, Santa Muerte represents the direct female personification of death that has also become a patron saint of the narcos. Kevin Freese argues that, to her followers and believers, she is a counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe; for them, she exists within the context of Catholic theology.

Freese links the myth of Santa Muerte to the material and practical associations that this figure has in Mexican society, and more specifically to the organised crime community in Mexico. He argues that the followers of Santa Muerte are closely associated with crime and those directly affected by it. They call upon her for protection and power, even when committing crimes. ‘They will adorn themselves with paraphernalia and render her respect that they do not give to other spiritual entities.’⁹⁶

These two saints represent the deformed perspective and cognitive dissonance that narcos employ for legitimisation. Well positioned within socio-cultural narratives, these two figures could be considered a form of Strategic Communications by the narcos deployed to generate empathy for their cause, which they believe to be ideologically just, due to their complete disenfranchisement and ostracisation from mainstream Mexican society.

95 Image Credit: Tomas Castelazo.

96 Kevin Freese, ‘The Death Cult of the Drug Lords: Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed’ (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2005).



Figure 11. A procession in Tepito, Mexico City venerating Santa Muerte.⁹⁷

Citizen Response

The Mexican state has not proven effective in fighting cartels. Its current President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has no coherent strategy for winning this war and has stated: ‘We will fight them with intelligence and not force. We will not declare war.’⁹⁸

For years, citizens have used blogs and social media such as Facebook and Twitter to share news about the activities of the narcos.⁹⁹ They have capitalised upon the anonymity of cyberspace, and its ability to bring together data at unprecedented speed, scale, and granularity in what might be termed ‘horizontal citizen-to-citizen’ violence prevention. Citizens employ internet communications technology—anonously, for their own protection—to use crowd-sourcing techniques for real time reporting and information sharing and to inform the police about actual or suspected crimes. The two most common forms of this are citizen reporting systems and blogs. *El Blog del Narvo* is a good example of this approach. Related sites such as *Notinfomex/Narcoviolenca* and *Nuestra*

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97 Image Credit: Thelma Datter.

98 Carrie Khan, ‘As Mexico’s Dominant Cartel Gains Power, The President Vows “Hugs Not Bullets”’, *NPR*, 23 July 2020.

99 For more on this, see Jorge Soto and Constanza Gomez Mont, ‘#DemocracyMX: Impacts of Cyberspace on Mexican Civil Society, Drug Cartels and Government’ in Robert Muggah and Rafal Rohozinski (eds), *The Open Empowerment Era: From Digital Protest to Cyber War* (Open Empowerment Initiative America, 2013).

Aparente Rendición advocate non-violence. The Center for Citizen Integration outs suspected cartel members.¹⁰⁰

The cartels recognise the power of citizen reaction and have tried to choke off citizen online empowerment. In 2011, they committed symbolically powerful crimes showing the killing and disembowelling of bloggers. One body set alongside a keyboard and mouse was left with a *narcomensaje* warning of the risks of online reporting.¹⁰¹

But the cartels are finding that citizens are tough minded. A second generation of citizen initiatives has added safety measures to reporting. Foreign-based organisations such as ‘Community RED’, as well as local ones such as ‘Hancel’, have leveraged technological savvy to develop and improve digital security tools and collaboration within Mexico. While Freedom House’s 2013 evaluation of digital safety among Mexican journalists and bloggers found persistent threats and an ‘urgent’ need for digital safety, new initiatives are protecting Mexico’s thriving horizontal citizen-to-citizen violence prevention.¹⁰²

Online videos that appear to be released by citizen groups have denounced corruption by local politicians and extortion by cartels. Images of family members and girlfriends of cartel members have been uploaded with evidence linking them to organised crime. In one case, an actual photo of an excel sheet showing the quantity and value of bribes paid by the Knights Templar to local officials, including police officers, was anonymously sent to the *Blog del Narco*.

Citizen opposition has gone beyond ‘naming and shaming’ cartels. It has launched frontal campaigns against them. In Michoacán, self-defence forces—paramilitaries—have established Facebook pages on which they post material, collect information on the Knights Templar and successor organisations,¹⁰³ rally support, denounce corruption and other state activities that hinder their cause, and issue public communiqués.¹⁰⁴ Spokespersons speak openly against the Knights Templar cartel, with their faces unmasked and their locations plainly visible.

100 Robert Muggah and Gustavo Macedo Diniz, ‘Digitally Enhance Violence Prevention in the Americas’, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Volume 2 No.3 Art. 57 (2013): 1–23.

101 Borderland Beat, 5 April 2013.

102 Jorge Luis Sierra, *Digital and Mobile Security for Mexican Journalists and Bloggers* (Freedom House and the International Center for Journalists, 2013).

103 In 2013, the leaders of this cartel were killed, or, as with one of its leaders, Ignacio Renteria Andrade, alias ‘El Cenizo’, arrested by Mexican authorities. The organization today persists in a weaker, fragmented form. See: ‘Knights Templar’, *Insight Crime*, 5 May 2020.

104 The Open Empowerment Initiative tracked six such Facebook pages between June and December 2013. All are centred on Michoacán state.

This movement is about more than countering cartel narratives. Citizens are increasingly battling to shut down narco cartel online platforms. The social media presence of the Knights Templar was short-lived. A study conducted by Antoine Nouvet for the SecDef Foundation in 2016 observed the shutdown of several Knights-Templar-affiliated Facebook pages that included not only outright fan pages of the cartel, but also a fan page of Knights Templar *narco*corridos that had been online since February 2012. A game of whack-a-mole during this period ensued as Knights Templar pages reopened and would then rapidly go offline, due to what some Facebook users noted were ‘successful complaints brought to Facebook to close these criminal social media platforms’.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of this drama is the absence of the state. The protagonists are cartels, anti-cartel paramilitaries, and the digital cheerleaders of either faction, as well as the mediation roles that private-sector platforms such as Facebook play.¹⁰⁶

Critical to managing the drug wars is to reclassify them. Many incorrectly characterise cartel violence and drug trafficking as high-intensity crime. They are that, but they also qualify as low-intensity conflict carried on by organisations that are properly characterised as terrorists. How one characterises the cartels governs what resources and authorities apply. Under the current situation, law enforcement’s hand are tied. We harbour no doubt that the cartels, who have killed arguably over 200,000 innocent civilians and operate freely in American cities, constitute an existential threat to this nation’s future. That holds true as well for Europe, which is connected through cartel activity.

The drug war may not be winnable by those who oppose the cartels. The cartels are too wealthy, too politically connected, and too militarily powerful. But the war can be managed. Their use of atrocity propaganda has proven integral to cartel culture and their ability to commit high intensity crime and seize political power. But citizens have shown a willingness to fight back. What’s striking is that the punch-back has come from *citizens*, not the state. President Obrador has shown relatively little mettle in taking on the cartels and high-level corruption—as witnessed by the arrest and release of Mexico’s supposed top ‘drug fighter’, General Cienfuegos. Events of this sort manifest such pervasive corruption as to neuter state efforts to prevail.

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¹⁰⁵ Facebook user’s response to a query on January 2014, on a Knights Templar fan page.

¹⁰⁶ The dilemmas faced by platforms such as Facebook in complex contexts such as these are something the SecDev Foundation has researched in more depth in Syria’s ongoing civil war.

Conclusion

The two books on public diplomacy and propaganda are well done, with essays by distinguished authors who offer important insights into the notions that this essay has addressed. In my view, nations have come up short in coming to terms with the challenges. It's time to rethink.

One might expect that, in the world as it existed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, states and other powerful actors might have found it easier to commit atrocities because they could more easily have been concealed or misrepresented, whereas in today's globally connected world, one might reasonably expect universal condemnation of atrocities and that parties seeking to gain and sustain credibility and legitimacy would refrain from committing them.

For states, this may be true. China's use of concentration camps against the Uighurs renders this more complex; Beijing has consistently represented their campaign to wipe out Islamic culture as benign education and training for good jobs. They seek to justify what amounts to cultural genocide by associating Uighur resistance with al-Qaeda and ISIS, thereby depicting all Uighur Muslims as terrorists. In contrast, non-state actors such as ISIS and its cohorts around the world, and the drug cartels, have glorified themselves in their employment of atrocities to enhance their public image as powerful and determined forces.

It turns out that civility is an elusive constraint on what some groups will do. Whether for religion, greed, politics, or other motives, atrocities will be committed, and different groups will proudly credit themselves for committing what the civilised international community would characterise as war crimes.