New Media and Latin American Violent Movements

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The Commons Lab, an initiative of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars recently published a provocative article entitled “New Terrorism and New Media.” In his discussion, Professor Gabriel Weimann of Haifa University in Israel focuses on insurgent movements such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. His work explains how terrorist movements utilize social media outlets, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to expand the reach of their ideology and attract new converts.

According to Weimann, social media is different than traditional internet resources because, with social media, terrorists are able to directly target individual followers. Thus, social media has increased the number of “lone wolf terrorists,” namely individuals who commit terrorist acts without being connected to a particular terrorist organization. With the rise of social media, Weimann argues that the war on terror has become increasingly “vital, dynamic, and ferocious,” and creates a new front in the struggle for international security.

However, the use of social media and new technology is not limited to violent groups in the Greater Middle East. Thus, the authors of this article would like to expand upon Weimann’s research by discussing how criminal groups in Latin America have also been successful at utilizing new media resources.

A Game of Definitions

Weimann’s discussion focuses on terrorist movements in the Arab world. It is essential to note that the same general term “terrorists” cannot be applied to the criminals that currently operate in Latin America. Rather, Latin American criminal groups include narco-insurgents like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia, Shining Path in Peru, the Bolivarian Liberation Front (FBL) in Venezuela, and the Paraguay People’s Army in Paraguay.

Mexico’s main criminal groups are drug trafficking organizations. These cartels include the Sinaloa Cartel, the Zetas, the Knights Templar, the Gulf Cartel, and New Generation. Additionally, Central America has its own share of criminal organizations. *Maras*, as they are known, are multinational gangs that have branches in countries ranging from the United States to South America.

For simplicity’s sake, we will utilize the term “violent movements” to encompass this vast number of criminal entities.

The Rise of the Latino Netizen

Latin America has experienced an explosion of internet activity in recent years. Some quick statistics help put this situation in the proper perspective. The World Bank estimated that the region had 581 million citizens in 2012, and a 2013 analysis by ComScore found that “Latin America had the fastest growing internet population, increasing… to more than 147 million unique visitors in March 2013.” Due to this increasing online presence, several institutions have carried out comprehensive analyses on internet usage in the region. Most recently, the Organization of American States and the internet security company Symantec published a major analysis entitled “Latin American + Caribbean Cyber Security Trends,” which focused on the rise of cybercrime in the Western Hemisphere, such as social media scams.

As Weimann notes, the internet and social media are valuable resources for criminal groups in general. When one considers the rising population of Latin American netizens, it is understandable why the region's violent movements have turned to such resources to further their agendas.

Colombia: The FARC and ELN's Virtual Presence

The FARC is Latin America's oldest insurgent movement and will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. The movement's strength has declined during the past decade and a half; its membership has shrunk from around 16,000 in the late 1990s to an estimated 8,000 today, and it has lost several of its leaders in recent years.

Even though the FARC has been severely weakened, the group remains a major force in Colombia and it has an active online presence. Its main online outlet is its own webpage. The FARC's website has a section that discusses the history of this organization and another page devoted to press releases, most of which praise the FARC and critique the Colombian government. For example, the FARC published a statement on its website announcing that it declared a unilateral cease-fire from June 9 to June 30 of this year due to the ongoing electoral process in Colombia. The website even has a "Contact Us" form where individuals can send inquiries to contact FARC commanders for interviews.

Additionally, the website has links to videos and news articles which clarify the group's position on social issues. Though the FARC is one of Latin America's most well-known insurgencies, its website promotes "wisdom and patience" in their conflict with the government. In a section addressed to soldiers and police, the FARC states that in other circumstances, "the groups could have been friends." Moreover in an effort to demonstrate that the FARC is a gender-friendly entity, the FARC created a webpage last October dedicated to the female members of the movement. A FARC statement regarding the creation of the website "Mujer Fariana" declares that, "without a doubt, in the FARC, female guerrillas found a great number of possibilities to be recognized as women, social fighters, political individuals, as fighters against every kind of discrimination and exploitation."

Additionally, the FARC has had a Twitter account since 2011, boasting more than 22,000 followers. On their profile, the group claims to fight for "a just Colombia with equality for everyone." The FARC's most recent tweets came from August 2013, when the group announced that it would no longer post on the site. It seemed that officials had attempted to track the account. The authors thanked Twitter for its support and announced that the Colombian people would be the FARC's official voice from then on. The group tweeted that it would march for the countryside, "without looking back."

Some FARC fighters also have their own Twitter accounts, such as Ivan Marquez, a member of the FARC's Secretariat. Unlike the FARC's official Twitter, Marquez's account remains active (though it is unclear whether the guerrilla actually composes his own tweets). For example, a June 10 tweet states: "The ongoing electoral race for the presidency has been one of the most shameful in the history of the country." Marquez' tweet provoked some strong replies from individuals who begged Marquez to stop his harsh commentary.

Finally, the FARC has a YouTube account that gained prominence when the FARC and the Cuban rap group Cuentas Claras made a video entitled "Colombianos Pa' La Mesa" (Colombians to the Table). The song's lyrics critique the government's participation in the ongoing peace talks. It argues that the FARC is fighting for "shoeless kids," while the government only wants to protect "its businesses." The video features two FARC fighters: an old insurgent commander and a Dutch female citizen who went to Colombia to teach and ended up joining the FARC.

On the whole, the FARC's online presence, while impressive, is inconsistent. As previously mentioned, the FARC no longer has an active Twitter account. Furthermore, the FARC's webpages sometimes go offline (most likely due to the efforts of the Colombian government). At the time of this writing, both the FARC's main site and the Mujer Fariana website are inactive. Moreover, it is unclear whether the FARC's various websites have improved its public relations. While the general population seems to approve of the governments' ongoing peace talks with the FARC, popular opinion towards the FARC itself remains low.

The FARC is not Colombia's only insurgent group that has an online presence. The ELN also has a website, which shares the group's history and ideology. As with the FARC site, the ELN webpage has a form that enables the public to send inquiries to the group's leaders. The page also features news articles describing its activities and recommendations for videos, music, and literature. On the front page, the site quotes Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez: "what matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it." It seems the page is meant to share the country's events through the lens of the ELN's ideology.

Mexico: The Bloody Narco Blogs

In Mexico, drug trafficking organizations comprise the most prevalent violent movements. Mexico's local media outlets fail to sufficiently cover accounts of cartel violence. This media self-censorship is unsurprising; Mexican cartels have made a hobby of killing media editors or journalists that air stories critiquing their actions. The competition between the media and the cartels culminated in September 2010 when *El Diario de Juarez*, a newspaper operating in one of Mexico's violent cities, published an op-ed asking drug cartels for a "truce." The Juarez newspaper agreed to limit its unfavorable coverage of cartels if the cartels promised to stop killing its staff.

Due to problems of fear and corruption associated with traditional news outlets, Mexican citizens have turned to the Internet for information regarding the ongoing internal drug war in their country. Narco-blogs, for example, originally appeared when citizen journalists tried to cover stories of violence. These authors would publish quick articles with photos and amateur videos soon after an incident took place. The publications served to inform the public of the actions of the cartels.

However, cartels soon infiltrated this informal online arena and began killing bloggers and forum moderators of sites that published stories on the narcos. In September 2011, for instance, a man and a woman were hanged from a bridge in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas after their eyes and fingers had been cut off. Coverage by CNN reported that a sign was found on the bodies, threatening those who used the Internet to report on organized crime. Two months later, the body of a forum moderator known as El Rascatripas was found decapitated at the foot of a Columbus statue in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. The murderers placed a sign above the body that read, "I'm Rascatripas and this happened to me for failing to understand that I should not report things on social media websites."

Moreover, cartels have also been known to post videos of executions and executed bodies to scare off their opponents. Members also use social media to boast about their own sadistic actions. As example of this narco-goriness is the website elnarcotube.com, which has a compilation of videos made by different Cartels. One video shows a member of the Zetas decapitating a woman who was believed to be a member of the Gulf Cartel. Another video shows the Zetas interrogating a police officer from Durango. In the final seconds of the video, the officer was shot in the head. Mexican cartels are also known to hire musical bands to sing songs of praise for them. These have become known as "narco corridos" (narco songs), and many can be found on YouTube.

Individual cartel members have also been known to brag about their actions. One Knights Templar member, who calls himself "Broly," posted selfies with victims and weapons on his Facebook page last year. Likewise, Alfredo Guzmán, the son of former Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, also had an active online presence until his father was arrested this February. On the positive side, the news agency Business Insider notes that the online presence of cartel members may enable law enforcement agencies to capture them. However, such prospects seem optimistic.

Other Groups

One additional insurgent movement that has its own website is Venezuela's obscure Armed Liberation Forces (FBL). According to the security news agency InSightCrime, the FBL is a guerrilla movement that operates in western Venezuela, close to the border with Colombia. InSightCrime explains that, unlike other insurgent movements, the FBL has generally avoided clashing with the government and has supported the government of the late President Hugo Chávez.

The website is hosted by the blogging site Blogspot, and its content includes a history of the organization and various press releases. For example, a June 5 press release on the website claims that FBL fighters activated smoke bombs in various areas of Caracas, including the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance. "This action was not aimed at hurting anyone, or destroy private or public property, but to promote action," the press release explains. Namely, the group was calling for popular protests against the "oligarchy" that brought about the ongoing crisis in Venezuela. However, *Últimas Noticias* only reports that pamphlets were found in the areas mentioned. Apparently no actual attack took place, though the ensuing tension resulted in an increase in security and police forces around the city.

There are certainly other criminal groups that operate in the Latin American region, such as the insurgency groups in Peru and Paraguay and the *Maras* in Central America. However, the authors of this article have not found any online presence that we can verify that is associated with these organizations.

Conclusions

In "New Terrorism and New Media," Professor Weimann argues that terrorists use the Internet to distribute propaganda, radicalize the population, and recruit followers. When it comes to Latin America, it seems the region's criminal organizations have a much more limited online presence. One cannot be certain whether individuals have been inspired to join insurgency groups like the FARC, ELN, and FBL, or other drug trafficking organizations, because of their websites or Twitter accounts. However, the online forums these organizations use certainly have not hurt their causes.

Propaganda is definitely one important objective of the criminal groups who use online resources. At the very least, the websites of groups like the FARC, ELN, and FBL put forward a "noble" version of their history and struggle against their governments. The internet provides these narco-insurgencies a chance to tell their side of the story when news outlets focus only on the violence that comes from their existence. For this reason, modern technology has made a difference in the ongoing power struggle between narco-insurgencies and governments.

As for the Mexican narcos, uploading videos of cartel members executing individuals (either from opposing cartels or security forces) seems to be more of a way to demonstrate a cartel's power. Yet the Internet has helped to romanticize the narco lifestyle in Mexico in recent years. There are worrying reports that Mexican youth now wish to grow up to become narcos due to their power and extravagant lifestyles. The fact that narco-corrido songs are now online also contributes to the propaganda machine of cartels. In this way, the internet has also enabled drug cartels to tell their own side of history.

Ultimately, the online presence of Latin American violent movements may not be as extensive as the Islamic extremist movements mentioned in Weimann's report. However, insurgency movements and cartels have begun to use the internet and social media for their own purposes. These resources have enabled criminal organizations to share their stories, whether this be the nobility of their causes or the extravagance of their lifestyles.

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