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# Citizen Journalism: From Thomas in Boston to Twitter in Tamaulipas, A Case Study

Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera,  
Maria Fernanda Machuca, &  
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## *Abstract*

As violence spiked in Mexico in clashes between drug trafficking organizations and law enforcement, news media were systematically silenced by cartels and cowed legitimate governments. Reliable information on street battles and their consequences ceased to flow through traditional channels to an anxious citizenry on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border 10 miles from McAllen, Texas. In Rey-

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nosa, Tamaulipas, a noted “plaza” territory contested by the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, ordinary citizens became journalists in 2010, reporting under the umbrella of the pioneer #ReynosaFollow hashtag on the Twitter social media platform. This gave frightened citizens a sense of anonymity and security in disseminating their real-time warnings to others, serving as the modern-day “underground presses” of the past signaling danger and injustice. Twitter and #ReynosaFollow have gained notoriety in mainstream media on the U.S. side of the border as useful and important news sources in territory that reporters no longer cover on a daily basis out of fear for their lives. This article chronicles how citizen journalism has developed in heavily censored states of Mexico where frequent gun battles and brutal murders still occur. Special emphasis is given to a case study of Twitter in the city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas.

**I**saiah Thomas, a runaway apprentice who became a leader in an underground movement for the American Revolution against England, alerted his countrymen to danger and injustice and fanned the flames for revolt through his “Massachusetts Spy” press. It was this movement of Radicals that “flashed the signal light from the steeple of Old North Church warning the Minutemen couriers of the impending British raid on Lexington and Concord” to which Thomas was an eyewitness (Emery 1972, p. 86). His report of that first battle in the War for Independence “remains today as the most notable war reporting of that conflict” (Emery, 1972, p. 86). It “helped solidify support for the Patriot cause,” (Mass Mo-

ments, 2015, para. 9).

Thomas had riled the British, was threatened with tarring, and once was hanged in effigy by Bostonians whose sentiments remained with the Crown. Undeterred, however, he “secretly published handbills for the Sons of Liberty” and “arranged for special post riders to exchange news and papers with like-minded citizens in other colonies” (Mass Moments, 2015). With his printing press smuggled under cover of night from Boston to Worcester, about 45 miles to the west, Thomas used this “instrument of war” (Emery, 1972, p. 86) to persist in reporting news and “beating the drums for the American cause” (Emery, 1972, p. 87). The Revolutionary War was “hard on patriot editors and publishers. They had committed themselves to the cause so wholeheartedly that it was impossible to stay in business under British occupation” (Emery, 1972, p. 87).

A biographer wrote in the August 1, 1814, *Polyanthos* monthly literary magazine published in Boston:

“He became the object even of executive hostility; and Gov. Hutchinson and his council endeavored to punish him for contempt and indict him for libelous publications. The public spirit was excited; the breach between England and the colonies widened; and for the safety of his person and press, he removed to Worcester a few days before Lexington battle.” (Biographical Sketch of Isaiah Thomas)

At his new base of operations, Thomas, in July 1776, “by now a prominent citizen of Worcester – read The Declaration of Independence aloud in Worcester from atop the porch of Old South Church” (Emblidge, 2012, p. 62).

The vigilant protectors and persuaders who gath-

ered around Thomas' clandestine printing press (Emery, 1972, p. 87) would have been the "tweeters" of today in the city of Reynosa in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Just across the international border from McAllen, Texas, drug cartels have put a silencer on traditional journalism, and citizen journalists have become the underground patriots fighting to protect each other from oppressive drug lords and their minions by tweeting warnings of impending danger through social media. They, like Thomas, post their eyewitness accounts using the technology of their day to warn and inform, risking identity discovery and subsequent retribution by those on whom they report. As the Revolutionary War was "hard on patriot editors and publishers" (Emery, 1972, p.87), so is the "war on drugs," declared by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon in 2006, escalating violence, media silence and tweeter caution. The tweeters' contributions to the safety of fellow Reynosans depends upon their anonymity through a Twitter "hashtag," as evidenced in their refusal to be identified, even in their participation in interviews for scholarly research.

Tamaulipas tweeters, too, fan flames of discontent through their frequent terse messages to families, friends and followers reporting that yet another melee has exposed them to a "situation of risk." Flames of discontent evolved in Thomas' day into a full-fledged revolution against oppressors and, as exemplified in the Arab world in 2011, "social media emerge as resources to develop collective experiences – a necessary condition for the success of social movements and protests" (Scherman, Arriagada, and Valenzuela, 2015, p. 154). Similarly, the Tamaulipas tweeters use their electronic gadgets as "instruments of

war” to join in collective experiences in fighting for daily survival and against the drug war that engulfs them.

This is a case study focusing on the “citizen journalism of war” that has developed in Reynosa where drug cartels do battle in the streets and where traditional journalism – and journalists – have virtually disappeared, just as in Thomas’ war time. Twitter users in Reynosa created #ReynosaFollow to localize citizen reports on Twitter that, unlike Thomas’ delayed accounts published for posterity, zip through cyberspace to serve an anxious audience craving immediate uncensored news that could save their lives. The hashtag dedicated to alerts of violence has created a sophisticated network of information with its own language and active citizen reporters of war.

In Reynosa, traditional journalism, as in Thomas’ Boston, operates under a death threat, and career journalists have publicly told their harrowing stories. For example, on March 3, 2010, the *Milenio* television station sent reporter Raymundo Pérez-Arellano to gather information on the kidnapping of four reporters by drug cartel members in Reynosa, a battlefield between the Gulf and Zeta drug cartels for control of the “plaza.” But what Pérez-Arellano (2012) and his cameraman didn’t expect was that they, too, would become the reporters of their own kidnapping. They were beaten by cartel members who suspected that the broadcast journalists were working for the Zetas. At the time, however, there were no full accounts of the incident in other local news media. Instead, the *Milenio* newspaper wrote a discrete note under the column “History in Short” stating that two reporters had been kidnapped but gave no names or details. It was not until two years later that Pérez-Arellano wrote in a blog about why

they had been kidnapped. “The deal is not with you. It is with the Zetas,” which “heats up the plaza, and then the military comes,” Pérez-Arellano said the kidnappers told them. The journalist said they were warned: “We don’t ever want to see you here. If you return, we will pick you up and will put you in the ground. Nothing has happened here.” The dilemma of news reporters, as was with Thomas, whose name was on a list to be “executed when taken,” (Mass Moments, 2015, para. 5) becomes: Do we report truth? Or do we comply with the cartel warnings?

This paper examines the censored zones under the control of the Zeta drug cartel and exhibits the rise of social media use, especially Twitter, by citizens in Reynosa reporting on violence in “real time.”

### **The Zetas and their Military *Modus Operandi***

The Zetas operate as organized military with strata of titles, responsibilities and reporting lines. They were “formed by Mexican army deserters who belonged to elite forces and were trained in the use of highly specialized military equipment, as well as in counterinsurgency tasks” (Correa-Cabrera & Nava, 2013). Bruce Bagley, Latin American affairs authority and Chair of the International Department at the University of Miami, has studied drug cartels in Mexico and concluded that the Zetas’ “military training has taught them that you just don’t commit crime, but you try to control the context in which the crime is committed” (Pena, 2010, April 10). They are not only controlling the physical area, but all of what it entails. They have transportation systems and traditional media outlets under tight rein, and censored media reports are what the public sees and hears.

The Zetas follow a strict hierarchy derived from their military training. At the bottom of the pyramid are the “halcones,” whose job is to watch and provide alerts of government security forces or suspicious people in the streets. The “soldados,” or soldiers, are divided into “estacas.” Their job is to support and cover if a gunbattle breaks out. At the top, there are the “sicarios,” or hired assassins. The lower ranks are strictly prohibited from drinking or using drugs, but the “sicarios” and “estacas” are encouraged to sniff cocaine to keep their energy peaked (Penhaul, 2010b).

With this highly structured organization, the Zetas have gained an unprecedented level of tyranny in states of northeastern Mexico and along the Gulf of Mexico coast. Their influence has prompted media censorship for the benefit of (1) organized crime, (2) territory control, and (3) the Mexican federal government. First, organized crime is responsible for keeping criminal activities out of the media to avoid repercussions from the government. This censorship also prevents alerting rival cartels about current turmoil within a drug organization that could give the rival cartel an opportunity to take over the plaza.

Second, as territory is claimed and controlled by a cartel, it manipulates the media as it wishes. Its leaders determine what should and should not be reported and impose their decisions under threat. A Reynosa newspaper editor said: “Our newsrooms have been infiltrated by these reporters. They monitor what we write; they know where we live. With this system, the narcos have direct control over us” (Emmott, 2010).

Third, the federal government pressures media to abstain from reporting on news that can make the govern-



ment appear ineffective, such as failed military missions and heinous cartel activities. In Veracruz, a city named in 1519 by explorer Hernán Cortés searching for gold, some journalists stated that they cannot refuse to follow federal orders because they cannot afford to lose the funds that the government provides to media outlets (Knoll, 2013). The city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, north of Veracruz, witnessed a three-hour shootout between rival cartels on March 10, 2013. The authorities reported the deaths of two civilians and the injury of one. A Tamaulipas law enforcement authority unofficially confirmed the death toll of about a dozen people. The true number remains unknown, however, because the cartel removed the bodies of their members (Ortiz, 2013). Correa-Cabrera said, “Not only are we seeing organized crime shushing the media, but now we are seeing the government at all levels put a lid on the media where you now have virtually no mainstream coverage of a battle of this magnitude” (Ortiz, 2013, p. XXXXX).

### **Media Silence in Northeastern States**

Northeastern Mexico states such as Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí have extensive Zeta infiltration within their regions, making media takeovers easier. “The Committee for Protection of Journalists has classified Mexico as the eighth worst country in the world for journalists in its annual Impunity Index” (Knoll, 2013). According to the press freedom group known as “Article 19,” in 2012, violence against journalists and media workers increased by more than 20% from 2011 to 2012. There were 207 cases of violent acts against journalists in 25 Mexican states, seven journalists were murdered, two journalists were kidnapped and remain miss-

ing, eight buildings were targets of firearms or explosives (Article 19, 2013), and at least 18 journalists moved to Mexico City as a result of attacks or threats in other regions of the country between January 1 and September 1 (Alava, 2012). The number of threats increased another 20% in the four months immediately after Mexican President Enrique Peña-Nieto took office December 1, 2012 (Knoll, 2013). If journalists are not killed, it is common for the cartels to “pick up” reporters, “shake them up a little” as a warning to them to disregard drug cartel activities in their reporting. However, a northern state newspaper editor-in-chief, who preferred to remain anonymous, described how organized crime picked up, beat and dumped him on a highway on the outskirts of the city September 24, 2012; he identified his captors as drug cartel members who warned him to quit his job at the newspaper and to leave town indefinitely (Alava, 2012).

Similar stories of reporter intimidation by cartel members are told throughout the Gulf of Mexico and northeastern states. In relation to the rest of the country, the state of Veracruz is at the top of the reporter death list “with nine journalists killed in just the past three years, according to the press freedom group Article 19” (Knoll, 2013). One of the most notorious cases happened in Xalapa, Veracruz. Journalist Regina Martínez of *Proceso* magazine was found dead in her home on April 28, 2012. Martínez had a history in investigative reporting dealing with narco-trafficking and government corruption. Her body exhibited signs of beatings and choking, but official statements declared she was dead as a result of a robbery because her computer was stolen from the scene (AFP, 2012; EFE, 2012). On April 8, 2013, Jorge Antonio

Hernández Silva was sentenced to 38 years in prison for Martínez' death. *Proceso* magazine published a statement noting inconsistencies in the case, how the suspect was coerced to confess to the crime, and how a second suspect remained at large (Knoll, 2013).

### **The State of Tamaulipas**

The state of Tamaulipas, the cradle of the Zetas and their current main base of operation, is home to three of the most disputed “plazas” – Reynosa, sister city of McAllen, Texas; Nuevo Laredo, sister city of Laredo, Texas; and Matamoros, sister city of Brownsville, Texas. After former President Felipe Calderón's declaration of his war on drugs in 2006, violence in Mexico intensified. Calderón deployed military troops to combat the cartels, and this intervention prompted revolts among cartel members. A “record-breaking year in terms of violence for the state of Tamaulipas” occurred with the split of the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas in 2010 (Correa-Cabrera & Nava, 2013). With increasing violence, the use of social media to report on events related to cartel activity became the medium of news for citizens in Tamaulipas and others living on the United States-Mexico border.

Shannon Young, an independent journalist and editor of the *South Notes* blog, interviewed two reporters from far south Texas, Idelfonso Ortiz, of *The Monitor* in McAllen, and Sergio Chapa, of KGBT-TV, the CBS affiliate in the Rio Grande Valley. Both reporters recognized the utility of social media outlets in their own stations and the importance of Twitter as a means to obtain information affecting the Texas-Tamaulipas border region. They combined official reports from the Mexican government and

social media from Mexican citizen journalists to provide information to their readers and viewers in south Texas. It has become common practice for news reporters to rely on social media to help fill the void left by the lack of reports from Mexican authorities and their own first-hand accounts from travel in Mexico (Young, 2012a). U.S. reporters on the border no longer routinely cross on a daily basis to cover news on the Mexican side for security reasons.

Lack of traditional media makes travelers, too, dependent on social media to inform them of dangers along their routes to from city to city. *South Notes* (Young, 2012b) advised residents and tourists to take precautions when traveling on Mexican highways. Alberto Rebollo, whose story was told on the *South Notes* blog, recalls his fear when he and his father stopped at a convenience store while driving through the state of Tamaulipas. Rebollo said they inquired about the name of the town they were in and received no response from store employees. Rebollo and his father observed that the store employees also did nothing when criminals robbed the store. The role of Twitter in spreading information about risky situations through an app known as “Zello,” which offers travelers free live private and public conversations – “a more effective way for reporting on the road because it doesn’t involve texting while driving” (Young, 2012b).

Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, not only provide news on events, but they also can warn their followers and friends to avoid transit in dangerous areas. However, travelers in the state of Tamaulipas, especially migrants, still risk ending up at the will of organized crime. In August 2010, a young migrant from Ecuador escaped from a ranch near San Fernando, Tamaulipas –

about a 100 miles south of Brownsville, Texas – where the Zetas had captured and killed 72 migrants from Central and South America, 58 men and 14 women (Booth, 2010). Correa-Cabrera recalled to an *Al Jazeera* reporter the shock of realizing how little information there was about the danger of passing through the area and how informal information filled a niche. She stated that, “People from the region were, of course, aware of this violence and corruption, but they were terrified.” She also emphasized that rural areas with limited or no Internet cannot make use of a social media outlet to spread the news of what the situation was like in the region (Arsenault, 2011).

Monroy-Hernández (2013) suggests that the upsurge in tweets is more prevalent when violence erupts. In examining the use of Twitter in the city of Reynosa, he noted that some traditional media outlets were also reporting on this social network. However, the fact that citizen users had contributed most of the information on this site recognizes the need of what he calls “civic media curators” for conveying critical information (Monroy-Hernández, 2013). Some users have doubled efforts by using more than one platform to report on violence. The Facebook page of *Valor por Tamaulipas* has gained “tens of thousands of followers for posting detailed but unconfirmed updates on security risks in the drug-war hot zone of Tamaulipas state,” and has about 24,400 followers on Twitter (Hernández, 2013, para. 1). However, social media users question the true citizen journalism nature of *Valor por Tamaulipas* for its eulogies on military personnel and related operations. Antonio Martínez, spokesman for the Mexico City-based free speech advocacy group Article 19, suggests that the administration behind *Valor por*

*Tamaulipas* is not an ordinary citizen (Hernández, 2013).

*El Blog del Narco* has become a widely recognized blog providing information that the government and the media don't report. Since March 2, 2010, this site also has become a preference for drug trafficking organizations, as well as law enforcement and ordinary citizens, who send their videos or information for posting (Rodríguez, 2010; Wills, 2013). The *Texas Observer* newspaper published an interview in 2013 with the principal moderator of *El Blog del Narco*, a woman in her mid-20s who used the alias "Lucy" to accomplish her goal of disseminating information. She confirmed that she operates the site with the help of a co-worker who is technologically savvy. Although the Internet gives them a sense of protection, she admits there is a constant fear of retaliation from the drug cartels and from authorities that have, at times, violated civilians who have been seen on the blog (Carroll, 2013).

### **The Rise of Twitter in the Border City of Reynosa, Tamaulipas**

The use of Twitter to report situations of risk in Reynosa is more organized than in most cities in Mexico. With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the establishment of the maquiladora industry and the development of the PEMEX refinery in Reynosa, many Mexican citizens born in other states moved to Reynosa searching for work. These citizens were not accustomed to media censorship. The newcomers created a more diverse and dynamic society that sought new methods to communicate news when information via traditional media was squelched by the cartels and the government. "The silencing/cooptation of local media outlets by

both governmental and non-governmental actors has led the populace to seek alternative methods to inform the society at large about the events that unfold in some regions of Mexico with regards to the ongoing war on drugs” (Correa-Cabrera & Nava, 2012).

In Reynosa, the frequent fighting from 2010 to 2012 between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel stimulated the need within the population to find unconventional ways to communicate and spread news quickly to avoid getting caught in the crossfire between the cartels. *CNN Mexico* reported the importance of Twitter reports by users during several shooting incidents in Reynosa in the week of February 25, 2010 (Valencia, 2010). Official confirmations were provided days after the shootings. Since official notices confirming violent situations after the fact do not help the people in Reynosa with daily plans and schedules, Twitter offers a safety net that allows them to take precautions to protect themselves.

It was on February 23, 2010, that Twitter user @luizonico decided to channel all Twitter users reporting in Reynosa into one hashtag. The user tweeted the following in Spanish: “Please post a comment under the tag #ReynosaFollow” to keep up with serious people please #Reynosa will follow who follows.” This is the first date reported as the first tweet containing the tag #ReynosaFollow. The founder, @luizonico, has been recognized by Twitter users such as @pancho\_panteras, who posted a Google search containing the first tweet of #ReynosaFollow. Other users also embrace @luizonico as the creator and introducer of the tag to Twitter users in the city of Reynosa. Since 2010, Twitter has been actively employed to report on violent events in the city. Penhaul

(2010a) states that the creation of #ReynosaFollow could be the result of constant tweeting in February when the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas fought throughout an entire day and one full night in downtown Reynosa.

Twitter, with its limit of 140 characters in each tweet, has led to the development of a new language where situations and terms have shorter versions and cues. The use of these terms has been so frequent that citizen journalists of war have embedded them in their daily tweeting. It is common to find acronyms in tweets, such as SDR, meaning situation of risk; CO, organized crime; GA, armed group; CA, armed citizens; and FA, armed forces. Examples of tweets containing the #ReynosaFollow and these acronyms are as follows:

On September 30, 2012, Twitter user @MrCruzStar reported: “4 hitmen dead, 3 wounded; and 2 military men wounded due to SDR in Maestro Blvd. #ReynosaFollow.”

On October 14, 2012, Twitter user @reytech10 reported: “#ReynosaFollow SDRs were concentrated around the Chedraui supermarket and nearby neighborhoods ... be careful, sporadic shootings.”

On March 14, 2013, Twitter user @Tuittero\_Rey reported: “at this time, 2:51 pm, you cannot hear shootings, but be careful of GA on the run #ReynosaFollow.”

Twitter has become the safe haven for citizens in the midst of cartel gunbattles. Tweets post reality while, at the same time, maintaining a level of security through the Internet. An unidentified Skype user told *CNN Mexico* (2010) about Twitter use in Reynosa: “The anonymous status gives a sense of trust to the citizen. It is amazing



that there is no coordinator, nobody imposing rules. It is incredible how organized it is.”

However, not all journalists have confidence in Twitter information about cartel activity. Some journalists have questioned the credibility of the tweets because anyone can post anything at any time. Gómez Leyva (2010) said in the *Milenio* newspaper that Twitter is a tool used to scare people in the state of Tamaulipas. He said he recognizes that journalism has been dead for several years in the city, and, as a result, Twitter provides a fertile field for spreading lies. The Mexican government also discredits social media messages when image is at stake.

“Authorities in Reynosa complain that residents’ tweets and YouTube videos create a sense of paranoia and ‘psychosis’ by spreading rumors and inaccurate information virally” (Pena, 2010). Social media are also followed closely by the cartels, which want to make sure the population knows that they are disseminating threats to corporations, criminal organizations, government authorities, and ordinary citizens in social media reports and exchanges. “Maintaining and being part of this movement is not easy; the ‘traditional media’ in Mexico have tried on different occasions to discredit all these tools, and also, the cartel members started using this outlet as a channel to spread fear” (Notario, 2010).

The current challenge is to distance this virtual site from cartel members who post around the Web to send messages and threats (CNN Mexico, 2010). Nonetheless, some citizens continue to praise the use of Twitter, such as Gabriel Regino, a criminology professor at the Universidad Autónoma de México, who was actively participating in the #ReynosaFollow when the February 25, 2010, events

occurred. He declared: “I am convinced that a well-informed society makes the best decisions. I was surprised to see the success Twitter had when the Green Revolution happened (in Iran), so I joined Twitter in 2010” (Valencia, 2010). Government officials also have joined the ranks of Twitter users in efforts to halt the spread of rumors about violence in the city. Juan Triana, from Reynosa City Hall, joined Twitter to try to prevent untrue tweets from creating a virtual crisis. If the tweets are true, he advises the population to stay away from the situations of risk (Cia, 2010; Penhaul, 2010a). Triana also verifies that this method of confirming or denying information has been successful in Reynosa, although other cities in Tamaulipas have not adopted it similarly (Cia, 2010).

### **Methodology**

Monitoring Twitter daily and systematically for four years, connecting tweets with experienced Twitter users, and interviews with those early users has resulted in identification of the most popular city hashtags. Shannon Young, reporting under her Twitter name @SYoungReports, identified the hashtags dedicated to reporting on violence most commonly used in the states with strong Zeta presence. Young’s monitoring suggests that the state of Tamaulipas has more city hashtags that systematically report situations of risk in a coordinated manner than any other state in which Zetas are prominent. To report on violence, Twitter followers in Tamaulipas use these hashtags: #ReynosaFollow, #LaredoFollow or #LaredoSDR, #CdVictoria, #Matamoros or #MorosFollow, #Tampico and #Mante or #ManteFollow – to report on violence. Other states where cities with hashtags are located

### Cities in Mexico with Twitter Hashtags Reporting Violence



Figure 1. Cities in Mexico with Twitter Hashtags Reporting Violence. Source: Design by authors with information provided by @SYoungReports

are: Coahuila – #Torreon, #Saltillo, #Monclova, #PiedrasNegras and #Acuna; Nuevo León – #MTYFollow and #RiesgoMTY –; Veracruz - #VerFollow, #VerAlert and #XalFollow; Guerrero – #AcaFollow ; and in San Luis Potosí – #CdValles. @MrCruzStar is one of the most popular Twitter users reporting for #ReynosaFollow. @MrCruzStar is well-recognized and respected in the Reynosa Twitter community with more than 10,000 followers. Rivers (2013) describes him as “a young man who doesn’t use his real name but has amassed thousands of followers on Twitter.” He uses a pseudonym because he fears retaliation from the Zetas and Gulf Cartel. @MrCruzStar said, “You have to be careful and take this very seriously because you’re risking your life here” (Rivers, 2013).

It is important to mention the difficulties that re-

searchers face when attempting to track and analyze organized crime and related clandestine activities. It is also complicated to do field research in sites experiencing extreme violence and particularly in those controlled by drug cartels or similar criminal actors. Since the present analysis focuses mainly on drug violence and civil society reactions to it in Tamaulipas – one of the most violent states in Mexico – available information sources and utilizable research methods are quite limited. Hence, this work was based on a small number of semi-structured interviews and participant observations in the city of Reynosa, as well as on information contained in a variety of media outlets and open-source press reports.

The reference section of this article contains a considerable number of journalistic sources. It is worth noting that most available information regarding Mexico's drug violence, drug-trafficking organizations, drug-related activities, and other forms of organized crime primarily has been released and analyzed by news reporters. Fear and extreme violence have debilitated formal sources, and news coverage about organized crime can be scarce and inadequate. Consequently, some data and information included was compiled through examination of informal media outlets.

The authors of this article collected all available stories reported in the formal and informal media on security, organized crime, and social media reporting on violence in Tamaulipas from January 2010 through October 2013 and then selected those deemed most credible. This is probably the first scholarly attempt to systematize all the available information on these subjects to generate a coherent narrative of events that explains the development

of citizen journalism in an extremely violent Mexican state. Because of a lack of security in Tamaulipas, many reports on violence are anonymous and some are not reliable. The reports utilized in the present study were selected in a process of “media curation.” Media curation is correct identification of relevant information through a wide knowledge of social media users and local journalists and the type of information they report, all of which is evaluated through daily follow up of the main platforms and frequent interaction with key formal and informal media actors.

Academic investigation of the topics addressed is still in a preliminary stage because of the extremely high risks of conducting field research in areas controlled by organized crime. A further difficulty experienced by academics is the limited access to government intelligence and classified information that would provide a more accurate assessment of security and the clandestine activities of these groups. The use of secondary sources and media articles is, therefore, justified. The present research also collects and systematizes scarce available information from disparate sources and locations into a single document.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with Twitter users who report situations of risks in the state of Tamaulipas. All five requested anonymity. Their conversations are not directly quoted, but their information was used to corroborate and complement that obtained through formal and informal media sources. The five interviewees who participated in the study were selected from among a group of Twitter users that have reported situations of risk since the creation of

#ReynosaFollow. Two interviews were conducted through Skype in May 2013, and the remaining three were conducted face-to-face in Reynosa in December 2013. These semi-structured interviews addressed the following general questions:

- What is the situation today in Reynosa and in the state of Tamaulipas in general?
- Describe the patterns of (in) security and organized crime in the state in the past three years – since the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas separated and initiated a very violent confrontation.
- Why did you start reporting situations of risk through the social media and what are the main devices you utilize? Explain the process of social media curation?
- Can you identify the main actors and their roles in #ReynosaFollow (civil society, members of drug cartels, personnel of law enforcement agencies, and other unidentified social media users)?
- Please describe the dynamics of the “war on drugs” in cyberspace.

The research was enriched by data obtained in following up on conflicts related to organized crime in northeastern Mexico on Twitter since March 2010 by informal direct interaction with multiple Twitter users who have reported relevant events and through usage of Topsy Pro Analytics for Twitter.

After an exhaustive examination of various platforms to analyze information gathered by Twitter users, the most relevant tool was Topsy Pro Analytics, although it had limitations at that time. This approach could not provide a sophisticated search on the number of tweets

that contained both the city hashtag and the hashtags with key words of interest. The platform only allowed for the search of one hashtag at a time and had time limits on how far it could be traced back. Even though the initial goal of this study was to quantify the tweets containing the city hashtags and their content, including the acronyms of key words of interest, no platform allowed for this analysis. At the time of the study, other applications, such as Tweetreach, Trendsmap, and Tweet Archivist, also did not have the capacity to perform the desired in-depth type of analysis.

To assist analysis of information shared through social media users, the study relied on a trial period of Topsy Pro Analytics. This tool offered free access to a platform containing search tools to track and analyze Twitter content. “The social analytics firm tracks trending topics on Twitter ... and it is one of Twitter’s biggest partners [analyzing] the half a billion messages sent over Twitter every day” (Guglielmo, 2013). The trial program gathered information on tweets posted online from July 2010 to early April 2013. The purpose for using Topsy Pro Analytics was to show that the #ReynosaFollow was the most utilized tag on Twitter to report situations of risk during the specified time period from July 2010 to April 5, 2013.

At the time of this study, Topsy Pro Analytics provided information on tweets that included hashtags and Twitter accounts. However, the program did not allow for searches that discarded tweets not containing key words of interest, such as balacera (shooting), SDR (situations of risk), CO (organized crime), GA (armed group), and FA (armed forces). Instead, the results from the analysis of the platform revealed the total number of tweets, or the

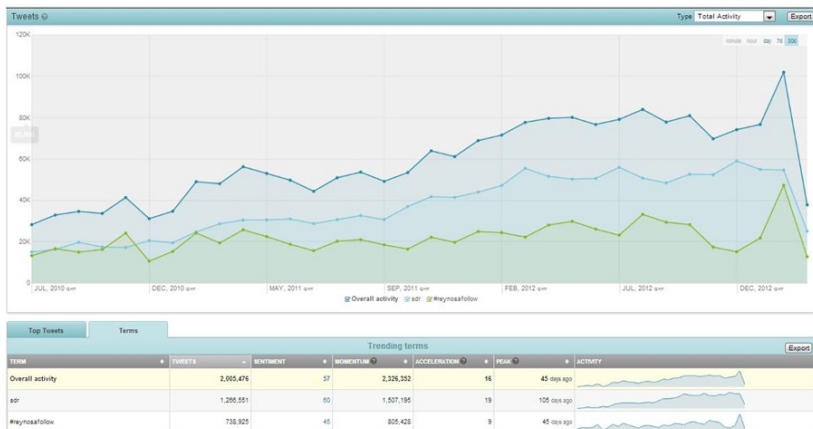


Figure 2. Activity Reported on #ReynosaFollow. Source: Topsy Pro Analytics. Captured April 5, 2013.

activity, and the exposure of the city hashtags. The activity tab on Topsy Pro Analytics shows a graph where the user can monitor the activity of the content being searched, such as the variance of tweets per day and shows the peaks of the activity (Finn, 2012). The exposure measures the potential number of people a certain Tweet reaches. “The exposure number is created by multiplying the number of tweets/links by the number of followers” (Finn, 2012). These are not the only measurable features in Topsy Pro Analytics, but because of the limitations in the searches available, this study relied only on these two features.

## Results

The number of tweets containing #ReynosaFollow totaled 738,925 from July 2010 to April 5, 2013. The graph shows steady activity, with peaks and decreased activity on certain occasions; these variances coincide with changing activities reported in the city of Reynosa. The peak at



the end of the graph is noteworthy. On March 10, 2013, Reynosa endured sustained hours of night-time violence, including shootings, pursuits, and blockages of the main road, “Blvd. Hidalgo.” The road closure left many locked inside a mall, a movie theater, a circus, and homes located nearby with the only option of communicating via text messages and social media (La Jornada, 2013). An increase in use of social media was reported, and the peak shown in Figure 2 likely reflects this event.

When analyzing the number of tweets containing the city hashtags, Topsy Pro Analytics identified #MtyFollow (Monterrey) as the most used city hashtag with 1,364,779 and #ReynosaFollow next with 738,927. The number of tweets counted addressed a variety of topics shared under the two hashtags. The Twitter city hashtags are sometimes used for other purposes such as marketing, personal posts, social activities, elections, tourism, AMBER alerts, kidnappings, among other instances that may require social awareness. Thus, there is no certainty that the hashtags were being used to share information regarding only situations of risk. However, with the numbers provided, it is evident that the use of #ReynosaFollow exceeded the frequency of #MtyFollow by more than one-half. If populations of the two cities are compared, Reynosa exhibits a stronger proportional presence on Twitter. According to the 2010 census, the city of Monterrey’s population was 1,135,550, and the city of Reynosa’s was 608,891 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). It must be noted that Monterrey is a metropolitan area where the surrounding municipalities could be referred to as “Monterrey.” This could translate into residents from other municipalities using the #MtyFollow

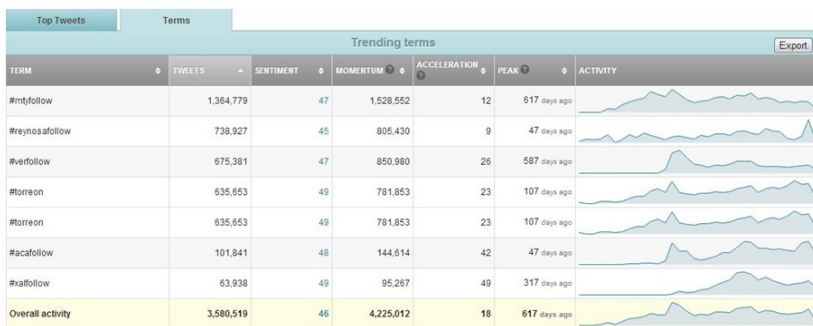


Figure 3. Activity of the most used city hashtags. Source: Topsy Pro Analytics. Captured April 7, 2013.

(see Figure 3).

The exposure measured by Topsy Pro Analytics, which is the measurement of the gross exposure of a tweet, also placed #MtyFollow and #ReynosaFollow as the first and second place city hashtags with the most exposure. These results showed the importance and strong presence of #ReynosaFollow at the national level (see Figures 3 and 4). The reach of #ReynosaFollow is more than half the reach of #MtyFollow. Tracing back to the activity numbers where #MtyFollow had double the quantity of total tweets of #Reynosa, it is important to note that the exposure did not present the same scenario. This translates into a stronger reception of #ReynosaFollow at the national level.

From information obtainable from Topsy Pro Analytics, this study found that #ReynosaFollow was the most utilized city hashtag. The citizen journalists curating the content of the social media platform, as well as the monitoring of Twitter by researchers of this study, supported the high usage of Twitter in Reynosa. Furthermore, mainstream media also have recognized how the online medium has impacted citizens of Reynosa by providing them with

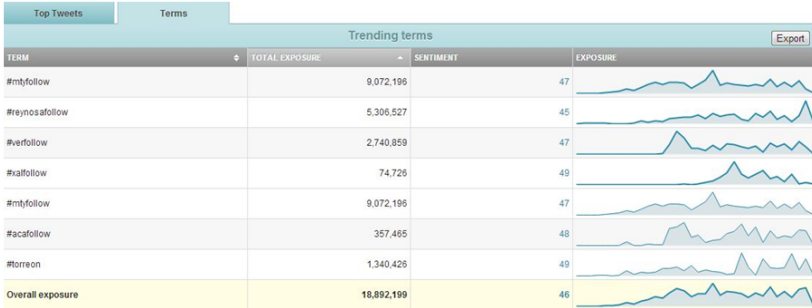


Figure 4. Figure 4. City hashtags exposure measurement.  
Source: Topsy Pro Analytics. Captured April 7, 2013.

an outlet of available online real-time information delivered by unbiased sources when situations of risk may be occurring in the city.

## Conclusions

A powerful organized crime presence has deprived the city of Reynosa, the state of Tamaulipas and other northeastern Mexican states of trusted local, state and national headlines, just as the British had done in the pre-Revolutionary War days of patriot printer Isaiah Thomas. Citizens no longer have simple routine rush hour traffic reports that help them safely travel to their jobs, their schools and their markets to tend to the common business of the day. Citizen journalists, through Twitter, have attempted to fill this void in the United States' closest international neighbor to the south, now considered one of the most dangerous in the world for journalists. The pioneer hashtag #ReynosaFollow provides citizens of Reynosa and thousands of others along the 348.6 miles of the Texas-Tamaulipas border information about what is happening on the streets that affect their daily lives. Tweets have be-

come the local modern-day underground newspapers produced in secret under cover of an anonymous hashtag blinking warning signals that allow people to monitor and report their expectations for security when leaving their homes. This research suggests that the use of Twitter and a new language that signals dangers and the detail of peril have been more prevalent in the city of Reynosa and the state of Tamaulipas where the Zeta cartel has exerted its strongest power than in other geographic areas.

This citizen journalism via Twitter as the medium of an “underground press” of times past prompts suggestions for future research that a 21<sup>st</sup> century Isaiah Thomas might well have demanded to inform his two-volume “History of Printing in America,” which is “still the outstanding authority on the early days of the industry” (Emery 1972, p. 88). These suggestions include (a) accurate, systematic reports of the numbers and content of tweets during outbreaks of cartel violence in cities where traditional media are threatened and repressed; (b) development of software to accurately analyze hashtags and tweeted key words and abbreviations; (c) a systematic comparison of city-specific official government police and news releases and the content of tweets by citizen journalists; (d) a catalog of city-specific hashtags dedicated to reports of cartel violence and citizen safety; and (e) a compilation of a developing tweeted language useful to citizen journalists of war.

## Notes

Quotes from Mexican media and Twitter interactions are translations from Spanish to English by authors.

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