
Mexico's Drug War and Criminal Networks: The Dark Side of Social Media. By Nilda M. Garcia. New York: Routledge, 2020.

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***Mexico's Drug War and Criminal Networks: The Dark Side of Social Media.* By Nilda M. Garcia. New York: Routledge, 2020. eBook ISBN: 9780429320309. Figures. Graphs. Maps. Tables. Appendix. Index. Pp. 144. \$39.96. (Also available in hardback, ISBN: 979036733496, \$155.00).**

Mexico's Drug War and Criminal Network: The Dark Side of Social Media by Nilda M. Garcia, a visiting assistant professor at the department of Political Science at Texas A & M International University, is a new contribution to the so-called academic field of "Drug Trafficking Studies." I place an emphasis on "so-called" because this controversial discipline has long been branded by its detractors as frivolous for celebrating *narcos* (drug traffickers) and *sicarios* (hitmen) and allowing space for them in the academic realm.

However, I strongly believe that we, academics, need to have a say in this semi taboo discussion involving El Chapo, Pablo Escobar, and their likes. Teaching such a subject matter does not mean we honor these inglorious figures and endorse their actions; rather, we will only help students understand the dangers of internalizing the heroic and positive portrayals in movies, series, and novels of capos and other violent criminals. As a matter of absolute fact, and because we live in an era where it becomes harder to tell fact and fiction apart, these slayers appear as protagonists in newspapers, television, cinema, and the narconovela, a popular literary subgenre that fictionalizes and dramatizes narco stories. Such portrayals complicate the narrative of the drug trade and cartels, endowing positive characteristics upon entities and individuals who have undermined the safety and stability of countries across Latin America. Hence, teaching a class on narcoculture, where this book could fall, is one way to approach the topic and reverse the narrative.

In her introduction, Garcia gives a concise background of the current state of affairs in Mexico with regard to the drug warfare and the different parties involved in this long-running carnage: the government, old and new generation cartels, civilians, and the (social) media. By defining basic yet relevant terms such as "cartel," "criminal organization" (p. 3) and "social media" (p. 6), the author aims to target an audience of experts and

non-experts in this specific research area. She also expounds on her study methodology and its limitations, as well as the various sections into which her book is divided. But, most importantly, she sets forth the purposes of her matterful investigation and analysis: to study how, when, and why Mexican drug cartels make use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) by applying social network analysis (SNA).

Following her thorough introduction is Chapter 1, “Narco Mexico.” Here, Garcia submerges the reader in the deep waters of the drug conflict in Mexico; its beforemath and aftermath, a master class on the recent political and social history of the country. Through Chapter 2, “Social Media: The Continuation of War by Other Means,” we continue to learn about the narco/government bloodshed and how social media comes into play. Garcia begins her chapter explaining the role of media during warlike conflicts since World War II, and its usage by certain regimes and crime organizations (Al Qaeda and ISIS) as political and religious propaganda to “fight their wars” (p. 36) and spread fear and terror. Nonetheless, social media has also been crucial in aiding citizens protesting against dictatorial powers and overthrowing authoritarian regimes. In that sense, the “Twitter revolution” (p. 36) was a turning point in the Arab Spring revolutions. Hence, the designation “Social Media Paradox” (p. 37) reflects a concept that mirrors the two opposing sides of social media.

The remaining three chapters are certainly the hard-core portion of the book, as they focus on the three most infamous Mexican drug cartels: The Sinaloa Cartel, The Zetas Cartel, and The Caballeros Templarios. Garcia does a remarkable job of dissecting the accounts of cartels in question and provides very accurate data and analysis. She reports that, besides boasting about their criminal activities and threatening their opponents, Sinaloa’s usage of social media (Twitter mostly) proved to benefit the citizenry in the sense that the cartel’s social media accounts take the form of an announcement board where people post employment opportunities. On the contrary, the Zetas, known for their “beheadings and public hyper-violence” (p. 75), use their Facebook and YouTube accounts to convey their messages and implement terror, as well as a hiring tool to attract the young population for the job of *sicario*. However, people have also been using this platform to report on the Zetas’ barbaric acts, but, most importantly, to alert the population of the most dangerous spots where crime is taking place, in place of the government- censored media outlets.

“The third most powerful drug trafficking group in Mexico” (p. 105) is the Caballeros Templarios cartel based in Michoacán, which is also known as “Tierra Caliente” for its extreme violence milieu (p. 105). This “cartel-sect” (p. 106) is a soi-disant religious organization, yet violence has been the main response to its enemies (read: authorities and citizens).

In her conclusion, Garcia summarizes her findings by comparing each cartel's strategy vis-à-vis social media. She reiterates the importance of keeping an eye on “criminal networks” (p. 136) and how the security forces should monitor criminal groups' activities through their social media platforms. Her study paves the way for scholars interested in future research on other criminal gangs in Latin America.

At the end of the introduction and conclusion, and every chapter, Garcia provides an extensive bibliography, which is a testimony to how knowledgeable she is about the most relevant works published in this research area.

Nilda Garcia's first work is the first volume that explores the subject of narcotics trafficking through the lenses of social media. Teaching such a sensitive and controversial topic like drug trafficking crime, by analyzing tweets, Facebook messages, and YouTube videos is certainly a great way to draw Generation Z college students' attention towards the hidden details of the narco underworld. Additionally, exposing students to academic as well as non-academic (i.e. pop culture) artifacts provides a well-rounded and diverse investigation of the topic. It helps them examine drug criminals more critically and see them for what they really are: bad guys; not heroes. This is especially important because the only previous reference the majority of our students have on the subject is through Netflix shows such as *Narco* and *Narcos Mexico*, where, once again, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction vanishes.

I recommend *Mexico's Drug War and Criminal Networks* with much enthusiasm, as it constitutes a new well-researched source for scholars of drug trafficking or narcoculture, and also for university professors who teach courses on politics, violence, and crime organizations in Mexico.

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