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## Hyping the New Media Buzzword: ‘Spillover’ on the Border

By Melissa del Bosque

ON MARCH 25, CNN’S *ANDERSON COOPER 360* rolled into El Paso to report on Mexican drug-cartel violence. Cooper was one more in a recent wave of national news heavy-hitters to parachute in, scare the pants off millions of viewers, and then jet off to the next headline destination.

Dressed in military green, Cooper furrowed his brow and squinted solemnly into the camera as the lights of the international border checkpoint glimmered behind him. Guest Fred Burton, identified as a terrorism and security expert with Stratfor Global Intelligence, was beamed in from a studio in Austin to paint a menacing picture of Mexican cartels invading U.S. city streets.

“It’s just a matter of time before it really spills over into the United States,” Burton warned, “unless we shore up the border as best we can.”

By God, they’re coming to your neighborhood! Looking at another live feed from El Paso, listening to the breathless reports of violence and “expert” analysis about “spillover,” viewers could only assume that the city was under imminent assault.

The truth differs wildly from the perception. In 2008, according to the FBI, more than 1,600 people were killed by cartel violence in Juárez. El Paso, a city of 755,000, recorded just 18 murders in the same year. Laredo had 11; Brownsville and McAllen had three and nine, respectively. By comparison, Washington, D.C., with a population smaller than El Paso’s, had 186 homicides in 2008.

Certainly, El Paso’s symbiotic relationship with Ciudad Juárez across the border has been disrupted by the explosion of drug violence south of the border, which began to escalate in January 2008. But it’s not the kind of disruption brought to you by CNN, Fox, *The New York Times*, and the rest of the media pack.

The real impact of the ongoing tragedy in Juárez is felt by El Pasoans in more indirect and personal ways. While the brutality across the river has not caused a wave of kidnappings and murders in El Paso, folks do feel its effects every day. El Pasoans can no longer visit their friends, relatives, doctors, or dentists in Juárez. Businesses on both sides suffer. The stories are legion: the high school student who can’t visit her beloved 105-year-old grandmother because her parents don’t want to risk her safety. The young Juárez woman who worries that her El Paso friends and relatives won’t be able to attend her wedding. And the many families mourning loved ones lost on the other side of the Rio Grande.

All too often the nightly news portrays Juárez and El Paso as identical, with the U.S. city symbolizing the perils of that new buzzword: *spillover*. Night after night in March, TV spin-meisters, retired generals, terror analysts, and politicians raged on about spillover violence. Following the 2008 year-end report by the Pentagon’s Joint Forces Command, they called Mexico a “failed state” and argued for militarizing the border. No wonder people in the United States are scared.

*Melissa del Bosque is a reporter for The Texas Observer, where a version of this article originally appeared. She lives in Austin.*

Consider this gem from former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, now a consultant for ABC News: “There is in fact an insurgency on both sides of the American-Mexican border, and it’s stepped up a lot in the last several years because the Bush administration ignored it and put its focus on Iraq” (“Mexico: The Next Iraq or Afghanistan?” abcnews.go.com).

After weeks of hearing the war drums beat louder and louder, Sito Negron, editor of El Paso’s online daily news journal, NewspaperTree.com, decided he’d had enough. An insurgency on both sides? he thought, listening to Clarke’s prime-time pronouncement. Are you kidding me?

A native El Pasoan, Negron was fed up with national media feeding the frenzy to militarize his hometown. After all, for El Pasoans and residents of nearby border towns, all the media hype might all be a mere oddity—maybe even worth a chuckle—if it didn’t mean the construction of 18-foot border walls, blustery talk about National Guard troop surges, and new resources for the disastrous war on drugs. While “troop surge,” “border wall,” and “drug war” might sound irresistibly sexy to politicians and pundits, it’s border residents who have to live with the fences and tanks and consequences.

On March 25, Negron published an opinion piece on NewspaperTree.com titled “Who Are You Idiots, and Why Are You on National Television Talking About the Border? An Open Letter to U.S. Media.” In it, he declared:

*Get this straight. The violence is not “spilling over the border” into the U.S. No, every time you say that, whether you mean to or not, you’re conjuring up images of crazed Mexicans crossing the border to burn Columbus, and you have it backwards. It spilled over from the U.S. into Mexico and Latin America long ago. . . . [F]or the past 20 years, we’ve*

*been slowly turning the border into a militarized zone, so let’s not say there isn’t violence associated with both sides of the drug trade and the Drug War. We could say that we’re now sharing the violence to a higher degree, an important distinction from the simple-minded terminology of “spilling over.”*

“I’m happy that the border is an important place,” Negron said a few days after writing the piece. “But I’m not happy about the context in which they place it. I’m generally a little more mainstream, but I got a bit loose with the editorial because I was ticked off.”

Also in March, El Paso mayor John Cook was interviewed by BBC anchor Katty Kay. The BBC, Kay said, had information that drug violence had spilled into El Paso. Cook was

eager to set the record straight. He’s had plenty of practice lately, with national and international media frequently asking him about the situation in Juárez and in his own city.

“I’ll speak with them and tell them there hasn’t been any spillover of violence into El Paso,” he said, “and then they will turn around and report that there is. Mostly I feel like I’ve wasted my time.”

He’s not the only border mayor who feels that frustration. On March 14, McAllen mayor Richard Cortez got into an on-air tussle with CNN anchor Don Lemon. With footage dated December 4, 2008, rolling of masked soldiers and body bags in Sinaloa, Mexico—960 miles from McAllen—Lemon informed Cortez what was happening in his city.

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912 Market St  
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608.791.5283  
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"I think it's pretty close to a crisis, wouldn't you agree?" Lemon asked.

"The crisis is in Mexico," Cortez replied. "It has not spilled over, Don, to mine—to our city."

"Yes, I know you say that. I know you say that it hasn't," Lemon said. "Since you're the mayor of the city, you have to put the best foot forward. I know your city is affected, but you have to put a good face on it."

Cortez insisted, "Believe me, these things are serious, and the public safety for my citizens are far more important than me putting a good face. I'm not putting my head in the sand. I'm just reporting to you as accurately as I can what has happened."

When folks around El Paso and McAllen hear rhetoric about sending troops to the border, they can't help remembering what happened in Redford, four hours east of El Paso, in 1997. With drug trafficking considered a threat to national security, thousands of soldiers were dispatched to the border. Residents' worst fears were realized when 18-year-old Esequiel Hernandez was shot and killed by a Marine while tending his family's herd of goats 100 yards from his home. Hernandez was the first U.S. citizen killed by U.S. military forces on native soil since the Kent State massacre in 1970. The Marine who shot him was not charged with murder, though the federal government eventually paid the Hernandez family \$1.9 million to settle a wrongful death claim.

Shortly after Hernandez's death, military operations along the border were suspended. Almost a decade later, between June 2006 and July 2008, 6,000 National Guardsmen were sent to the border as part of Operation Jump Start. This time they were assisting Border Patrol officers with technical, logistical, and administrative work to free up the patrol to focus on detaining more undocumented immigrants. Eagle Pass

mayor Chad Foster says the National Guard troops in his area spent most of those two years parked outside the city in Humvees, dressed in camo fatigues.

"I came back from a trip and thought, 'My God, what happened while I was away?'" he recalls. This time, at least, there were no murders—just a couple of bored soldiers who got into trouble for shooting off rounds on the outskirts of town one night.

Foster, Cook, and other border mayors are trying to fend off calls for another National Guard "surge" along the border. It's not easy, with fear-mongering about drug violence, spillover, and terror threats again reaching fever pitch. In a March 7 article in *The Hill*, a daily newspaper about congressional politics, Representative Trent Franks (R-Ariz.) served up a vintage sampling of runaway rhetoric about Mexican drug cartels:

"When you have . . . gangs and they have loose ties with al-Qaida, and then you have Iran not too far away from building a nuclear capability, nuclear terrorism may not be far off."

And now, it seems, it doesn't matter whether you live in Texas or Georgia or Alabama. Newspapers and wire services have made the leap of linking the "spillover" of violence with the "flood" of Hispanic immigrants moving into the interior of the United States. In an April 18 Associated Press story ("Grisly Slayings Brings Mexican Drug War"), reporter Pauline Arrillaga quoted a DEA agent saying that "the flood of Hispanic immigrants into American communities to work construction and plant jobs helped provide cover for traffickers looking to expand into new markets."

And according to a March 23 *New York Times* article, "The Atlanta area . . . has emerged as a new staging ground for drug traffickers taking advantage of its web of freeways and blending in with the wave of Mexican immigrants

who have flocked to work there in the past decade."

Several paragraphs into the news stories, the reporters note that it is difficult to actually link the drug activity in Alabama or Georgia with Mexican cartels. They also mention that the majority of cities along the southern border are actually seeing a decline in criminal activity. These few lines buried in the text can't compete with the beheadings, kidnappings, and other salacious details that grab the headlines.

The impression they leave is of a violent conquest in the making—a wave of gun-toting, cocaine-sniffing Latinos moving across the United States like locusts. The underlying assumption seems to be that the problem isn't the United States' voracious demand for drugs but rather the "Mexican violence" flooding our small towns and spilling over our border.

Perhaps the tide is changing. Recently the Obama administration conceded that fighting drug cartel violence is a shared responsibility. During a visit to Mexico in March, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized that the United States needs to both curb its demand for drugs and stop the flow of guns heading south. That's a decidedly different political tack from the George W. Bush years, when all the talk was about bigger walls, increased firepower, and Mexico's responsibility for the problem. Other high-level administration officials have been dispatched to Mexico with messages similar to Clinton's, including Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Attorney General Eric Holder.

This new approach risks sounding "soft" to those in the United States fed a steady media diet of border mayhem and spillover. In an age where media outlets concentrated in fewer hands dole out a concoction of sensationalism and news, the public bears the burden of separating fact from fiction. ■