

BEYOND NARCO TUNNELS AND BORDER SECURITY

Tips and techniques for investigating stories along the U.S.–Mexico border

BY CELESTE GONZÁLEZ DE BUSTAMANTE » BORDER JOURNALISM NETWORK

Geopolitical borders and the communities that thrive among them are unique places where cultures can be both connected and contested at the same time. Borderlanders, those who live on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border region, share hybrid histories irrespective of what is happening in their political centers. The borderlands also are a place of innumerable untold stories waiting to be written, captured on video or produced for the Web. With America's heightened focus on the U.S.-Mexico border and politicians' calls to "secure it," it might be time to ask, how can journalists get better stories about the border, and why should they improve their coverage of it? Here are 10 tips:

THINK TRANSNATIONALLY

The first thing journalists can do is to recognize that all border stories are transnational.

The economies and cultures of the border straddle both sides. If you write a story about a cross-national drug tunnel, it is at first glance a cross-border story, but there are a myriad of other issues and stories that might not be so obvious.

The borderlands are a cultural laboratory where people learn to coexist and adapt. A recent report by The Dallas Morning News reporter Alfredo Corchado about African-American expats living in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, (bit.ly/1E7g83z) illustrated another side of the border — one that does not fit neatly into the trope of "people who head north for a better life." Sometimes, as Corchado's story points out, people travel south, and for a variety of reasons.

Economically speaking, cross-border communities are inextricably linked. According to a 2013 report by University of Arizona economists, the Nogales, Arizona, fresh produce industry,

which links Mexican produce to U.S. consumers, had contributed a three-year annual average of \$436.7 million to the Santa Cruz County, Arizona, economy (bit.ly/1wwlkk4). In Los Angeles Times reporter Richard Marosi's recent series, "Product of Mexico," Marosi made public the contrast between deplorable living conditions of Mexican farm workers and their workplaces, which were described as "immaculate greenhouses" where "laborers are ordered to use hand sanitizers and schooled in how to pamper the produce" (bit.ly/1yY15sY).

KNOW THE HISTORY OF THE BORDER

Reporters won't get far if they step onto the border and begin to interview its inhabitants without considering that the north side was originally part of the Spanish empire. Reporters should also know that 167 years ago, the north side was still a part of Mexico, except in the case of Arizona and New Mexico, which were acquired a few years later as part of the Gadsden Purchase in 1854.

"Ringside Seat to a Revolution," David Dorado Romo's microhistory of El Paso, Texas, and Juárez (bit.ly/1GtWz8c), is a fascinating cultural examination of the turn-of-the-19th-century border community, and it provides deep background and an important backdrop to many relevant and contemporary issues.

PUT STORIES INTO HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Journalists can go beyond finding out about the history of the borderlands and increase the quality of reporting by putting their work into historical context. They can visit and consult local historical societies and university archives along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Many of these resources are now online. One such resource is an online digital archive based at the University of Arizona, which



Reporters are encouraged to research the history of the border area. Archives, like this postcard from the Mexican Revolution, are available at the University of Arizona.

houses Mexican and Mexican-American newspapers published from the mid-1800s to the 1970s (bit.ly/1Mtbwtf).

There are numerous indigenous nations whose tribal lands straddle both sides of the border. Each native people has their own rich history, which if included, could add a valuable dimension to reporting projects. The photo above of members of the Yaqui Indian Nation was acquired at the University of Arizona Special Collections, home to numerous online photo collections.

The historian's craft is similar to the journalist's, though the former has the luxury of time to investigate projects. Nevertheless, studying the work of scholars, such as Elaine Carey's "Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime" (bit.ly/1t0hLAz), might be useful in finding leads for stories and for triggering ideas about what to report.

DON'T TREAT THE BORDER AS A MONOLITH

No two border cities are the same: What happens in San Diego, California/Tijuana, Baja California, is different from Nogales, Arizona/Nogales, Sonora (Ambos Nogales), and those places are distinct from El Paso/Juárez, and so on. Each trans-border community has its own culture and history. The diversity of the U.S.-Mexico border lends itself to excellent cross-border and border-wide projects. Journalists can embrace the diversity and look for projects that examine and compare everything from environmental issues, such as water and climate change, to political and economic issues.

KNOW THE SECURITY SITUATION

InSight Crime reported that as many as 2,000 guns per day are trafficked into Mexico from the U.S. (bit.ly/1HGpX7F). With that many weapons crossing the border, there's bound to be some violence. But violence, like migration patterns, change frequently. Currently, the situation in parts of Tamaulipas, for example, is much more dangerous than the situation in the cities of Baja California or Sonora. Checking sites such as InSight Crime can be useful in determining whether it's worth crossing the border at a given time.

BEWARE OF THE "DANGEROUS BORDER" STEREOTYPE

Speaking of dangers along the border, journalists should recognize that what they report helps to shape public perceptions about places and people. If reporters only cover crime and violence, then

that is what the public thinks about when a reference is made to the U.S.-Mexico border. Media scholars have found that network television news coverage of the U.S.-Mexico border increasingly paints the region as a more dangerous place. While this is true in parts of the south side of the border, many cities on the north side, including El Paso and San Diego, represent some of the safest places in the country.

GO BEYOND MIGRATION AND THE DRUG WAR

Look for stories that go beyond migration and the drug war. While narco tunnels and border security are interesting and important stories to cover, they hardly define the complexity of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Erin Siegal McIntyre's reporting on educational challenges of young children whose parents have been deported to Tijuana serves as an illustrative example of how to report the border in a distinct and powerful way. This is an issue that runs border-wide, and across borders, and lends itself to a comparative reporting project. Another issue that's bound to make headlines and loads of money for U.S. investors for years to come: Mexico's energy reforms, which will allow foreign investment in energy. A recent Congressional Research Service report indicates that potential binational collaborations involving natural gas and oil production has implications for communities all along the U.S.-Mexico border (bit.ly/18CbamH).

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DELVE INTO OPEN DATA ALONG AND ACROSS THE BORDER

Look for open data to drive your stories. Editors don't have to be convinced to buy expensive databases when much data is now available online. Last summer in Sonora, Mexico, when a leaching pond owned by Grupo Mexico spilled millions of gallons of contaminated water into an important river in the region, Sonorans and Arizonans were reminded that mining interests remain important. For data on mines, journalists can consult an investigative piece recently published by Mexico City newspaper *El Universal*, in conjunction with *Cartográfica*, in which the daily reported that mining concessions sit on one-fifth of the country's land (eluni.mx/1qRe5hH). For stories about migration, reporters can consult the Institute for Justice and Journalism's Open Data Library (bit.ly/1wYQlby). IRE also has a hefty database library that members can access.

CONSULT LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS

Human rights organizations and academic think tanks frequently have a very good pulse on circumstances on both sides of the border. They can be a great starting point for story ideas, as well provide good data that can add weight to reporting. One of the best national sources in the U.S. for open data on the border and Latin America is the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).



North side of the Nogales, Arizona — Nogales, Sonora border wall.

On the national level in Mexico, the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) monitors human rights violations on the border and throughout the country. The civil society organization posts daily reports on a listserv titled “Hoy en DH” (Today in Human Rights). Locally and regionally, all along the border there are dozens of organizations that can provide rich data and information.

LOOK FOR CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATIONS

Let’s face it: Some stories along the border are simply too big and too expensive for one individual to tackle. That’s when cross-border relationships and projects can pay off.

Given the Global Investigative Journalism Network’s recent report about freelancers around the world having to give up on stories because of scarce resources (bit.ly/1xeWiRu), it seems clear that collaborations are the wave and necessity of the present and future. Some of the best reporting can result from cross-border reporting teams. In 2013, U.S.-based reporter David Barstow and Mexico City-based reporter Alejandra Xanic von Bertrab won a Pulitzer and an IRE award for their coverage of Walmart’s use of bribery to get its way in Mexico. Recently, several organizations have emerged offering a host of benefits from up-to-date information about the U.S.-Mexico border to training and opportunities for collaboration in cross-national/cross-border reporting projects and investigations. Many of them are listed [below](#) alphabetically.

List of cross-border organizations

- Border Center for Journalists and Bloggers: journalistsandbloggers.com
- Border Journalism Network: borderjnetwork.com
- Borderzine: borderzine.com
- Center for Border and Global Journalism: borderjournalism.org
- Frontera List: fronteralist.org
- Fundación MEPI: fundacionmepi.org
- Global Investigative Journalism Network: gijn.org
- The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: icij.org
- Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project: occrp.org

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