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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Digital Journalism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rdij20>

### Journalism in times of violence

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Published online: 05 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Celeste González de Bustamante & Jeannine E. Relly , Digital Journalism (2014): Journalism in times of violence, Digital Journalism, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2014.882067](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.882067)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.882067>

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# JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF VIOLENCE

## Social media use by US and Mexican journalists working in northern Mexico

Celeste González de Bustamante and Jeannine E. Relly

*Mexico ranks as one of the most violent countries in the world for journalists, and especially for those who work on the country's periphery such as its northern border. Given the dire situation for Mexican reporters covering the northern part of the country, and the continued responsibility of US journalists to report on the area just south of the border, this qualitative study addresses the overarching research question that examines how Mexican and US journalists who cover northern Mexico are using social media, given the heightened levels of violence in the region. The authors utilize a modified version of the conceptual framework of scale-shifting to investigate how journalists in a specific transnational environment of conflict are using social media. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of 41 interviews gathered in fall 2011 in 18 cities with news media outlets along the United States–Mexico border. Findings describe the innovative ways that journalists are circumventing online security risks (what the authors call scale-shifting) and how social media are used to build cross-border relationships.*

**KEYWORDS** collective action; journalists; Mexico; organized crime; scale-shifting; social media; United States–Mexico border; violence

### Introduction

Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral. (Melvin Kranzberg 1986, 5)

In a place like Mexico, where as many as 88 journalists have been murdered in the last decade, news media workers and citizens have turned to social media in their attempts to get their messages out and to inform the public (Reporters Without Borders 2013). Their actions sometimes come at a heavy price. On September 24, 2011, the decapitated body of 39-year-old María Elizabeth Macías Castro was found in a public square, along with a computer keyboard and a note stating that she was killed because of information she posted in an online chat-room (Centro de Periodismo y Ética Pública 2011; Greenslade 2011). Online media and social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, allowed this local event to become global, noting a *scale-shift* in the traditional pathways of information flows. Scale-shifting has the potential to minimize the power of legacy media and governmental agencies by allowing anyone with access to the Internet to produce news content (Livingston and Asmolov 2010). Tarrow (2005), describes one dimension of scale-shifting as a form of collective action with “instances for cross-spatial collaboration” that include support of “spatial proximity, interpersonal networks, and institutional linkages within particular societies” (122), all potential

characteristics of the United States–Mexico border (US–Mexico border) region—the geographical focus of this study. Further, scale-shifting, in part, requires a shift “from familiar domestic structures of opportunity and constraint to new terrains, and the need to forge new alliances with different allies against different opponents” (122).

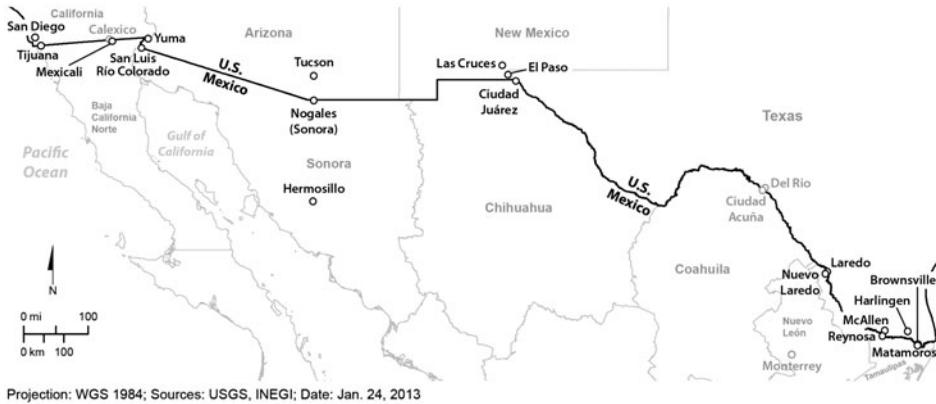
In northern Mexico, where the majority of Mexican journalists were killed in the decade leading up to our 2011 study, the phenomenon of scale-shifting was occurring in an environment of information scarcity and online security risks (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010b; Sierra 2013). In a recent survey by Freedom House and the International Center for Journalists of 102 journalists in Mexico, including those who work in some of the violent states, most Mexican journalists assume that they are under surveillance either by government officials or by members of organized crime groups (Sierra 2013). In some cases, fake followers created by corrupt politicians use social media to defame journalists; an age-old tactic that implements new tools (Sin Embargo 2013). While this scenario presents grave economic and social implications for Mexican journalists, it also further complicates and creates challenges for some US journalists who rely solely on Twitter and other social media to cover northern Mexico. In this article, we utilize the conceptual framework of scale-shifting advanced by Livingston and Asmolov (2010), who examined foreign news reporting to investigate how journalists working in a transnational environment of conflict are using social media for newsgathering and journalism practice.

## Background

For the past several years, Mexico has ranked as one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists 2012). Attacks against journalists spiked after President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa began to increasingly use the military, in comparison to his predecessors, in an effort to reel in transnational criminal organizations (Camp 2010). During Calderón’s presidency (2006–2012), 630 attacks were reported against the press, and from 2000 to July 2012, 82 journalists were killed and 16 others were disappeared (Human Rights Watch 2013, 1), with the majority of journalists murdered in northern Mexico between 2001 and 2011 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010a). These increasing aggressions toward journalists at the hands of members of organized crime who sought to control both territory and media-driven messages about their respective organizations in such an overt way represented a new phenomenon (Antonio Mazzitelli, personal interview, November 20, 2013).

In the digital age, posting on social media sites can pose increased risks and opportunities for journalists and bloggers. In 2011, four bloggers were murdered in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. At the same time, because of a lack of coverage about organized crime at longer-standing news organizations in the region, social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide opportunities for journalists and citizens to inform themselves (Cave 2011; Correa-Cabrera and Nava 2013).

On the US side of the border, some local reporters who cover Mexico are told by their news organizations that they must do so without crossing south (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). This situation presents an additional challenge for



**FIGURE 1**

Map of the US–Mexico border region (cities and towns in black are those included in the study)

journalists who attempt to confirm the veracity and accuracy of information coming across such informational feeds such as Twitter and Facebook. Indeed, the lack of reporting regarding organized crime on the Mexican side (Arana and Guazo 2011), coupled with the inability of some reporters to cross into northern Mexico, creates a perfect storm for misinformation. At the same time, these circumstances have created a window of opportunity for “collective action” via social media, as journalists and citizens on both sides of the border circumvent organized groups, and in some cases, the state, in their quests to seek and disseminate information.

Given the dire situation for Mexican reporters covering the northern part of the country, the continued responsibility of US journalists to report on the area south of the border, and the potential risks and opportunities associated with social media use in a transnational environment of violence, our qualitative study examines the uses of social media by US and Mexican journalists who are charged with covering northern Mexico. The study is based on an analysis of 41 interviews gathered in fall 2011 in 18 cities with news media outlets along the US–Mexico border. We present findings for the region from San Diego, California, United States/Tijuana, Baja California Norte, Mexico to Brownsville, Texas, United States/Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico (see Figure 1).

## Literature Review

Violence against journalists in Mexico is not a new phenomenon, given that between 1971 and 1984, 24 journalists were murdered in various parts of the country (Trejo Delarbre 1992, 21). The murders in 1986 of Norma Alicia Moreno Figueroa and her editor Ernesto Flores Torrijos, who were shot to death in front of their Matamoros-based newspaper, *El Popular*, in Tamaulipas, led to more cautious reporting practices in that area of the border (Fundación MEPI 2010). Yet there are new elements related to twenty-first-century attacks and aggression against the press, including increased levels of violence and threats against journalists along the political and geographic periphery, as well as a dangerous digital landscape in which journalists must work (Sierra 2013).

Consequently, scholars and non-governmental organizations have established that journalists have dramatically altered the way that they practice their craft (Arana and Guazo 2011; De León 2011; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Viridiana Rodelo 2009).

### *The US–Mexico Border*

This study advances previous scholarship on social media (Bruns and Burgess 2012) by honing in on transnational journalists who work in a zone of conflict (Ali and Fahmy 2013; Hamdy and Goma 2012; Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2013), though we seek to add to scholarship by concentrating on Mexico’s northern border with the United States (Jones 1992; Carter and Kodrich 2013). The almost 2000-mile-long US–Mexico border functions as a unique laboratory to “compare whether issues of practice and professional dynamics vary across different locales,” an area of inquiry lacking in the existing literature regarding online news media (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2009, 577). In transnational regions such as the US–Mexico border, journalism that is produced, or the information that is censored, takes on special significance for those inhabitants of a region who are historically, economically, and culturally intertwined through professional and personal relationships that extend across the international line (González de Bustamante 2013; Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). Further, our study concentrates on a transnational group of peripheral journalists, who are “more prone to be a victim of fatal attacks than the metropolitan press,” as Waisbord (2002, 96) noted about Latin American journalists, including those in Mexico, in the 1990s.

As Carter and Kodrich (2013) demonstrated, continued violence against Mexican journalists also has implications for how US journalists cover issues south of the border. While Carter and Kodrich focus on US journalists covering Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, ours represents one of the few academic studies to examine journalists from a transnational perspective because it concentrates on news media producers in the United States and in Mexico (Jones 1992; Jha 2008).

Following the suggestions of Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) and Steensen (2011), the authors aim to deepen the way that online journalism is conceptualized by focusing on the use of social media by journalists’ scale-shifting on both sides of the US–Mexico border in a context of information scarcity and collective action (Livingston and Asmolov 2010; Tarrow 2005).

### *Information Scarcity*

Even in the age of the Internet, information scarcity can exist when governmental entities or pseudo authorities, such as transnational criminal organizations, attempt to control or withhold information (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007). This has been the case in some communities in northern Mexico, where because of a lack of reporting and verifiable information, the public has been compromised and democracy has been weakened (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Waisbord 2002). At the same time, because of the “internet society”, journalists who work in zones of conflict must sift through greater amounts of

disinformation (Conway, Grabe, and Grieves 2007). Reporters working along Mexico's northern border are faced with extreme challenges when trying to verify messages in a location where decapitations, retaliatory narco-banners, and mass graves have contributed to widespread fear, as organized crime groups vie for the attention of news organizations and in some cases attempt to directly influence reporting (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014). In response, and in an attempt to gather reliable information, journalists and the public can develop newsgathering innovations as a collective through "peer networks" (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Jowett and O'Donnell 2006). In this case, peer networks are supported by technology, more specifically social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Livingston and Bennett (2003) posit that new communication tools are changing journalists' reliance on powerful elites for information. However, this article acknowledges the limitations of the use of social media for newsgathering. Among the well-documented impediments of social media are digital surveillance (Livingston and Asmolov 2010; Sierra 2013), misinformation (Conway, Grabe, and Grieves 2007), and propaganda campaigns (Herman and Chomsky 2002), all of which journalists in northern Mexico have reported (Relly and González de Bustamante 2014; Sierra 2013).

### *Collective Action Through Scale-shifting in a Zone of Conflict*

By the end of the twentieth century, non-state actors around the world represented one of the largest sectors of society that influenced policy decisions (Livingston and Asmolov 2010, 749). Thus, we argue that journalists working in vulnerable environments have the potential to address some of the most challenging policy issues through collective action. We use a broad perspective on collective action defined as actors "brought together in a variety of ways to coordinate their actions" (Oliver 1993, 293; Gamson 1992). The authors suggest that journalists may participate as part of a collective of non-state actors who, through informal and formal networked communities, work together to report in the public interest in insecure environments. As Dahlgren (2013, 157) suggests, participatory journalism of today can "open itself up to assistance and collaboration from citizens," but in a zone of conflict, the consequences of online participation can increase risks to journalists.

In a broad context, we adapt a networks approach utilized by Livingston and Asmolov (2010, 748), who studied the future of foreign affairs reporting in a networked world from an international relations framework that proposes, "an emerging system of world organization and governance that includes non-state actors empowered by new information and communication technologies." Our study also draws on other scholars' work (Castells 2010; Siegel 2009; Tarrow 2005) to examine the influence of networks on local and transnational reporting along the dynamically changing environment along the US–Mexico border.

Social networks minimize barriers of time and distance, which can be highly relevant for reporting news in conflict zones and working in transnational environments (Livingston and Asmolov 2010; Siegel 2009, 123–124; Tarrow 2005). Where Hanksa-Ahy and Shapour (2013) concentrated on collaboration among journalists and the public during uprisings in Iran in 2009, and subsequent uprisings throughout numerous Arab

countries beginning in 2010, we focus on the importance of social media and potential collaboration among journalists across the US–Mexico border.

Our research examines the advantages and constraints of the scale-shifting phenomenon, which we argue represents a manifestation of what Hanska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) call “collaboration.” According to Livingston and Asmolov (2010, 746), “Scale shifting opens up the possibility that state institutions are bypassed altogether in networked flows of images, words, and other symbols.” In other words, social media can also function as social networks to enable journalists and the public to collectively circumvent (scale-shift) institutions of power, both governmental authorities and pseudo authorities such as criminal organizations.

We attempt to advance the scale-shifting framework in an unconventional way to additionally include transnational criminal organizations, which have become *de facto* authorities and powerful institutions in parts of Mexico’s northern border (Correa-Cabrera and Nava 2013). These groups, which often are in a state of structural flux, frequently control information and thus become an obstacle that journalists and citizens attempt to circumvent. Further, we argue in accordance with Livingston and Asmolov (2010, 746) that when non-state actors bypass state structures by using social media, traditional news media also may be bypassed.

Our study examines social media use by journalists working along the US–Mexico border, and their roles in providing a means of communicating news in an era of violence, insecurity, and information scarcity. Though other scholars (Livingston and Asmolov 2010; Tarrow 2005) have focused on collective action through the global network of social movements and non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, our study conceptualizes collective action in a broader sense as a possible response to an environment of information scarcity created by state actors and criminal non-state actors. Further, we apply this framework to examine interactions among non-state actors and journalists using social media, including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, along the border as an alternative source of information.

## Methodology

Thus, based on this literature, we pose the following research questions:

(RQ1) Given the online and physical security risks and the professional and geographic constraints for journalists covering northern Mexico, how are journalists on both sides of the border using social media to circumvent (scale-shift) and to overcome these constraints?

And, as a subset of this research question,

(RQ1a) How is the use of social media by US and Mexican journalists covering northern Mexico distinct or similar?

(RQ2) In an atmosphere of heightened violence, to what extent have social media influenced cross-border relations and collective action among journalists?

Our research centers on a geographical case study (Yin 2009, 8–9, 18) of the US–Mexico border, which includes California–Baja California Norte, Arizona–Sonora, Texas–Chihuahua, and the Eastern Texas–Tamaulipas sections of the border, and those

journalists in the region who cover northern Mexico. We recruited<sup>1</sup> journalists from major media markets<sup>2</sup> who were based along the almost 2000-mile-long US–Mexico border, a region that has had the most deaths of Mexican journalists in the country in the last decade (Committee to Protect Journalists 2010b). Interviews were conducted with 41 journalists and one blogger based in the four southern US border states (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) and in four of the six northern Mexican border states (Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas).

Journalists interviewed for this study worked in the following news platforms: television and radio, print publications, and online. The blogger was self-employed. Occupational titles of the study's participants were newspaper, online, television, and radio reporter; editor; anchor; photojournalist; video-journalist; and producer. Twenty-seven participants were based in Mexico (64.3 percent) and 14 journalists and one blogger were based in the United States (35.7 percent). Twenty-seven of the study participants are male (64.3 percent) and 15 are female (35.7 percent). The range in ages of the participants is 25–63 years with a mean of 40.79 years (SD = 8.03). Participants had between 4 and 35 years of journalism experience with a mean of 15.14 years (SD = 7.24).

In-depth interviews were conducted from September 17, 2011, through December 16, 2011. Interviews were semi-structured and most frequently lasted about one hour, and were conducted in newsrooms or locations secured by the researchers to ensure privacy and safety. All participants in the study agreed that interviews could be audio recorded and were offered the option of anonymity for the study; every journalist opted for their names not to be used. Questions for the study utilized the framework of scale-shifting in an environment of information scarcity (Livingston and Asmolov 2010; Siegel 2009; Tarrow 2005) to address social media use and cross-border relations in an environment of violence in northern Mexico.

Twenty-seven audio files were translated from Spanish to English and were transcribed, as were 15 English-language files. Transcripts were analyzed for categories in the following conceptual areas: social networks, information scarcity and information insecurity, propaganda, violence, and collective action. Within these broad conceptual areas, we further examined scale-shifting relationships that were guided by Tarrow's (2005, 122) conceptualization of "cross-spatial collaboration," which is strengthened by "spatial proximity, interpersonal networks, and institutional linkages within particular societies," all characteristics that we analyzed in the text of our transcripts.

## Findings

Mexican and US journalists informed us that the murders of bloggers in fall 2011 in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, had a palpable effect on how they chose to either use or, in some cases refrain from using social media. Journalists from both sides of the border noted that they were keenly aware of the dangers of reporting in Mexico and in the period of our study, which included the months after the bridge hangings in Nuevo Laredo, journalists discussed particular caution with respect to social media use.

Given the online and physical security risks and the professional and geographic constraints for journalists covering northern Mexico, and through analysis of our in-depth interviews, we found that in some cases, and most notably in the area of the East Texas–Tamaulipas section of the US–Mexico border, heightened levels of violence

are seriously affecting journalists' work by increasing their reliance on social media. For the purposes of this study, the East Texas–Tamaulipas section of the US–Mexico border begins in Laredo, Texas/Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas and ends at Brownsville, Texas/Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

In response to the increased risks to safety that online media pose, journalists are developing innovative ways to use social media. Some of these innovations suggest that journalists are circumventing (scale-shifting) various institutions, including government officials, *de facto* authorities such as criminal organizations, and at times their own news media organizations.

Journalists on both sides of the border felt that they are at greater risk than they were prior to President Felipe Calderón's decision in late 2006 to send military troops to parts of the border in an attempt to cripple the power of criminal organizations (Camp 2010). In the following section, we provide details about changes in practice, what we view as innovations created to scale-shift around threats and constraints, beginning first with findings related to Mexican journalists, and then US journalists who cover northern Mexico. We then explain findings regarding the second research question in our study, which examined how social media have influenced cross-border journalists' relations and collective action in an atmosphere of heightened violence.

### *Scale-shifting Through Innovation in an Atmosphere of Information Scarcity*

*Mexican journalists.* Mexico-based journalists concurred that a general lack of reporting on "hot topics" such as organized crime in newspapers and on television and radio has led to an increased importance and role of social media. The salience of social media for reporting appeared to be more pronounced among journalists working in Tamaulipas state. For example, a Tamaulipas journalist said:

Yes, they [social media] play a determining role. I think social networks right now have already taken work, I don't want to say it like that, but with their capacity to inform, they've already taken work from TV, from printed media, and from radio ... Here in Tamaulipas, you're not going to get anything from news organizations. Whatever you can find will be direct and personal information that's put up on social networks.

Despite the extreme level of violence in the state of Tamaulipas and the murders of journalists and bloggers using social media, reporters in this state continue to use Facebook and Twitter to inform citizens. At the same time, they have developed several innovations with respect to social media use. For example, reporters have changed the way in which they describe events, and they have altered the language and terminology to report violent acts or events. A Tamaulipas journalist gave an example of how journalists report violent acts without giving out too much information: "You don't even say 'shooting' anymore. 'Blockade in this area.' Or 'this and this is blocked.' Not 'this neighborhood is in conflict,'—no, because people already know."

Another Tamaulipas reporter described how the word "shooting" is sometimes replaced by euphemisms such as "risky situation," and that social media are used, "mostly for risky situations, to know when there are risky situations so we know where

not to go. Before it was the opposite: if there were a risky situation, we'd all go. Now if there's a risky situation, you don't get near it."

In an attempt to gather information when verifiable information is scarce, some journalists have gone so far as to create Facebook and Twitter under false identities as a reporting tool. On the other hand, there are limitations to scale-shifting and social media use in the midst of a violent environment, as a Baja California Norte investigative reporter, who said he uses made-up accounts on social media, said he cancelled these accounts after he received threats.

Undoubtedly, social media use can put individual journalists at increased risk (Sierra 2013). Keenly aware of these personal dangers, some journalists said they severely limit what they post on Facebook and Twitter, as one Sonoran radio reporter noted, "I'll upload 'such-and-such has just happened right now.' And that's it. I don't use it to debate or to talk badly about anyone or to say that this cartel does this and this cartel doesn't do this. I mean, I just share bits of news and that's it."

While some journalists said they are concerned that organized crime groups and corrupt officials might attempt to hack accounts to determine sources of tweets, a longtime Tamaulipas editor was less worried, as he commented:

I think they are trying to, but they're not going to be able to. How will they get a half a million hackers dispersed throughout Mexico? And how much will it cost them to pay off the hackers? Not anyone can be a hacker. They're not going to be able to. Of course, these situations such as that girl they killed and the couple they killed was because they were uploading information to the Internet.

While Mexican journalists reported that social media have taken on increased significance in the midst of violence, especially in the East Texas–Tamaulipas region of the border, the scarcity of verifiable information on social media sites posed challenges for newsgathering. A Tamaulipas journalist commented that she and her colleagues followed up news events from a number of tweets to investigate crime scenes that were reported on Twitter, but as they went to the cities of Ciudad Victoria, Matamoros, and Reynosa they found that statements posted on social media were incorrect. She explained:

We drive quickly to the specific area, there we go, and nothing is happening. Now here, in Matamoros, you go, and nothing is happening. I'm here in Reynosa, and nothing happening. And each time we saw that nothing was happening. So then, what's going on? And because of that, I came to think that no, I don't trust them [social media], or at least not totally. I have to verify, I have to go. If I can't go to the location, then I don't write it.

*US journalists.* US journalists and the one blogger we interviewed acknowledged that even with the proliferation of social media, there was a scarcity of information in legacy media and a general lack of reliable information on social media sites. In cases in which newspapers and television stations ignore news events, a blogger from the East Texas border noted that:

People would pick up on that or people would just discuss what's going on ... It [social media] has to be one of the most important outlets for us here, in hearing about those things, and the media has to pick up on those reports from Facebook or

Twitter and things like that because sometimes government officials might not be all that forthcoming.

US reporters acknowledged that their Mexican colleagues were in a much more dangerous position for reporting, though some admitted fear or avoidance, at times, in crossing for work assignments in Mexico, and they sometimes curtailed activity there. Despite this acknowledgement, US reporters covering the northern border are taking precautions and developing their own innovative ways of using social media. As one Arizona reporter noted: "I'm super, probably over-cautious on what I'm tweeting ... I don't exactly want people to associate me with [mentions specific assignment] with my wife and son. I don't want to be a target."

As an added safety measure, some US journalists said they refrain from using social media while they are reporting south of the border, and will use Facebook and Twitter once they are back on US soil. One Texas reporter stated:

I don't generally tweet when I am over there [in Mexico]; I usually do it after I am back ... I don't want to paint a target of where I'm at. I don't want to get kidnapped or assassinated or something.

For US journalists whose news organizations have prohibited them from crossing the border south into Mexico for reasons of liability and safety, social media have taken on increased importance because they are unable to witness or conduct interviews about events or activities occurring in northern Mexico. This situation has exacerbated the problem of information scarcity, in particular for some journalists who are based on the East Texas section of the border. As a result of information scarcity and continued responsibility of covering events in northern Mexico, these journalists also have developed innovations related to social media.

In response to geographical constraints, journalists said they use social media, including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and chats, to get news tips, as a beginning, to get breaking news. One US-based journalist who covers the entire border stated, "You use it to figure out what might be happening and then you have to verify everything. Because we know also that criminal groups use it effectively as well to send misinformation."

Some reporters responded to information scarcity by keeping their TweetDecks open all day at work; many journalists primarily follow hashtags. Journalists in the region, like elsewhere, receive Twitter, Facebook, and border blog feeds on their phones and other devices from government agencies and officials. Many said they work to verify videos, images, and tips. Some verify tweets with trusted sources.

US journalists who must rely on social media recognize that their dependency on Facebook and Twitter presents some ethical problems, in particular, the reliance on social media made it extremely challenging for them to verify information. As one East Texas journalist stated:

It's not the way I like to do journalism. And you can't do anything real extensive. You can't use any sound bites or anything, any interviews. It's basically, we're reading reports this is what we saw. This is what we heard ... So, it's more you're doing play-by-play analysis. It's like you're at a football game and you're just doing it that way. To me it's not quality journalism. It's just a notch above hearsay and rumors.

Despite these constraints and fears, some US journalists yearned to be able to cross the border south to cover Mexico. One journalist from East Texas stated, "We need to go back there."

### *Cross-border Journalists' Relations and Collective Action*

The use of social media has provided journalists with another way, and sometimes the only way, to develop or to continue cross-border relations. For example, journalists on both sides of the East Texas–Tamaulipas border said they share information via social media and texting. Journalists on both sides of the border consider these relations as a vital part of their work. Conversations among journalists that used to take place on the phone or in person now begin with social media. For example, a Brownsville journalist explained how they keep up on events south of the border in Matamoros:

We follow their tweets and once we see their tweets, then we'll try to contact them. We'll try to send an email or tweet back to them. Sometimes they don't answer. So basically we take what they put on there at face value. Then the second tier of reporting is we call people that we know and we'll ask them what's going on and they look into it and call us back and say, "This is what we found".

An Arizona-based journalist said he follows specific Sonoran journalists on social media sites such as Twitter. This journalist noted that he follows one Mexican reporter's tweets in particular:

He's completely focused on getting out what happened. Like the other day they found this house with these sorts of torture instruments in Nogales Sonora, like a cattle prod and this stick with nails coming out of it and he was the one who tweeted about it. So yeah, I follow his tweets really closely.

Mexico-based journalists seemed less dependent on social media to communicate with their counterparts north of the border. At the same time, communication and information via social media have proved to be extremely important for collaborations and support among those journalists based and living in Mexico's northern states. A Ciudad Juárez journalist commented that social media have helped strengthen solidarity among journalists:

Social media help Mexican journalists keep in touch with journalists from other regions. For example, there have been people from Veracruz who don't know what to do. When they see the reality they're in, they call you and ask you, "What did you guys do? How could you go on doing your work?" People from Tamaulipas—fortunately right now social networks [laughter] have helped us be in touch with everyone right now. And the exchange is, "What do they do? What are they doing?" So we've understood that. The situation has united us, bit by bit. It's also made us wake up and say, "I'm also an affected citizen. I'm also that living victim of the violence, as a journalist."

In addition, reporters who are members of the journalism advocacy organization in Juárez known as La Red de Periodistas de Juárez (Juárez Journalist Network) have a Facebook site that they use to admonish aggressions and threats against journalists by government officials. Founders of the Juárez group established the organization

following the model of the national journalism advocacy group, *Periodistas de a Pié* (Journalists on Foot).

In some cases, the information that US journalists post on social media sites has caused tension among Mexican journalists and their US counterparts. One Tamaulipas reporter explained that some of the terms that some US reporters have tweeted to describe violent situations in northern Mexico are offensive. According to this Tamaulipas reporter, some US journalists used the word “party” (fiesta) in reference to a dangerous or violent event. He added: “I’ve found that here in the valley when my colleagues ask me if something’s going on in Matamoros they tell me ‘Is there a party in Matamoros?’ And I feel like kicking their asses!”

Some Mexican journalists also criticized US journalists’ reliance on social media for reporting, instead of crossing the border. As one Tamaulipas reporter stated:

Everything is Twitter. Everything is Facebook. Everything is social media. It’s all through contacts. It’s rare for them to cross over and if they do cross over it’s as if they’re going to Iraq or Afghanistan. Yes, that’s how they go over. Please, someone take them down from their pedestal!

Despite existing tensions, most US and Mexican journalists expressed a desire to work together with their cross-border counterparts in an effort to inform their audiences, and to increase personal safety.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### *Information Scarcity, Scale-shifting and Collective Action*

This study examined the ways in which journalists on both sides of the US–Mexico border are using social media in a region struggling with heightened levels of violence. The authors utilized the concept of scale-shifting with a broad interpretation of collective action to investigate both how journalists might circumvent institutions, through innovations in scale-shifting, in order to inform as well as to examine the influence of social media on cross-border relations among journalists.

Similar to Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013), we found that social media have become part of news routines, yet these news routines regarding social media along the US–Mexico border were subject to change, given the volatility of this particular conflict zone. Further, our findings demonstrated that social media use became more salient for newsgathering for US and Mexican journalists along the East Texas–Tamaulipas section of the border. This is partly explained by an increase in the general level of violence in the state of Tamaulipas in 2011. While violence in the northern border states of Mexico was concentrated in the first three years of Calderon’s term (2006–2009) in Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua, by 2011, much of the violence had shifted to the eastern-most northern border state of Tamaulipas, where journalists were being “severely constrained” (Molzahn, Rodriguez, and Shirk 2013, 22–24). Thus, we conclude that heightened levels of violence in this section of the border, coupled with intense aggressions against journalists and bloggers, and a history of a less-aggressive press (Arana and Guazo 2011), created a distinct situation for journalists covering the state of Tamaulipas, in contrast to other parts of the US–Mexico border.

Findings suggest that the conceptual framework of scale-shifting (Livingston and Asmolov 2010) is valuable in helping to explain how journalists and citizens, as a collective, in an area of violent conflict, can circumvent, as an element of scale-shifting, the state as well as members of organized crime through the use of social media. The innovative ways that journalists on both sides of the border are using social media to seek information and report suggests that reporters have not been completely “silenced,” and that they are attempting to fulfill their duty, despite serious constraints.

Given the scale-shifting innovations that journalists on both sides of the border have created, the authors suggest that the “scale” is tipping away from institutions such as nation-states and traditional media, and in some cases, organized crime groups, allowing some information to be disseminated. Thus, similar to what Livingston and Asmolov (2010, 750) argue, our findings reveal the “growth and empowerment of non-state actors” in the US–Mexico border region, alongside a “seamless and simultaneous presence of local events and issues at a global scale.” One clear example of scale-shifting included the choice by bloggers, journalists, and citizens to continue to provide and seek information through Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and Facebook, despite the decision of traditional media to not cover organized crime.

The ability to verify information posted on social media emerged as a daunting challenge, most notably on the East Texas–Tamaulipas section of the US–Mexico border, which is consistent with Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) who described difficulties regarding verification of information for journalists in Iran in 2009, and for journalists covering the Arab uprisings in 2010, where the state instated blackouts. The difference along the US–Mexico border region—in some cases south of the border, was that news blackouts were created by a lack of news coverage, rather than being imposed by the state.

For East Texas-based journalists, the challenges with respect to verification were complicated by the limitations placed on physical mobility by news organizations. US journalists scale-shifted these institutional constraints by using information on social media sites and contacts in Mexico. Mexican journalists sought social media sites to obtain information not available through government or other means. We suggest then, because of the factors of limited mobility coupled with scarcity of information, that the existence of scale-shifting was more pronounced in the East Texas–Tamaulipas sector.

Our findings revealed that the potential for scale-shifting could be thwarted or complicated by the presence of online surveillance of journalists and citizens by both government officials and members of organized crime. This is consistent with Sierra’s (2013) findings about digital surveillance of members of the news media in Mexico. Thus, our findings suggest that there are limits to the phenomenon of scale-shifting, especially in areas of conflict and violence. Further, the implications of these findings point to the presence of a negative and unpredictable side of networked society, in contrast to scholarship that focuses on the positive aspects of digital technologies (Tarrow 2005).

### *Cross-border Relations and Collective Action*

The ways that social media influenced cross-border relations and the potential for collective action varied along the US–Mexico border. US journalists seemed more inclined to use social media to develop ties with their counterparts to the south. This

was especially evident among East Texas journalists who were banned from crossing the border, but Arizona journalists also relied on Facebook and Twitter as a way to keep in contact with Mexican journalists. On the other hand, Mexico-based journalists seemed less dependent on social media to communicate with their counterparts north of the border. This is not surprising, given that Mexican journalists often are asked by their news organizations to cover events north of the border, and they can freely travel north in most cases, with presumably less risk.

With respect to using social media for collaboration and collective action, Mexican journalists appeared to use social media less for developing ties north of the border, and instead used Facebook to strengthen solidarity among their national counterparts in northern Mexico. The establishment of the organization La Red de Periodistas de Juárez illustrates that these journalists are working together to advocate for increased press freedom.

The emergence of a cross-border networked society in the US–Mexico border region warrants further investigation, given that the US–Mexico border has long been a place of economic and cultural collaboration, a locus of face-to-face interaction among transnational citizens where many border landers have relatives and business on both sides of the international boundary (González de Bustamante 2013; Jones 1992). In some cases, the ease with which US reporters crossed into Mexico diminished, presenting opportunities for “virtual communities” to develop. However, the potential for cross-border interaction through social media was not uniform across the border, and, in some cases, opportunities for collective action seemed to decrease. For example, negative perceptions surfaced as a result of some US journalists’ use of offensive language, and their reliance on social media in lieu of first-hand reporting while covering northern Mexico. And, as Livingston and Asmolov (2010) noted, some communities have low network density, which presents a host of other research questions.

As one of the first studies to use a transnational approach to explore the nexus among social media and journalism practice along the US–Mexico border, the results of this investigation lay the groundwork for future research regarding social media in the region. However, given the persistence of a substantial digital divide in Mexico, we remain cautious not to overstate the significance of social media. About 42 million people, roughly 36 percent of the Mexican population, used the Internet in 2012 (Internet World Stats 2012). In contrast, in the United States, more than 245 million people, or roughly 78 percent of the population, used the Internet (Internet World Stats 2012). Despite the inequities, and given current trends, more Mexicans will likely be relying on mobile telephones and the Internet for communication. These realities necessitate additional research regarding social media, journalism, and societal conflict.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Emerging Scholars Grant; the University of Arizona Center for Latin American Studies; The UA Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute; and The Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy.

## NOTES

1. A recruitment list was developed after consulting with the following organizations: the Bi-national Association of Schools of Communication, the Inter American Press Association, Investigative Reporters and Editors, and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. The snowball approach was used for further recruitment, once we began interviewing participants.
2. The Mexican border cities and towns in which journalists and one blogger were based included Tijuana and Mexicali, Baja California Norte; Hermosillo, Nogales, and San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora; Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The US border cities were San Diego, California; Tucson and Yuma, Arizona; Las Cruces, New Mexico; El Paso, Harlingen, Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville, Texas. We did not include journalists from Monterrey, Nuevo León for safety reasons.

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