

Criminal Communication: Public Representations, Repertoires, and Regimes of Criminal Governance

Philip Luke Johnson


Criminal actors are widely assumed to maintain a low profile, exerting power through coercion and clandestine networks. Scholarship addressing public action by criminal actors focuses largely on visible violence. However, an ample empirical record demonstrates that criminal actors also communicate publicly to broad audiences. To better understand this practice, my study focuses on campaigns of narco-messaging in Mexico. I ask: how do criminal actors represent themselves when they speak publicly? How does such self-portrayal interact with other practices of criminal governance and control? I identify three patterns of self-representation: RULER of territory, SCOURGE of enemies, and GUARDIAN of people. Overall, public communication expands the repertoires of criminal actors, offering ways to modify public perceptions of better-known practices such as costly signaling through violence. Different representations are deployed strategically in the contexts of establishing regimes of governance, maintaining regimes, and fighting criminal wars.

In September 2006, masked members of a criminal organization stormed a nightclub in the Mexican state of Michoacán. They fired into the air, terrifying the patrons. Then they dumped five severed heads onto the dance floor, along with a message scrawled on a sheet of cardboard. The message read: “The family doesn’t kill for money, doesn’t kill women, doesn’t kill innocents. Only those that deserve to die will. The people must know, this is divine justice” (#0563).¹ This horrific act received extensive media coverage, and is often referenced as a precursor to the spectacular criminal violence that has gripped Mexico since 2006. A typical interpretation of the event reads: “You don’t have to speak Spanish to understand the message intended . . . Do not test us, because our violence knows no bounds” (De Leon 2015, 70). While conventional, this interpretation completely disregards the message left at the scene, which explicitly claims that the violence is bounded and justified. We might question the sincerity of the message, but doing so raises the further question of why the gunmen would bother to leave a message at all. If the message was meaningless, why did

thousands more such “narco-messages” appear in Mexico in the following years?

While it could be argued that brutal violence speaks much louder than words scribbled on cardboard, in other contexts such words are taken seriously. An expansive field of research examines the communication practices of terrorist and insurgent actors (Loyle and Bestvater 2019; Loken 2020).² Studies of the propaganda of non-state armed actors recognize that such communication is not necessarily an accurate reflection of these actors, but can nonetheless yield insight into how the actors publicly project and represent themselves (Brown 2020b; Mehran et al. 2021). Given the range and depth of research on the words of such actors—and given that some criminal actors use similar tactics to terrorist actors—we should surely take the words of criminal actors seriously rather than assuming that their violence speaks for itself (Phillips 2018).

Most scholarship on organized crime emphasizes that criminal actors maintain a low profile, wielding power through clandestine networks within localized home communities, and only infrequently resorting to public displays of violence (Gambetta 1995). Maintaining a low profile or “hiding in plain sight” allows criminal actors to cultivate discreet relationships with amenable state actors, while avoiding the type of hostile state attention that can interrupt illicit activities and eat into profits (Lessing 2020, 855). Criminal communication as understood in this research is usually coded and unintelligible, if not invisible,

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to the wider public (Gambetta 2009). This scholarship assumes that public self-disclosure is a risk not worth countenancing for criminal actors.

A growing body of scholarship examines public engagement by criminal actors, but focuses predominantly on visible violence (Duran-Martinez 2018). Violence is a “costly signal” that credibly demonstrates capabilities and thus builds the reputation of criminal actors (Gambetta 2009). Criminal actors strategically manipulate the visibility of their violence, and in doing so signal strength or resolve, putting pressure on or easing pressure off of the state (Cruz and Duran-Martinez 2016). To the extent that other actions or forms of communication accompany violence, these are treated as epiphenomenal and often coded as an expression of violence (Duran-Martinez 2018, 57). Given the costs of any kind of public display, this research assumes that if criminal actors go public, they do so through the most effective signal available. If a message needs to be sent, criminal actors are supposed to let violence do the talking. This research explains why criminal actors go public, but does not account for different modes of public criminal activity.

Despite receiving little sustained scholarly attention, criminal actors often communicate publicly (Badillo-Samiento and Mijares 2021). Brazilian gangs have used newspaper adverts, videos, and government hearings to condemn the government and explain their own actions (Penglase 2005; Holston 2007). When Guatemalan gang leaders wanted to send a message pressuring the government for policy changes, they planned to “make it a global (sic),” ensuring their violence and written communication reached broad audiences within and beyond the country (Fontes 2018, 172). These instances of communication often talk about violence, but are by no means reducible to violence. The addition of written text to acts of violence in Guatemala and Michoacán suggests that criminal actors seek to shape their public image to a greater degree than is possible through costly signaling. These cases further imply that criminal actors consider public communication to be a necessary addition or alternative to violence, and worth the risks associated with public self-disclosure.

Narco-messages in Mexico are thus part of a wider phenomenon of public (written or spoken) communication by criminal actors, and offer a useful window into this phenomenon. Between 2006 and 2012, at least 5,771 narco-messages appeared in public places in Mexico. These messages were extensively reported in the media, sometimes with full transcriptions of the texts. Drawing upon the most extensive collection of such data to date, I ask: how do criminal actors represent themselves (and others) when they speak publicly? How does such self-portrayal interact with other practices of criminal governance and control?³

I find that criminal actors represent themselves through three distinct but recurring images. First, these actors

portray themselves as RULERS of territory, emphasizing control of society, and delineating a legible social order. Second, criminal actors portray themselves as SCOURGES of their enemies, willing to use terrible violence to purge threats from society. Finally, criminal actors also portray themselves as GUARDIANS of the people, claiming a close relationship to local society and offering an extralegal version of justice preferable to that of the state. While these representations invoke concepts like justice and order, criminal actors also represent themselves as operating outside of the law and willing to deploy ruthless violence.

Taken together, these representations expand the repertoire of strategies and practices available to criminal actors (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2017). Public communication allows criminal actors to modify other strategies for generating control and governance. It does this by shaping public perception and understanding of other criminal practices, such as imposing order or using brutal violence. Different self-portrayals modify existing strategies of control in different ways, aiding criminal actors as they seek to establish regimes of governance, maintain these regimes, or prosecute war against their enemies.

This study is organized as follows. The next section reviews literature on the repertoires of criminal actors and regimes of criminal governance, arguing that public communication modifies these repertoires. The second section situates narco-messaging within larger changes in the repertoires of criminal actors in Mexico. The third details research design and data. A descriptive typology and three case studies of specific narco-messaging campaigns follow: the *Familia Michoacana* portraying themselves as Rulers of Michoacán; the *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* portraying itself as a SCOURGE of a rival faction; the *Caballeros Templarios* portraying themselves as the GUARDIAN of the *pueblo* through a series of open letters.⁴ The final sections scale up from specific cases to generalized self-images and repertoires of criminal actors, and discuss the main contributions of the study.

Communication and Repertoires of Criminal Actors

Not all criminal (or criminalized) actors aspire to govern, but this article focuses particularly on how public communication can be a strategy of criminal governance, given that governance is clearly tenable without public communication. Scholarship on regimes of criminal governance describes a diverse repertoire of strategies and practices, which generally aim to shape the behavior of local society (Lessing 2020). Unlike rebels who might engage in zero-sum contestation with the state, criminal actors often cultivate close relationships with state actors (Barnes 2017). Criminal governance regimes without at least some state protection do not last very long (Trejo and Ley 2020). While not all criminal ventures are violent, a

capacity for violence is essential to success in illicit undertakings where recourse to legal dispute resolution is not available (Duran-Martinez 2018).

Criminal actors who aspire to govern draw upon a diverse repertoire of practices, adapting this to different strategic contexts. Three broad contexts recur in the scholarship: establishing a regime of governance, maintaining a regime of governance, and criminal war. When establishing a regime, criminal actors invest in connections with local society in the expectation that over time, this embedding will yield greater profits (Blume 2021). Criminal actors may face fierce competition in establishing a regime, and so will demonstrate their capacity for irresistible violence to destroy or subordinate rivals.

When maintaining a regime of governance, criminal actors temper their violence to provide security and order. Reputation rather than actual violence may be sufficient to deter competition. Maintaining governance might include some provision of public services, like extralegal forms of justice (Alves 2016). While establishing a regime is a transitional process that criminal actors aim to move through and leave behind, maintaining a regime includes reaping the benefits of earlier investment and sacrifice, and is a strategic context that criminal actors aim to prolong indefinitely.

Criminal war occurs when criminal actors battle one another for turf and survival. When criminal actors battle the state, they do so largely to constrain and alter state behavior; zero-sum war occurs primarily between criminal actors (Lessing 2015). Civilians might become collateral damage rather than a resource to secure in this context. Criminal war can occur before regimes of governance are established or as regimes collapse—including strife between former allies within a regime (in this way, state-cartel wars of restraint can trigger zero-sum criminal wars). This type of war can also incentivize criminal groups to seek to govern (Trejo & Ley 2020).

Public communication expands the repertoire of criminal actors, not by creating new types of governance, but rather, by shaping the way existing practices are perceived and understood. Language can add contingency (whether something happens), tense (when it happens), and logic (why it happens) to other actions (Brown 2020a). It is also a fundamental way of claiming who is responsible for actions, especially violence (Kearns 2021). To return to the example at the beginning of this article, language can turn the horror of severed heads into a claim about divine justice. Such meaning does not inhere in the act or signal of violence; it needs to be explained to the public. Language combines with and complements other signals. By speaking or writing publicly—even if they do so disingenuously—criminal actors shape the meaning of their actions and relationships (Kearns, Conlon, and Young 2014). Public communication is thus used in tandem with other strategies, and changes the impact of these by

changing the way they are perceived or understood. Table 1 summarizes initial propositions about the way public communication interacts with the broader criminal repertoire in the contexts of establishing a regime, maintaining a regime, and criminal war.

Some clear strategic advantages follow from the proposition that public communication combines with better-known practices in the criminal repertoire. Establishing a regime of governance takes time and involves substantial risk, as criminal actors invest in forming local networks and developing a reputation. Public communication can help shorten this costly process, through public relations campaigns that cast a criminal actor as a trustworthy provider of security or order (Johnson and Gillooly 2023). Maintaining a regime of governance should see less risk and more returns for socially embedded criminal actors, but unexpected shocks can disrupt such regimes, putting pressure on criminal actors and straining the relationship between the governing and the governed (Weinstein 2007). Public communication can mitigate the effects of shocks or other changes, by projecting continuity and social connectedness. Conversely, the often very public violence of criminal war runs the risk of alienating people to the point of provoking resistance (Moncada 2021). Public communication can increase public tolerance for violence and buy criminal actors time to defeat their rivals, portraying brutal violence as warranted and victims as enemies to be purged.⁵ Modifying the perception of violence does not require the criminal actor to actually change their use of violence; they might attack indiscriminately while claiming to target selectively. Writing about political violence, Kalyvas calls this an “optimal strategy” but assumes that it would be difficult to implement (2006, 190).

Criminal actors take a keen interest in their public profile (or lack of profile). Reputation is an important source of power, and is jealously managed by many criminal actors (Gambetta 2009). Table 1 provides starting propositions about how criminal actors use public communication, but beyond establishing that criminal actors combine communication with other elements of their repertoires, I develop a descriptive typology of how criminal actors represent themselves to the public.

Changing Criminal Repertoires in Mexico

For most of the seven decades of continuous rule by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)—spanning from the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution to the end of the twentieth century—organized crime in Mexico was kept in check by the single-party state (Smith 2021). The state security apparatus exercised considerable control over illicit economies and organized crime, leading to relative peace among major criminal actors (Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009). During this time, criminal groups in Mexico functioned much as the literature on organized

Table 1
Repertoires of criminal actors with and without public communication

| | Establishing Governance | Maintaining Governance | Criminal War |
|---|--|---|---|
| Conventional approach to governance | Form clandestine bonds to local society and officials. | Provide limited public goods. | Signal capacity to use violence despite cost. |
| Approach to governance with public communication | Demonstrate capacity to liquidate rivals. Claim close relationship with society. Create distance between rivals and local society. | Displace other political and social authorities. Discredit other authorities. Emphasize interconnections between crime and society. | Signal impunity, lack of costs of violence. Portray violence as selective, targets as guilty. Explain violence as service to society. |
| Intended impact of communication | Persuade public to accept new regime, speeding up process of social embedding. | Persuade public to prefer this regime of criminal governance, buttressing it against destabilization. | Persuade public to tolerate or support violence, decreasing risk of delegitimizing backlash. |

crime would expect; they operated in discrete territories, embedding within communities by forging dense local networks and acting as mediators among different social actors (Mendoza Rockwell 2018).

Liberalizing reforms in the 1980s and 1990s paved the way for viable opposition parties and contested elections, but also caused unanticipated shifts in organized crime. The first state governorship was won by the opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) in 1989, and the same party won the presidency in 2000. With competitive elections and alternation of party rule, the power of the state security apparatus to control crime diminished. Without credible protection and punishment by the state, the major cartels raised private militias (Trejo and Ley 2020). The Gulf Cartel, based in northeastern Mexico, recruited elite soldiers to form the Zetas, a paramilitarized enforcer group. These recruits brought state counterinsurgency strategy to the Zetas, creating a new paradigm for criminal organizations based more on military-style training, brutal violence, and a terrifying reputation (Johnson 2019).

This new type of criminal organization changed the face of organized crime in Mexico. These emerging actors focused less on illicit drug trafficking, and more on controlling territory and taxing activity within that territory (Moncada 2021). The newer groups were also mobile; they aimed to control territory, but did not depend upon deep roots in any one territory. During the first PAN administration (2000–2006), the major criminal organizations used these paramilitarized groups to contest established territorial divisions. In the northeastern states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, this led to public confrontation between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas. Rival actors displayed public acts of violence and began to leave written messages at the scene of violent displays (Smith 2021). The Zetas, in turn, infiltrated Michoacán, a state far from the east coast preserve of the Gulf Cartel (Trejo and Ley 2020). With criminal actors adapting to conquer

and control territory, old criminal domains came under outside pressure, while entirely new turf opened up.

This qualitative shift in criminal influence and violence dramatically increased the sense of insecurity in some states—even though national violence rates were at a historic low (Ravelo 2007). Some state governors called for help from the national government, leading to military deployments in key areas (Astorga 2015). Felipe Calderón (also of PAN) won the presidency in 2006, and shortly after his inauguration, declared war on narco-trafficking. Thereafter, the level of violence in the country rose sharply, and continued to climb for most of Calderón’s presidency. Public display of narco-messages increased with levels of violence, and an increasing proportion of violent acts included a message (Atuesta 2016). While the Calderón administration initially touted its victories, the war raged on and showed little sign of coming to a decisive end. The capture or death of major criminal figures did little to undermine criminal organizations, and instead produced greater violence and opportunities for the rise of new actors (Calderon et al. 2015; Arias and Johnson 2023).

Recent scholarship provides some insight into the use of narco-messaging in Mexico. Analysis of the distribution of narco-messages finds that these appear in contexts of competition among criminal actors and state security operations (Phillips and Ríos 2020). Some descriptive work finds that the content of narco-messaging covers a wide range of apparent themes and audiences, and that messaging has a varied relationship with violence (Martin 2012; Maihold 2012; Atuesta 2016). Several studies consider the meaning and effects of these messages—particularly the way these shape political understanding—but draw on small pools of evidence (Campbell 2012; Eiss 2014; Mendoza Rockwell 2016). To date, no study combines an expansive pool of communication data—including attention to narco-messages that appear without accompanying violence—with in-depth analysis of the

content of communication. I build on earlier work by combining rich data with in-depth analysis.

Public criminal communication emerged at a time of major changes in organized crime. New strategies and practices were developing, but rather than constituting a completely new repertoire, these innovations expanded and modified the existing repertoire, adding new ways to approach governance. Critically, these practices provided a means for criminal actors—including paramilitarized groups with only weak local networks—to attempt to impose and maintain regimes of governance.

Research Design

Public criminal communication is a puzzling phenomenon, observable in a range of settings. Narco-messages are a Mexico-specific version of this broader phenomenon. Criminal communication is culturally inflected—narco-messages resemble earlier forms of public communication by organized labor in Mexico—and we should expect communication to look and sound different in different contexts (Mendoza Rockwell 2016). Narco-messaging is just one form of public communication used by organized crime in Mexico. Other forms include *narcocorridos* or ballads commissioned by criminal actors, and *narcovideos* circulated on social media (Cardona and Briggs 2022). Narco-messages take the distinctive form of portable, temporary written messages, which can be quickly displayed, and are often quickly decommissioned by rivals or authorities.⁶ This form of public criminal communication makes a good focus for typology building, because media and government sources provide a detailed empirical record of the phenomenon during Calderón's government.

This study is based on an original collection of narco-message data (Johnson 2024). The collection includes data on 5,771 messages and transcriptions for 2,724 (47%) of these. The data spans 2006 to 2012—roughly the timeframe of the campaign, election, and presidency of Calderón. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of narco-messages by state and year during this time period; 3,653 (63%) of these messages appeared with an accompanying act of violence, coded as the display of one or more murdered bodies. The online appendix describes the data in greater detail.

Although expansive, this collection is not comprehensive, nor is it representative of the universe of cases of narco-messages. The message transcription data comes from media reporting and contains some biases (Parkinson 2023). Journalists are frequent targets of threats and violence by criminal and state actors, and thus moderate what they report (Dorff, Henry, and Ley 2023). In some cases, this leads to “zones of silence,” where the media self-censors heavily (González de Bustamante and Relly 2021, 83). The data almost certainly undercount messages from 2012, when norms around reporting on messaging changed (partly in response to government requests, and partly

because of conversations within the industry about how to responsibly report on crime). The number of messages in large, simultaneous displays are counted by the most conservative estimates, with the actual number in some of these displays likely to be much higher. This is a primarily descriptive study, and so depends upon rich data, but does not depend upon a representative sample or universe of cases. Nonetheless, it is possible that other messages exist, which do not conform to the observations described here.

Within this data, I focus on campaigns of narco-messaging. This departs from previous research that examines the distribution of individual messages (Phillips and Ríos 2020) or treats cumulative message content as a bag of words to be coded (Martin 2012). I define campaigns as sequences of messages with the same author, a consistent theme, and a delimited timeframe. Focusing on campaigns allows me to trace the way meaning emerges across messages, rather than treating messages as discrete, decontextualized units. At least 47 campaigns of narco-messages appeared in Mexico between 2006 and 2012. With more message transcription data or more in-depth investigation of different states and localities, it would almost certainly be possible to identify more campaigns. The online appendix includes a brief overview of the 47 campaigns as well as the method of identifying them.

Analyzing campaigns rather than individual messages is also vital for dealing with hoax or false flag messages. These certainly exist: criminal actors have tried to paint their rivals as unhinged predators with false flag messages; political groups have used hoax narco-messages to link their rivals to organized crime; domestic violence has been blamed on cartels through the use of fake narco-messages. These are rare occurrences, but nonetheless make it difficult to verify the authenticity of isolated messages. Campaigns of more than a few messages, however, require considerable logistical capacity. Most campaigns involve either multiple displays of violence, or a large number of simultaneously displayed texts. These can only be successfully enacted by an organized crime outfit, and (extremely rare) false flag campaigns have been met with very public reprisals—either violence or counter-messaging.⁷ Limiting the analysis to campaigns keeps the focus on organized crime and (possible) regimes of governance.

This study examines three specific campaigns of narco-messaging in Mexico, with each campaign corresponding to a different image of organized crime. The cases were selected to illustrate variation in how criminal actors represent themselves. The year and state in which each campaign occurred is marked in table 2 (note that the campaign for the third case spanned across four states).

The analysis of these campaigns is guided by a rubric or “grammar” of public criminal communication (Mohr et al. 2013). Similar to other interpretive work on communication, this grammar breaks down the content of communication into several focal areas (Johnson and

Table 2
Summary of narco-messages by state, 2006–2012

| State | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | Total |
|------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Aguascalientes | – | 3 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 11 | – | 41 |
| Baja California | – | 8 | 38 | 29 | 20 | 13 | 4 | 112 |
| Baja Calif. Sur | – | – | – | – | – | 1 | – | 1 |
| Campeche | – | – | 4 | – | 1 | 3 | – | 8 |
| Chiapas | – | – | 9 | 13 | 1 | 4 | – | 27 |
| Chihuahua | – | 4 | 94 | 75 | 128 | 137 | 9 | 447 |
| Coahuila | – | – | 25 | 12 | 34 | 82 | 52 | 205 |
| Colima | – | – | – | 9 | 12 | 6 | 5 | 32 |
| Distrito Federal | 1 | 8 | 6 | 10 | 26 | 12 | 4 | 67 |
| Durango | – | 4 | 50 | 20 | 58 | 48 | 7 | 187 |
| Guanajuato | – | – | 22 | 57 | 60 | 43 | 95 ^c | 277 |
| Guerrero | 14 | 22 | 58 | 131 | 151 | 368 | 209 | 953 |
| Hidalgo | – | 1 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 13 | 8 | 35 |
| Jalisco | 2 | 4 | 8 | 23 | 129 | 102 | 75 | 343 |
| México | 1 | 1 | 36 | 53 | 100 | 84 | 34 ^c | 309 |
| Michoacán | 37 ^a | 11 | 31 | 89 | 89 | 159 | 57 | 473 |
| Morelos | – | 1 | 5 | 50 | 174 ^b | 54 | 34 | 318 |
| Nayarit | – | – | 1 | – | 17 | 25 | – | 43 |
| Nuevo León | 6 | 9 | 37 | 11 | 51 | 168 | 145 | 427 |
| Oaxaca | – | 1 | 12 | 6 | 9 | 13 | 4 | 45 |
| Puebla | – | – | 5 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 16 |
| Querétaro | – | – | – | – | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Quintana Roo | – | 4 | 8 | 2 | 22 | 10 | 4 | 50 |
| San Luis Potosí | – | – | 12 | – | 9 | 15 | 21 | 57 |
| Sinaloa | 2 | 12 | 90 | 98 | 211 | 61 | 16 | 490 |
| Sonora | – | 2 | 19 | 51 | 20 | 11 | 10 | 113 |
| Tabasco | 1 | 6 | 37 | 28 | 34 | 24 | 5 | 135 |
| Tamaulipas | 1 | 6 | 65 | 16 | 82 | 53 | 21 | 244 |
| Tlaxcala | – | – | – | – | – | – | – | 0 |
| Veracruz | – | 11 | 49 | 55 | 47 | 19 | 20 | 201 |
| Yucatán | – | – | 10 | – | – | – | – | 10 |
| Zacatecas | – | – | 27 | 2 | 3 | 15 | 47 | 94 |
| Unknown | – | – | – | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 7 |
| Total | 65 | 118 | 773 | 857 | 1506 | 1561 | 891 | 5771 |

Notes:

^a Case 1. Michoacán 2006

^b Case 2. Morelos 2010

^c Case 3. Guanajuato, Guerrero, México, Michoacán 2012

Gillooly 2023). These areas are drawn from fundamental aspects of criminal governance. In particular, the analysis considers 1) who is cast as an enemy of the message authors, 2) how the authors characterize their relationship to society and the state, and 3) what meaning the authors ascribe to their own use of violence. These three considerations combine to provide an overall self-image, which authors project when they publicize their messages. These self-images are a projection of how criminal actors want to be seen, rather than an accurate reflection of who the actors really are.

In analyzing public communication, it is important to distinguish audience from addressee. The authors of narco-messages aim to achieve a broad public audience for their communication. This is an audience of ordinary people who intentionally or inadvertently encounter messages in public space, newspapers, or on social media. As

one journalist told me, it is often hard to avoid news about narco-messages, as these are splashed across the front pages of newspapers prominently advertised at newsstands and by vendors every morning (Interview, journalist #46).⁸ By contrast, some messages have a specific *addressee*, which could be a rival criminal actor, government officials, or sometimes civilians or neighborhoods. Not all messages have an addressee, but they always have a broad audience in mind. Public communication aims to influence the perceptions and thus actions of its audience. Where it stipulates an addressee, it aims to influence the audience’s perception of that addressee. For example, in the third case study, when narco-messages address the president, they are aiming to shape public views about the federal government. While this might result in some response from the addressee, the primary target of the communication is the public audience.

Case Studies: RULERS, SCOURGES, GUARDIANS

Each of the three cases laid out in this section presents a different public self-representation, a different image of a criminal actor: RULER of territory, SCOURGE of enemies, or GUARDIAN of people. Table 3 summarizes the key elements of each of the projected self-images. These different portrayals do not reflect fundamental differences between the three criminal authors at the center of the case studies; they are projections of how the criminal actors want to be publicly understood. These projections are deployed strategically, in response to specific contexts. The projection of a specific image ends when the situation changes. Indeed, each of these three criminal groups portrayed themselves using different images in other contexts and campaigns.

In the campaign that established *La Familia Michoacana's* reputation as a powerful criminal actor (case 1), the group portrayed itself as the RULERS of Michoacán. This image represents the author as mandated to impose a clear order, protecting innocents and punishing anyone who disrupts this order or challenges the RULER's regime. Violence and messaging combine to assert an order applicable throughout the territory. The RULER image is likely to be deployed in the process of establishing a regime of criminal governance, to convince and coerce people into viewing the authors as a credible source of violent but stable order.

As the Beltrán Leyva Organization splintered into competing factions, the emergent *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* portrayed itself as the SCOURGE of its enemies (case 2). Projecting this self-image involves an unrelenting focus on demonizing specific rivals, and on advertising the capacity of the author to violently cleanse these rivals from society. SCOURGES represent themselves as furiously violent, but only against deserving targets. This self-portrayal involves

little attention to a wider program of governance. The SCOURGE image is used to justify all-out war against rivals, altering perceptions of otherwise delegitimizing violence, while offering little benefit to local people.

As President Calderón left office, the *Caballeros Templarios* portrayed themselves as GUARDIANS of the *pueblo* (case 3). This depicts the author as embedded within society, and as an intermediary between local society and distant government. The image emphasizes justice and protecting local society. It also constrains the credibility of the government, claiming that extralegal governance by the criminal author is more effective. Violence is de-emphasized in this self-portrayal, with the criminal actor taking up arms only if the state violates its duties. The GUARDIAN is an image adopted by those aiming to maintain their regimes, and to buttress their rule in periods of uncertainty, where the usual social ties might be disrupted by outside shocks.

This last self-portrayal is surprising, given dominant criminal actors seemingly have less to gain from public activity. If dominant actors reduce their use of (visible) violence, we might expect that they would also minimize public communication (Duran-Martinez 2018).⁹ Whereas the campaigns of the *Familia* and the *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* accord with research that finds a connection between narco-messaging and competition among rival criminal actors, the *Templarios* communicated publicly in a context of relative local calm, absent any direct competition or rising homicide rates (Phillips and Ríos 2020). Speaking of political rebellion, Weinstein argues that an “activist strategy” of social integration is vulnerable to external shocks (2007, 12). The use of the GUARDIAN image suggests that some criminal actors take strategic measures to counter any such possible vulnerability.

For each of the following case studies, I provide background, then a narrative overview of the campaign, and

Table 3
Self-images of criminal actors in public communication

| | Case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| | Familia Michoacana | Cártel del Pacífico Sur | Caballero Templarios |
| Author self-image | RULER of territory | SCOURGE of enemies | GUARDIAN of people |
| Primary antagonist | Challenges to order: any rival criminal actor, petty criminals | Specific rival criminal actors and their allies | Corrupt or unjust government |
| Relationship to state/society | Imposes order upon local state and society | Purges enemy from society. Warns state to step aside and society to inform | Mediates between local society and distant state. Calls for justice |
| Meaning of violence | Exemplary: enforces order, demonstrates impunity | Punitive: purges enemy, exacts revenge | A negotiation tool, used with restraint |
| Purpose of projected image | Makes order legible, facilitates establishment of regime | Justifies violence, allows continued prosecution of war on enemies | Responds to shocks/uncertainty, buttresses existing regime |

finally a discussion of patterns in the content of messages in the campaign.

Case 1: *The Familia Michoacana, 2006*

The Milenio Cartel was the main criminal organization in the state of Michoacán at the start of the 2000s. Michoacán was an early battleground of paramilitarized criminal outfits, as the Zetas infiltrated the state with the help of local criminal actors, disrupting Milenio Cartel operations (Ernst 2015). The *Familia Michoacana* was unknown before 2006, but shot to prominence in the second half of the year, thanks to a campaign of messaging and violence that staked a claim to the entire state of Michoacán (Ravelo 2007). The campaign occurred between the election (July 2) and inauguration (December 1) of Calderón. Ten days after his inauguration, Calderón declared war on narco-trafficking from a military installation in Michoacán (Astorga 2015).

The identity or brand of the *Familia* emerged slowly. The first narco-message to allude to the *Familia* appeared on July 27 in Morelia, the state capital. Displayed alongside two corpses, the message simply stated, “So that you learn to respect the family. The family is sacred” (#6223). The content of the message was ambiguous; the text seemed to refer to the family as a social unit, rather than as the name of a criminal group. This pattern of messaging, with ambiguous reference to the family, continued with two similar messages in early August. Six more messages appeared in late August, and in these “the family” clearly refers to an actor claiming a presence across Michoacán. The first message to use the name “*Familia Michoacana*” appeared on August 14 in the eastern municipality of Tuzantla (#6088), while several messages in western Michoacán stated, “The *Familia* salutes you” (#6121). Rather than speaking about the family, in these messages, the *Familia* speaks.

The campaign of messages reached a climax in early September. Three separate messages appeared with bodies on September 4, all warning against “messing with the *Familia*” (#6095). Then, on September 5, gunmen stormed the nightclub in Uruapán, leaving severed heads and the written message invoking divine justice. Fewer messages appeared in later months: three in October, two in November, and two in December. Several messages were formally signed, “Sincerely, the *Familia*” (#6123, #6419). Most messages reiterated elements of the nightclub message, including references to divine justice and proscribed actions. After Calderón declared war on narco-trafficking in December, the *Familia* largely returned to silence. In 2007, only one message attributable to the *Familia* appeared in Michoacán (#6103).

This campaign represented the *Familia* as the RULERS of Michoacán. Beyond introducing the group, the messages portrayed the *Familia* as enforcers of a strict order—both

within their ranks (#0563, #6088) and in wider society. Messages never referred to state officials, but the display of some messages at police installations signaled that the *Familia* was the real authority. The claim of “divine justice” (#6419, #6101)—unusual for a criminal actor—evoked irresistible rule, but also a mandate that comes from outside the community. The *Familia* thus portrayed themselves as new but undisputed RULERS of Michoacán. Within this turf, they decided the rules and dispensed punishment. The *Familia*’s relationship with local society was thus represented as one of strict, coercive control, in return for a measure of stability and order.

The group’s primary antagonists were anyone who violated the order or undermined the *Familia*’s rule. Prohibited activities included theft (#6088), extortion (#2486), dealing methamphetamine (#6124, #6101), and snitching or informing (#6419). Some messages threatened members of the Valencia family, who ran the Milenio Cartel (#6123, #6420), but the overall focus remained on proscribing crimes and those accused of these crimes. Other messages declared that punishment would follow for anyone “messing with the *Familia*” (#6081, #6095, #6096). While there was a legible order under these RULERS, it was also a capital offense simply to interfere with their control and command.

Every message in this campaign appeared at the scene of a murder, with the texts consistently explaining violence in terms of the order imposed by the *Familia*. The murders were thus justified as exemplary, a predictable punishment for certain violations. A message proscribing meth dealing stated, “The orders given by the *Familia* are clear and should be followed to the letter” (#6124). Another message left with a body warned, “learn from this experience” (#6081). This emphasized the imposition of a new order, similar to “the people must know” from the nightclub message (#0563). Such messages implied that violence would end when violation of the RULERS’ order ended. Through the display of violence itself, the *Familia* also signaled their ability to move freely, kill brutally, and act with impunity throughout Michoacán.

At the beginning of July 2006, the *Familia* was unknown as a criminal actor. By December, the group had displayed at least 21 messages across 15 municipalities in Michoacán, claiming control of the entire state. The *Familia* did not characterize themselves as the existing RULER of Michoacán—in one message they state, “remember that we are growing” (#6123)—but rather as a new entity teaching the public about a new order. The messages in the campaign modified the meaning of the brutal violence deployed by the *Familia*, recasting what could have been terrorizing, destabilizing violence as the foundation of a stable, legible order. The campaign highlighted that the *Familia* intended to govern, asserting the sort of social relations and compact that usually only develop slowly in the process of establishing a regime of governance.

Case 2: *The Cártel del Pacífico Sur, 2010*

The state of Morelos remained relatively peaceful during the early years of the war on narcotrafficking. The state saw only one narco-message in 2007 and five in 2008. This changed with the arrival of the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO). Led by Arturo Beltrán Leyva and his brothers, this group carved out a territory based in the state capital, Cuernavaca, monopolizing regional drug trafficking and using forced disappearance to maintain control (Interview, journalist #38).

In late 2009, the navy targeted Arturo Beltrán Leyva in a series of operations. One of the factional leaders within the BLO, Édgar “Barbie” Valdez, was passing intelligence about Beltrán to U.S. agencies (Slater 2015). Marines killed Beltrán during a raid on the outskirts of Cuernavaca in December. For three months after Beltrán’s death, Morelos was quiet but tense. The homicide rate did not rise, but a number of narco-messages pledged loyalty to different factional leaders of the BLO and warned of impending war (#1199). Valdez featured prominently in this messaging, with his supporters moving quickly to declare him the new leader of the organization, while a few messages accused him of betraying Beltrán (#1213).

War broke out in March 2010, as a rival faction of the BLO initiated a campaign of messaging and violence against Valdez and his supporters. This faction was led by Héctor Beltrán Leyva, the younger brother of Arturo. This faction claimed to continue the legacy of the BLO, but also launched a new name, the *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* (CPS). From March to August, most of the narco-messaging in Morelos could be attributed to this faction, with a relentless focus on threatening and delegitimizing Valdez. A number of these messages appeared at businesses purportedly owned by Valdez and his supporters. One of the earliest messages appeared at a mechanic’s workshop, which has been set on fire the day before, and warned, “We won’t rest until we find you and all the traitors” (#1253). Four days later, a longer message spoke of “cleansing” Morelos and “eliminating the traitor” Valdez (#1256). Similar messages appeared throughout the state (#1254, #1258, #1259, #1260).

April saw rates of both violence and narco-messaging double in Morelos; the vast majority of messages involved CPS prosecuting their war against Valdez. Several messages suggested that CPS was closing in on Valdez, such as one at a bus terminal declaring “we know you are in Xochitepec” (#2416, #2417). Only two messages signed by Valdez appeared in Morelos in April, contributing to the sense that CPS had Valdez on the run and was winning the war for Morelos (#1263, #2269).

The campaign continued from May to August, with message frequency decreasing but content remaining consistent. At least four messages displayed in Cuernavaca and Jiutepec in May denounced Valdez and a list of officials

working with him (#2709). On July 13, three messages were left with bodies at different bridges in Cuernavaca. These messages emphasized that “if the authorities cannot do it, [CPS] can,” and reaffirmed that CPS would target any of Valdez’s associates (#1325, #1326, #2471).

Valdez was arrested in Mexico City at the end of August (Tuckman 2011). While CPS did not succeed in avenging Arturo Beltrán Leyva by killing Valdez, the group did make good on driving Valdez from Morelos and securing control of the state. With Valdez behind bars, narco-messaging in Morelos decreased. CPS messaging shifted emphasis; instead of portraying itself as a SCOURGE, CPS focused on establishing a legible order as RULER of Morelos (#1361, #1368).

This campaign represented the *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* as the SCOURGE of Valdez and his allies. Messages focused narrowly on demonizing Valdez and his associates, and on portraying CPS as an implacable but necessary force for expunging Valdez from Morelos. A message left with four bodies on the side of a highway read “This is going to happen to all the traitors” (#1260). Another message from March stated, “Morelos will be cleansed of all you degenerates” (#1254). These messages focused less on elaborating a predictable order, and more on punishing specific enemies. Rather than proscribing a fixed set of crimes wherever they occurred, the campaign proscribed Valdez and his allies for a litany of reasons, accusing Valdez of treachery, madness, addiction, and homosexuality (#1253, #1259, #1260). Several messages characterized Valdez as an animal (#2417), with one stating “a dog that bites the hand does not deserve compassion” (#1256).

Some messages appeared at the scene of an act of violence, but others only threatened violence or appeared at the scene of property damage. CPS emphasized the brutality of their violence, but justified this as the lesser evil; violence for the sake of defeating a worse violence. One message concluded by stating that CPS had orders to “execute and dismember” Valdez’s associates (#2442). This is a punitive, vengeful violence, which would end only with the elimination of the Valdez—not with general compliance to CPS rule.

These messages offered little in the way of a legible order for the people in Morelos, and only minimal suggestion that CPS would provide stability or security. The campaign briefly explained what CPS offered, but even this was partly phrased in the negative; “The *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* is an organization dedicated exclusively to the business of drugs. We never do anything to harm the families of Morelos” (#1276). CPS dedicated little time or language to elaborating a relationship with the people of Morelos, besides calling on people to share information about Valdez’s whereabouts, and advising that “the people keep out of this” (#1256).

The *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* did little in this campaign to establish an embedded regime of governance, instead attempting to purge any rival claimants to the BLO legacy and regime. The messaging aimed to modify public perceptions of the violence deployed by CPS against Valdez, emphasizing implacable brutality, but justifying this as cleansing, a necessary evil. CPS characterized itself as a criminal enterprise and offered little to the people of Morelos, instead positioning itself as a presence to be tolerated, buying itself the time to prosecute its war on Valdez and thus reassert control of Morelos.

Case 3: The Caballeros Templarios, 2012

The *Familia Michoacana* remained the dominant criminal actor in Michoacán until a dramatic change in 2011. In January of that year, a campaign of narco-messages announced that the *Familia* had disbanded (Pachico 2011). After weeks of uneasy calm, a new organization, the *Caballeros Templarios*, emerged and claimed control of the state. The core leadership of the *Templarios* came from the *Familia* (Ernst 2015). Rather than a new entity, the *Templarios* constituted a rebranding and reorganization of an existing group, concentrating power in Michoacán within a smaller circle of allies.

The *Templarios* remained the dominant criminal actor in Michoacán throughout 2011 and 2012. The group also expanded into neighboring states. During this time, the *Templarios* embedded in their territory by offering some social provisions and maintaining strict order (Herrera 2023). In addition, they fostered close (coercive) connections with the state government, municipal police, and civil society groups (Moncada 2021). Calderón's presidential term also ended in 2012; in July elections, Calderón's party, PAN, was beaten by the resurgent PRI and their candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto.

During the presidential transition, the *Templarios* published three "open letters" to the outgoing and incoming presidents. The content of each letter was repeated across many narco-messages simultaneously displayed in areas under *Templario* control. None of the messages were accompanied by acts of violence, and homicide rates remained steady in most of these areas. The first letter to Calderón involved the coordinated display of over 40 messages—along with smaller posters and flyers—on November 13 and 14. The messages appeared across Michoacán, Guanajuato, Guerrero, and México state. The second letter to Calderón, closely echoing the first, appeared on November 27, with a coordinated display of messages in Michoacán and Guanajuato.¹⁰ Calderón left office three days after the display of this second letter, with his successor inaugurated on December 1. The first weeks of Peña Nieto's presidency saw little criminal communication in the areas contested or controlled by the *Templarios*. On December 19, the *Templarios* displayed the final letter of the campaign in Michoacán and Guerrero.

This campaign represented the *Templarios* as the GUARDIANS of the *pueblo*. This *pueblo* centers on Michoacán but extends to adjacent areas. In the first message, the *Templarios* call themselves the "Michoacán Guard" (#2611). The second letter expands the *pueblo*, with the *Templarios* calling themselves the "Mexican Guard" (#3515). The *Templarios* cast themselves as standing between the honest, oppressed people and the distant federal government. They also speak on behalf of the people, stating "it would have been better for Michoacán if you ... had treated your *pueblo* with love and justice" (#2611).

In these messages, the *Templarios*' primary antagonists are corrupt elements of the state and their criminal allies. These messages do not, however, portray the entire government as corrupt; the *Templarios* state "we are with you" to the incoming president (#2390). The letters explain that the primary role of the GUARDIAN is to shield ordinary people from corruption, and to intercede on behalf of the *pueblo* with the ineffective (but not corrupt) elements of the state. Justice also features prominently in these letters: the first letter accuses Calderón of failing to show "love and justice" and of causing "wounds that are still fresh" (#2611). Although Calderón is a Michoacán native, these claims portray him as an out-of-touch outsider, while aligning the *Templarios* with ignored, neglected people. The third letter states that the group is "tired of so much injustice," and petitions the new president to "fairly and correctly" apply the law (#2390).

This campaign did not involve messages displayed with violence, but there is a latent threat behind these messages. The *Templarios* deliver a kind of ultimatum to Peña Nieto, stating that if the incoming government is just, they will "hand over our weapons and leave our security in your hands," but if the government does not fulfill its duties, the *Templarios* will "defend our home and our people" (#2390). The *Templarios* describe their activities as illegal but state that this is justifiable when it protects the *pueblo*. They claim that they will gladly "face the law" to account for their illegal acts (#2390). The *Templarios* also tout their record of taking up arms to combat "the terrible [Zetas] and the other cartels that want to turn our state into their den" (#2390).

The *Templarios* were already a well-known and powerful group, and these letters advertised this power in a specific light. The campaign positioned the *Templarios* as an enduring presence in the midst of political change, and as locally connected and responsive in comparison to distant politicians. The letters thus sought to deepen the *Templarios*' control of territory and connection to the people. The image of the GUARDIAN was projected to maintain and buttress an existing regime of governance. The image was deployed at a time when outside shocks might have risked the stability of the *Templarios*' regime. Indeed, despite efforts to project their power, the

Templarios' control began to falter the following year. The broad mobilization of self-defense groups in Michoacán undermined the *Templarios* (Herrera 2023). The criminal organization remained powerful, but control of Michoacán was more hotly contested by criminal, social, and state actors.

Projecting Images, Expanding Repertoires

Beyond these specific cases, each image has been projected by various criminal actors in Mexico. Of the 47 campaigns identified, seven (15%) could be coded as projecting the RULER self-image.¹¹ For example, in March 2011, the newly-formed *Templarios* displayed over 30 messages across Michoacán, in which they laid claim to the state and set out a clear order of proscribed behaviors. The self-image of the SCOURGE appears to be the most frequently used, with roughly 18 campaigns (38%) coded into this category. For example, in 2008 a group called *La Línea* displayed messages in Chihuahua state in which they threatened and denigrated anyone associated with the Sinaloa Cartel. The image of the GUARDIAN is also widely used, projected in about 14 campaigns (30%). While the focus on alternative forms of justice and government inadequacy appears across these cases, who exactly counts as the people to be protected varies. The Gulf Cartel launched a massive campaign across 14 states in 2008. These messages claimed to inform the Mexican citizenry in general about collusion between Calderón's government—particularly the Secretary for Public Security, Genaro García Luna—and the Sinaloa Cartel. It should be noted that even though these images recur in other campaigns, many narco-messages do not fit within clear campaigns and may not project these images. Nevertheless, the recurrence of these images in different campaigns by different criminal actors shows that these are readily available and deployable, a set of stock images, rather than the unique brands of specific criminal actors.

While these images recur, other possible self-portrayals do not appear in narco-messaging. Although criminal leaders will sometimes claim to be mere patrons, employers, or businesspeople, this type of language rarely appears in narco-messages. Nor do criminal actors advertise their more cruel or coercive business practices, such as extortion or kidnapping. Narco-messages are not used to demand ransoms. Italian and U.S. mafia outfits propagated images of themselves as men of honor and protectors of local tradition, and while some echo of this can be seen in the GUARDIAN's invocation of the *pueblo*, the language of honor or tradition remains rare (Lupo 2015). The patterned recurrence of certain images and absence of others enforces the idea that public criminal communication provides a set of familiar images, which are readily deployable to address specific strategic contexts.

These self-images tell us something about how criminal actors want to be understood, but audience reception does not necessarily align with authorial intent.¹² There are, however, clear indications that these images generate positive effects for criminal actors, even if the public audience does not fully subscribe to the projected images. First, these images circulate widely and are read by the public. A journalist explained a common attitude in this way: many people do not take narco-messages at face value, but they also consider it risky to ignore the messages (Interview, journalist #35). Criminal communication shapes people's behavior and discourse, even without being fully believable.¹³

Second, while local and federal government publicly dismiss narco-messages, they both suppress and study messages. A security official explained to me that local authorities quickly obscure and remove narco-messages, while federal security agencies keep detailed information on messages (Interview, official #11). The Calderón government also criminalized the display of narco-messages, as these increasingly voiced criticism of the government (Contreras O 2017). This strongly suggests that governments see messages both as containing meaningful information, and as capable of impacting public discourse.

Public communication has real effects even when the public does not fully subscribe to the message communicated. Wedeen documents the way propaganda generates compliance, even when the messaging is palpably false (1999). Fujii shows that public performances of violence create broad circles of complicity, drawing spectators into displays of power (2021). Similarly, criminal communication captures attention and produces quiescence, even if public audiences never fully subscribe to depictions of criminal actors as RULERS, SCOURGES, or GUARDIANS. Calls for mobilization or action are conspicuously absent from these case studies. Across these cases, the people (and government) are supposed to leave the work of violence, establishing order, and pursuing justice to criminal actors. This is particularly pronounced for the SCOURGE and GUARDIAN images, which aim to influence public perceptions in order to buy more time for criminal actors—either to wage war on enemies or to govern people.

The image of the RULER is used to project control of territory, and so to convince the public that criminal actors are, in fact, in charge of a regime of governance. Even here, quiescence remains the eventual goal, but creating rather than continuing a regime likely requires greater local assent and thus investment in public engagement. This may explain why campaigns projecting the self-image of the RULER occur less frequently than campaigns projecting the other images. We see some indication of the greater investment in the *Familia*'s 2006 campaign. In addition to displaying narco-messages, the *Familia* had a public relations representative who courted members of the press in Michoacán (Ravelo 2007). This was also a campaign in

which every single message was accompanied by acts of violence, with further acts of brutal public violence also attributed to the *Familia* (Contreras O 2017). Although this suggests greater investment required to make effective use of this image, the costs were not prohibitive.

These case studies also show that novelty can play an important role in self-representation. Leaders of the *Cártel del Pacífico Sur* elected to launch a new cartel brand in the midst of strife, while the *Caballeros Templarios* were a rebranding of a faction of the *Familia Michoacana*. The *Templarios*, in particular, sought continuity of governance not by maintaining a static identity, but instead by strategically rebranding themselves. This highlights the way public communication expands the repertoire of criminal actors, adding unexpected range. Even the dominant criminal actors in Michoacán saw value in disbanding and rebranding to change their public image—a move largely unaccounted for by criminal governance literature. The ability to dramatically change the way they are publicly represented is a compelling tool for criminal actors seeking to govern.

Conclusion

Public communication by criminal actors is puzzling because of the widespread expectation that these actors maintain a low profile, and let violence do the talking when they need to act publicly. In Mexico, however, criminal actors do communicate publicly, using narco-messages both with and without accompanying violence, and in different strategic contexts ranging from intense competition to dominance. I argue that within these messages, criminal actors represent themselves using three recurring images: RULER of territory, SCOURGE of enemies, and GUARDIAN of people. Each image encompasses a different profile of claims about who is an enemy, how violence is justified, and relations with local society and the state. Together, the three self-portrayals expand the repertoire of actions and strategies available to criminal actors. Rather than actually calibrating and changing how they deploy violence or integrate into society, criminal actors use public communication to modify how they are understood by the public.

The generalizability of this typology of criminal communication should be tested at two levels. At a more specific level, this entails investigating the deployment of the same three images by criminal actors in other settings. Examples from Latin America suggest the propagation of similar images. Neo-paramilitary criminal bands in Colombia variously depict themselves as RULERS or SCOURGES (Badillo-Sarmiento and Trejos-Rosero 2023). In some contexts, these self-representations reappear in different styles or scales. In Haiti, gang federations have adopted more overtly revolutionary public messaging—such as “with our guns and with the Haitian people, we will free the country”—which nonetheless can be seen as

projecting a GUARDIAN image on a national scale (Sanon and Coto 2024). The recurrence of these images suggests that they articulate readily with general strategies of criminal governance. If entirely different self-images can be identified in criminal communication in other settings, then this would invite a fascinating investigation into why certain images recur in Mexico but not in other contexts (and vice versa).

Zooming out to a broader level, further research should examine if and how public communication interacts with the repertoires of criminal actors in different settings. Criminal communication is culturally inflected, and could look quite different in different settings. We should expect that modes of communication adapt to suit the specific needs, repertoires, and cultures of different criminal groups. Regardless of the medium, further work can explore if and how public communication interacts with repertoires of various criminal actors. Further work can also consider whether public communication is deployed in the same three contexts of establishing regimes of governance, maintaining regimes, and criminal war.

This research contributes to several scholarly conversations on the strategies and power of criminal actors. First, the study reshapes our understanding of the repertoires of organized crime. Criminal actors make extensive use of public communication, which is distinct from costly signaling or patterns of violence (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2017). This builds on the work of Durán-Martínez examining variation in visibility of violence, by extending the repertoires of visible action to forms of written and spoken communication (2018). Further, this study demonstrates that we should look beyond whether or not criminal actors communicate, to examine what they say. Different images, claims, and justifications are deployed in distinct contexts. Each image plays a different role in modifying public perception, and thus shaping relations between criminal actors and the public.

Second, this study rethinks assumptions about the dynamics of regimes of criminal governance. Scholarship on criminal governance tends to focus on the existence and quality of fully formed regimes. I emphasize that the practices deployed to establish a regime of governance are not necessarily the same practices needed to maintain that regime, and thus, that we need to attend to what García Pinzón calls “trajectories of governance” (2024). Beyond this distinction, studying the way public communication interacts with other tactics in the criminal repertoire demonstrates the agency and adaptability exercised by criminal actors to preserve their power. While the common expectation is that violence—especially brutal, visible violence—is costly and thus reduced (or concealed) by criminal actors as quickly as possible, I demonstrate that in some cases, criminal actors try to buy themselves more time to use such violence against their enemies. Even dominant criminal actors take proactive steps to maintain

power, such as anticipating and mitigating shocks (like elections). In addition to highlighting criminal agency, my argument centers the importance of persuasion for criminal governance. Public communication modifies understanding of violence and governance without necessarily changing underlying conditions. This strategy opens a breach between information and reality, increasing the pathways for criminal actors to convince people to submit to their rule. The importance of persuasion is well established in scholarship on state and rebel governance, but has received far less attention in work on criminal governance.

Third, the study identifies an interesting point of distinction between criminal and extralegal “political” governance. Across the three self-images described here, criminal actors rarely project themselves as leading a mobilized constituency. Instead, criminal actors portray themselves as replacing other social and political actors, sometimes telling the authorities to step aside. This emphasis on de-mobilizing society suggests an important divergence from Fujii’s theory of public display (2021). Whereas violent political actors generally aim to expand the circle of participation in their project, criminal actors look to supplant and pacify the people. Even when claiming to represent the people, criminal actors do not project themselves as empowering the people. Instead, they portray themselves as the singular source of local authority, backed by violence. Criminal communication appears more geared towards producing passive consumers, rather than mobilized supporters. The difference between criminal and insurgent or terrorist groups, then, is not about whether a group speaks or engages in political discourse, but rather about the purpose of that communication.

Finally, an extensive literature examines the relationship between democratization and criminal violence (Arias and Goldstein 2010). This article extends scholarship away from more institutional features of democracy, like elections and party alternation (Trejo and Ley 2020), and towards the relationship between organized crime and the public sphere. In Mexico, the same liberalizing reforms and processes that ushered in competitive elections also opened up the public sphere. Criminal actors capitalized on this, utilizing newspapers and other media to reach a broad public audience. They ensured this by coercing and coopting precarious media workers, such as beat journalists (González de Bustamante and Relly 2021). Both the tactics used by criminal actors to circulate their messages, and the often heavy-handed responses from government risk undermining the public sphere. Calderón sought to limit media reporting on narco-messages, but silencing the press carries its own risks for democracy, and largely ignores the fact that media outlets are sometimes impelled to cover stories in a certain way (by criminal or state actors). In response to pressure from crime and state, Mexican journalists and media outlets coordinated to shift norms towards reporting the appearance of messages

without circulating the content of messages. This appears to be a productive way forward, but depends upon unconditional government support for media independence.¹⁴

Public criminal communication in Mexico increased after Calderón declared war on narco-trafficking. This was not the singular cause of narco-messaging—the *Familia*’s campaign preceded the war—but the public attention that followed from Calderón’s declaration likely bolstered this nascent approach to self-promotion among criminal actors. In making a public enemy of criminal actors, the government provided them with the “oxygen of publicity” (Gilbert 2023). The current, outgoing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) has shifted public perceptions in a different direction, generally (although inconsistently) minimizing organized crime, and declaring the war over (Arias and Johnson 2023). There is, however, little evidence that this has prompted criminal actors to lower their profile.

Instead, narco-messages continue to appear, with criminal actors turning to social media and messaging platforms such as Whatsapp to communicate to broad audiences. With media outlets more cautious about reporting the details of narco-messaging, it is difficult to estimate the frequency or distribution of messages, but patterns described in this article continue to hold true. In May 2024, for example, a narco-message appeared on the Belizean side of the border with Mexico, claiming territory on both side of the border and threatening local police and “rats” (Grupo Megamedia 2024). The message claims that a new RULER controls this territory, imposing order, and demanding compliance from fearful local people.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001956>.

Data Replication

Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IY8LZR>

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Notes

- 1 I ascribed a unique, four-digit identifying code to every message referenced in this study. Transcriptions of the messages can be found in the online appendix.
- 2 Communication sometimes features as a definitional distinction between criminal actors and violent political actors, such as terrorist or insurgent groups. Political actors are expected to have a publicly articulated mission, while criminal actors are seen as fundamentally private, economic actors. This can mean that behavior which is expected of political actors becomes puzzling when deployed by criminal actors. Following Kalyvas, this article makes some use of literature on communication by violent political actors to develop propositions about the micro-dynamics of public criminal communication (2015; Barnes 2017).
- 3 These questions are designed to be primarily descriptive. As befits an exploratory study into an under-examined phenomenon, the goal of the research questions and study is to produce a descriptive typology which can be used as a foundation for further theory building (García Pinzón 2024).
- 4 *Pueblo* translates as village or town, but also carries the connotation of people. This sense of the people can refer to either a local collective or a larger entity such as a nation (Eiss 2010).
- 5 In theory, public communication could also emphasize the brutality of violence. Campbell sees this as a possibility, but treats violence and written messaging as two variants of narco-propaganda, rather than as distinct tactics with distinct roles in criminal repertoires (2012). In practice, it is difficult to imagine how communication would increase the sense of brutality; criminal actors that wish to terrorize through brutality are more likely to use “extra-lethal” violence (Fujii 2013).
- 6 “Narco-message” or *narcomensaje* is the standard term for this form of communication in Mexico. Almost all messages referenced in this study were described by local media as narco-messages or *narcomantas*—a closely related term that refers to larger messages displayed on banners or sheets (Eiss 2014).
- 7 Public disavowals of narco-messaging are exceedingly rare. By contrast, criminal actors quite often use public messages to disavow acts of violence. This suggests either that public messages are rarely hoaxes, or that there is little cost imposed by hoax messages. For hoaxes to be plausible, they must read as very similar to actual messages. This raises the question of the strategic value of displaying false flag messages.
- 8 In addition to message data, the claims in this study are supported by interviews conducted in Mexico in 2018 and 2019. Interviews referenced in this article were conducted with journalists or government officials, and are referenced by a random two-digit number.
- 9 Duran Martínez finds that visible violence increases when the state security apparatus lacks cohesion (2018). The *Templarios*, however, displayed their open letters not in response to a breakdown in state cohesion, but rather in response to a functional institution: a federal election leading to alternation in power. Public criminal communication might supplement Duran Martínez’s work in a different way; she states that contexts of high visibility but low frequency of violence are rare, but the display of narco-messages without accompanying violence provides this missing element of the criminal repertoire.
- 10 The open letters in case 3 were displayed in multiple states and addressed a national topic, and it might seem as though criminal actors aim for a broader distribution of messages when they address a broader topic. However, each letter by the *Templarios* appeared in a different combination of states. This is likely indicative of the logistical capacity of the criminal group when they displayed each message, rather than a direct relationship between scope of message topic and distribution of messages.
- 11 In coding the 47 campaigns in the larger data collection, I have relied primarily on the language of the messages themselves. This means the coding is less precise than in the three case studies, where I also consider context and sequencing of the messages. Coding is discussed further in the online appendix.
- 12 This article focuses on how criminal actors portray themselves, but a further direction of research would be the collective effect of criminal communication on the public imaginary. In Mexico, for example, other forms of culture like narco-ballads likely interact with narco-messages to shape popular images of crime (Cardona and Briggs 2022).
- 13 While journalists and the wider public might not take narco-messages as fully believable, to have some impact the messages need to be plausible. Messages project images, but are probably less likely to fabricate entirely. For propaganda to be effective, it generally needs to tap into discourse that the public finds credible; completely fictional propaganda is easy to disprove (Ellul 1973).
- 14 The media developing its own norms and limits for reporting on public communication appears to be a promising policy. This raises an interesting problem for research. This article, for example, was only

possible because newspapers in Mexico did, for a time, publish full transcriptions of narco-messages.

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