

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

How many deaths does it take for one gram of cocaine?

Judith Torrea and her blog about the most dangerous city in the world

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Reports of violent excesses in Mexico's drug war generally originate from Ciudad Juarez, the city on Mexico's northern border, and considered the most dangerous city in the world. Judith Torrea lives there as the one foreign journalist and documents the daily suffering in her blog "Ciudad Juárez, en la sombra del narcotráfico" (Ciudad Juarez, in the Shadow of Drug Trafficking). Internationally her blog has received a number of honours and just won the Best Blog Award from the Deutsche Welle and Reporters without Borders.

Ms Torrea, how did you, a native of Spain, come to write a blog about the drug war in Mexico?

I have experienced the reality of life in Ciudad Juarez for 14 years now. Nine years after I had come here for the first time, I started working in New York as a journalist. At exactly the same time that President Calderón began his so-called war in drugs, on narcotráfico. I had to go to all kinds of parties for the magazine I was working for then. So much cocaine was consumed there and I began to ask myself: how many deaths in Ciudad Juarez, of my beloved "Juaritos", does it take so that a person here can peacefully consume one gram of cocaine?

So you decided to return to Ciudad Juarez?

The moment the so-called war on narcotráfico began, the city was militarized and everything changed. Ciudad Juarez is a city that showed me what life is 14 years ago. When this city then begins to disappear off the map, when your friends are killed and so many people flee, the only thing left is to report on it. And so I decided to dedicate my work to real life in Ciudad Juarez.

Why did you chose the blog form?

Initially I wrote newspaper articles and reports and offered them to the international media. But then the economic crisis happened and no one wanted to buy my stories. So I thought: well, if no publisher in this universe wants to have my stories, then I'll try a blog.

You report on the drug war in your blog?

I tell stories. Stories about what happens in the war on narcotráfico. I don't just report on those murdered, but also about what happens after. When a family cannot pay for a funeral, for example. You see, nine percent of the people here do not have the money to pay for a burial that costs 3,000 pesos or around 125 euros. Poverty is a huge problem in the conflict. The soldiers earn very little money, so they become corrupt and so on.

Who gives you your material?

Oh no, I'm not given any material. I go there and get it myself. All the photos, all the writing you find on my blog is my own. I drive to the crime scenes. Then I describe the families. Not all of them, since there are anywhere between 6 to 27 cases every day.

Rap culture is a special topic on your blog. What role does rap play in Ciudad Juarez?

The rap movement began in the USA with the repression of African Americans. It is similar in Juarez. Rap is a way for young people not to go crazy. To find the strength to live another day, in a city in which their teacher is murdered, their doctor, their friends. The lyrics are very brutal. It is a scream for equality.

You live in Ciudad Juarez and through your work run the constant risk of becoming a victim yourself...

... I think in Ciudad Juarez that is the danger for every human being, for every living thing. The only ones who are truly safe are the dead.

Personally the greatest pressure on me is from the Mexican government.

What about the cartels?

Everyone knows that the cartels are bloodthirsty. What is truly horrible though is that the government authorities are just as bloodthirsty. That they abuse human rights.

So you see politics as the central problem?

Absolutely. You see I have been asking myself this question for some time: How can it be that a drug becomes something deadly at a specific political moment? Like in Columbia and now in Mexico through President Calderón's war on drug trafficking.

Isn't drug trafficking the reason for the violence?

The reason for all the dead is above all drug consumption all over the world. And those who die are mostly the small consumers who work for the cartels. But the true drug dealers, the bankers who wash the money, the corrupt politicians, they don't die. It is a business. One of the largest businesses in the world and who wants to put an end to one of the largest businesses in the world?

You have no hope that anything will change?

An artificial peace will come. A peace between the cartels. But then we will have to ask ourselves, why were there so many deaths? So that the cartels could win in the end? There will be an artificial peace, but horrific social problems will remain. And the government authorities will do nothing.

Your blog has received a lot of international attention. It was just given the Best of Blog Award from the Deutsche Welle. What is the reaction to your blog like in Mexico?

It is very harsh. Many people, victims in particular, thank me. But it is often very difficult. Along with the government, there are also a lot of corrupt journalists who work for the cartels or the government. But the most important thing for me is and will always be that I can give a voice to the people of Ciudad Juarez.