

# The neoliberal Houdini who escaped from (poverty and) prison: Chapo's *narcocorridos*, political communication and propaganda

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mwc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mwc)**Juan S. Larrosa-Fuentes** 

ITESO, Tlaquepaque, Mexico

## Abstract

Chapo Guzmán was the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel. Although he was a well-known criminal, there is a scarcity of first-hand information about his career. This situation raises a question: how did Guzmán become a public figure without having public exposure? This communicative phenomenon is possible because drug cartels have sophisticated propaganda techniques that allow them to challenge the state not only in the military realm but also in the cultural realm. Among other media, these criminal organizations use *narcocorridos*, a popular music genre, as a medium for propaganda. This article studies, through a narrative analysis of 66 lyrics, how music, as a form of political communication, is used as propaganda. This study found three main narratives in the *narcocorridos* dedicated to Guzmán: (i) the origins of this drug dealer; (ii) the masculine features that led him to be a global kingpin; and (iii) his genius for corrupting political systems. These lyrics are propaganda because: (a) they spread knowledge in the form of stories about Guzmán; (b) they create a mythology about the kingpin and the narco-world; and (c) they distort reality by picturing Guzmán as a great man and blur reality by suppressing any reference to the drug wars.

## Keywords

Chapo Guzmán, *narcocorridos*, narrative analysis, political communication and music, propaganda

On 10 February 2019, a US federal court found Joaquin Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, alias Chapo Guzmán, guilty of criminal charges related to drug trafficking. Guzmán, who was the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, became the most powerful drug dealer in the early decades of the 21st century by controlling the drug market in Mexico and other countries. According to news reports, he managed 45 percent and 25 percent of the

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## Corresponding author:

Juan S. Larrosa-Fuentes, ITESO, Periférico Sur Manuel Gómez Morín # 8585, Tlaquepaque 45090, Mexico.

Email: [larrosa@iteso.mx](mailto:larrosa@iteso.mx)

Mexican and US drug markets, respectively (Calderón, 2014). In a controversial editorial decision, *Forbes* included this drug dealer on its list of the most influential and wealthiest people of the world. Moreover, Guzmán became famous for escaping from federal prisons. After more than three decades of producing and smuggling drugs around the world, murdering people as part of his regular activities, and inflicting terror on various regions of Mexico, he will spend the rest of his days in a maximum-security prison in Colorado (US).

In terms of public knowledge, Chapo Guzmán's trial served as a mechanism for publicly scrutinizing his life and crimes as a kingpin, as well as the structure of his global empire. However, before this legal process, there was a scarcity of first-hand information about him. Guzmán did not offer journalistic interviews (except for his conversation with Sean Penn and Kate del Castillo), and he did not have a public life like other gangsters such as Pablo Escobar, who even ran for office. Despite his low public profile, Guzmán was a well-known character in Mexico and became the most wanted criminal in the US, where he was named the 'Mexican Osama Bin Laden' (Radden Keefe, 2014). Thus, this scenario raises an interesting question: how did Chapo Guzmán become a public figure without having public exposure? These communicative and political phenomena are possible, among other reasons, because Guzmán, and drug cartels in general, have sophisticated propaganda techniques that allow them to compete with the Mexican state not only in the military but also in the political and cultural realms (Campbell, 2014).

Criminal organizations in Mexico have been developing propagandistic strategies to communicate their existence, to construct a brand, to gain support for their cause and, in some cases, to terrorize other criminal groups as well as the civilian population. In other words, criminal organizations, in a new division of labour, have created different political communication strategies as part of their operations (Campbell, 2014; Phillips and Ríos, 2020). Among other strategies, drug dealers have co-opted and financed popular culture industries to create and disseminate propaganda. The example that epitomizes this strategy is the production, performance and dissemination of *narcocorridos*, a popular musical genre. These songs have been a medium to tell criminal stories, and many of them are dedicated to Guzmán. Hence, this article investigates *narcocorridos* that describe and celebrate Chapo's life, and analyses how these songs are used as propagandistic devices.

The article consists of four sections. The first offers a theory and literature review that argues that political communication is not restricted to processes that fall within traditional democratic procedures. Political communication also structures other forms of human actions, including criminal activities. Therefore, this section explains the concept of propaganda as part of political communication and how music has historically been used as propaganda. It also explains the origins and characteristics of the *corrido*, a Latin American musical genre, which criminal organizations have co-opted and recycled as a vehicle for propaganda.

In the second section, the article provides the methodological coordinates that include (a) grounded theory as an umbrella for collecting and analysing 66 *narcocorrido* lyrics, and (b) social narrative analysis for identifying and interpreting the stories that a social group, such as the narco world and Chapo's supporters, create and embrace (Shenhav, 2015: 17).

The third section presents the results of the study. Three main narratives pervade the *narcocorridos* dedicated to Guzmán: (i) the origins of this drug dealer; (ii) the masculine features that led him to become a global kingpin; and (iii) his genius for corrupting political and cultural systems.

Finally, the fourth section discusses *narcocorridos*' propagandistic mechanisms. Drawing on the work of various authors (Bakir et al., 2018; O'Shaughnessy, 2004; Zollmann, 2017), this article finds that these songs are propaganda because: (a) they create and spread knowledge (i.e. stories) of Chapo Guzmán; (b) these stories create a mythology about the kingpin and the narco-world; and (c) these narrations distort reality by picturing Guzmán as a great man and blur reality by suppressing any reference to the horrors of the drug wars. Finally, the article presents conclusions that stress the relevance of studying propaganda as a form of political communication that takes place in non-democratic contexts.

## Theory and literature review

### *Propaganda as a form of political communication*

Defining the concept of propaganda is problematic because, at least in the historical present, it has negative connotations (Bakir et al., 2018: 5). As Lilleker (2006: 163) explains, 'few are willing to use [propaganda] as a descriptor for political communication' because it operates as part of the communication strategies of many political, economic, cultural, and social organizations around the Western world. These strategies, on many occasions, 'serve antidemocratic ends' (Herman, 2000: 101). Thus, nowadays, propaganda is studied and sometimes blurred, under descriptors such as political communication, advertising, public relations, and, particularly, 'strategic communication' (Bakir et al., 2018; Lilleker, 2006).

The concept of propaganda can be traced back to the 17th century when the Catholic Church used the term to refer to strategies for spreading the values of this institution (Wilke, 2008). Since then, states, governments, and corporations, as well as criminal and terrorist groups, have used propaganda to shape public opinion and to manufacture consent (Herman, 2000; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Lasswell, 2013; Lippmann, 1922) in order to legitimate political regimes, elites and ideologies and/or to gain support for a cause and particular interests. Propaganda has been used to promote military interventions and wars, to uplift morale during armed conflicts, to lobby for commercial products and services, to brand the images of criminal groups, and so on (Campbell, 2014; Castells, 2009: 165–189; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Zollmann, 2017).

In this sense, propaganda is one of the forms that political communication can take. Here, political communication is any practice in which two or more individual or collective entities exchange symbolic forms, through mediated means, in order to structure the production and reproduction of political power. Propaganda is political communication because it involves *strategic communicative* practices that have the goal of persuading or manipulating people's minds, opinions, emotions or behaviours, in order to gain support for ideas, causes, ideologies or actions (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Lasswell, 2013; Lippmann, 1922; Wilke, 2008), i.e. to gain political power. Propaganda 'can thus be

understood as the forming of texts and opinions in support of particular interests and through media and non-media mediated means with the intention to produce public support and relevant action' (Zollmann, 2017: 7).

### *Music as propaganda, corrido as propaganda*

As the definition in the previous section suggests, propaganda can adopt any form of mediated communication. In one essential but understudied formation of propaganda, music is the vehicle for its production, diffusion and consumption. Music has been extensively used in electoral campaigns and political rallies, and to present candidates through radio and television jingles; moreover, governments have used music to *propagate* their goals and values to the general population (Street, 2017).

By and large, most of the research on music and propaganda has an historical nature and focuses on the strategic conditions in which music was produced. On the one hand, there is a body of literature that describes music as a vehicle for propaganda in authoritarian regimes, such as the ruling of Benito Mussolini in Italy (Illiano and Sala, 2012), Francisco Franco in Spain (López, 2016; Muñoz, 1998), and Jorge Videla in Argentina (Wilson, 2015). On the other hand, other studies observe how music was produced during the World Wars (e.g. Guthrie, 2014; Hanley, 2004).

In this sense, this article contributes to the expansion of the empirical examination of propaganda in two ways. First, it goes beyond the production of propaganda in the frame of the state and public institutions that control political power and, on the contrary, focuses on how criminal groups use music as a form of propaganda. Second, it examines propaganda within the drug wars, an armed and violent conflict that is different from the traditional wars and armed conflicts studied in previous research. Thus, this investigation contributes to filling this void by studying *corridos*, a popular music genre in Mexico, as a form of propaganda created by criminal organizations.

The *corrido* is a musical genre that narrates popular myths, stories and legends (Badillo Carlos, 2015). *Correr* is a Spanish verb that means 'to run'. *Corrido* is a noun that comes from the verb *correr*. This genre adopted the name *corrido* because these stories seemed to 'fly' and to 'run' (Burgos Dávila, 2013: 67), and *corridos* were initially transmitted through oral communication. The *corridos*' lyrics are poetic and popular compositions structured in four-line stanzas (*Diccionario del Español de México (DEM)*, 2014). The duration of these songs, in their contemporary form, is about three minutes; however, they were longer in earlier times (Simonett, 2001).

*Corridos* contain lyrics that narrate stories about politics, popular culture and social life, such as the assassination of historical characters like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa during the Revolution, labour union uprisings, the anecdotes of bandits and criminals, stories about migration, and the sentimental life of ordinary people. Within the *corrido* universe, the subgenre of *narcocorridos* emerged in the 1930s (Cabañas, 2013: 35; Ramírez-Pimienta, 2010). There are different kinds of *narcocorridos*, but in general, they follow the musical structure of the *corrido*. The main feature of these songs is that their lyrics describe and portray a culture that gravitates towards drug trafficking.

Currently, *corridos* and *narcocorridos* are placed in the public domain through various communication systems that include face-to-face communication (i.e. people singing

these songs), group communication (i.e. bands reproducing these songs in concerts), and digital communication (i.e. producers and bands distributing these songs over the internet). These systems, of which the cartels have co-opted various parts, increase *narcocorridos*' circulation, and the musical genre has become very popular within the criminal world and, broadly, in Mexican cultural consumption (Parametría, 2011).

One of the contemporary functions of *narcocorridos* is to operate as propaganda for celebrating kingpins and drug cartels. By narrating the narco world, these songs have at least three objectives: (i) to work as a branding strategy for the cartels, (ii) to terrorize enemies, and (iii) to make the argument that these organizations are not as bad as the government and journalists portray them (Campbell, 2014; Guevara, 2013). *Narcocorridos* are part of political communication because they are symbolic forms crafted as a strategy for producing and reproducing political power over a lucrative industry (i.e. drug trafficking), which includes, among other actions, negotiating and fighting with the institutions that hold political power in Mexico (i.e. the state). *Narcocorridos* are propaganda because they are texts manufactured to further the drug cartels' interest in generating public support for their economic and criminal causes. In this context, two research questions structured this research: (a) what narratives about Chapo Guzmán's life are embedded within the *narcocorridos*? Furthermore, (b) what propagandistic strategies do *narcocorrido* narratives use to celebrate and depict Chapo Guzmán's life?

Before ending this section, it is important to stress that *corridos* and *narcocorridos* are not always propaganda. Some lyrics convey critical stances against political and economic powers, including drug cartels and the war on drugs (Burgos Dávila, 2014: 27, 30, 46). Moreover, the fact that some *narcocorridos* are propaganda does not mean that their content has an automatic, significant, and unique effect on the population (Iruetagoiena, 2016). However, the audience-reception loop goes beyond the scope of this research and informs the future research agenda of *narcocorridos* as propaganda.

### *Chapo Guzmán's propaganda within the framework of the drug wars*

This article focuses on studying *narcocorridos* that depict the origins and career of Chapo Guzmán, who started his criminal activities in the 1980s but became a public figure after escaping from Puente Grande prison in 2001. Throughout his entire criminal career, Guzmán kept a low profile in the public arena. He did not have contact with the press – except for his conversation with two actors/celebrities, published in the *Rolling Stone* magazine (Penn, 2016). He did not make any public appearances and, in semi-public events, he avoided being photographed. Despite his low public profile, Guzmán has been a well-known character. According to surveys, Guzmán had levels of recognition similar to those of national politicians. In 2011, 86 percent of the population said that they knew who Guzmán was and, in 2019, the percentage increased by nine points (Parametría, 2019).

Why did Chapo Guzmán become a name, an image, and a brand, known worldwide without having a direct public presence in public communication channels? One explanation, among others, relates to the emergence of narco-propaganda within the framework of a 'war on drugs'. In 2006, Felipe Calderon became the Mexican President. After a contested election, he decided to deploy a powerful and robust strategy against the drug

cartels in order to gain political legitimacy. He declared a ‘war on drugs’, and violence escalated: since then, 250,000 persons have been killed, and more than 9 million people have been displaced (Reina, 2019).

In the context of the ‘war on drugs’, cartels assumed the military narrative and started to formulate propaganda strategies including ‘(1) spectacles of symbolic/orchestrated violence for public view, (2) narco-messages, written statements and signs with cartel-related content, (3) videos and cyber-postings, (4) narcogenres of music and lyrics, and (5) control and censorship of the mass media and information’ (Campbell, 2014: 64). The Sinaloa Cartel, led by Chapo, was not the exception, and produced propaganda to communicate their supremacy, to create an image for the criminal organization, and to gain sympathy for its members.

The *narcocorrido* is one of the forms that narco-propaganda adopts. These songs are composed within a mafia-style community that supports a cultural industry that produces and distributes these cultural artefacts (i.e. songs, lyrics, and videos) to a transnational audience that has expanded throughout the entire continent, but primarily Mexico and the US (Burgos Dávila and Simonett, 2019). *Narcocorridos* are one manifestation of what scholars and artists have called narco-culture. This culture can be observed in other popular culture products, such as movies, series, and soap operas, where the narco-world and drug dealers are at the centre of the plots, and in new religious practices such as *Santa Muerte* (Cabañas, 2013; Pine, 2012; Schwarz, 2013).

Drug cartels have co-opted many political, economic, and cultural sectors in Mexico, including parts of local governments, state-owned strategic companies (e.g. PEMEX, the state oil company), local media outlets, and cultural industries. In the case of the *narcocorridos* industry, many composers, singers, bands, managers, and entrepreneurs are funded, and sometimes coerced, by criminal organizations. It is a common practice that kingpins pay songwriters for composing lyrics that tell their stories (Simonett, 2004). For example, Chapo paid up to half a million dollars for the production of *corridos* that described and celebrated his life (Esquivel, 2018). However, amateur singers also produced these songs spontaneously. Given that *narcocorridos* are manufactured in a cultural system co-opted by criminal groups, it has been dangerous to conduct ethnographical research about the political economy of these cultural manifestations (Burgos Dávila, 2014; Campbell, 2014). For now, it is not possible to know which *corridos* were paid for by Guzmán and which were produced spontaneously.

## Method

Grounded theory and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) formed the umbrella that guided this research process, which entailed going back and forth from texts to theory. This inductive methodological approach demanded a transformation and evolution of the sample and research questions.

In February 2014, Chapo was arrested for the second time. During the following weeks, various Mexican news outlets, with national reach, published lists of *corridos* that depicted the drug dealer (*El Universal*, 2014; *Milenio*, 2014; Preciado, 2014; Reyes, 2014). In total, these outlets selected 18 *corridos* that described Chapo’s life. Thus, these *narcocorridos* became the sample for textual analysis (Mckee, 2003). This first stage of the research was useful for exploring *narcocorridos* as cultural texts that contained

evidence of ideological formations (Hall, 2009) of the narco-world. Here, the research questions were oriented to finding the values and symbols that structured Chapo's image. However, as I kept finding and reading more lyrics, I realized that the sample was not enough for reaching saturation and, consequently, a new sampling strategy was designed.

The expansion of the sample was a challenge, given the amount of information that can be found about Guzmán on the internet. A simple query illustrates the previous assertion. In December 2019, a Google search for the terms "Chapo Guzmán" + "*corridos*" showed 138,000 results. This universe is composed of different kinds of elements: journalistic stories that refer to Guzmán, videos of people talking about him, *narcocorridos*, and more. Thousands of internet entries refer to *narcocorridos*. However, there are many songs published by different users, songs that have different versions (e.g. studio recordings, live presentations, performance by different artists), and songs that mention this drug dealer vaguely.

Hence, the second strategy for seeking these songs was based on Google's time selector tool. This tool allowed a search for songs that depicted Guzmán from 1990 to 2018 – the period of his criminal career. The process was the following: first, search for "Chapo Guzmán" + "*corridos*" and then for "Chapo Guzmán" + "*narcocorridos*" during 1990; second, collect the first five lyrics that explicitly narrated Chapo's life, excluding songs where he was mentioned but was not the centre of the song. The same process was repeated for the following 28 years. During the first 16 years (1990–2006), I found less than five lyrics per year. After 2006, the number of lyrics started to grow. In the end, the sample had 66 Spanish-language *narcocorrido* lyrics that covered the different stages of his criminal life. All the 18 *narcocorridos* of the first sample appeared in the second one.

After reading and analysing the collected lyrics several times, it became evident that these songs were telling stories about Guzmán's life. At this point, I added a social narrative analysis (Shenhav, 2015) to the research method and started to find the regularities and ruptures within the stories of these songs. With this approach, it was possible to ask what narratives about Chapo Guzmán's life were embedded within the *narcocorridos* (RQ1). Then, I started to realize that all the songs were a celebration of the drug lord, and that there were no traces of critical understandings of his life in the context of the drug wars – this is true for all the songs collected for this research. Therefore, I analysed the songs within the framework of political communication and propaganda, and asked what propagandistic strategies *narcocorrido* narratives use to celebrate and depict Chapo Guzmán's life (RQ2).

In a separate process, the sampling design included searching *narcocorridos* through websites devoted to socializing these lyrics (e.g. *Letra De NarcoCorridos*, 2020; *Letras de corridos y banda*, 2020). This strategy allowed me to verify that the sampling design was successful in terms of reaching a theoretical saturation in the frame of grounded theory (Saunders et al., 2018: 1897); although I found more lyrics that explicitly narrated Chapo's life, I kept observing the same coding themes in these *narcocorridos*.

### Three narratives

#### *Chapo's origins: 'If I escaped from poverty, it is easier to escape from jail'*

Guzmán Loera was born in 1957 in a small, impoverished community named La Tuna, located in the municipality of Badiraguato in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. His childhood

took place in a rural area where people worked in the fields, earning low wages, with little chance of acquiring their own land. In this context, he grew up as a deprived child who had to work from a young age, as the song ‘*La cuna del Chapo Guzmán*’ (Chapo Guzmán’s cradle) narrates:

When I was a kid, I was poor, and I complied with my duties,  
but by selling oranges nobody earns enough.

In the village of La Tuna, where my mother raised me  
she turned a crate into a cradle

to make me sleep, while she was caring for me. (Las Fieraz, 2013)

Badiraguato and La Tuna play an essential role in the narratives that describe Chapo’s life. In many of the songs, both places emerge as sites where he wants to return (RQ1). He wants to come back because those are the places where the poor people of his childhood live. On 15 occasions, lyrics depict that Chapo helped communities. Two songs exemplify this idea. ‘*La gente de El Chapo*’ (El Chapo’s people) narrates:

When we were very poor, and the government faked blindness

he [El Chapo] was the one who gave us a hand, and that is why we [poor people] are grateful.  
(Los Alegres del Barranco, 2015)

The song ‘*Yo soy Joaquin*’ (I am Joaquin), expands on this notion:

They have called me the king of the mountains, and that is why I am happy here, where I can help people.

Here there are no social classes, here we have equality.

That is why I will always give you a hand,

for everything you need, here is Chapo Guzmán. (Los mayitos de Sinaloa, 2015)

In these *narcocorridos*, Chapo becomes a bizarre Robin Hood who helps poor people and, in return, receives love and protection from the rural world (RQ1). Nevertheless, there are no descriptions of a real economic transformation of these deprived communities.

La Tuna is more than the place where Guzmán was born; it is where his mother lives. As narrated in ‘*La cuna del Chapo Guzmán*’ (Chapo Guzmán’s cradle) (Las Fieraz, 2013), his mother raised and took care of him in needy and complicated times. She is, in this narrative, the person that seeks his wellbeing. Chapo’s mother is the only female character that appears in these stories. Although we never know her name and details about her life, she is present as someone important for the kingpin and, consequently, he

tries to please her. For example, the song ‘*Los recuerdos de El Chapo*’ (Chapo’s memories) narrates the following story:

I returned to La Tuna to be with my mother  
 there [La Tuna] people respect me because I have helped them  
 the caves and ravines offered me shelter  
 before becoming a trafficker I am the heir of a hovel. (Fundillo Norteño, 2013)

The *narcocorridos* contain tensions and contradictions. Contrary to the nostalgic and romantic story where Guzmán is always returning to his origins, some lyrics suggest he is also running from home. Various songs reveal that he is continuously escaping from something (RQ1). The recurrent escapes are the two times that he fled from prison. Moreover, he is running away from the Mexican government, from the army, the marines, and the DEA. In fact, in two different songs, Chapo is referred to as ‘Houdini’, the illusionist who became notorious for his ‘escape acts’ (Calibre 50, 2015; Santa Cruz, 2014). However, the most prominent motivation for being a drug trafficker is to escape from poverty:

I was first incarcerated in Almoloya de Juarez  
 and because I tried to escape, I was transported to Puente Grande,  
 but if I escaped from poverty, it was easier to escape from jail. (Las Fieraz, 2013)

Guzmán’s origins and childhood are narrated in 22 of the 66 lyrics that make up the sample of this research. These songs build a narrative that explains this character’s biographical roots and, at the same time, justifies his criminal life. The function of the narratives that describe Guzmán’s origins is to explain why he became a drug dealer. It is clear that he was born into a low-income family and environment, and that he did not have enough opportunities to succeed. Therefore, the only way of escaping from poverty was to become a criminal who, instead of selling oranges, trafficked drugs. Becoming a drug dealer allowed him to have dozens of brand-new cars, luxury houses and, in general, money. As explained in the next section, these narratives perform the political work of justifying Chapo’s criminal activities as well as the existence of the narco-world.

### *The narco-macho: A manual for becoming a kingpin*

The *narcocorridos* depict that Guzmán climbed the ladder of the criminal community from the bottom to the top (RQ1). In this narrative, his criminal activities are justified as the means for someone who works hard to become a wealthy person. For instance, the song ‘*A mis enemigos*’ (For my enemies) illustrates this pattern:

No one gave me anything, and everything I have is mine  
 with the sweat of my forehead I have achieved all that I want. (Elizalde, 2006)

In the same fashion, other lyrics celebrate that, after many years, the boy who once sold oranges in a rural community became a transnational entrepreneur (e.g. Los Bukanans de Culiacán, 2013; Ortega, 2008) and the general of an army that fights against states and criminal cartels (e.g. Corrido 2011, 2011; Enigma Norteño, 2011). In this context, a potent narrative emerges within the *narcocorridos* that explains what it takes to be a successful drug dealer. Embedded in this narrative is a manual for becoming a man in the narco-world: only men can be part of this community. These men should be strong and brave, and they have to develop the capacity of ruling over other men (RQ1).

The *narcocorridos* build a mythology where authentic drug dealers are men who were born in Sinaloa, a northern Mexican state where the production and distribution of narcotics have been part of the local economy since the middle of the 20th century. Throughout the songs, Sinaloa, its municipalities, and inland cities such as Badiraguato, La Tuna, and Culiacán appear on 114 occasions. In this narrative, Sinaloa – especially Badiraguato – is a territory of brave men where many conspicuous drug dealers were born and raised, such as Caro Quintero, Ernesto Fonseca, and, of course, Chapo Guzmán. Sinaloa is described as a ‘land of courageous men’ (Elizalde, 2007), and as a ‘key point for raising brave men’ (Los Alegres del Barranco, 2008).

The *narcocorridos* illustrate the characteristics that define a drug dealer. In the narco-macho symbolic world, men have to be able to show and deploy physical power. Ironically, the nickname ‘Chapo’ (‘Shorty’) refers to Guzmán’s short stature, and 16 songs try to explain that, despite this condition, he is a strong man, and capable of leading a criminal enterprise (e.g. Calibre 50, 2013; El Potro de Sinaloa, 2007; Los Alegres del Barranco, 2008; Los Bukanans de Culiacán, 2013; Rivas, 2009; Tapia, 2006). Diego Rivas (2009) sings:

Joaquin Guzmán Loera is his birth name  
 he was baptized like that  
*he is a short man*  
*but his brain is big, and it functions [well]*  
 he is the strongest among the strongest  
 and if there is someone that doesn’t like this [order of things]  
 then he is not on his side. (emphasis added)

Another song warns:

Do not try to mock me, just because *I am short*.  
 I have big ones [testicles]  
 if you do not believe me, come and see. (Vega, 2009, emphasis added)

In addition, in the narco-world, men have to demonstrate that they are willing to use violence to achieve their goals. The violence is rarely explicit; on the contrary, it is hidden within the lyrics. The violence is contained in objects such as weapons, ammunition, and armoured cars, objects that are mentioned in 20 songs. Mostly, these objects are not actioned within the stories that the lyrics narrate, but they appear as symbols for expressing the violent potential of the narco-machos. If the *narcocorridos* were a painting or a sculpture, Chapo Guzmán would appear in significant proportions, wearing a belt with bullets across his chest and with a *cuerno de chivo* (AK-47) in one hand and a rifle in the other (e.g. Los Bukanans de Culiacán, 2013).

The image that the *narcocorridos* portray is that Guzmán is a person who is fighting a war (RQ1). Throughout the songs, he is framed as the general of an army that fights against the Mexican government and the DEA but, especially, against rival cartels (e.g. Corrido 2011, 2011; Enigma Norteño, 2011). In these songs, Chapo is compared with Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata (Corrido 2011, 2011; Enigma Norteño, 2011), two of the leading generals of the 1920s Mexican Revolution who fought for social justice. However, as in the bizarre-Robin-Hood narrative, there is no political agenda behind Chapo's military exploits. The army is only a medium to secure his trade and to make more money.

### *Chapo's real success: The master of corruption*

The deprived economic context and the toxic masculinity of the narco-machos are narratives that pervade *narcocorridos*, which operate as a vehicle for communicating the violent norms and values of the narco-world. However, these stories conceal a narrative that explains that the successful drug dealer is the one who knows how to play the system (RQ1). In these stories, drug dealers are not the violent and strong men from Sinaloa, but individuals who understand that the only way to succeed is by learning the rules of operation of the political and economic realms, and then breaking, corrupting, and co-opting them. In this narrative, kingpins are intelligent, talented, and astute, and these *narcocorridos* clearly describe Chapo's ability for corrupting men and, in general, for co-opting political, economic, and cultural systems.

The two occasions when Chapo escaped from prison epitomize his ability to corrupt the political and economic systems – 25 of the analysed songs narrate how he escaped from facilities, which, in theory, had high levels of security. However, the *narcocorridos* do not tell stories in which an army attacks a federal prison, subdues the custodians, and rescues Guzmán. Nor do they tell the story of a prisoner who, after years and years of observing the prison dynamics, finds a way to escape through a complicated strategy that outwits prison security. On the contrary, the lyrics chronicle two events where a man was able to bribe politicians and police in order to leave his confinement. For instance, *Escape de Puente Grande* (Escape from Puente Grande) tells the story of his first breakout. The lyrics explain that all the prison staff were bribed and that the warden waited three hours to notify the federal authorities. This time was enough for Chapo to reach Guadalajara and board an aeroplane that finally took him to Sinaloa (Elizalde, 2007).

After the Puente Grande escape, Guzmán was a fugitive for almost 13 years. During this period, he maintained a low profile in the public arena. He was not photographed or seen in a public setting; nor did he offer any journalistic interviews – until he talked to Sean Penn and Kate del Castillo weeks before he was apprehended for the second time (Penn, 2016). Throughout this time, his fame as a real and fictional character grew. The *narcocorridos* narrated how he was able to move around the country without interference from the government. For instance, the song, ‘*El papa del diablo*’ (The devil’s father), explains that during the ‘war on drugs’, many regions of Mexico were militarized. In these regions, the army controlled the movement of persons and vehicles. Nevertheless, the lyrics explain, Chapo was never detained by soldiers (Vega, 2009).

The lyrics show how the Sinaloa Cartel co-opted various public institutions and agents. Chapo’s success was broader than having the power of moving around the country without any interference. He was also able to bribe governors, mayors, and significant portions of the military as well as federal and local police:

Using all his power, Chapo *bought* all the chiefs.

That is why the law never found him. (Los Tucanes de Tijuana, 1994, emphasis added)

Thus, politicians, police, and soldiers not only allowed him to work as a drug dealer but many of them actively worked for him. In other words, Mexican institutions were bought by the kingpin and started to work for him, as is expressed in a verse of the song ‘*El jefe de la sierra*’ (The boss of the Sierra) that explains that those who worked for Chapo, were ‘civilians and soldiers’ (Los Tucanes de Tijuana, 2010). The element that binds together all these stories is Chapo’s power to corrupt individuals and institutions (RQ1).

## The propagandistic nature of *narcocorridos*

One of propaganda’s narrative functions is to spread knowledge about an idea, an ideology, a cause, or a person. As different authors have explained, popular culture, including music, is a path for producing, diffusing, and acquiring political knowledge (Barnhurst, 1998; Inthorn et al., 2013; Van Zoonen, 1998). In this sense, *narcocorridos* are cultural artefacts conveying propagandistic messages that allow cartels to spread their political and economic goals, and values (i.e. propaganda as political communication). In the case at hand, *narcocorridos* provide knowledge about Guzmán, knowledge produced within a specific context: the narco-world (RQ2).

The *narcocorridos* narrate Chapo’s biography that begins with his escape from La Tuna and the period when he learned how to be a criminal through mentors such as Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, aka ‘*El Padrino*’ (The Godfather), who was the most powerful drug dealer in Mexico during the 1980s. People can also learn who Chapo’s main partners were because *narcocorridos* offer descriptions of the criminal elites and regularly mention kingpins like ‘*El Mayo*’ (The May), ‘*El Azul*’ (The Blue) and others (Los Canelos de Durango, 1999). Readers and listeners can also obtain information about the three times that Chapo was arrested, the two occasions on which he fled from federal prisons, his extradition to the US, and his trial and sentencing in New York. *Narcocorridos*,

as a set of propagandistic narrations, operate as a documentary series of the narco-world through which the public can acquire knowledge about the kingpins' lives (RQ2).

Myths, 'which are stories that a culture tells about itself to perpetuate itself' (O'Shaughnessy, 2004: 88), are devices that work as building blocks of propaganda (Lilleker, 2006; O'Shaughnessy, 2004) and Chapo's *narcocorridos* are not the exception. 'A myth is a communication from society to its members' (Wright, 1978: 270). Through these communication systems, communities explain and propagate their hegemonic values. In the corpus analysed for this research, the *narcocorridos* proclaim that only strong and smart men from Sinaloa can be drug dealers (RQ2). Chapo Guzmán's stories fit this mythical narration. He was born in the municipality of Badiraguato, located in Sinaloa, and the lyrics narrate, over and over again, stories of a strong and smart man who built an economic and military empire. In this sense, these stories expand the mythical narrations of other conspicuous Mexican drug lords and reinforce the idea that Sinaloa is the epicentre of narco-culture.

The songs also justify Chapo's criminal career. As mentioned earlier, Chapo's story begins in La Tuna, the poor, small village where he was born. In his infancy, he started to work 'selling oranges' in the market, but he soon realized that this was not the path for making a living. These lyrics show the extraordinary story of the poor and humble kid who, by working hard, acquires economic capital and social prestige and, at the same time, the songs do political work by justifying drug trafficking. At the individual level, *narcocorridos* operate as a public relations strategy for cleansing Chapo's reputation and persuading listeners and readers that Guzmán is a good and kind person (RQ2). As the band, 'Los Tokayos de la Sierra' (2017) explains, 'he [Chapo] has been blamed for many things, but he is not a bad person.' However, at a social level, these narratives have the power to resonate in a country where, according to the Federal Government, 43 percent of the population is poor (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social, 2017). As one of the *narcocorridos* explains, in Mexico, it is easier to escape from prison than from poverty (Las Fieraz, 2013). Thus, like other forms of propaganda, *narcocorridos* persuade a community to support a leader by justifying his cause (RQ2).

A key element for analysing narratives is to figure out the elements that are missing, left in the dark, silenced (Polletta, 1998). Finding what is present and what is absent is also a crucial element for studying propaganda. Propaganda, as part of a political communication strategy, seeks to deliberately conceal or obfuscate information from reality in order to manufacture consent or manipulate public opinion. This form of political communication is 'deceptive because those involved know people would less likely be persuaded if they knew the full picture' (Bakir et al., 2018: 12). *Narcocorridos* are propaganda because they strategically omit the evil nature of Chapo Guzmán, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the drug wars (RQ2)

The *narcocorridos* 'omit' stories about the criminal business that entails selling drugs and using violence to gain political and economic power. For example, throughout all the corpus, the word '*droga*' (drug) is only mentioned on two occasions; '*polvo*' (dust), a euphemism for cocaine, appears on only one occasion, and there are no references to other drugs. Thus, there are almost no references to the products that made Chapo a powerful kingpin. The *narcocorridos* do not tell stories of people using drugs or stories about people getting addicted to these substances.

Furthermore, these songs do not depict the violence that surrounds and, ultimately, structures, the narco-world, and the drug wars (RQ2). Guzmán is never depicted as the man who directly ordered the murder of hundreds of persons and who created an economic empire by engaging in criminal activities. He is never related to drugs, either as a producer, or as a distributor, or consumer. Furthermore, in all the 66 songs, there is only one critical reference to the drug wars (Ortega, 2008). The lyrics do not talk about a war that has left more than a quarter of a million people dead, 37,000 people missing, and more than 9 million displaced.

## Conclusions

Chapo Guzmán was the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the most potent international criminal organizations. Although he is a well-known criminal, with higher levels of recognition than some national politicians in Mexico, there is a scarcity of first-hand information about his life and criminal career. From a communicative point of view, this contradictory situation opened the door to investigating how Guzmán became a public figure without having public exposure. This communicative phenomenon was possible, among other reasons, because Guzmán, and drug cartels in general, have co-opted communication and cultural systems in order to produce and disseminate propaganda. In this sense, this article illustrates the strategic use of propaganda as a form of political communication, which occurs in a violent context.

This article contributes to the field of political communication in three ways. First, it takes up the challenge of bringing the concept of propaganda back to the field of communication and media studies in general (Zollmann, 2017), and political communication and music (Street, 2017) in particular. Second, this article makes a case for thinking about political communication outside its 'traditional' settings such as electoral cycles, journalism, or public administration within the framework of democracies. Political communication also occurs beyond these settings, not only in democratic contexts. Accordingly, this research argues for expanding the study of propaganda and political communication in order to understand transnational crime (e.g. Campbell, 2014; Guevara, 2013), terrorism (e.g. Baines and O'Shaughnessy, 2014; Baugut and Neumann, 2019), and other forms of armed and violent conflict that go beyond 20th-century wars (e.g. Collins, 2015; Lasswell, 2013).

Third, this article studies propaganda from a sociocultural perspective (Craig, 1999). Departing from the objective of measuring propaganda effects, which is a legitimate and necessary endeavour, this research seeks to understand social narratives (Shenhav, 2015: 17) as a vehicle for reproducing propaganda. Hence, this article offers a path for studying how criminal groups, in the context of 21st-century wars, have co-opted popular culture systems, and used them to gain support for their cause. The production and dissemination of *narcocorridos* illustrate the operation of the strategic use of propaganda in the criminal world, but there are other systems to be explored, such as journalism, film, and sports industries, to mention a few.

Thinking about *narcocorridos* from a sociocultural perspective lays the groundwork for other analyses of the 'war on drugs'. Traditionally, this war has been conceptualized

as a matter of national security. Nevertheless, it is also disputed in the cultural field. Drug cartels have spread violence in Mexico, developed a parallel economy, and created a new culture that is related to specific values and aesthetics (Cabañas, 2013; Pine, 2012; Schwarz, 2013). In this context, *narcocorridos* are symbolic vehicles for producing and reproducing the narco-world's narratives. Therefore, it is an analytical mistake to narrow the discussion of the 'war on drugs' to a national security dimension. The war is also, and not only, a cultural struggle, which should be carefully studied in order to understand the causes that have allowed violence to grow in various regions of the world.

In recent decades, there have been public debates in Mexico about the idea of censoring *narcocorridos*. Sinaloa's Congress approved a law and banned these songs from being broadcast over radio stations. However, given *narcocorridos*' viral nature – they can be reproduced through interpersonal, group, and digital communication – this measure was useless. Moreover, from the human rights and freedom of expression perspective, censoring music is problematic. Nevertheless, the production and reproduction of *narcocorridos* as propaganda remains an issue that affects public communication because it entails deceptive and false communication (Bakir et al., 2018; Martín Serrano, 1982). In short, *narcocorridos*, in their propagandistic forms, are 'bad' (Althaus, 2012) for public communication. These narrations naturalize the existence of drug dealers in a country where drug wars have produced casualty rates in the form of deaths, disappearances, and displacements that are higher than in many 20th-century wars. Therefore, an urgent task, as Barthes (1993) explains, is to shed light on the discourse mechanisms of myths and, in this case, of propaganda. This action would allow us to have a better understanding of the (cultural) wars that are taking place in various regions of Latin America.

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## ORCID iD

Juan S. Larrosa-Fuentes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1529-5107>

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### **Author biography**

Juan S. Larrosa-Fuentes is a researcher in the Department of Sociocultural Studies at ITESO University (Mexico), where he teaches at the School of Journalism and Public Communication. He has published in journals such as *International Journal of Communication*, *Tripodos*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Global Media Journal México*, among others. His interests are concentrated in political communication and journalism.