Crimecraft:

Journalists, police, and news publics in an Argentine town

ABSTRACT

Crime narratives emerge from a collaborative process that involves diverse social groups across different locales. This diffused production of stories is captured by the concept of crimecraft, which helps illuminate the relationship among news media, organized crime, and police violence in postdictatorship Argentina. There, news makers must creatively maneuver between official reports and public secrets by shifting the story’s authorship from themselves to their audiences. They do this with online news forums, which provide a space for readers to anonymously criticize brutal police practices, sometimes leading to public protests. Such is the negotiated and shifting relationship between law and violence, as well as the processual and performative character of knowledge production, which crimecraft helps unpack. [police, crime, violence, media, publics, journalism, Argentina]

Relatos del crimen surgen de un proceso de colaboración que involucra a diversos grupos sociales en diferentes sitios. El concepto de crimecraft captura esta producción difusa de historias y ayuda a aclarar las conexiones entre los medios de comunicación, el crimen organizado y la violencia policial en Argentina. Allí, los encargados de noticias deben maniobrar de manera creativa entre los informes oficiales y secretos públicos desplazando la paternidad literaria de la historia de sí mismos a sus audiencias. Lo hacen con los foros de noticias online, que proveen un espacio para que los lectores critiquen prácticas brutales de la policía de forma anónima y que a veces lleva a las protestas públicas. Crimecraft sirve para esclarecer esta relación negociada e inestable entre la ley y la violencia, así como comprender el carácter procesual y performativo de la producción del conocimiento. [polícia, crimen, violência, meios de comunicação, públicos, periodismo, Argentina]

We reached the edge of town at sunset. Roads were unpaved here, and the tires of vehicles that traversed these deforested lands pressed deep into the dark red soil characteristic of the tierra colorada, the iron-rich land of Misiones Province. On the outskirts of Puerto Iguazú, an Argentine town on the country’s northern border with Brazil and Paraguay, settlers, colloquially called intrusos (literally “intruders”), had been moving to an area known as the 2,000 Hectáreas, or Dos Mil. Formerly an army territory, it had been handed over to the municipal government, but its infrastructure was still underdeveloped, and the state’s presence was sketchy. Some intrusos were landless families seeking shelter and work; they cut down trees to build makeshift homes. Others were speculators, buying and selling plots before moving on to new ones. Many Iguazúenses considered the new frontier dangerous, especially after dark, when one could hear the sound of machetes being sharpened. Three people had been slain in the Dos Mil since the beginning of the year, just two months earlier.

One of those killings had brought us to the area that evening in March 2014. Kelly Ferreyra, the director of an Iguazú digital newspaper, La Voz de Cataratas, was invited to observe a crime-scene reconstruction undertaken as part of the murder trial.¹ The killing took place January 12, when 19-year-old Leandro Medeiros was shot in the back of the head during a confrontation between a new group of squatters and earlier settlers; he later died in the hospital. Two suspects were arrested, but as the investigation unfolded, witnesses contradicted their initial testimonies, prompting the judge to call for a reenactment of the night’s events. As we arrived, we saw one police vehicle parked in the field near a small wooden shed and, gathered closer to the dirt road, a dozen or so squatters, mostly women with small children—the witnesses. At the far end of the field, a bonfire was being built to re-create the conditions of visibility on the night of the crime. Kelly was the lone journalist, and while we waited for the rest of the participants in this legal theater to gather, she casually chatted with the young officers assigned to the remote police station on the edge of town. Reconstructing the murder was a slow process. An hour went by, then another, until we saw the flashing blue lights of a caravan of cars bringing Judge Juan Pablo Fernández Rissi and the special-investigations team from Posadas, the provincial capital. While lawyers were setting up their laptops and cameras and witnesses were being instructed about...
their role in the staged event, Kelly approached the judge. Comfortable in the company of this journalist, Rissi complained to her of being powerless against squatters who ignored their eviction papers. He also said that investigations in Iguazú were delayed because the town had only one prosecutor and one court. Rissi trusted Kelly and willingly shared his opinions, certain that she would not publish them. Later that evening, Kelly also spoke with the aunt of the accused. Her nephew’s lawyer had not heard about the reenactment on time and so was unable to attend, she said. The woman was upset with the judge and dissatisfied with the legal process. “Justice is slow,” she said.

Dragging late into the night, the crime-scene reconstruction was a dramatic performance, staged primarily for the participants in the court case. It was also one in an array of techniques, including forensic investigations, ballistic analyses, and autopsy reports, that law enforcement routinely employed to construct and circulate knowledge about crime. When it came to reporting homicides, most journalists in Iguazú turned to press releases distributed by the regional police. Only “trustworthy” reporters—those who would not make the mistake of publishing sensitive information, unconfirmed theories, and opinions circulating behind the scenes—were invited to attend crime-scene reconstructions. Kelly was one of them. During informal conversations with the police, judge, and family of the accused that evening in the Dos Mil, she learned many details about the case and heard heavy criticism of the investigation. Yet her news story that appeared the following morning provided only a concise summary of previously known facts about the case.

This was an instance of a journalist following a “code of silence” (Jussonyte 2015), out of concern for her safety and out of respect for local frameworks of legality and legitimacy. During ethnographic fieldwork in Argentina’s triborder region, most of which I conducted from 2009 to 2011, I documented how journalists covering organized crime, including drug trafficking, money laundering, and contraband smuggling, upheld the unwritten rules of complicity and, instead of investigating, relied on press releases prepared by the security forces. Reporters rarely wrote original crime narratives, and when they did, these were limited to instances of what they called “crimen común” (common crime)—assaults, burglaries, homicides. For poorly trained reporters employed by small media organizations, it was too risky to pursue stories about organized illegal activities, such as drug smuggling, which could sometimes implicate government officials and security agents. A pact of silence, forged between law enforcement and journalists, established the boundaries of public discourse on crime. Although from 2011 to 2014 a series of incidents involving police violence in Iguazú became an opportunity for the media to play a more prominent role of “watchdog journalism” (Waisbord 2000), there persisted a discrepancy between what local reporters knew about these cases and the stories they published. More detailed information did, however, routinely appear in anonymous comments posted online by their readers.

My research shows how crime narratives emerge out of a complex, decentralized process that stretches across several spaces, from the crime scene to the digital media, and involves various social groups—police officers, journalists, and news publics. The public, as understood here, is not the same as the people. It is “the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (Warner 2002, 61). Instead of being a preexisting entity, the public comes into being by virtue of being addressed, when certain objects—in this case, crime—become matters of discussion (Fassin 2015, 599).

Such publics coproduce crime stories along with journalists and the police, and this process depends on the relationships and hierarchies among them. For example, Kelly says that, as a journalist, she knows “hasta qué punto” (how far) she can go when dealing with criminals and with the police. Her connections both enable and limit what she can publish. This is because news is produced within the political, economic, and cultural context that defines the norms of social life in the border region. In Misiones, where some residents, engaged in contraband, and the security forces, sent to prevent illicit flows across borders, are playing hide-and-seek, the media create a patchwork of visibilities and invisibilities, making informal economies illegible to government officials who seek to control them (Jussonyte 2015). Since everyone knows everyone (reporters, security agents, and smugglers live in the same neighborhoods), journalists do this by classifying information into two main categories—“on the record” and “off the record” (Jussonyte 2013). In situations that are characterized by police violence and organized crime, news making depends on creative maneuvering between official reports and public secrets, made possible by diffusing the authorship of the story from the media to their audiences. This is a collaborative process, which I explore from the perspective of journalists: how they tactically use sources in law enforcement to acquire information and how they circumvent the limited content that they are authorized to share by allowing the production of stories to extend to anonymous publics.

Placing this argument in conversation with anthropological analyses of crime, violence, and the media, I propose the concept of crinemcraft as an analytic tool to examine practices through which a particular event becomes crime news. With this term, I mean to capture how media narratives are produced during negotiations among multiple individuals and institutions that work together to translate facts on the ground into authoritative explanations of their significance (see Briggs 2007; Moodie 2010; Tate 2007). Built from scraps of professional expertise and infused with local experience, crime stories in Iguazú press
against the domain of “public secrets,” or “that which is generally known, but cannot be spoken” (Taussig 1999, 50). To be effective storytellers, journalists not only have to learn the techniques of folding singular events into dominant narratives, but also must develop the social knowledge and skills necessary to recognize where not to look and what not to see. To circumvent these constraints, crimecraft is partially outsourced to news publics, which vociferously stitch up the gaps left in published accounts. Online forums and comments sections create a virtual public space, which news readers use to circulate sensitive information and engage in social criticism, questioning the political-economic status quo and thereby making it possible to discuss organized crime, police violence, and corruption. Like gossip (Besnier 2009), these discussions can be seen as a weapon of the weak, a prime site where the disempowered can engage in political resistance. But as I will show, the diffusion of news making to the public, while breaking the code of silence and bypassing censorship, may instigate other forms of violence. Delegitimizing the work of law enforcement, rumors that spread through online comments breed uncertainty about the state’s ability to guarantee security and advocate both private means of protection and violent forms of justice (e.g., Caldeira 2001; Goldstein and Williams Castro 2006).

The gymnastics of journalism

Violence and crime are socially constructed, and the media play an important role in making some of their forms visible while obscuring others (Bishara 2012; Briggs 2007; Coronil and Skurski 2006; Reyes-Foster 2013; Torres 2014). Fully aware of their position as intermediaries holding the power to define the newsworthy, journalists can find their role particularly difficult when the crimes they write about are committed by state actors, such as in cases of police violence. The relationships among reporters, police, and news publics on the Argentine border circumscribe the production of public knowledge. Crimecraft is a particular kind of skilled labor, in which journalists accomplish three tasks at once: maneuver the official legal coordinates that draw the boundary between permitted and outlawed activities, uphold their professional mandate to find and expose the truth, and contend with popular understandings of right and wrong that may or may not align with the law. An Iguazú reporter once called this “the gymnastics of journalism”—knowing how much could be said without risking one’s life or the safety and well-being of one’s family. They weave their stories around meaningful silences, which become clues to their readers.

Writing about the production of historical narratives, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that it “involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production” (1995, xix). Power is key in the process through which “facts of the matter” become stories, because the differential exercise of power makes some narratives possible while silencing others. For Trouillot, “mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis” (48). I build on these points to underline that silence on issues of public secrecy is meaningful and that such silence is crucial for understanding how asymmetries of power condition crimecraft in Iguazú. When choosing how to frame their stories, journalists negotiate with their editors and sources, including government figures, police officers, and civil society actors, as well as with their publics. Often, the resulting narrative extracts violence from the thicker historical, political, and economic milieu and presents it as a product of pathological subjectivities, reifying what Charles L. Briggs calls “an oppressive faux cartography” (2007, 334), a standard script that uses a limited number of subject positions arranged in spatial, moral, and legal terms. Enacted across power differentials, crimecraft in the news media both draws from and adds to broader discourses and practices of criminalization (Merry 1998, 2002; Schneider and Schneider 2008).

Undermining the centrality of the government in producing and authorizing crime narratives, I emphasize the multiplicity of voices involved in negotiating them. This process of negotiation involves news publics, which are created through discursive engagements—interpellated, or hailed (Althusser 1972), by particular kinds of crime stories. Rather than passively consuming news narratives, publics actively use them (Goldstein and Williams Castro 2006). News stories objectify and constitute publics by means of reflexive, performative, and discursive practices (Himpele 2008, 23). As an analytic framework, crimecraft both exposes the interdependence between an act of crime and its narrative and blurs the distinction between the production and reception of this narrative, smudging the line separating authorship and audience. Rather than mere spectators in a staged play, publics are crucial participants in legitimating discourses about crime. And not only that: publics move swiftly across the fluid boundary between events and their capture in the narrative, from reading to acting, from online to offline. To paraphrase Trouillot, while some of us debate what the story is or was, others take it into their own hands (1995, 153). Like journalists who maneuver between being cultural producers and social actors, writing stories about crime in the same community where they live, publics mobilize in response to particular narratives that address them, but their action is not limited to the confines of newspaper comments or television call-in shows. Stories about rising crime do not only foster the discourse of mano dura (iron-fisted) policies, but also—in communities where residents are upset about the absence of government-provided security and justice—spill into the streets in the form of protest and can lead to acts of vigilantism.
Crime in the Argentine media

At the turn of the 21st century, Argentine journalists played an important role in constructing dominant representations of criminality. In the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s and the ensuing economic crisis of 2001, which severed the trust between citizens and the government, the fall of the middle class became a recurrent theme in the news media. The country's political elites habitually described social unrest, including food riots and looting, precipitated by the crisis and resultant in hyperinflation, in terms of delincuencia (crime) (Auyero 2007; DuBois 2005), and the press circulated these state discourses, creating a moral panic (Cohen 1972). Mainstream media uncritically linked violent crime with the lower classes and limited their coverage of the middle and upper classes' unlawful activities to “white-collar crime,” such as corruption. Only in the past decade, when highly mediated scandals brought attention to the extent of international drug trafficking in Argentina, did these boundaries between lower- and upper-class crime become blurred (Donna Goldstein 2012, 220). By the time I started fieldwork in 2008, the iterative nature of reporting on crime in the national media had intensified anxieties about rising insecurity to such a degree that for many Argentine citizens, the fear of crime became the organizing principle of daily life (Serí 2012). In parallel to developments in urban Brazil (Caldeira 2001), the talk of crime circulating through the media pushed affluent residents to enclose themselves in the zones of privatized security. Although the country's news media were concerned in the last decade with many issues—such as their fierce battle with the government over antimonopoly legislation—insecurity overshadowed political factionalism, appearing in the headlines across the broad spectrum of the press. Scandalous crime coverage was co-opted for every political agenda: it demonstrated the state’s demise, emphasizing its failure to protect citizens, just as effectively as it shored up the state’s power, justifying the securitization and militarization of everyday life.

Yet the circulation of news stories creates not one but multiple publics. Each public decodes messages from its unique social position, using what Stuart Hall (1980) referred to as dominant, oppositional, or negotiated ciphers. In Iguazú, stories about rising crime and insecurity in Argentina’s urban centers were read from the perspective of a peripheral community, historically marginalized by the federal government and criminalized by the mass media. Instead of joining their compatriots as an anxious and fearful national public, demanding mano dura policies to solve the problem of skyrocketing crime rates, Iguazúenses used mainstream news to reverse the dominant geography of blame that had historically implicated them as deviant subjects, leading outlaw lives on one of Argentina’s “dangerous” frontiers (Gordillo and Leguizamón 2002; Markoff and Baretta 2006). Foreign and national media popularly portray the triborder area as the “frontera caliente” (hot border), where people are represented as routinely smuggling contraband, laundering money, and engaging in other criminalized activities (Ferradás 2004; Grimson 2002). Local journalists became concerned that these negative representations threatened the regional economy, which depends on tourism to the Puerto Iguazú National Park, and in 2011 began regularly using dominant narratives about violent crime in the capital city as a proof that, unlike Buenos Aires, Iguazú was safe (Jusionyte 2015).

Official government numbers corroborated their position. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census, Misiones consistently ranked among the provinces with the lowest incidence of crime. Journalists also used their personal experiences to dismiss violent crime as a nonissue in Iguazú. While some of them remembered run-ins with criminals in big cities, including being robbed at gunpoint, they never had such experiences in the border area. “Puerto Iguazú is a virgin land for criminals,” one radio reporter told me in 2010. “They steal your shoes or your motor scooter, they break into your house, but that is all.” Unlike people living in urban centers, nobody in Iguazú would get killed for two pesos or for a pair of shoes, he said. Yet Iguazú was by no means crime-free. Burglaries, assaults, homicides, and incidents of domestic violence were frequently reported by the local media. But, like the coverage of international organized crime, these local narratives relied heavily on sources in law enforcement and usually provided mere “facts” established by the police without reflecting on the deteriorating security situation or criticizing the government. Aware that regional, national, and foreign press could copy their publications and damage the image of their hometown as an attractive tourist destination, the editors and reporters of La Voz de Cataratas and other local media tactically downplayed the extent of crime in the area.

Although such selective crime coverage hints at the discretion that journalists had in choosing between making news and maintaining silence, their agency was very limited. Even when they would have liked to speak up, journalists had second thoughts. In postdictatorship Argentina, activities of law enforcement, from federal security forces to the local police, continued to be shielded by public secrecy. Although powerful nationwide media organizations occasionally launched independent investigations and uncovered large-scale corruption linking the state’s political and legal institutions to criminal enterprises, in small towns in the country's interior, where the press is weak and anonymity impossible, journalists hesitated to break the code of silence. Their publications could put them at risk of losing their jobs and possibly their lives. Under these circumstances, crimecraft diffused among multiple social groups and extended to virtual space. Scattering the authorship of the story to anonymous
commentators relieved journalists from potential dangers involved in taking sides on contested issues, thereby enabling open criticism of criminal police practices.

As with the new social media, such as Twitter and YouTube, people used the online forums in Iguazú’s digital newspapers as pragmatic tools for sharing information and as venues for expressing alternative political imaginaries (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Fattal 2014; González de Bustamante and Relly 2014; Juris 2012; Postill 2014). Although residents also participated in local radio and especially politicized television call-in shows, which were used to pressure municipal government and other state actors into delivering social services (Jusionyte 2014), they were much more outspoken online, where constraints of the limited schedule of live programming were lifted, allowing people to join ongoing discussions around the clock. The popularity of online media as a site for producing distributed narrative also extended across the boundaries of social class. Even Iguazuenses who did not have computers or an Internet connection at home could often access the web at their workplace in the town’s tourism-dominated economy: resorts, hotels, tour companies, and other establishments catering to domestic and international travelers. In 2011, the website of La Voz de Cataratas had 15,000 daily visitors, about four times the number of subscribers to the monopolistic local cable television channel; by 2015, the number of visitors exceeded 40,000. In a town with a population of just over 82,000, these numbers were significant. Sometimes expressing discontent in online news forums was not enough, and Iguazuenses took their criticism to the streets, participating in large public demonstrations.

Police in the crossfire

Founded in 2005 and staffed by an entirely female crew, the comisaría de la mujer (women’s police station) in Iguazú operates from a triangle-shaped redbrick building at the entrance of a residential neighborhood (see Figure 1). I passed by it numerous times in 2010, when I was living a few blocks down the street. The light inside the comisaría was on day and night, and a blue-and-white Chevy sedan with police logos was often parked diagonally across the open door. Amid growing concerns with domestic violence, sexual abuse, and human trafficking in the Argentine Northeast, the station aimed to help women who experienced gender-based violence to gain access to legal protection. But, as Sarah Hautzinger (2007) shows in her study of the all-female police stations in Brazil, there was a discrepancy between the promise and the reality, resulting from the contradictory mandate of these institutions: to provide both repressive functions and social services. Hautzinger found that these police stations were often counterproductive, revictimizing women in the process of filing complaints, thus further marginalizing them. Unlike the all-female police stations in Brazil, the comisaría de la mujer in Iguazú only registered women’s complaints and did not provide them with further assistance. For legal and psychological counseling, survivors turned to civic associations and volunteer groups. But even the comisaría’s exclusive focus on law enforcement and the outsourcing of social services to nongovernmental actors did not bestow authority on the women’s police, which remained ancillary to other police units.

When I entered the comisaría for the first time, I was with Vivi and Dario, two reporters from the local television channel CVI Canal 5. One evening, they received a call from the studio informing them that a minor had been abused in an outlying barrio. We immediately rushed to the hospital, where doctors were examining the victim, a six-year-old girl. Respecting her privacy, the reporters decided to leave the hospital and instead go to the comisaría, where the victim would be taken to file a complaint. About half an hour later several policemen brought the girl and her older brother to the station and presented them to Vanesa Ledesma, the officer in charge of the comisaría. We waited behind closed doors for what could have been an hour. When Ledesma finally spoke to us, she said she could not register the complaint of abuse because both the girl and her brother were minors. The children’s father was at work in Eldorado, a town about 100 kilometers south of Iguazú, and would not be back until the following morning. It was getting late, and Dario and Vivi were eager to leave, so they did. I was with them again the next day when the reporters filmed Ledesma’s public statement. According to Ledesma, the girl’s mother had been drinking at a neighbor’s house in Barrio 1ero de Mayo. A man who was there, she said, had taken the girl outside and abused her, and her older brother saw what happened and called the police. Their father filed the complaint. Ledesma did not specify what kind of abuse the man was accused of, nor did she give further details about the case.

As this case demonstrates, crimecraft begins with the contact between journalists and police officers (see Figure 2). What follows are long periods of waiting, gathering information, and negotiating among the actors involved—law enforcement personnel, reporters, victims, witnesses, legal experts, and news publics. During the interactions between police and journalists that I observed and participated in, I noticed a clear distinction between information that was circulated behind the scenes and what was eventually said on the record. Reporters and police officers informally discussed the details of the crime, sharing rumors, suspicions, and opinions. It was during these casual conversations that the police and media agreed on the framework of the official interview: the questions to be asked and those to be avoided. These authorized performances were recorded, then published or broadcast. I never saw journalists trespass the boundary between public information and public secrets, circumscribing the content.
of crime stories. There were, however, other ways to extend discussions of crime, skirting the limits set by police authorization. Detaching news discourse from official government sources was especially critical when law enforcement agents were implicated in a crime, as the following case illustrates.

In 2012, Mariela García, a traffic officer, was shot and killed by her abusive partner as she was filing a complaint against him at the comisaría de la mujer. The killer, Mario Muga, was an adjutant sergeant in the press office of the regional police. *La Voz de Cataratas* ran a story titled “Policeman Killed His Partner When She Was Filing Complaint of Abuse,” which listed facts verified by a senior police official in charge of the investigation (*La Voz de Cataratas* 2012). The article claimed that the couple had been living separately for the previous three months and that the family court had issued Mariela a restraining order against Mario. The news of this “femicidio” not only made headlines in all local media but also immediately spread to the regional press based in Posadas and as far as the headquarters of
the national media in Buenos Aires. La Nación, one of the oldest Argentine dailies, described how Mario entered the comisaría around midnight, withdrew a shotgun from under his clothes, and fired right in front of an officer who was taking down Mariela's information. The bullet hit Mariela in the back. The article noted that Mario ran away from the crime scene on a scooter but was captured a few hours later without resisting arrest; Mariela died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital (La Nación 2012). La Nación reiterated the same details and repeated the same quotes that were circulated in the local press. Although some stories published about the incident were more thorough than others, they all outlined the contours of the known story—the "facts" that journalists acquired from sources in the police.

Local readers of La Voz de Cataratas collaborated to extend this official narrative by contributing additional information and critical social commentary. They interpreted the situation based on their embodied experiences and their previous encounters with police. Some of them knew Mariela or Mario from having interacted with them in formal policing settings; others were their friends or acquaintances. Many Iguazuenses who read the story in La Voz de Cataratas lived in the same neighborhoods as the reporters who wrote for the paper. "Small town, big hell," one journalist had once told me when I asked why the media in Iguazú were reluctant to pursue crime stories. Many residents were connected through extended kinship and labor networks, restricting their ability to write about contested issues. But the social proximity between news journalists and their publics in Iguazú also meant that they shared common knowledge, accumulated through years of experience. They readily tapped into this joint reserve to understand the broader context and trace the details that were missing from the story. To borrow the distinction suggested by Rihan Yeh (2012, 716), readers of La Voz de Cataratas formed a popular "hearsay public," which had different logics of representation, circulation, evidence, and authority than the bourgeois-type public, modeled after the bourgeois public sphere and based on rational debate, as described by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Instead of being backed by the authority of the state, responsibility for rumors is distributed among a group that is anonymous yet cohesive.

In the aftermath of Mariela's murder, Iguazuenses turned to online comments to express their frustration with the low standards maintained by the police force, which allegedly recruited people without adequate background checks. A commenter using the name "veci" asked, "How can it be that a violent person and a MURDERER is part of the police? Don't they do psychological tests before accepting them?" Others added that Mario's weapon should have been confiscated when Mariela first complained of domestic violence. People were angry about the ineffectiveness of the justice system, noting that even though Mariela had made numerous complaints against Mario, nobody helped her. "Not even inside the comisaría are you protected," wrote "un vecino" (a neighbor or a resident). Some accused the comisaria of not taking complaints seriously and even covering them up when police officers were involved. Commenters noted that they could not trust the police, which "Ciudadano" (citizen) described as "corrupt murderers and beaters." Another reader, "Alejandra," complained, "How many more women will find themselves in the same situation???? And many are afraid and don't file complaints because they think that it would make things worse!! What impotence!" "Fer" agreed: "Outrageous!!! The worst is that it was a chronicle of a death foretold, and once again the victim was left alone!!! Where is protection for the victims of violence?" Few defended the police. "Anonimo" wrote, "Unfortunately, the law clearly says that without signs and/or witnesses you can't eradicate a complaint of abuse; it is not the fault of the police; it's the law that is bad and should be changed." Some blamed the female officers for not acting to protect Mariela. "Jorge" even called for "outside patrols by male police officers to protect the female comisaria," expressing the dominant machista ideology that frames discussions about women's role in law enforcement and the military in Latin America and beyond.

Although the public discourse following Mariela's murder centered on a particular incident of gendered violence and ineffective police work, it extended to address broader concerns with insecurity—the dissatisfaction with the justice system, which was again accused of being too slow, and anger with widespread corruption in law enforcement. Numerous readers called for reinstating the death penalty for male police officers to protect the female comisaria," expressing the dominant machista ideology that frames discussions about women's role in law enforcement and the military in Latin America and beyond. In 2014, out of 277 murders of women in Argentina, 16 were committed in Misiones, and the absolute majority, nine out of 10, were carried out by the victim's current or former partner (Territorio Digital 2015). In Iguazú, some female journalists who were themselves victims of domestic violence, or who knew women suffering abuse by their partners, reported ominous statistics of gender-based crime and explicitly encouraged survivors to file complaints. Yet the reasons behind widespread violence against women were not investigated in the news media, and the press's attention to several disturbing cases, such as Mariela's, confirmed only that, unless domestic violence resulted in death, the issue was steeped in silence.
Legacies of brutality

We must situate the relationship between law enforcement and the media in Iguazú within the broader history of police violence in Argentina. During the last authoritarian regime (1976–83), the police served as one of the government’s primary forces for waging the Dirty War, as it is known, against people designated as “subversives”—a category that included youth activists, trade unionists, and journalists (Feitlowitz 1998; Robben 2005; Timerman 2002). The media were an important propaganda tool, circulating the regime’s official pronouncements, but they were also a dangerous adversary that could offer alternative narratives. For this reason, they had to be controlled. By mid-1976, about 100 of Argentina’s most prominent reporters had been forced to leave, and over the course of what the military junta called “the process of national reorganization,” many other journalists were “disappeared.” The secret police routinely kidnapped alleged subversives in unmarked Ford Falcons, tortured them in clandestine detention centers, often located in police stations, and killed them, dropping their bodies from airplanes into the ocean.

To this day, Argentine police remain ambivalent toward the military dictatorship, which officers vaguely refer to as “those past times” or “the time of repression,” neutralizing and facilitating the acceptance of the regime and its methods as a necessary evil (Seri 2012, 86–87). Police forces played a crucial role in the junta’s atrocities, providing the largest number of perpetrators after the army. In the first years following the return to democracy in 1983, Argentines saw police abuse as a residue of the dictatorship, but it soon became clear that it had come to stay. Reports by the Center for Legal and Social Studies, based in Buenos Aires, document police violence, torture, and extrajudicial executions, as well as more mundane everyday procedures, such as irregular searches, arbitrary detentions, and abuse of force. No wonder many Argentines tend not to trust the police. In the early 1990s only a quarter of the population positively viewed law enforcement and the justice system, but by 2003 the number had dropped even further, to 14 percent (Tiscornia 2004, 79). As a former employee of the army who at that time worked for the Iguazú municipal government told me, “People don’t respect the police. They don’t respect the uniform anymore.” He voiced a concern that was widespread among Iguazúenses: the police never recovered their authority lost during the dictatorship. As Sofía Tiscornia (2004, 88) argues, administrative measures of social control, which create zones of legal exception, provoke no reaction in Argentine public opinion, which remains highly sensitive to spectacular occurrences of police violence; in the name of public security, popular calls for “saturating the streets with the police” are unambiguously loud. In a society concerned with insecurity, criminal suspects are rhetorically recast as the new “subversives,” construed as the threat to the nation, justifying extralegal measures against them.

In Iguazú, the relationship between local journalists, news publics, and the police developed against the background of ambivalent public memories about the effects of the military rule in the region. According to Nunca más, the report by Argentina’s National Commission on the Disappeared (CNDP), the police operated three out of five secret detention centers in Misiones: the Provincial Police Information Service, Police Station No. 1, and the Federal Police Office; another one belonged to the National Gendarmerie (CNDP 1986, 177). These stations were rather small and often used as transit stops for captives being taken to the central provinces, where there were more sophisticated torture facilities. Misiones was not home to many people who by default fell into the category of subversives—leftist youth and trade union militants. Residents who lived in Iguazú in the late 1970s and early 1980s repeatedly told me that, while the junta’s authoritarian policies were by no means absent, they were rather thinly applied in the borderlands.

Apart from lingering ambivalence toward the role of law enforcement under the military regime, there is another important reason that journalists in Iguazú were cautious when reporting on police violence: the overlap between journalists and law enforcement. Iguazú has a long history of heavy law enforcement presence, having been founded in the beginning of the 20th century as a military outpost. In addition to the regional police and its specialized units, Iguazú is home to an assemblage of security agencies, casually referred to as las fuerzas, that include the Naval Prefecture, the National Gendarmerie, the Federal Police, the Airport Security Police, and the Ninth Mountain Infantry Regiment of the Argentine army. Because law enforcement is so dense in Iguazú, most residents have family members, friends, or neighbors who work for the federal forces or for the local police.

Not only do journalists and military or police agents there come from the same social backgrounds, but some even switch back and forth between the two occupations. For instance, Javier, who in 2010 was a street reporter for Radio Yguazú, had served in the military, while Yanina, a journalist at Radio Cataratas, was hired to work at the police press office. Both Javier and Yanina left their careers in the fuerzas and chose to stay in the media, yet their cases show that the boundary between journalism and law enforcement in Iguazú is permeable. Individual biographies and extensive social ties between residents who work for the news media and those who serve in the repressive apparatus create conditions for complicity when it comes to exposing illegal police practices.

Many journalists whom I interviewed emphasized the media’s symbiotic relationship with the fuerzas—officers provided a constant flow of information for reporters, who copied and pasted the scripts that were prepared for them,
while the press helped the *fuerzas* to publicize successful operations of intercepted drug traffickers, establishing them as powerful and efficient border-enforcement institutions. The existence of such mutually beneficial ties thickened the code of silence, thereby severely limiting press coverage of police violence.

Often, news media in democratic countries see their role as providing the voice to the people affected by government wrongs, including those abused by the police. But when deciding how to deploy stories as tools to demand accountability, journalists use discretion. Their choices are not always motivated by the code of silence but depend on the legitimacy of the justice system and on their personal experiences.

Consider this confession from a media professional in Iguazú. “Once I witnessed how [the police] beat the thieves,” she said. When the journalist and the police officer later spoke, the latter downplayed the significance of the incident and suggested that the journalist “didn’t see anything.” “I saw the beating and I can write about what I see,” the reporter remembered protesting, but she did not publish anything about it. “What for?” she said. “Some people deserve a good beating.” When I objected that the media are responsible for monitoring abuses of power, she replied, “And what about the thieves?” She was frustrated that criminals were commonly let go without punishment. This comment shows that Iguazú journalists succumb to the same sentiment that characterizes the discourse of injustice spread throughout Latin America during the era of sweeping neoliberal reforms (Daniel Goldstein 2012). Both the police and the media occasionally agree on the ineffectiveness of the formal justice system and turn a blind eye to or even facilitate extralegal measures of crime control. Although it is unusual to hear journalists express outright support for tough-on-crime policies, their inconclusive stories open up spaces for debate where anonymous commenters can endorse *mano dura* measures.

**Blind spots**

Crimecraft does not unfold in a sociopolitical vacuum but is negotiated and contested within the broader framework of security. In the triborder region, where organized crime has a strong presence, both the police and the media are entangled in a network of complicity, one that constrains news coverage. The three cases that I discuss next reveal how journalists have blind spots when it comes to some crimes, even when they draw public attention and mobilize protest. This acceptance of limits as to how much they see and show arises from the personal risks that reporters encounter when they act as messengers. Diffusing news making to the publics in these situations is particularly effective, yet it can have unpredicted and dangerous consequences.

The homicide of Taty Piñeiro and the alleged suicide of Hernán Céspedes are key cases for understanding how media coverage of police work in Iguazú is circumscribed by connections between crime and local politics. In July 2012, a high school student from a humble family, nicknamed Taty, was abused and murdered in the town of Puerto Esperanza, about 60 kilometers south of Iguazú. The suspect, Hernán, who was detained and held in a police station, was found dead in his cell just hours before he was scheduled to testify. The youth had purportedly used a shoelace to commit suicide. Taty’s relatives did not believe that Hernán was the mastermind of the crime, only its executioner. Both families joined together to seek justice, suspecting that Taty was killed during the birthday party of a politician’s son and that Hernán was brutally silenced to hide the truth. People were outraged, sensing a political cover-up and denouncing the impunity of “hijos de poder” (the children of the powerful) (Carbajal 2013). Locals knew about private parties organized by the politician’s son and his clique, who would invite girls from poor families, sexually abuse them, and threaten them not to file complaints. They shared this information through anonymous comments on web-based news articles, but that was not enough. In the aftermath of Taty’s murder, residents marched in large numbers to protest government inaction in the face of violence against women. With anger and criticism spilling from news forums into the streets, the boundary between online discourse and offline action was blurred.

It was not the first case in which the police were suspected of covering up crime. About six years earlier the death of David Gómez also pointed to the involvement of law enforcement. In 2006, the 18-year-old Iguazúense went missing after attending a party at his classmate’s home; two days later his corpse was found hanging from a tree near Puerto Libertad, about 40 kilometers south of Iguazú. The police claimed it was a suicide. “As if in Puerto Iguazú the police did not do anything,” commented Argentina’s major left-of-center daily, *Página/12*, on the unlikely location of David’s supposed suicide: the youth was found far away from where he lived, in a place he had never been to before, on privately owned forest land (Cecchi 2007). The victim’s body was full of hematomas—there were signs of severe beating on his abdomen, genitals, and knees—but the forensic report established that the wounds were inflicted after his death. No photos of his injuries were taken during the autopsy, and the evidence, including David’s clothes, mysteriously disappeared. A witness showed up, admitting that she saw two police officers beating David, but she withdrew her testimony the following day, after allegedly receiving threats. Then his friends came forward, telling about David’s confrontation with another youth who had recently joined the police. Despite all this, the prosecutor and the judge assigned to the case refused to confiscate police records, saying that “such a
measure is excessive.” Later, a hypothesis suggested that the police mistook Gómez for David Galeano, who had previously been brutally beaten by the police of Eldorado. Galeano was warned that if he filed a complaint, the police would kill him. Gómez and Galeano shared the same given name and age, and they both lived in the same barrio—as La Voz de Cataratas put it, “the data matches” (La Voz de Cataratas 2006). But half a year later the case was closed, classified as a suicide. Unwilling to compromise, David’s father continues to seek justice in Iguazú, organizing annual marches in his son’s memory and against police impunity. Like residents who gathered to support the relatives of Taty, he is extending social protest from online forums to the streets.

Many journalists refer to the Gómez case as a police cover-up. One reporter told me in 2014, “Even now I tell the officers that this kid was killed by the police.” She recalled how an acquaintance working for the police showed her photographs of bruises on David’s body. She does not hide her conviction that the police are guilty, but says that officers laugh at her when she brings up the issue. “I don’t have evidence,” she said. “They know that I won’t do anything without having evidence.” Evidence is an important factor that limits crimecraft in the media. On another occasion the same journalist told me that she calls the police to verify the information she receives through informal tips. “I already have the news from elsewhere,” she said. “I only need the source to say whether it is true or not.” When the answer to her question is silence, she takes it as a confirmation, yet one that is too weak to move forward. If a plausible story is not verified by a trusted source, editors do not publish it, since they want to avoid becoming caught up in the unfolding events.

Managing the release of information is a matter of safety for journalists. When reporting on crime and especially possible police involvement or complicity, withholding information is strategic. Niko Besnier (1989) suggested that one of the functions of withholding information is to manipulate the audience into becoming coproducers of the story. The practice of distributing authorship of crime stories between the media and their anonymous publics obscures the agency of journalists as the sole authors of crime news and thus protects them from possible retaliation. In Iguazú, participants in online news forums are well aware of what can and cannot be said, and they know how to read between the lines. Journalists regularly do not even need to name the suspect alleged to be involved in a crime because news readers imaginatively draw from bits of local knowledge and rumors to complement the information that is provided. Besnier (2009) noted that gossip adds to the cohesiveness of the social group: only insiders can figure out whom the gossip is about. These two characteristics of online commentary as a form of gossip—the involvement of the publics in the narrative process and the circumscription of those who can participate to a local community—protects journalists from accusations of libel and at the same time foments the sense of common cause among the town’s residents. What is less clear, however, is whether journalists withhold information purposefully, anticipating that their publications will spur public discussion to fill in the gaps, or whether this is a side effect of the constraints on the local media. In part, crimecraft in Iguazú is limited because busy journalists do not have time to thoroughly gather details on the cases and resort to circulating news “packages” prepared by the police press office. It is therefore possible that the ensuing discussions online are not part of the journalists’ plans. But neither are they unexpected. Digital news forums extend and feed face-to-face gossip. Both are linguistic activities that draw on anonymity, vagueness, and clues to enable people to create public narrative in spaces shielded from the surveillance of those who hold political power (Besnier 2009, 10) and control the legitimate discourse on crime.

Notable in cases involving the police discussed thus far, evasiveness through withholding information is even more relevant in the coverage of organized crime. In May 2013 the internal investigations team of the Misiones police was sent to Iguazú to work on the case of Carlos Alberto Ojeda, the chief of the regional police investigations brigade, who was accused of having connections to a Paraguayan drug dealer and to criminals who carried out several robberies in Iguazú. Although the prosecutor asked for Ojeda’s arrest early in the investigation, the court did not immediately take action. Instead, Ojeda was first transferred to another position in Posadas, where he was eventually detained without bail. In the beginning the media complained that Ojeda’s case was handled with “hermetismo inviolable” (inviolable secrecy) (Territorio Digital 2013). When journalists of the major provincial daily El Territorio reached the chief of the Iguazú police, he told them, “We have to let the justice do its work. . . . I don’t want to give my opinion about what is happening” (Territorio Digital 2013). Witness testimonies leaked to the press documented how Ojeda’s dark Peugeot 405 was spotted in front of the Paraguayan drug dealer’s house every Friday morning and how the officer received envelopes, allegedly containing bribes for not investigating drug trafficking. They also included comments by one of the suspected robbers who, when detained, said Ojeda offered them protection. The high-ranking officer purportedly alerted robbers of police actions and freed up zones from patrols in areas where crimes were to be committed. The former chief of the investigations unit was formally accused of “being a ‘partícipe secundario’ [secondary accomplice] in two cases of armed robbery, aggravated by his position as a public officer,” and of “failing to fulfill his duties as a public official” (La Voz de Cataratas 2013b).
Ojeda’s case precipitated a full-blown crisis in Iguazú, where police allegedly participated in “a rising crime wave” (Territorio Digital 2013). Authorities in Posadas had already been concerned about the situation in the northwestern part of the province after two suspicious incidents in 2012: the dubious suicide of Hernán Céspedes and an escape of prisoners during a change of guard. When Ojeda’s case hit the news, law enforcement leadership in Posadas acted by removing all top officials in Iguazú and relocating them to other municipalities around Misiones. To the dismay of local rank-and-file police, the chief, who was accused of transferring Ojeda to cover up the scandal, was assigned to a new position in the provincial capital (La Voz de Cataratas 2013a). In conversations I had with Iguazúenses, they expressed resentment by comparing Ojeda’s prosecution and the cosmetic personnel changes in the regional police to trimming branches off a tree.

The same bitterness permeated comments about Ojeda that readers posted online. “Vecino” wrote, “The thread is always cut where it is the thinnest. When will the other bosses go?” “Kpd” agreed: “Logically, there are bigger fish, but they won’t all fall together.” Another “vecino” added with irony, “Great. They change the criminals so now we have new ones. They are funny.” Iguazúenses used the discourse of corruption to draw connections between government officials and the police, creating a narrative in which law enforcement, organized crime, and institutional politics were tightly knit together. Anger at the corrupt officials who facilitated crime resulted in calls for the return of the military, as in the following comment: “Let’s go set all police stations on fire, and let the military return, so that we can walk peacefully down the street. . . . In their times there were no thieves.” News media also called for communal and private forms of justice: “I would never go to the Police. In case of crime I will use my own hands, with the help of some Paraguayans. You pay them and for a little money you can make a thief, an abuser ‘disappear.’” Such online comments called not for public protest but for vigilantism.

None of these incidents was easy to report in the local media. Kelly, who wrote about Ojeda’s case for La Voz de Cataratas, said she was afraid because “la droga es [un tema] jodido” (the topic of drugs is fucked up). She could publish the story only because she received information directly from trusted sources in the police. She understood the seriousness of the situation and, as a measure of protection, shared her data with journalists in El Territorio. Since the story simultaneously appeared in different media, Kelly hoped that getting rid of the messenger would no longer be effective at drowning the message and would make her into a less likely target. Her responsible handling of information in a situation that implicated the police as the perpetrators built trust between her and other police officials, who were often comfortable sharing more details with her than with her colleagues, as we saw in the vignette at the beginning of this article. “This is the result of years of work,” Kelly admitted.

Journalists said that in their interactions with the police and other security forces, they followed a “código” (code). “You must have código, trust, and commitment,” one explained. Following a code means “writing without exaggerating matters,” “without saying more or saying too little.” This last phrase is especially telling. As mediators between the police and the public, that is, by maintaining the fine balance between revealing too little and too much, journalists adhere to a code that is key to understanding why and how crimecraft is kept from expanding too far beyond the official narrative (see Figure 3). Collaborative engagement in crimecraft destabilizes the code of silence imposed on discussing police violence, but it does not subvert it. The history of authoritarian police practices directed at news journalists in Argentina and the close-knit social ties between reporters and police in a small border town continue to affect the local media, circumscribing their coverage of crime.

The diffusion of crimecraft takes some responsibility off the shoulders of journalists and saves the media from publishing unfounded claims and accusations. Readers, often commenting anonymously or under pseudonyms, say what journalists generally know but do not have evidence of. The projection of a public, however, is an operation infused with existing power dynamics: “A public seems to be self-organized by discourse, but in fact requires preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (Warner 2002, 75). Online news comments might look like a public sphere of collaborative news making, but journalists are always behind the scenes; editors approve comments before they are posted online, thus controlling how far crimecraft can extend. Yet in my work with news editors in Iguazú, I rarely witnessed them censoring online comments (when they did, it was usually for profane language), allowing most of them to appear—including the calls for vigilante justice, the torching of police stations, and the return of the military. The practice of outsourcing the making of crime stories to anonymous hear say publics allows journalists to bypass constraints imposed by professional norms of news reporting as well as by public secrecy. Expressing their criticism of law enforcement and advocating private forms of justice against criminal suspects and against corrupt authorities, news readers can participate in a public discussion that is otherwise severely curtailed by the conditions of everyday media production.

Caught in the middle

One of the journalists I came to know well in Iguazú lived in a building that was tucked in between the residence of a suspected drug dealer and a house owned by a bribe-taking border officer. She found her situation ironic, but it was
not surprising, considering how many Iguazúenses were participating in the informal economy, working for the fuerzas, or both. Reporters are inevitably entangled in the stories of violence they tell—through relationships that underlie news production as well as through anticipated and tangible effects of their circulation. Media narratives are neither created nor distributed in an empty social milieu; thus, representing crime entails risks to those who do it. Two advocacy organizations, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders, note that Latin America is one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist: in Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and elsewhere since the mid-1990s, the body of the messenger has too often become another signifier in the regional economies of violent crime. In a small border town in northern Argentina, legacies of the country’s military dictatorship, complemented by ongoing drug trafficking and police corruption, frame how journalists work with law enforcement officers. They collaborate every day in crimecraft by following “the code,” which establishes boundaries between secret and public knowledge, leaving difficult subjects, such as police violence, in the media’s blind spot.

Producing knowledge involves the participation of multiple actors who shape the story from their uneven positions in society. Yet this is not unique to crime scripting. Other public narratives, including political and social gossip, are also predicated on distributed action. Here, my particular focus on crimecraft has provided a means to link the study of crime to that of the media. Uncovering negotiations between secrecy and disclosure among law enforcement, media, and news publics allowed me to examine how journalistic practices result in defining only some violations of the law as crimes, revealing how the press participates in the social production of criminality. When journalists are limited in what they can report, online news forums extend their narratives and thus expand crime stories by including more details of particular cases and allowing for broader discussions and social critique. These collaborative attempts to fill in the gaps left by official press releases through readers’ comments provide alternative versions of possible truths. The flexible discursive space between bare facts and explanatory narratives is a zone of discretion, which protects journalists who report on crime.

In Iguazú, media organizations are primarily local and privately owned, and it is difficult to guarantee the anonymity of journalists and of their sources. My ethnographic study documents how, to protect themselves, journalists often leave crime stories unfinished: their reports give clues for further interpretation by the public, which eagerly shares its knowledge and opinions to fill in the missing parts of the story. Authorship of crime narratives becomes diffuse, stretching from the police to the media and to the news publics, from crime scenes to online discussion forums to street protests. News publics, formed through the circulation of crime narratives, participate in crimecraft both on- and offline. Crimecraft enables discourses that may be met with criticism if authored by journalists, such as calls for the militarization of society, for tough-on-crime measures, and for vigilante justice.

The outrage at police inaction and brutality in Iguazú is no longer limited to angry comments on the web—in early 2015, Iguazúenses took justice into their own hands by severely beating up a thief caught robbing a house before they turned him over to the police; photos of his
blood-covered body went viral on the Internet. Crimecraft can loop from online social commentary to peaceful protest marches or brutal extrajudicial practices, returning once again to the virtual space. The dynamics of these conversions is an important issue wherein the interests of media and police ethnographers converge.

Notes

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1. Journalists are public figures and generally sign their articles, so I use their real names rather than pseudonyms.
2. Data for the years 2006–8 was retrieved in November 2013 from the online database maintained by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos de la República Argentina, at http://www.indec.mecon.ar.
3. The CPJ’s and RSF’s annual reports, which count journalists who are imprisoned, disappeared, or killed in different countries, can be accessed at https://www.cpj.org and https://rsf.org/en, respectively.

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