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On and Off the Record: The Production of Legitimacy in an Argentine Border Town

Based on ethnographic research in Puerto Iguazú, an Argentine town bordering Brazil and Paraguay, this article explores how journalists maneuver between stories for, on, and off the record to maintain a locally valid boundary between law and crime. Journalists occupy a multifaceted position in the Iguazú community: as residents, they often participate in the informal circulation of legal and illegal goods across the border; as cultural producers, they create representations about it. Coverage relating to informal trade depends on local schemes of legality and legitimacy that juxtapose the rights and rules for those living in this small border community with national legislation, which disadvantages the remote town and serves to obstruct cross-border exchanges. Due to the discrepancy between local understanding of legality and national laws, many potentially newsworthy illegal exchanges are not addressed in the media. On the border, where consensus regarding the legality and legitimacy of many common practices is unstable, this article shows how local news production plays an important part in determining what is legal, illegal, legitimate, or illicit.

For the Record: A Journalist with a Camera

Zooming in on a landmass across Río Paraná, the camera moves past an abandoned convention center and focuses on a green and yellow landmark, a monumental version of the border demarcation signs found throughout Latin America. Its colors blend with the surrounding Brazilian subtropical jungle. As the camera swiftly turns in a clockwise direction, it pans over Río Iguazú and the lush vegetation, barely spotting another marker: painted in sky blue and white, an obelisk built in 1903 to celebrate Argentine national sovereignty. Finally, as the camera glides further to the right and returns across Río Paraná, it captures a red, white and blue Paraguayan signpost, rising tall above the river port.

“We will share the experience of crossing by boat from Puerto Presidente Franco, Paraguay to Puerto Iguazú, Argentina,” comments the voice behind the camera. “Unique in the world: three countries, two rivers.” Two journalists and I present our documents to a man in a checkered shirt sitting on the rocks by the river. When earlier that morning we took a bus across the Tancredo Neves Bridge from Argentina to Brazil and then across the Puente del Amistad [Friendship Bridge] uniting Brazil and Paraguay, migration control did not stamp our passports, so we could not get departure stamps either. Money for the tickets can be paid for in any combination of currencies: Argentine pesos, Brazilian reais, or Paraguayan guaraníes. We gather our fares and board the ferry.

The journalist with the camera records every minute of the trip. Then she briefly turns off the device as she approaches an acquaintance. “Esteche! What are you doing here?”
Figure 1: The Triple Frontier: Foreground is Argentina and Río Iguazú, Brazil is to the right, and background is Paraguay and Río Paraguaí. (Courtesy of Pablo Longo.)
Contrabandeando algo [smuggling]? Pirateando [pirating]?” Both laugh. She turns the camera back on and interviews a couple of German tourists in English: “What do you think of the Triple Frontera? Is it dangerous?” “No, no! It’s very good. I like nature,” answers a man in a safari vest. The ferry is full of vehicles with Argentine registration numbers, whose owners are returning from shopping centers in Paraguay. As the ferry traverses the river and slowly approaches Iguazú, passengers notice a long line of look-alike minivans with tinted windows, winding like a serpent down the hill to the port and heading back to Paraguay. It is common knowledge that the back-and-forth movement of these vans shapes the circuit of everyday contraband, where electronics from tax-free Paraguay flow into Argentina and state subsidized products, including food and fuel, are taken in the opposite direction. But the camera does not focus on the vans, nor does the voice behind it acknowledge them (field note, November 26, 2010).

Rather, the journalist uses the camera as a lens to tell a particular story about the Triple Frontera for the record. However, by the time this selective border narrative is published, a second story—about the origin of the camera itself—has been obscured. This same camera had been brought into Iguazú six months earlier. During that trip I accompanied this journalist, who tensed up as our car moved past the Argentine customs control. She stopped at a designated spot and a female officer approached the vehicle. The journalist lowered the window and greeted the officer by her first name. They exchanged some news about their children. Though the officer threw a glance at the bags on the back seat, which contained, among other things, a new handheld video camera, she did not inquire about their content. The journalist closed the tinted window and, as we drove away from the border post into the town, commented: “Iguazú residents are not allowed to make purchases either in Paraguay or in the Duty Free Shop at the border with Brazil. We still do it. Contraband. They know who I am and they don’t check me at customs” (field note, May 7, 2010).

This article shows how journalists maneuver between stories for, on, and off the record to reproduce a locally valid boundary between law and crime in the northeastern Argentine town of Puerto Iguazú. At the intersection of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, people and objects move across international borders and simultaneously in and out of legal regimes. The Triple Frontera is a particularly interesting place to question the role of media in producing and maintaining the distinction between legality and illegality. Approximately one-third of the articles about Misiones published between 2008 and 2010 in the biggest general interest Argentine daily, Clarín, focused on different forms of criminal activities, including drug contraband, murder, human-trafficking, child abuse, document forging, and government corruption. This coverage represented a trend in the country’s mass media to depict the border as a haven for organized crime. However, local journalists rejected such negative representations and emphasized that Iguazú had less crime than most metropolitan areas.

This disjuncture is not arbitrary. Practices are never “legal” or “illegal” in and of themselves; rather, they become such through complex processes of interpretation and labeling in which both governmental discourse and news-making play a role. Often, border residents see legality and illegality as a continuum, and dependent on how justifiable they consider certain economic practices to be.

Managing the disjuncture between law and social legitimacy has long been a contentious issue for Iguazú media. Local radio stations (and cable television channels) set up on the border, known as FM truchas (fake FMs) or radios piratas (pirate radios) were not legal when they were first established because they did not register their frequencies or have broadcasting licenses. Despite negative connotations of illegality, however, the community has defended
these media. For Iguazúenses, their Spanish programs were a preferred alternative to the powerful Brazilian radio and television signals broadcasting in Portuguese from across the border, or the unreliable, poor transmissions of Argentine national media. Over the years in a remote border area, where infrastructural and ideological reach of the state was weak, news outlets even took on some of the practical functions of governance, assisting residents in solving such problems as failures in water and power supply (Jusionyte forthcoming).

By the beginning of 2011, Iguazú had three local television channels, one of which enjoyed a near monopoly. There were also at least seven local radio stations—some registered, others not—and two online dailies. Except for the national radio, all Iguazú media were privately owned. The majority belonged to entrepreneurs who moved to the border from distant urban centers or towns in the interior of the province in search of business opportunities. Only a few had some education in journalism; the rest, from news directors to rank-and-file journalists, had no professional training in news production. Their jobs were precarious: most journalists were hired en negro [under the table] without work contracts or social benefits. Both pro- and antigovernment media were heavily involved in local political struggles, often using news agendas to promote their directors as candidates in municipal elections. Regional dailies from the Argentine Misiones province had permanent correspondents in Iguazú. However, reporters for the national mass media were located in Posadas, the provincial capital, and would come to Iguazú only rarely.

When Iguazú-based media choose whether to cover stories of crime, they draw on their knowledge as border residents rather than using official, primarily legal, criteria. In doing so, they employ and reinforce local schemes of legitimacy that guide everyday life at the border. Anthropologists have explored how alternative moral–legal regimes emerge at the juncture of the formal laws of the state and illegal economic practices (see Heyman 1999; Nordstrom 2007; van Schendel and Abraham 2005). Borders, in particular, have attracted attention as places where locals manage ambiguous legality to their own ends (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Flynn 1997; Galemba 2012; Grimson 2002; Roitman 2006). Margins of state borders are spaces where state law and order have to be continually reestablished (Das and Poole 2004). Proximity to Brazil and Paraguay is a resource for Iguazu residents, who benefit from price differences by crossing international borders to shop. Even after the creation of the Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur; MERCOSUR) in the 1990s, which established formal regional trade integration among the three countries yet ironically instituted stricter regulations on traditional local commerce and criminalized the livelihood of many border residents, Iguazuenses continue to engage in what they see as justifiable economic practices. Willem van Schendel and Itty Abraham distinguish between legality as political legitimacy and licitness as social legitimacy (2005:5). Most Iguazu residents do not regard a few bags of bananas or oranges carried across the river as contraband. Nor do they consider it a crime to bring untaxed computers, cameras, cell phones, or even flat-screen televisions into the country, despite official regulations that prohibit it. Here contrabandear (contraband) or piratear (pirating) become ironic terms that Iguazuenses invoke to refer to the “common sense” of engaging in formally banned—but widely practiced, justified, and, hence, socially legitimate—economic exchanges. Residents use the border space to their own interest by creatively maneuvering the law in their everyday routines.

As Iguazuenses, local journalists are responsible for and have an interest in ensuring that small-scale contraband remains illegible in the national public sphere. Therefore, the role of Iguazu media is seemingly contradictory: they need to balance their loyalty to the community with their commitment to democratic governance, transparency, and national state-building. As a result of economic and political structures of media control (Herman and Chomsky
1988), journalists are much more likely to produce news that is in line with the formal state’s point of view than contrary to it. However, scholars working in Latin America argue that the media has contributed to the quality of democracy and government accountability in the region (Hughes 2006; Lawson 2002; Porto 2012; Waisbord 2000). A decade after the end of Argentina’s military dictatorship (1976–83), media inquiries were even seen as substitutes for legal investigations (Martini and Luchessi 2004). Though governments wrestled to control the media, Argentine journalists were able to revive debates over social injustice, corruption, and impunity. Yet in Iguazú, the media generally avoid covering controversies that could threaten the stability of the community. With regard to news coverage, the interests of border residents and the local government often go hand-in-hand, especially when they are juxtaposed with national policies.

This article discusses how journalists, who occupy a multifaceted position in the Iguazú community as members and participants in the informal border trade and producers of representations about Iguazú, maneuver the boundaries of the formal law in their daily personal and professional lives. Conscious of the way media is capable of reproducing legal effects, such as enforcing policing of those classified as “illegal” (De Genova 2004), local journalists use the public sphere tactically: they depict some illegalities and obscure others. They navigate the borders between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay using locally constructed moral and practical coordinates. They refuse to squeeze local situations into the given “communicative cartographies” (Briggs 2007): specifically, generic state-centered schemes of law and crime common in metropolitan media representations. Iguazú media produce legality when they categorize activities from the point of view of the state, employing the official vocabulary and moral binary discourse to define what is legal and what is illegal. But, as this article shows, local media also (re)produce social legitimacy, or licitness, when they avoid, or speak around, illegalities that make members of the local community uncomfortable because of the lack of local social consensus over their moral and legal quality. Iguazú journalists maneuver between stories that they intentionally frame (for the record) with evidence cited from official sources (on the record) and those that are excluded from publication (off the record). In this fashion, journalists ensure that socially licit, yet politically illegal, informal economic practices remain officially illegible.

**Historical Context**

Puerto Iguazú is an Argentine town in the northwestern corner of the Misiones Province. It is located 18 kilometers from the Iguazú Falls, a UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site, which is visited by more than one million tourists every year. According to the 2010 national census, the town has 82,227 inhabitants, while its neighboring cities—Brazilian Foz do Iguacu and Paraguayan Ciudad del Este—have a combined population exceeding half a million people. Ciudad del Este was created in 1957 when Alfredo Stroessner’s government embraced state-sanctioned smuggling as a new source of revenue and turned the border region into the center for Paraguay’s contraband trade, specializing in alcohol, cigarettes, stolen vehicles, and electrical appliances (Lewis 2006). In addition to commercial incentives, Brazilian and Paraguayan populations in the Triple Frontera grew as a result of the construction of the Itaipú Hydroelectric Dam on Río Paraná. Carmen Ferradás (2004) has shown how the development project indirectly contributed to the flourishing of the informal sector: workers who had migrated for jobs in the construction of the dam were left unemployed after the dam was completed, and so became involved in the informal border economy. It is estimated that in the 1990s, during the golden age of Paraguayan commerce, around 20,000 vehicles and 30,000 pedestrians crossed Puente del Amistad daily, many of them engaged in contrabando hormiga
[ant contraband], or small-scale smuggling. This dense movement inspired Sebastian Rotella of the Los Angeles Times to call Ciudad del Este “a global village of outlaws” (1998).

For decades, neighboring economies were separated by different currency values, tax rates, labor regulations, and tariffs (Lewis 2006), but residents and visitors benefited from relatively lax border controls. However, in 1995, the three countries created the MERCOSUR. Studying the impact of regional integration on the Argentine–Brazilian border, Alejandro Grimson (2002) observed, “regional agreements like MERCOSUR allow only one kind of circulation, that considered ‘legal’ by the states, forgetting or prohibiting the classic local exchange of border people” (167). Like in other situations of cross-border trade agreements (see, e.g., Galemba 2012), MERCOSUR activated integration from above, while generating new frontiers between citizens (Ferradas 2004; Grimson and Kessler 2005). For example, in an effort to protect Argentine entrepreneurs in the area, in 1998 the Federal Authority for Public Income began limiting how much border residents could purchase abroad. Iguazúenses were given smaller quotas compared to people who did not live close to the border.

The Border Trade Regime (Regimen de Tráfico Fronterizo, RTF), outlined in the General Resolution of the Federal Administration of Public Income No. 1116/2001, established that Argentine citizens and foreign residents who live less than 100 kilometers from the border have a $50 monthly quota for shopping in Brazil or Paraguay. Shoppers must prove their residency in the area by presenting their birth certificate or national identity card. They can purchase nonperishable food items and nondurable goods, such as clothes or shoes manufactured in the neighboring country, for personal use in small quantities that do not suggest commercial ends. Due to the fear of foot-and-mouth disease and other sanitary considerations, the importation of other foodstuffs—primarily meat, fruit, and vegetables—has been strictly prohibited since 1999, which is when what Grimson (2002) referred to as “hygiene wars” between the neighboring countries broke out (159). Once a year residents of Iguazu and its surroundings are also allowed to make purchases of up to $300 in the Duty Free Shop, which is outside Argentine customs control.

Iguazúenses criticize limitations imposed on shopping in the neighboring countries not only because historically borders were more permeable to small-scale traders and consumers, but especially because prices of food products in convenience stores around Iguazu are very high in comparison to the central regions of Argentina. By the time the merchandise reaches the remote border town, located more than 1,200 kilometers away from the capital city, its price increases due to freight costs. In 2010 and 2011, when frequent protests and a shortage of fuel caused delays in ground transportation and fuel prices to skyrocket so high that the state decided to renationalize the energy company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), the price of basic commodities in Iguazu rose exorbitantly. Since the 1990s, regulations limiting what border residents could purchase in the neighboring countries have been partly designed to protect such a costly internal market from international competitors in Brazil and Paraguay. But Iguazúenses often complain that the lack of competition allows local vendors to inflate prices at will. Therefore, it is not surprising that many people in Iguazu take advantage of the availability of the cheaper and greater variety of products across the border.

Iguazu journalists are consumers in search of affordable commodities: they are homeowners and business owners, but they are also cultural producers with a public voice and ensuing responsibility to talk and write. Working in the gray area between the legal and the illegal, Iguazu media craft particular ways of reporting on contraband: they show some and hide other illegal exchanges across the borders. This tactical juggling between regimes of legibility and
legitimacy developed for a number of reasons. It is difficult to conduct investigations into organized crime and contraband because of the limited resources and professional training available to local journalists. Without formal education, their knowledge and experience of ethical and legal standards, such as protecting the identity of their sources, is limited. Because of their size and lack of resources, small private media organizations are also unable to provide anonymity and an institutional backbone to defend their employees. Usually reporters for local news outlets are required to produce multiple stories per day, a schedule that does not allow them to pursue thorough investigations. Since local government and powerful businesses, by means of advertising, are major financial supporters of the media in the area, journalists are aware of the precariousness of their jobs and are hesitant to raise suspicions. But journalists also do not cover contrabando hormiga, even though it would be logistically feasible. To understand this refusal it is critical to situate local reporters as local Iguazüenses, who disdain the negative images in the mass media that depict the Triple Frontera as a place of crime and violence. Journalists seek to cuidar el destino [to save or care for the destination], ensuring that tourists come to the waterfalls and fuel the local economy. This agenda means that they do not pursue stories that play into the narrative of the notoriously insecure border. However, in addition to this strategic rationale, a particularly important factor that shapes the way journalists cover (or, usually, do not cover) small-scale contraband is that the local media operate by a different code of political and social legitimacy than the one written into formal state law.

On the Record: Food

It is common knowledge in Iguazú that early each morning a number of Paraguayan women, known as cuperas [cupo means “quota”], cross Río Paranal by canoe. Appreciating lower prices than in local supermarkets, many Iguazüenses purchase produce from these smugglers. In June 2009, I accompanied Yanina, a reporter for La Voz de Cataratas, an Iguazú digital daily, as she interviewed a high-ranking official of the naval prefecture. When they discussed the types of merchandise confiscated on the river, the official admitted:

I am less interested in confiscating a kilo of lettuce than a kilo of marijuana. The truth is that with marijuana and cigarettes they send vegetables, so if a cupera brings in vegetables, it means there is no control. And so what do we do? To me it doesn’t matter that vegetables pass, while cigarettes and drugs do matter. Yet I have to confiscate vegetables because there is a law that says that. [Interview, June 1, 2009]

The prefect explained how illegal commodity flows intertwine as they cross the borders (see Nordstrom 2007). But he warned Yanina that his acknowledgement of the disinterest border patrol agents have in food smuggling was to remain “off the record.”

Later that week pursuing the same story, Kelly Ferreyra, the editor of La Voz de Cataratas, and I boarded one of the prefecture’s boats. On condition that the invitation remained informal, we were offered to observe the routine of patrolling the river border. As we sped up and down Río Iguazú and later Río Paranal, we spotted the piques: narrow sandy openings on the shore and trails leading up into the forest. Both the prefect and Kelly knew the names of these clandestine crossing points. When Kelly admitted that she bought fruits from a cupera, the officer was not surprised. On the contrary, in defense of his own role, he explained that they usually do not intentionally search for food smugglers, but rather, “happen to find them” on the river (field
note, June 4, 2009). Once cuperas are stripped of their merchandise, they are always let go, only to attempt the passage again the following day (see parallels in McMurray 2003).

The article published in La Voz de Cataratas following interactions with the naval prefecture focused on the destiny of contraband intercepted on the river: “The prefect reported that when food products are confiscated they are handed over to National Food Safety and Quality Service [SENASA, Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria], which is responsible for destroying them, ‘because sales and consumption within the country are completely prohibited.’” The text also included a quote from the prefect: “Although we understand the need to have cheaper vegetables and other food items in our town, our job is to implement sanitary laws which prohibit contraband and consumption of fresh produce.” Then the story shifted to drug trafficking, which the prefect called “an issue that worries us most.” The publication reiterated official legal information. Both the media and the security forces accept food smuggling as an unavoidable side effect of the inequalities created by the border, but only off the record. Although the article cast a hint of social legitimacy over smuggled food, especially in comparison to drug trafficking, it remained only implied (La Voz de Cataratas 2009).

Food also moves the opposite way—from Argentina to Brazil and Paraguay. Trade agreements permit Brazilians and Paraguayans to spend up to 300 pesos (about US$70 in 2010–2011) on Argentine products without being taxed on the border. However, this purchase quota excludes products that are subsidized by the Argentine government and labeled exclusively for consumption in the domestic market. During 2010 and 2011, the most frequently smuggled Argentine commodity was subsidized cooking oil. Foreigners purchased oil in large quantities without valid receipts and hid it in vehicles with double interior walls or under the seats. Journalists who lived in neighborhoods close to Río Paraná also told me about boxes of oil unloaded from trucks and taken across the river to Paraguay through the same piques smugglers use to bring cheap vegetables, poultry, and cigarettes into Argentina. Speaking off the record, an Iguazú customs administrator acknowledged to Jorgelina, another reporter for La Voz de Cataratas, that, in practice, they permit Paraguayans to take the subsidized oil in small quantities in order to minimize commercial disruptions and to appease both consumers and distributors (field note, May 5, 2010). Apart from reprinting press releases from the customs office when they intercept subsidized merchandize being smuggled out of the country, the media did not scrutinize these flows.

Due to the absence of local media coverage, when La Voz de Cataratas reprinted an investigation by a large Paraguayan newspaper that described corruption in Puerto Presidente Franco (in Paraguay) (ABC Color 2011), it received widespread attention. Readers not only welcomed the article as an accurate portrayal of legal infringements on the border, often facilitated by state officials; they also acknowledged being implicated in these violations. “I’m not from Misiones, but I’ve lived in Iguazú for a while. We’ve all gone to Ciudad del Este and brought unauthorized merchandize. Let’s stop lying to ourselves!” wrote one reader whose comment was followed by multiple others: “There is not a single person who does not bring stuff from Paraguay and Brazil, hidden in some compartment of their vehicle. Let’s stop blaming these starving Paraguayans who come here to avoid hunger.” But one commentator recognized that there is a line between illegal practices that are socially legitimate and those that are not: “We all bring stuff from Paraguay, but these are boludeces [small, unimportant things]. This article is about large-scale contraband of products that are subsidized by the government for the poor people from here” (La Voz de Cataratas 2011d). Although everyone engages in smuggling items for personal consumption, some Iguazuñeses saw the contraband of subsidized commodities out of Argentina as both illegal and wrong; that is, socially illegitimate. Yet others perceived the two-directional flow of different goods as morally equal. There was no consensus.
Figure 2: Prefect patrolling Río Paraná, which marks the border between Argentina and Paraguay.
Off the Record: Tools of Media Production

On March 11, 2011 Kelly’s cell phone rang. It was her contact from the Customs Office on the Tancredo Neves Bridge. They had just captured a van full of smuggled electronics that was destined for Argentina and the official wanted La Voz de Cataratas to get the scoop. Kelly is one of the few local reporters with a degree in journalism and also one of the few who is not involved in the politics of the municipality. A todo terreno [four-wheel drive] journalist, as she likes to point out, who moved to Iguazú from rural San Pedro, she has worked in the local media for more than 20 years. Kelly knew Iguazú inside and out, and her critical, yet responsible, reporting earned her the trust of many government officials, including those in the border control apparatus. She got into her mint-colored Fiat, covered with newspaper logos, and drove to the border checkpoint. Although obtaining permission to photograph the area surrounding the border post is a cumbersome bureaucratic process, she was immediately allowed to take pictures of the electronics neatly arranged on a desk. If she had been too busy to come, her contact would have sent her pictures via e-mail of lined-up cell phones, photo and video cameras, DVD players, USB memory sticks, GPS devices, and other equipment. To demonstrate the efficiency of their work, customs officials regularly issued such press releases with photographs of their booty.

However, this smooth collaboration between customs and the media obscures an important issue. As the story in the beginning of this article hinted, border journalists are directly bound to the informal economy by the very nature of their profession. In Iguazú, they often access the means of media production, such as cameras, computers, digital voice recorders, and microphones, through illegal routes. Commercial venues in Iguazú have only a limited selection of expensive equipment, so media organizations make major purchases, such as radio antennas, transmission stations, and professional video cameras, in Buenos Aires. However, the most popular destination for purchasing smaller electronics, both for personal and professional use, has been Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. It is a shopping metropolis, with much greater variety than Brazilian or Argentine border towns. Since taxes on consumer electronics are significantly lower in Paraguay (where VAT is 10 percent and exercise tax varies between 1 and 10 percent) than in Argentina (where VAT is 21 percent and exercise tax is 26 percent), it is an attractive locale for Iguazú journalists to purchase many of their day-to-day necessities, such as cassettes, memory cards, batteries, and cables. For example, in 2010, a MiniDV cassette for a video camera was three times cheaper in Ciudad del Este than in Iguazú. Savings from purchasing cameras or computers in Paraguay could amount to hundreds or even thousands of dollars per item. This difference was significant for owners of small private media companies, who had limited budgets formed by mixing personal and business income. It was even more substantial for individual reporters, who earned as little as 1,200 pesos (about US$300 in 2010) per month. These reporters considered owning a digital voice recorder and a camera with photography and video capabilities as necessary tools of their daily work. It relieved them of the burden to use borrowed company equipment, and hence provided them with a sense of independence and job security.

The most complicated part of shopping in Ciudad del Este is passing through the Argentine customs control on the way back; the resulting travel often takes individuals across multiple international borders. Since the 1990s, when investigation of two bombings of Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires led authorities to Middle East terrorist groups operating in the Brazilian Foz do Iguacu, where they used contraband to launder money to finance their activities (Greenberg 2010; Hudson 2003), the area has been known as frontera caliente [hot border]. Control became even tighter following the September 11 attacks on the United States, when Argentina complied with the U.S. request to secure its allegedly porous borders. The National
Direction of Migration took over the Tancredo Neves Bridge from the National Gendarmerie and started passport checks on the border. Despite integration through MERCOSUR, Argentina also tightened its customs inspection.

Resenting rigid controls, locals have invented ingenious ways of bringing electronics into the country. They refer to this practice as passing the merchandise *por izquierda* [by the left, or outside of the law]. The creativity of Iguazúenses is illustrated by the following example: when a news editor bought a portable computer, he hid smaller items, such as cables and the power adaptor, in an empty hot water thermos used for *mate* (a traditional herbal infusion) and his wife sat on the new laptop in the passenger seat while they crossed the checkpoint. Larger desktop computers are often brought in disassembled, part-by-part, on multiple trips. In most situations, people discard original packages in Paraguay not only because they are bulky, but also to convince Argentine customs that these items are not new purchases. This is especially easy with cameras. When my digital SLR was stolen, a friendly reporter gave me advice on how to purchase a new camera in Ciudad del Este: “Throw out the box, take a few pictures with it and then carry it across the border as your own already-used camera” (field note, October 23, 2010).

Large commodities such as flat-screen TVs might seem too big to be smuggled stealthily. Yet, I heard from reporters in Iguazú that many shops in Paraguay offer transportation services; for an extra charge they will take the responsibility of delivering the purchase across the border. Alternatively, for a small surcharge, people referred to as *pasadores* [smugglers], can deliver products across the border by exploiting their personal connections to customs officers. Those who have been living in Iguazú for years usually know customs officials well, and so their cars rarely get checked. Even if they are checked, it is a rather superficial, symbolic act of state control, as seen in the ethnographic vignette with which this article began. Similarly to situations on other borders (see, e.g., McMurray 2003), state agents in charge of supervising the border go through the motions to show that they are doing their job, while largely allowing border flows to proceed.

There is another essential link between media companies and law evasion on the border. Many Iguazú media, known as *truchas* [fake, forged] or *piratas* [pirate], historically had neither licenses to operate nor registered frequencies. Although the new Argentine media law, passed in 2010, invited all media organizations on the border to register with the Autoridad Federal de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual (Federal Authority of Audiovisual Communication Services; AFSCA), advantages of *blanquearse* [going “legit”] have been limited by a number of requirements that legalized media have to meet. One of these requirements involves transparent purchasing policies: all media equipment has to be bought legally with receipts, and therefore, in Argentina. This rule discourages registration among border media, which frequently purchase electronics in Paraguay. “The requirements are very strict and include purchasing authorized equipment, so you cannot bring it *del otro lado* [from the other side],” one media entrepreneur complained to me (field note, September 16, 2010). The price of legalizing is high: local media has struggled with the decision to register since they prefer to maintain access to cheaper, if illegal, equipment.

When that March 11, 2011 Kelly received a call from her contact in the customs office, it was during a period of sharply intensified control on the bridge. In the months of March and February, news stories about smugglers caught with illegal electronics hit the media at least once or twice a week, and sometimes every day. The publications conveyed only minimal information from a press release, including the kind of vehicle intercepted, as well as the quantity and price of merchandize confiscated. Over the course of three days, *La Voz de Cataratas* reported that “Customs arrested a tourist from Córdoba, who was riding an international bus line between
Ciudad del Este and Iguazú, and confiscated latest generation cell phones for an estimated value of 10,000 pesos [US$2,481]” (La Voz de Cataratas 2011a); “yesterday evening customs officers implemented checks of vehicles circulating across Tancredo Neves Bridge, and found merchandise from Ciudad del Este for a value of 84,000 pesos [US$20,847]” (La Voz de Cataratas 2011b); “Iguazú Customs stopped two tourist buses and confiscated electronics worth 20,000 pesos [US$4,963]. Passengers had placed merchandise in luggage for clothes” (La Voz de Cataratas 2011c). There were also a few stories about women who taped cell phones to their thighs and waists under bulky clothing. When Kelly published the story about tourist buses, I commented that both buses belonged to long-distance tour companies. “They don’t catch the ones from here because they have it all arranged with the customs,” laughed Kelly (field note, March 4, 2011). Although intended as a joke, we both understood that her response quite accurately depicted the situation. Despite the controls, illegal electronics were being brought from Ciudad del Este to Iguazú, where they were resold in local stores or through informal channels.

Like food, electronics form part of the outlawed, but licit, cross-border commodity flows. From the everyday lives of journalists who prefer buying certain food items from Paraguayan cuperas, to their professional news production facilitated by illegally acquired equipment, media practices along the border are embedded in the local informal economy. Journalists choose not to report such activities, especially if the people involved are local Iguazúenses rather than foreigners or Argentines from other regions, because their community benefits from them. Such tactics of silence serve to maintain the feasibility and persistence, and social legitimacy, of the informal economy at the Triple Frontera. But this moral economy, based on social norms and obligations (Thompson 1971:79), is only valid for locals. When smugglers take the merchandise out of Iguazú, local residents, including journalists, are more likely to see these actions as illegal and illegitimate practices, and, therefore, do not hesitate to report them.

“It will make me neither richer nor poorer”

Javier Villegas is a reporter for Radio Yguazú. He spent most of the last two decades oscillating between working for the media and the Argentine Army. It was not until 1999 that he left the Regimiento de Patricios (one of the oldest and most prestigious regiments of the army) in Buenos Aires and returned to Iguazú to resume his radio reporting full-time. Javier now lives in Ribera del Paraná, a neighborhood on the banks of Río Paraná through which most of the river contraband to and from Paraguay passes. Despite his former career in the armed forces and his current work as a journalist, Javier’s role as a resident and a consumer in the informal economy determines his take on food smuggling. He commented:

I see working people, Paraguayans from the other side, who bring their vegetables and their fruit to sell them here. If you make a denuncia [complaint], some will find a new pique, but you will take away the work of these Paraguayans. It will make me neither richer nor poorer. On the contrary, today it suits me because when I buy from them I pay much less. For example, for the cost of one kilo of onions [in Argentina] I can buy three kilos of onions [from Paraguay]. I see these things and try not to meddle in them. I am not sure I did well selecting the profession of journalism. One needs to have a lot of common sense. [interview, November 2, 2011]

Javier’s comment that he might not be a good journalist speaks to the notion that media should be watchdogs over criminal activities and are obliged to denounce them in the public
sphere. He contrasts this mission to the *common sense*, or “rational or reasonable behavior” (Roitman 2006:249) that those living on the border have developed in relation to the informal trade. Iguazú media also use such local notions of common sense in their journalistic practices. Javier’s work as a reporter depends on, and is powerfully shaped by, his residency at the border. The acknowledgement that covering smugglers’ activities would make him neither richer nor poorer—if anything, more likely the latter, as he would have to purchase produce in expensive grocery stores—is an important part of the explanation for why journalists keep silent. Javier shows solidarity and complicity with his neighbors. While national media assume a black and white view of legality and illegality, the practices of those residing in Iguazú reveal the farce of such an artificial, and stark, divide.

Border residents frequently justify engaging in unlawful though licit economic exchanges by critiquing unfair policies dictated from a remote political center. As is common in border areas economically abandoned by the state, residents view the national law as limiting and criminalizing instead of enabling and protecting. Such “bad law” constrains habitual economic exchanges, renders an increasingly larger sector of the population who continue to engage in banned practices as illegal actors, and foments the growth of the informal and extra-legal economy (Vásquez-León 1999). The law loses legitimacy in the eyes of these illegalized actors. Although Iguaζúenses are proud to be Argentine citizens, they are annoyed by what they see as detached policy planning. Regulations that intimately affect their everyday lives, from free trade agreements to policies circumscribing the work of the media, are formulated far away by politicians who are insensitive to the needs of border residents. The geography of legality and legitimacy is mapped onto power inequality between the central commercial areas of the Argentine state and peripheral, marginal corridors. Faced with what they see as historical government injustice, Iguazú journalists use local “common sense” to justify their refusal to cover petty smuggling and other minor infringements, and thereby contest state-centered communicative cartographies and the national media’s dominant schemes of law and crime.

Silvia Martínez, one of the few journalists born and raised in Iguazú, also uses such local common sense, contrasting it to the legal norms deployed by state institutions. She grew up in barrio Almirante Brown, a neighborhood close to Río Paraná. After a few years studying law, and a few more working in the tourism industry, Silvia discovered her passion for journalism. She is an attentive listener and particularly interested in social issues, so journalism offered a way for her to listen to what people around her had to say. The fact that she is local has not put Silvia in denial about crime in the area. However, her deeper understanding of, and broader justification for, practices that transgress state law is based on her experience of growing up on the border:

> As kids we used to go swimming in Río Paraná. We saw how the boats came, how somebody signaled them that the prefects were not around. There was a certain sense of *cohабitacidаn* [togetherness] because we were witnesses to all of this. But we were little and we greeted them all, even the boats carrying prohibited merchandise. You see all the movement but don’t say anything because you don’t want to put yourself in the middle. You know it is bad, but you also know that these people do this because they need to get by. [Interview, September 26, 2010]

The Argentine Northeast, composed of Formosa, Chaco, Corrientes, and Misiones provinces, is the poorest region of the country. Poverty is perpetuated by inadequate governmental social policies, leaving locals unable to pay inflated prices for food and other goods. Living across the river from Paraguay, with its cheaper alternatives, means that local residents have long pursued
illegal routes to acquire commodities for their households and their workplaces. Emphasizing her local background, Silvia continued: “People from other places learned to live here, but they don’t have the same love for the town. For me bad things that happen here really hurt. It’s not just news. It hurts me” (interview, September 26, 2010). With these words Silvia straightforwardly acknowledged that news has the potential to upset or even criminalize those whose ways of life it represents (or misrepresents). She explained why certain things are better left unsaid. As an Iguazúense, Silvia embodies the multifaceted border identity that cannot be summarized in oversimplified news stories about law and crime.

Journalists who have lived in Iguazú long enough to know what is happening and why are unlikely to investigate contraband. However, they often overlook not only food smuggling, but also drugs, as the two sometimes travel together. Silvia explained: “Here it is very easy to cross the puddle of Paraná with a paddle and contraband anything. We know there are barrios that need to be investigated, but I don’t want to get into it because it involves very humble families” (interview, September 26, 2010). Silvia said that she knows families who live on the coast of Río Paraná and are drawn into the illegal drug trade. Teenagers often work for Paraguayan traffickers, who become padrinos [godfathers] of the family, sometimes replacing an absent parent. In order to support their families, smaller children become mulitas [little mules] for drug traffickers. Silvia lamented that the children involved cannot complain even when they are threatened because they do not want to compromise their family’s source of income.

The unwillingness of Iguazú journalists to cover border crime is related to the deep interconnectedness of criminal activities with the region’s economic struggles and marginality. Silvia even justified such illegal flows by explaining that the smugglers are “people just like us, only that they live off of something illegal” (interview, September 26, 2010). Although local residents consider smuggling drugs to be illegal and illicit, compared to food and electronics, even this border violation is partially justified by the local journalistic common sense: Silvia argued that traffickers do not choose their profession, but rather get involved in illegal practices out of necessity. Iguazú journalists watch the poor being criminalized, while MERCOSUR assists multinational corporations with the fast and easy transport of goods that the treaty has “legalized.” By keeping practices that have widespread social legitimacy out of media coverage, Javier and Silvia, like their colleagues, contribute to the maintenance of the informal border economy and reproduction of illegal yet licit practices, which, in the absence of sufficient legal employment and social welfare, support their community.

**Law and the Border**

The camera is a selective tool. Its lens focuses on some objects and not others. The story narrated by the journalist who took the ferry from Paraguay to Argentina appeared in the pages of a local online daily in Iguazú. It celebrated the uniqueness of the crossing experience and the natural beauty and safety of the area (*La Voz de Cataratas* 2010). Produced “for the record,” it was strikingly different from another story, dating back to 2007, when Ronnie Arias, the host of a national investigative TV program called *La Liga* came to Iguazú to demonstrate the alleged permeability of the borders. Hoping to avoid immigration and customs officers while crossing Río Iguazú from Brazil into Argentina, his team was nonetheless detained by the gendarmerie.

The program’s producers explained to the officials that the team was filming how easy it was to cross the border without being caught (*Página 12* 2007). Ironically, Arias and his companions were not only caught, but they were also charged with violating immigration law and entering the country via an unauthorized route. This national media outlet failed to translate local “off the record” knowledge into a story “for the record.” Instead of being an investigative story
about the border that the producers had aimed for, coverage of their ordeal became a parody of journalism. It became a widely cited example of how mass media chase after the discourse of an allegedly lawless border while they ignore reality on the ground. Mass media correspondents who occasionally parachute into the border area thus habitually fall short in their attempts to create an adequate representation of the area.

As a social space, the border is *produced* before being *read*, and not in order to be represented, but rather to be lived by people in their own particular ways (Lefebvre 1992 [1974]:143). International and national media have designated the Triple Frontera as a violent place. However, “space is a practiced place” (de Certeau 2011 [1984]:117). Local journalists in Iguazú are simultaneously architects and walkers, producers and users of the border. As users, they “make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiii-xiv), and it is precisely in relation to their role as users that journalists as producers operate. Representations they create not only depend on but also influence their routine on the border. Concurring with Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) that the margins of the state are spaces of creativity, in this article I have shown how local journalists juggle the legibility and illegibility of illegal border practices, depending on their social legitimacy and their own stake in the outcome.

This article has focused on insiders, Iguazú journalists, who use practical vision and “common sense” to decide what kinds of local knowledge will become public information. Although the rationale for avoiding certain topics includes journalists’ personal safety, time, and financial constraints, in addition to their commitment to promoting tourism, such logistical difficulties are only a part of what constrains reporting in Iguazú. I argue that living on the margins of the state and the doorstep of alternative economic, political, and social regimes provides journalists with a particular understanding of what constitutes socially legitimate activities. This formation, in turn, powerfully shapes how local media determine what is newsworthy. In Iguazú the letter of the law and local practices, as well as local social and moral regimes, often do not coincide, making it difficult for contentious topics to enter the news agenda. While national media, which look for more scandalous angles from which to cover regional stories, often discursively produce the border as the space of the illegal, local media produce the illegal as an illegible practical alternative to the formal economy. Iguazú residents, including border officials and journalists, agree that legality and illegality are two ends of a continuum, along which certain practices can be seen as more severe violations of the law than others; therefore, some of them go “on the record,” while the rest remain “off the record.”

As an ethnographer, I also have had to decide what goes on and off the journalistic and ethnographic records. During the longest stretch of my fieldwork, which, between August 2008 and April 2011, consisted of two shorter visits and one long stay in the area, I occasionally wrote articles for *La Voz de Cataratas*, and for a few months in 2010, together with Javier Rotela, I produced and conducted a weekly investigative program, “Proximidad,” broadcast on local television. Involved in media production, I faced the same challenges as the local journalists. I had to decide where to draw the line between speech and silence with regard to informal practices forbidden by law but justified by the community. Residents were suspicious of journalists who, like myself, were strangers, since they were more likely to break the local codes of reporting. Although in my journalistic work I probed the boundary between legality and legitimacy—as when investigating informal adoptions and child trafficking (see Jusionyte 2012)—I avoided the issue of minor law infringements, such as smuggling. As my social networks grew denser and wider, I learned more about practices of law evasion, but the range of topics I could cover also became more limited. Embeddedness and social ties turned out to be obstacles to, rather than resources for, reporting on matters of questionable legitimacy.
Cautious not to harm the people I cared about, in much the same way as local journalists, I reasoned my way out of this potential predicament. After all, my primary task was to write an ethnography that reflected local regimes of legibility and legitimacy, not to publish a journalistic investigation. Ethnography allows me to include more detailed and complex representations than the media stories that I created in Iguazú. Smuggling was not news for the local media; however, it is an important topic for anthropological inquiry, allowing us to question the categories and practices of law and crime in a given society, and to understand how social order is created, challenged, and upheld.

Notes

I would like to thank Iguazúenses for sharing their stories and their lives with me during the time I spent at the border. This article would not have been written without their acceptance and trust. It was from Kelly Ferreyra, my colleague and friend, that I learned how to be a journalist in Puerto Iguazú. Silvia Martinez, Javier Rotela, Javier Villegas, Jorgelina Bonnetto and Yanina Faria, among others, all helped me understand different parts of life on the border. Drafts of this article received invaluable comments by Elizabeth Ferry, Charles Golden, Melanie Kingsley, Ryo Morimoto, Rebecca Galemba, and Kedron Thomas.

1. The Spanish word “frontera” can be translated both as border and frontier. In English terminology these have markedly different connotations; a border is a formalized boundary line between territorial jurisdiction of two states, while a frontier is a more flexible space between domains of strong state control and is oftentimes seen as a zone of disorder (Prescott 1987:36). Although the most commonly used English names for the region are “Triple Frontier” and “Tri-Border Area,” the locals prefer calling it “Tres Fronteras” [Three Borders]. Due to the multiplicity of names with their important connotations I use the original Spanish term Triple Frontera so that the reader can interpret the polyvalent meanings.

2. Throughout the article I use the proper names of journalists and state officials when they are public figures identified in the news. In other situations, when the information shared was off the record, their names and recognizable characteristics are omitted.

3. In Ciudad del Este, a Panasonic MiniDV cassette cost US$1.65, while photo center Fotografías Rolando in Iguazú sold a TDK MiniDV cassette for 26.50 pesos (US$6.37), and a small store on central Gustavo Eppens Street sold Sony MiniDV cassettes, allegedly smuggled from Paraguay, for 25 pesos each (US$6.01). This comparison shows the significance of price differences in electronic merchandize that exist between Ciudad del Este and Puerto Iguazú, and explains the rationale for smuggling.

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