The Cultures of Anonymity and Violence
in the Mexican Blogosphere

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This article analyzes the famous Mexican website *El Blog del Narco* as symptomatic of the type of publicity common in contemporary Mexico and the manner in which violence has structured the citizen journalism sector of the Mexican blogosphere. The article interrogates how the blog's mode of production and its reliance on anonymity has propelled the bloggers—in particular, an anonymous blogger who refers herself as "Lucy"—to the level of civic heroes and how a global community of sympathizers made sense of her actions. In this violent context, Lucy has used anonymity as a necessary mechanism to construct a place of trust and safety. In the process, Lucy has embodied the contradictory figure of the anonymous hero. The analysis is indebted to Seyla Benhabib's classic interrogation of Hanna Arendt's notions of publicity—in particular, Arendt's ideas of heroicity and self-disclosure.

Keywords: blogosphere, violence, anonymity, Mexico, digital technology, trusted systems

The rise of massive violence due to organized crime that Mexico has experienced since the beginning of the presidency of Felipe Calderón in 2007 has brought powerful challenges to Mexicans wishing to participate in the public sphere. Traditional journalism has been under siege, with journalists routinely killed, kidnapped, beaten, and threatened because of their reporting of drug violence. As a result, self-censorship in journalism has risen, and it has become increasingly common for violent crime to go unreported by news organizations. These factors have created gaps in public knowledge that a sector of anonymous bloggers have tried to fill. Anonymity is as needed here as it is among the soldiers and police officers who are directly fighting drug cartel violence and who have to resort to using masks to hide their faces to protect themselves and their families. Blogging is, however, different from policing and soldiering. The meaning and value of anonymity changes when it is embodied on a person meant to participate in the public sphere, one not protected by powerful state institutions, one meant to convey trustworthiness individually as opposed to institutionally.

This article uses violence to reveal a significant blind spot in theories of publicity: the analytically generative presumption of bilateral trust between public actor and reader/listener/user. The presumption of trust has become normative, informing approaches to publicity, including the relevance placed on identity and self-disclosure. Rejecting this normative presumption, this article argues that the conditions

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of publicity in most places in the world do not support bilateral trust, and, thus, publicity must be retheorized. It forwards the beginning of such theorization by analyzing the confluence of anonymity, violence, and mistrust in the Mexican blogosphere with particular attention to a series of websites commonly referred to in the singular as *El Blog del Narco* (*EBDN*), one of the two most famous of these anonymous blogs.[1]

EBDN routinely publishes some of the most gruesome depictions of violence, which include decapitations, dismemberments, and all sorts of vile executions that leave viewers wondering about the very humanity of the perpetrators. Extremely violent content notwithstanding, *EBDN* has been among the Mexican blogs that generate the most traffic, and its fame has extended to international observers, which often have lauded *EBDN*'s public role, painting it as nothing short of heroic. Commentators as diverse as Melissa del Bosque, writing for *The Texas Observer* (April 3, 2013), Bernardo Loyola, writing for *Vice* (May 13, 2013), Sonja Peteranderl, writing for the journal *Digital Development Debates* (October 2013), and Rory Carroll, writing for *The Guardian* (repeatedly during 2013), share this heroic view of *EBDN*'s creators. Against the grain of a narcissistic blogging culture that, Zizi Papacharissi (2010) argues, "'interpellates' its citizens as consumers," to this group of admirers, *EBDN* contributes to a public sphere in the hope of "heightening civic engagement" (p. 146). The bloggers clearly place themselves in danger to help fight the obscene power of the drug criminal organizations and the ambiguous, though equally deadly, power of the Mexican state, and they use anonymity to protect themselves.

In the case of *EBDN*, anonymity, violence, and mistrust converge in the figure of the anonymous hero, the bloggers' public personae. This convergence is clearest when examining the public understanding of Lucy, the most famous of these bloggers and the one who is usually singled out as the creator of *EBDN*. Public discourse about Lucy reveals the gaps and paradoxes inherent in Lucy's heroicity and the limitations of the presumption of bilateral trust and self-disclosure. In particular, these gaps and paradoxes help me expand Seyla Benhabib's (1996) classic interrogation of Hanna Arendt's (1998) notions of publicity, recuperating some key insights found in the work of both Arendt and Benhabib. The use of new media technologies in violent contexts put these foundational ideas through the harshest test and highlights the need to retheorize publicity in the new political and communicational contexts afforded by nontraditional political challenges to nation-states as these converge with the new affordances of digital media.

The first section examines *EBDN*'s mode of production and the particular discourses of heroicity and civics energized by and around Lucy. The second section places these discourses within theories of publicity, highlighting the connection between identity and the public hero. The third section examines the discursive and theoretical connections between anonymity, publicity, trust, and digital technologies, foregrounding the paradoxical type of publicness and heroicity that digital anonymity constitutes.

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[1] *El Blog del Narco* has been arguably as famous as *Valor Por Tamaulipas*, another anonymous blog with similar production techniques. Unlike *EBDN*, *Valor Por Tamaulipas* is most famous through a notoriously popular Facebook page that has more than 250,000 followers.

What Is *EBDN?*

What is commonly known as *El Blog del Narco* is not one, but several blogs and websites that, according to their DNS provider (http://who.godaddy.com), originated in May 2008, and a last one in 2010. All these domain names—elblogdelnarco.com, elblogdelnarco.net, elblogdelnarco.info, and the 2010 blogdelnarco.com—connect to Monterrey, Mexico, and to the same e-mail address in Nuevo León, suggesting that they are owned by a single person or organization. However, it is unclear who has managed or authored the blogs or whether these blogs have been managed by the same person(s).

Although the first of the sites associated with *EBDN* appeared in 2008, it was not until Lucy's site (http://blogdelnarco.com) appeared in 2010 when *EBDN* began gaining users by the millions. According to Alexa.com, the blog received between 2 and 5 million visits per week during times of intense traffic, and would often be ranked in the top 50 Mexican news sites. At its peak, in October 2011, Lucy's site ranked as the 47th most visited site in Mexico, the number-one blog, and sixth among news websites behind only *El Universal*, *Milenio*, *El Norte*, *Reforma*, and *CNN*. While numbers of visitors fluctuated, *EBDN* remained an important source of news in Mexico until its termination in 2013. The site stopped publishing shortly after Lucy published a book detailing her work and her goals.

Proximity to violence has shaped the reputation of *EBDN* not simply because the majority of the stories, images, and videos that form the content of *EBDN* engage violence. The specter of violence shaped *EBDN*'s modality of production, with anonymity being one of this modality's central characteristics. Two acts of violence have marked, like giant signposts, the blog's popular standing and the need for and perils of digital anonymity. On September 13, 2011, the bodies of a young woman and a man who had collaborated with *EBDN* and other social media (in particular, Twitter) appeared hanging from a bridge in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. The victims had tweeted and blogged about drug violence and participated in sites like *EBDN*. The woman was captured on camera hanging from her hands and feet, seminude, and disemboweled. The man hung from his hands with a cut on his side so deep that his bones were visible. On the bridge and around his body were yellow posters, referred to as *narcomantas*, stating: "This is going to happen to all of you posting funny things on the Internet. You better fucking pay attention. I'm about to get you." The sign was signed by the Zetas, a violent splinter cartel that has tried to control Nuevo Laredo for some time. Eleven days later, the body of journalist and blogger María Elizabeth Macías was found, decapitated, also in Nuevo Laredo, with the signature of Los Zetas. According to the *narcomanta* by the body, Macías was killed not simply because of her news reporting but because of her comments in blogs and on Twitter. Lucy (2013) reports: The killers left "keyboards, a mouse, and other computer parts strewn across her body, as well as a sign that mentioned [*EBDN*] again" (p. xi).

In an interview in 2013, Lucy wrote about being highly traumatized by these events as they dramatically reminded her of the precariousness of her situation.[2] In the introduction of her 2013 book, *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War*, published in Spanish and English, in which

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[2] Rory Carroll, writing for *The Guardian* on April 3, 2013, was able to corroborate that the person he interviewed was indeed in control of *EBDN*, but some of the rest of the information in this and other interviews have not been corroborated because of Lucy's anonymity.

Lucy narrates a year in the life of the blog, she recalls how in the four days prior to the writing of the introduction to the book, she and her partner had received nine photos of killings with messages written on them: "you are next EBDN." Violence seems to be the filter through which *EBDN* existed as a content provider, but also in terms of its mode of operation and organization. Interviews during 2013 as well as Lucy's 2013 book reveal some aspects of *EBDN*'s mode of operation and the tactics used by her and her technical assistant to remain one step ahead of the cartels.

Lucy claims she is a young woman in her mid-20s who created the site to fill the information gap in cities like Monterrey, where violence was rampant and reporting was scarce. Single, without children, and a patriot, Lucy repeatedly noted that her actions also had the goal of correcting the global perception of Mexicans as corrupt, uneducated, and violent. The blog has been under attack from the beginning. Lucy often states that these attacks are cyberattacks from the Mexican government. "We change where we live every month. We've been in basements. It's very difficult. We hide our equipment in different places. If the authorities get close we run" (Lucy, quoted in Carroll, 2013a, para. 24). As the 2011 killings and attacks demonstrate, Lucy's concerns were not just paranoia. Clearly, the drug criminal organizations and some members of the Mexican state will go to great lengths to control the public sphere and to force, through the most brutal coercion, silence over clamor.

Lucy (2013) describes herself sometimes as a journalist and, in other instances, simply as someone with "experience gathering information" (p. 3). It is unclear whether she ever was trained as a journalist or worked as one in a news organization. Regardless, she has framed her blogging practices as "citizen journalism." Her goal was to use anonymity to bypass the forces of censorship that were silencing traditional journalistic sources. These forces, she argues, included government and organized crime efforts to stop news organizations for reporting or for reporting the bare minimum. In her view, the government censors by underreporting or hiding the chaos in some regions of Mexico.

In addition to Lucy, David Sasaki (2010) and Andrés Monroy-Hernández and Luis Daniel Palacios (2014) call *EBDN* citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is used to designate the reporting and civic work of individuals not associated with news institutions. The work of citizen journalists is thus free in the sense that is unpaid and in the sense that is voluntary, highlighting the fact that bloggers' feel that their work is akin to their civic duty. What does it mean that civic work needs to be carried out in secret? What does it mean that anonymity is a necessary component of civic participation in the public sphere? Why is it that Lucy's (as well as other bloggers') anonymity is portrayed as heroic? To begin answering these questions, the next section examines classic theorizations of publicity connecting publicness to heroicity. This is followed by an examination of the conditions of publicity and anonymity in Lucy's case.

The Public Hero

In *The Human Condition*, Hanna Arendt (1998) develops seminal ideas about publicity in modernity that she anchors on an analysis of Greek life. Arendt argues that publicity is possible only through the coming together enabled by language and human communication, which make possible social arrangements free of violence:

> To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were prepolitical ways to deal with people characteristic of life outside the *polis*. (p. 26)

From these powerful sentences one can quickly infer that the Greeks, like our contemporaries, were concerned with avoiding violence and finding methods of social interaction that would eliminate it. Violence existed, but not in the sphere of politics, which was ruled by talk, rhetoric, and the ideal of shared understanding.

As Benhabib (1996) has noted, Arendt's ideas about publicity are not without complications. She uses not one, but two models of publicity. In the Greek city, the public realm "was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all" (Arendt, 1998, p. 41). This "agonistic space," to use the term used by Benhabib (1996), is a textured and competitive space in which moral and political greatness is "revealed, displayed, and shared with others" (p. 102). It is eminently dramaturgic, the space of heroes, as this space is not meant to be homogeneous, but a stage full of different values that allow some actors and their voices to protagonize debates and some persons—and personae—to gain and continue gaining public stature. This topological thinking is also theatrical, meant to foster passion, thought, and action.

There is a second type of publicness, an "associational view of public space," Benhabib (1996, p. 102) calls it, that in Arendt's view is more conducive to positive political outcomes. This associational type of publicity manifests anytime "men act together in concert" and is part of Arendt's conceptualization of power, force, strength, and violence. Benhabib notes that this associational space represents "the kind of democratic or associative politics that can be engaged in by ordinary citizen who may or may not possess great moral prowess but who acquire the capacities of political judgment and initiative in the process of self-organization" (p. 125). Power is acting together, the power of the *polls*, the seminal meaning of politics, one of the normative notions that Arendt relies on in *The Human Condition* and in *On Violence*. For Benhabib, "these diverse topographical locations become public spaces in that they become the sites of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion" (see Arendt, 1998, p. 78).

The notion of a public hero, the type of public heroism that some have tried to cast on Lucy, is at home in Arendt's topological and agonistic conception of publicity. Lucy claims that she attempts to reveal the dark, bloody secrets of Mexico's drug conflict, and, in the process, she must attempt to conquer a style of preeminence, a high point, a stature, from which she can share with others her views of a better Mexico. In this agonistic space, the textured drama of life necessitates actors who use loud and perhaps even spectacular forms of personal display and action in order to command attention. Without attention, the message is lost.

Benhabib (1996) finds fissures in Arendt's ideas—particularly in Arendt's separation of the private and public realms. However, this is not the only fissure in Arendt's argument. Benhabib's classical feminist analysis of Arendt's work questions Arendt phenomenological essentialism, or the notion that different

human activities have their own place and, thus, that the different boundaries that define the public, which include the public and private and *the* public/political and violence/prepolitical, neatly separate human activities. Benhabib's concern was not violence, but the separation between the private and the public, and her arguments have stood the test of time. Yet violence is not simply the fulcrum that allows the public to exist and that should be dismissed once the public is established; violence is, too, an activity that should be phenomenologically de-essentialized. For instance, even though Benhabib questions Arendt's domestication of the Homeric warrior, who in Arendt ceases using violence and instead uses deliberation and rhetoric, Benhabib never retakes the notion that the social landscape inhabited by Homer's heroes is one of deadly violence and conflict. Benhabib's critique of Arendt's weaknesses simply falls short. There is a dismissal of violence as an object of theory both in Arendt and Benhabib—one that needs correcting.

The dismissal of violence reveals a particular perspective in both theories of publicity: the dangerous notion that theories of publicity naturally belong to a political ecology in which the state has a monopoly of power. This is true even though Arendt's own ideas were drawn against the context of totalitarianism, a type of political organization in which violence indeed is monopolized, and even though Benhabib's ideas were sketched in the context of women's struggle against patriarchy. The issue is not simply whether Homer is read or not read properly. The issue is that their notion of politics does not match the history of Western nations and is simply inapplicable to nations in which the state does not have a monopoly on power and corruption of state actors weakens the state of law. What are heroes in these contexts? What is publicity in the bloody modernity that Mexico is experiencing? What can Lucy's case teach us about the missing parts in these theories of publicity?

The Hero's Odyssey

Lucy's story does not end with her promotion to civic hero by the international community. On May 5, 2013—only weeks after Lucy's series of interviews in March and April of the same year revealed her work to the public—her colleague, the webmaster who helped with the technical side of the blog, called her one last time and simply uttered the word "run" (Carroll, 2013b). No one has heard from Lucy's colleague again. After hiding for a few days, Lucy fled first to the United States first and then to Spain. A few days later, she used Skype to contact Carroll, the writer who had previously interviewed her for *The Guardian*, and revealed her state of panic and loneliness. Her last post in *EBDN* was May 3, claiming that she did not have intentions to resume. She was staying in a boardinghouse with enough money to last a few months, but was otherwise without contacts and almost without identity in a country not her own. Carroll (2013b) writes: "Her biggest fear is she will see her colleague appear on a video of the type that frequently appeared on their blog: battered, interrogated, gazing into the camera, knowing a terrible fate awaits" (para. 13). Her stay in Spain did not improve. She writes in her new blog: "Sí, ha sido un gran error venir a España. Yo sé, España es un gran país, pero lamentablemente no me había percatado de las buenas relaciones que tiene con Felipe Calderón Hinojosa. Acepto que ha sido un error" ["Yes, it was a big mistake to come to Spain. I know, Spain is a great country, but sadly I wasn't aware of the great relationships it has with Felipe Calderon Hinojosa. I accept that it was a mistake"] (translation by the author).

On June 5, 2013, Lucy started a personal blog (http://blogdelucy.com), in which she wrote about her race to survive. At present, this short-lived blog is available on the Internet Archive. Her first entry is about the publication of the book *Dying for the Truth*. Her second entry, on June 6, is about her race to survive away from Mexico. Sometimes thankful to all who had reached out and spoken to her encouragingly through e-mail and Twitter (#blogdelnarco and later #elblogdelucy), sometimes morose, Lucy wrote of her struggles, hungers, the sense of betrayal she had to live with, and her dreadful opinions about the Mexican political system—in particular, the executive power held by President Calderón.

In July 2013, she published an angry letter asking the international community to help her leave Spain. She seemed aware that her journalistic quest was understood through a different register than the work of other famous new media political stars. She argued that she had not received any help because "I am Mexican, and not Cuban like Yoani Sánchez, or U.S.-American like Edward Snowden." Sánchez, the creator of the famous human rights blog *Generation Y*, has dedicated her life to shedding light on Cuba's internal dissonances, including Cuba's poor human rights record, the challenges to freedom that Cubans routinely experience on the island, and the small corruptions involved in having to live waiting for daily basic necessities, from electricity to bread. Her blog is a trusted source of political commentary and criticism, and she is broadly recognized and respected around the world, particularly after *TIME* magazine (the international version) placed her on the cover in 2008 and named her one of the world's most influential people. Her fame has allowed her to go on fundraising trips to different locations, including Mexico (October 2013), where she has received strong monetary support to continue her work. Lucy herself declared her support for Sánchez's work, yet their experiences as women Latin American bloggers could not be more different (Corsa, 2008). The year after Lucy disappeared, Sánchez's blog became an independent digital newspaper (*14ymedio.com*) in Cuba, further adding weight to her words and her views of Cuban society and politics.

Unlike bloggers Lucy and Sánchez, Snowden came to fame as a whistle-blower, a computer professional who leaked classified information from the U.S. National Security Agency in 2013. Among other things, his leaks revealed the illicit manner in which the National Security Agency spied on other nations, including allies such as Germany and Brazil. Although these leaks were highly controversial, Snowden has also become a hero to many for his willingness to break U.S. law arguably for the well-being of others and for the principles of good government and just international relations. Like Lucy, his life after the leaks in 2013 has required ongoing hiding and relative isolation (Burrough, Ellison, & Andrews, 2014). The key difference is that Snowden may fear jail; Lucy fears death.

On July 22, 2013, a request for funds to get out of Spain was issued by or on behalf of Lucy in the crowdfunding site Kapipal (http://kapipal.com). According to the site, she was able to collect close to 500 euros—a pittance. Was Lucy correct? Was the international community's apathy a type of racism or anti-Mexicanism? I do not think so, and to help me explain this, I turn again to Arendt's work, which I argue is better at explaining the most likely reason for Lucy's failure to raise the type of sympathy and support that other acts of Internet courage have.

When Arendt discusses what Benhabib refers to as the agonistic public realm, she centers her argument on the nature and pairing of action and speech. The actions that distinguish those who deserve

to be in public—those that single out an individual and that make them worthwhile of admiration and respect—are actions always followed by or explained by speech. It is through action and speech that individuals reveal their uniqueness and their identity, their difference, vis-à-vis the world. Actions without words lose their subject:

> The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do. (Arendt, 1998, p. 179)

It is the spoken word that characterizes the entrance in the public realm, and it is only through words that actors can leave behind a lasting influence in social relationships. Through speech, actors reveal their "life stories," and through self-disclosure, social actors can become protagonists in the web of social stories, the monuments and histories that surround the hero and that propel the hero to memory. In Arendt's agonistic realm, anonymous publicity is an oxymoron.

Arendt (1998) acknowledges that in war situations, anonymity is often required to act in public. But anonymous speech in warring contexts is, for her, "mere talk," incapable of revealing the "who," and hence incapable of transcending the moment. This "mere talk," as she would label Lucy's public intervention, cannot be memorialized, because it is only through the courageous act of self-disclosure that a public act becomes story). The case at hand reveals the prescience of Arendt's words. Lucy's actions, her blogging, her writing, her willingness to publish others' work, are quickly becoming erased from memory and were already insufficient in 2013 to incite significant response. This lack of response to Lucy is rooted in the type of mediation she used and her anonymity, which became the production tactic and emblem of the danger in which she existed. Her heroic persona was linked to her need for anonymity, and digital technologies provided the techniques to establish this anonymity. In the process of embracing anonymity, however, her actions lost the ability to transcend and are bound to be forgotten.

Casting her profile against the politicized heroic identities of Sánchez and Snowden, Lucy's anonymous efforts against cartels and corrupt Mexican politicians gave her no springboard from which to propel herself into international stardom. Even though the threats on her life have been more certain and terrifying than the risks on Sánchez or Snowden, Lucy's quest never fitted the parameters of heroic stardom that have become the norm in Internet celebrity culture. The reasons include self-disclosure. Sánchez herself has reflected that the fame of her blog gave her relative protection from Cuba's government. It is likely that Snowden felt the same. In a sense, they have been relatively protected both by fame and by their willingness to openly reveal their identities alongside their deeds. Lucy, who feared the impunity typically enjoyed by the drug criminal organizations, did not have the luxury to reveal herself to others.

Arendt can explain some features of Lucy's case, but Lucy's case also clarifies some features of Arendt's thoughts. In particular, Lucy's need for anonymity is evidence of the parts missing in Benhabib's and Arendt's ideas on publicity: the a priori of publicity is trust, and trust is concretized in and through

media technologies. These missing parts are central to understanding publicity in the West and are essential for the evaluation of publicity in violent contexts.

Anonymity, Trust, and (New) Media Technologies

Arendt's heroes existed in the age of orality, when stories told about the past depended on faithful learning and repetition of each story, each generation. Homer's heroes—Ulysses, Achilles, Paris, and Hector, to name a few—come to us through the web of sociality made possible by oral stories. As noted above, Benhabib shows us that these heroes became domesticated in Arendt's work, distinctive not because of their capacity to act and survive violence but because of their memorialization in speech and stories. The agonistic realm that she sketches is also indebted to Arendt's ideas on orality. The act of self-disclosure central to publicity was courageous because, like Hector's faith, showing oneself in public would mean certain death. In Arendt's work, "courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self" (Arendt, 1998, p. 186). But not to worry, Achilles is not waiting; only a stronger debater who will leave sword behind but not reason. In the political imaginary constructed by Arendt, and reproduced in many theories of publicity, orality underscores most principles of publicity, including the nature of the courage one must embrace when entering the public realm (Benhabib, 1996). This is a courage that trusts the basic safety of those in public. The public realm is a contest of speakers, not killers; its heroes engage in a war of ideas and rhetoric, not bullets.

Orality implies self-disclosure, but once we leave behind orality, things quickly become complicated. Violence may loom. These complications are not simply the result of the heterogeneous nature of modern societies, which is Benhabib's argument, but the result, too, of the very affordances of technology and media. Mistrust is not simply the result of different views on life, politics, and values. To de-essentialize the phenomenology of mistrust, borrowing Benhabib's insightful criticism, we must recognize the spatiality of trust and the manner in which technologies of space complicate, muddle, and even negate trust. For things have changed after orality. Can trust exist without self-disclosure? Can self-disclosure exist without copresence?

Communication technologies mediate between individuals, and they are fundamentally paradoxical. They connect people, and they stand between them. Because of the latter, from the origins of writing to today, all communication technologies have been tools of anonymity or, at the very least, for making self-disclosure ambiguous. Because they do not require copresence, post-oral communication technologies constitute types of mediation between a person and, potentially, an unknown. All media technologies insert opacity in social relations. To address the otherwise inevitable insecurity of technology, people have developed "trusted systems" to assure secure communication and reduce or bypass opacity. Although today we associate the term *trusted systems* with computer-mediated technologies and communication, trusted systems have always been part of mediation. In writing and, later, printing, we have used seals, signatures, and rules of authorship that are meant to assure readers that they indeed know who is communicating with them, even if they cannot see them or touch them (Illich & Sanders, 1988). I trust I know who wrote *El Laberinto de la Soledad* because Fondo de Cultura Económica printed the name Octavio Páz in its 1991 reprinted cover, and I trust I know what Páz wrote in that book because

Fondo is a highly respected Mexican editorial house. Trusted systems are indexical of opacity and point to the secrets at the heart of mediated communication.

The development of trusted systems in computer environments is very complex, but here I want to highlight a way of making sense of these systems in relationship to the particular challenges to publicness in digital environments that Lucy had to face. The challenges are connected to the ability or inability of computerized media technologies to replicate open, trusted, face-to-face, civic (or polite) interactions in violent contexts. These challenges can be organized into two categories summarized in the idea of open civic communication: (1) The term *open communication* refers to the topological challenges of publicity in a violent context, or the challenges brought about by space, identity, and trust. (2) *Civic communication* highlights both the goal of the specific communication and the type of content it includes.

Open Communication

Trusted systems in writing were meant to connect, like copresence, writer and reader and were about establishing identity and authorship. Peter Seligman (1997) forwards a useful definition of trust that serves our purposes well: Trust is an "institutionalized model of generalized exchange" (p. 106). In writing, trusted systems were not about agreement but about recognition. I do not have to agree with what Páz wrote, but I trust I know who I am disagreeing with. In fact, the most evident examples of mutual trust in communication are in the context of unmediated, copresent, debate. In face-to-face debate, we need to have two types of trust. We must trust we know who the other speaker is, even if we disagree with her or him, and we must trust the other's behavior during the disagreement. In debate, trust translates into safety, which, not coincidently, is the Old Norse etymological origin of the word: *treysta* meant "to make safe" (Garmonsway, 1928, p. 144). Trust is thus not simply the faith resulting from an institutionalized way of communicating, but the outcome of or the feeling that faith provides, the confidence that allows us to disagree without fear. In Spanish, which did not benefit from the Old Norse precedent, trust translates simply as *confianza*: the belief that everything will be fine, particularly if we exchange words in very specific, predetermined, and recognizable ways. Trust during disagreement is not an outcome that can be taken for granted, but it can more or less be predicted in some specific institutionalized contexts, when it belongs to a social system, to a habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). In particular, feeling safe even in disagreement is part of the modern habitus, and this element of sociality has a particular history that can be traced as the rise of "civility" and "politeness" in public settings (Seligman, 1997, p. 65).[3] We trust we can disagree with each other without needing violence if we feel we are in a "civilized" context and with people who are civil, who are polite. The relation to publicity is not coincidental, but foundational. The term *civility* and the behaviors it implies are rooted in the Latin *civitas*, the same root of *citizen*, which in turn comes from the Greek *polites*, which refers to a member of the *polis* (Smith, 1997, p. 106). Civility and politeness thus mean more than good manners; they refer to the personal characteristics needed to be part of a democracy, which includes debating without violence. Civility and politeness are trusting systems in copresent debate. They refer to pre-agreed-upon protocols of interaction that allow us to communicate without fear of reprisal.

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[3] In Spanish, we still prefer the word *cortés*, courteous, a word that reminds all that this aspect of trust developed first in modernity in the courts of the aristocracy.

Trusting systems are needed in publicness, for debate, and they are even more needed when face-to-face open communication is impossible and the trusting effects of openness are necessary. This is particularly true in contemporary societies, which tend to be complex social arrangements that bring together dissimilar populations. More than ever, today's democracies depend on systems of cohesion, which can only be the result of debating about our difference. Yet mediated communication is a general model of exchange that seems to privilege intellectual harmony, not debate. Readers, listeners, or viewers who find something that they disagree with do not have an ethical duty, which is part of face-to-face interaction, to engage the other's ideas or argument. They can simply stop reading, listening, or viewing. The echo-chamber effect that many have written about regarding U.S. media is partly a technological problem and partly a problem of socialization, a way of avoiding intellectual disagreement in exchange for the easy exchange of ideas with those who agree with you. Face-to-face is great for sustaining community, but it can be more socially meaningful in debates and thus in pluralistic societies.

This is partly why Habermas's *Structural Transformation* (1989) tracks the rise and decline of the public sphere, from publicness to what he calls the "re-feudalization" of the public sphere, in terms of an erosion of face-to-face sociability, the rise of the power of public opinion, and the eventual substitution of public opinion for public relations, a market-driven way of being social and political (p. 135). Trust is not gone; rather, it is thinned down or difficult to attain. The trust needed to hold a system of agreement together is a minor thing compared with the robust trust needed to hold a system of disagreement together (Putnam, 1995). In this system of exchange, impoliteness and lack of civility can quickly become violent. Absent the power of copresence to invoke an ethical relation of trust between self and other, the self may quickly normalize impoliteness and incivility (Dahlgren, 2006; Peters, 1999).

The echo-chamber effect is not the predetermined result of the mediating techniques. Not every aspect of technologically mediated communication reduces trust. Live television, for instance, reignited the possibility of immediate trust by allowing some aspects of copresence to be part of technological communication (Auslander, 1999; Peters, 2001). Mexicans trusted Jacobo Zabludovsky, who anchored Televisa's news for almost three decades as much as U.S. Americans trusted Walter Cronkite, who for almost two decades anchored CBS. We may have not agreed with them, but we trusted that we knew who we were agreeing or disagreeing with. Our trust was needed as both anchors represented institutions wielding huge cultural and political power. Liveness is not openness or face-to-face communication; it is an institutionalized form of communication understood as performative. It is a replica of openness, a copy that represents some core elements of openness and leaves off other ones. In live television news, we can see the faces of the anchors, their serious demeanors, their emotional outbursts, and hear their words roughly at the same time they utter them. The replica is socially and dramaturgically powerful.

Critics have argued that replicas of liveness seem to constitute weak communities, less likely to be civically engaged. This is true in general, but not because mediation automatically produces disengagement. In times of violent crises, the replica can be powerful and elicit the strongest sense of trust. Sometimes the liveness of broadcast seems to dissolve the technological structures that separate anchor and audience and elicit more than thin agreement. When, on November 22, 1963, Cronkite announced the death of President John F. Kennedy, and we heard his voice breaking and saw his hand

reaching up for his glasses and saw him barely able to contain his tears, we trusted the information, and we trusted the person; we knew how he felt about the event, and we became one with him.

On September 19, 1985, immediately after the catastrophic earthquake that killed between 14,000 and 40,000 people (depending on the source) in Mexico City, Zabludovsky had his Cronkite moment. The magnitude 8.0 earthquake happened at 7:19 a.m., and Zabludovsky was still at home. From his car, which had one of the first car phones in the world, he transmitted reports while driving toward the Televisa News building in Chapultepec. From that car phone, his voice reached a frightened regional and national television audience. He was the only reporter giving testimony of what was going on in one of the most devastated areas of the city. His report tells us much about liveness and how liveness can activate the most powerful ethical connection between anchor and viewer. In his report, Zabludovsky is driving and walking through the devastation in downtown Mexico City, and though he has made a career as an anchor unfazed by events, we trust his words the most when we hear his feeling of uncertainty and fear, like when he is temporarily in danger because gas tanks are being moved just feet from him, or when he is moving by a building so tilted that he knows it may fall any moment. Trust is liveness, the feeling of the body, not cold objectivity. Zabludovsky keeps going, describing what he sees. Even though audiences cannot see what he sees, he describes the best he can, naming the buildings that are up, the ones that are down. He is walking through an unrecognizable downtown. He helps viewers recognize by pointing out the landmarks still visible, even the billboards. The report famously ends when he arrives to the main building of Televisa News, his network, and finds it destroyed. He has been narrating all this time with tragic emotion, but he is the most powerful then, when in tragic sadness he can no longer talk. His coworkers are trapped or dead in the crumbled building. At that moment, liveness was the most effective. At that moment, audiences not only shared the sense of bodily risk that Zabludovsky shared with them throughout his difficult trajectory but felt they were with him, face-to-face, sharing his pain (Peters, 2001).[4]

These replicas of open, oral, communication have in common that they all bypass an important element of face-to-face communication, one central to publicness. In the copresent debate and sharing that we associate with the idealized forms of publicness, openness is possible because of the reciprocity of trust (Papacharissi, 2010). So idealized forms of publicness, such as Arendt's, rely on the trust of two: the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader, the singer and the audience, the anchorperson and the viewer. Zabludovsky and Cronkite were live and trusted but not present. Almost always their bodies were hidden from those who, in rage, may have listened and wanted to respond, those who wished to disagree with them, and even wanted to harm them in anger. We trusted them, but they did not need to trust us. Reciprocity of trust was not required. The replica cannot fully reconstruct publicness. We call them public persons, but these anchors benefit greatly from the opacity permitted by media technologies.

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[4] The material in this paragraph came from the following sources: an interview with Jacobo Zabludovsky by José Luis Ruíz published in *El Universal* on the anniversary of the earthquake in 2010. In 1995, on the 10th anniversary, Televisa also transmitted a special that included Zabludovsky's famous narration, in abbreviated form. I was also in Mexico City that terrible day and remember the broadcast as if it were yesterday.

Like Zabludovsky and Cronkite, Lucy wanted to be trusted but could not fully trust some of the users of *EBDN*; she actually feared them, as she repeatedly stated when referring to the threats by state forces and drug criminal organizations. Unlike Zabludovsky and Cronkite, Lucy did not have a powerful news institution shielding her from danger or cops ready on the dial to protect her in case of need. Instead, she relied on the peculiar affordances of new media technologies to generate trust through liveness and anonymity through digital opacity. These two affordances, however, are complexly intertwined, raising the possibility that certain types of publicity in digital realms will never fully work in contexts of violence.

From the perspective of the blog creator, from Lucy's perspective, the key elements that generate trust are liveness and/or authorial identity. Liveness replicates copresence just as authorial identity stands for self-disclosure. Both mechanisms allow users/readers to understand whose work they are using (reading or viewing). The feeling of liveness is relatively easily achieved in new media technologies, which are quite apt at replicating a sense of embodied copresence and thus at generating this aspect of trust. Chatting through the Web allows a user to almost see how a finger on the other side of the world, perhaps one at a help desk in India or Brazil, just pressed the letter *Q*, giving you a feeling of its embodied presence. Temporal immediacy replicates copresent, face-to-face communication. It was easy for Lucy to convey trust while she updated her blog daily, and her ongoing embodied labor could be felt. Authorial identity was assumed. Users no doubt felt that only Lucy (or whatever anonymous entity they imagined as the author) could be in charge of the changes. This assumption about authorship is partly the result of the ubiquity of trusted systems and the users' awareness of their existence.

Trusted systems are key for establishing authorial identity in the digital realm, and most users of digital media have to interact with at least some of these systems on a regular basis. To use the World Wide Web, for instance, requires emblems, logos, signatures, secret codes, URLs, key chains, and passwords to give and receive assurances about identity. In fact, to attest to the staggering number of unknown elements in digital communication environments, most computer communication uses multiple trusted systems simultaneously. I wrote this article at a coffee shop using a computer that is only accessible to me because it requires a password to log in. My computer relies on security software to identify malware, Trojans, and computer viruses that could harm my computer. I access and back up my files on the cloud, so I had to use a password to access the coffee shop wireless system, which uses my URL as part of the trusted systems it depends on. The cloud system I use requires a digital certificate, a high-tech identity marker that assures the cloud that I am who I am or, if you prefer, that my computer is "who" my computer says it is. These trusted systems use security protocols, cryptography, and hardware security systems to assure that the article you are reading is written by me, that it is safe, backed up, and that nobody can steal my ideas so that you can eventually read them. Digital identities and communication cannot exist without these. Trust would otherwise be as impossible as proving authorial identity.

While retaining their individual anonymity, Lucy and her partner used these systems of trust, too. They registered and bought space for their website from a legitimate Internet service provider (http://godaddy.com) using a "signature"—in this case, a real e-mail address originating in Monterrey, Mexico. They used a series of pertinent passwords to enter their domain name server provider's website and modify the *EBDN* website. In fact, these basic trusting systems allowed Lucy to prove to Carroll (*The*

Guardian journalist) that she was indeed who she claimed to be. Significantly, this proof was modifying the website and, thus, Lucy's proof was at the level of the embodied labor of publisher, not author. These trusted systems are partly assurances about the embodied location of the author, and thus they create a paradox to bloggers like Lucy.

The paradox of digital trusted systems is that the systems that establish authorial identity (IP addresses, Internet service providers, and the passwords connecting these two) are also some of the systems used to construct anonymity. Lucy and her partner used these trusted systems to protect themselves from dangerous users, but the digital walls proved to be insufficient. While a physical barrier often hid and protected Zabludovsky and Cronkite, the digital walls meant to protect Lucy's identity and location were much easier to circumvent, as the disappearance of Lucy and her partner proved.

Can an anonymous public hero exist in the digital realm? Not if the hero needs something back from the people or from institutions. Members of Anonymous, the famous organization of hackers that uses digital snooping as a way of doing activism, can expect to be treated as heroes only while they inhabit the masked persona they are known for. Their anonymity has not stopped their vulnerability, as members of Anonymous Veracruz experienced after launching in 2011 OpCartel, an operation that targeted Los Zetas. The operation was quickly stopped when one of Anonymous's members was kidnapped by the cartel and Los Zetas threatened the family of the kidnapped person and promised to kill 10 members of Anonymous if they dared to reveal the information the hackers had gathered about the criminal organization (Naone, 2011). When the heroic act cannot even be performed and police cannot or prefer not to protect, hacktivists cannot be called digital heroes. Similar to members of Anonymous, Lucy's public role could not be truly open; her heroicity, if that is what we need to call it, could not be attached to her identity, as in the case of Snowden or Sánchez; she could not trust some of the visitors to *EBDN*, and, as she powerfully narrates, her day-to-day activities were carried out by hiding, in fear, by tricking the trusted systems, by moving from location to location, and by never revealing who or where she was.

Lucy's anonymity ultimately did not work, because tricking digital trusted systems is much harder than most people realize. Yet when it did work, her anonymity allowed thousands of contributors and commentators to share their experiences with and views about drug violence in Mexico. She was trusted, even if this trust was not universal. But whatever trust she gathered through her role as citizen journalist withered away once her reporting stopped. Trusting her necessitated a different type of maintenance than the trust of other public persons, other heroes, whose identities are entwined with their heroic actions. Unless Snowden or Sánchez betrays through action the spirit of their extraordinary acts of publicity, our admiration for them will remain attached to their life stories and their bodies, the very emblems of the risk they took for their communities. Without ongoing activity, without exposing her life to danger, the elements of liveness that Lucy could deliver, Lucy's pleas quickly became alienating, those of an unknown other, one who will likely be forgotten.

Conclusion

Violence forces us to look deeply into theories of publicity, which, I argue, are tested to the limit by the case at hand—a case involving violence and the digital realm. Contrary to the normative

presumption that publicity theory is also, in a sense, a theory about trust, the case shows that bilateral trust cannot be taken for granted in Mexico—and, arguably, most places in the world. In violent contexts, and in cases of digital communication, spaces of trust are muddled businesses. Secrets are often necessary, as in the case of journalists hiding their sources, whistle-blowers like Snowden, or hacktivists like Anonymous. These secrets are meant to protect the identity of those who stand up to power and who, contradictorily, wish to reveal secrets and illuminate what is hidden. Lucy falls in this muddled category of public actors wishing to control the level of self-disclosure, and her case reveals the limits and even dangers of anonymity. The space of trust was not for Lucy. This space depended on the hero treatment, and this treatment necessitated a face, a body, and an identity. Lucy could not occupy the space of hero, rebel, and fighter embodied by and identified with Sánchez and Snowden. She was both openness and secrets, words without a face, a hero and a fugitive. Yet, even in this state of ambiguity and contradiction, she taught us all a lesson.

Anonymity is not anathema to publicity. Secrets indeed have uses in the public sphere, and not only when administered by and within such legitimate institutions as journalism or the state security apparatus. In a world besieged by pluriform violence, one in which corruption has yielded useless claims that clearly distinguish between state and criminals, the a priori of politics can no longer be the Hobbesian maxim that the state should have a monopoly on violence or that the state should have a monopoly over secrets. The base of politics should be—as Lucy foresaw in her darkest hour and enacted through her stubborn, unadvisable, and dangerous reporting of violent events—a collective imagined street by street, not in the scale of state or nation.

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