

Impacts of the Drug War On Mexico's Image in Canada

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Peter Andrews/Reuters

INTRODUCTION

Mexico and Canada are celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations in 2014. Official bilateral diplomacy concerns issues such as commerce, cooperation as NAFTA partners, and migration. Since 2004, the two countries have also been participants in the Canada-Mexico Partnership, meant to strengthen cooperation between the public and private sectors.

Approximately 1.8 million Canadians visit Mexico and 130 000 Mexicans visit Canada every year. Mexican residents in Canada are estimated to number 80 000, while around 50 000 Canadians live permanently in Mexico.¹ Due to the intense movement of tourists and working people between the two countries, it is important to analyze Mexico's image in Canada, something we consider influences the migratory

flow between them, as well as their bilateral commercial relations and potential direct investment.

This article is based on a study of Canadian media in 2012 and 2013, in which we looked for news and features related to Mexico. To interpret the results, we will introduce the reader to the concept of the image of country of origin and recall the political events in Mexico that may help explain our findings, particularly government policy on the war on drugs. Our purpose is to reflect on the relationship between the Mexico's image abroad, its bilateral relations, and, possibly, the need to improve that image through public diplomacy.

STATE BRANDING

The image of the country of origin, a concept used in international relations since the 1960s, may be seen as a generic construction made up of general images not only of repre-

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sentative products, but also of the level of a country's political and economic maturity, historical background, foreign relations, culture and traditions, technological development, and level of industrialization, among other factors, according to Roth and Diamantopoulos.² The construction of the country-of-origin image includes a *cognitive* element, referring to consumers' belief in a certain country, but also to an *affective* one, referring to the emotional value that country has for the international public.

In an international environment where ordinary people are becoming more and more important,³ there is increasing interest in networking people and territories. In this respect, the media are an important tool of soft power, and they play a vital role in building the image not only of people, but also of territories and countries.

In his work, Peter van Ham teaches us that in a world loaded with information, images and strong state brands are important for attracting foreign direct investment, recruiting talent, and exercising political power. Therefore, having a bad reputation or no reputation is a serious impediment for countries seeking global competitiveness. This results in an increasing importance of public diplomacy and image construction. According to Van Ham, in the short run, the state will have become ® *The State*.

If we understand a brand as the idea consumers have about a product, state branding refers to the international public's ideas about a certain country. According to Van Ham's state branding theory,⁴ Mexico and Canada are no longer simply countries that one sees on a map. Mexico and Canada have now turned into "brand states," whose geographical and political contexts seem trivial when compared to the emotional resonance they produce in public opinion.

THE WAR ON DRUGS IN MEXICO

Only 11 days into the Mexican presidency in 2006, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa initiated a most worrisome war on drugs. Calderón thought that this "fight for the security of the Mexican people" would solve the legitimacy problems he had when he took office.⁵ While at the beginning of his term, his approval ratings rose from 54 percent to 64 percent in four months,⁶ by the end, his drug policy was generally disapproved. This was due to the fact that not only did the "war" take place between drug dealers and the authorities, but it also involved an important part of the civilian population. As some drug dealers

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were displaced, the number of kidnappings and street fights rose. During Calderón's years in office, crime levels went up so much that some journalists compared Mexico to Iraq in terms of the number of deaths. After the first year of the "National Agreement on Security, Justice, and Legality" (2006-2007), 8 867 murders were reported, a number that grew to a total of 121 683 by the end of his mandate, according to the National Geography and Statistics Institute (INEGI).⁷

His strategy was widely criticized on a political and social level. The media reported about the consequences of his policy in terms of a climate of violence and insecurity nationwide. For President Felipe Calderón, this strategy was necessary to eliminate crime organizations in the country. Nevertheless, many regions saw severe changes in the population's life style in order to deal with the climate of insecurity, including the need to migrate domestically or abroad. As a matter of fact, it was in this context that Mexico became the first country of origin for asylum seekers in Canada, some of them truly based on this context of violence.⁸

The war on drugs negatively affected Mexico's image, changing it from a country perceived as an important tourist destination to somewhere unsafe, where the rule of law no longer prevailed. As a matter of fact, important international media considered the agreement a military failure.⁹

Therefore, we offer here an analysis of what we consider to be the impact of the war on drugs on Mexico's image in Canada, based on data from 2012 and 2013.

MEDIA STUDY

Our study consists of a content analysis of three important Canadian newspapers, where we looked for articles involving Mexico between January 1, 2012 and April 31, 2013. We examined 68 articles found in three regional papers: *The Toronto Star* (43), *Montreal Gazette* (8), and *Winnipeg Free Press* (17). We analyzed the proportion of good vs. bad news about Mexico as well as the most frequent topics in these publications. In general bad news (65 percent) prevails over good news

(21 percent) (see Figure 1). Some opinion pieces, analysis, and news may also be interpreted as good or bad according to the readers' opinions; these categorized as "Not applicable" (N/A).

When analyzing the proportion of good vs. bad news, we found that *The Toronto Star* is the most negative of the three, with 72 percent of bad news (see Figure 1). The *Montreal Gazette* is the most positive, but also the one that publishes the least about Mexico, an interesting point, as this paper belongs to the Francophone region. The *Winnipeg Free Press* offers an intermediate position, with 53 percent of bad news versus 29 percent of good. This comparison could be interpreted as Mexico having a worse image in English-speaking Canada (Ontario and Manitoba) than in the French-speaking part (Quebec), a hypothesis that must be confirmed by other studies.

THE MOST COMMON TOPICS

Different regions in Canada seem to choose news in Mexico according to their particular interests. *The Toronto Star* emphasizes the issues of violence and the drug war; violence experienced by Canadians in Mexico; the violent political

FIGURE 1
PERCENTAGE OF GOOD NEWS VS. BAD NEWS
FOR EACH CANADIAN PUBLICATION

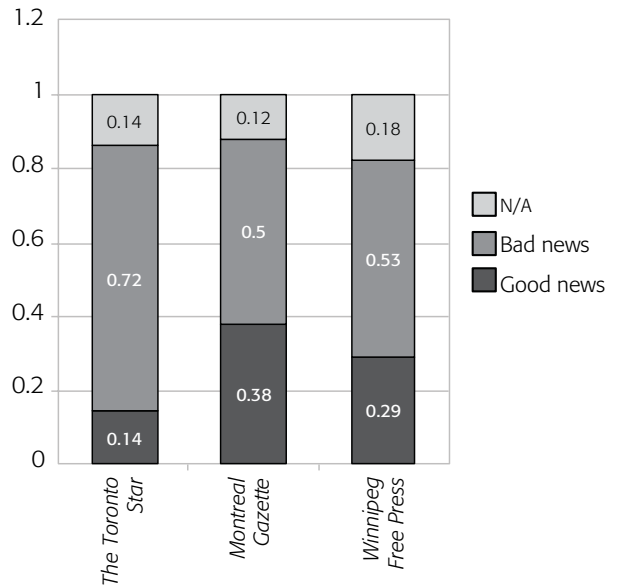
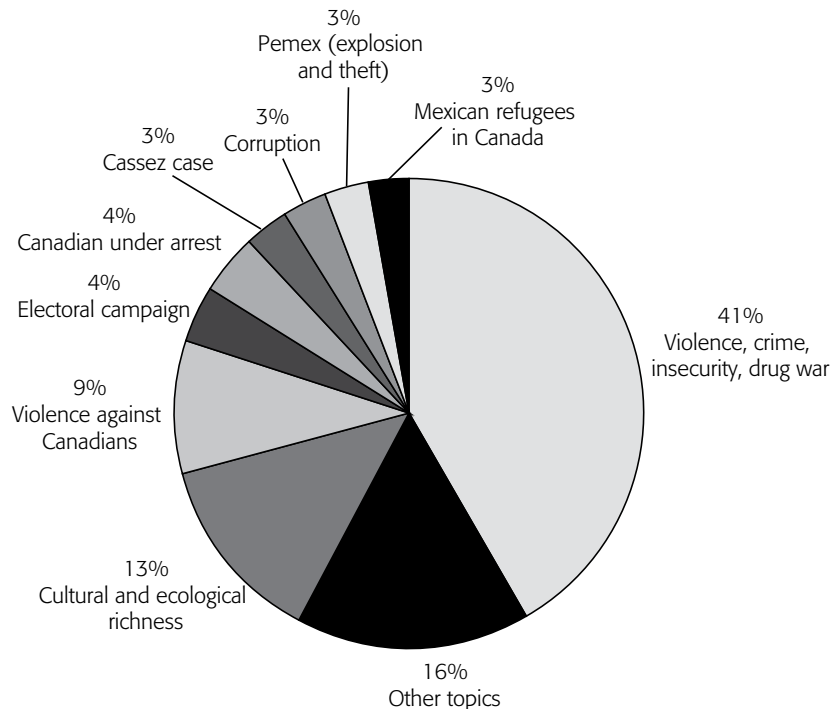


FIGURE 2
THE MOST FREQUENT TOPICS ABOUT MEXICO IN CANADIAN NEWSPAPERS*



*Note: approximate percentages.

atmosphere in Mexico; as well as the country's cultural and ecological wealth.

The *Montreal Gazette* focuses on Mexican refugees, and specifically on the deportation of drug-war refugees and the Harper policy in this area, but also on Mexico's cultural and ecological wealth.

Again, for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the most important topics seem to be the same positive one (Mexico's cultural and ecological wealth), but also the case of a Canadian under arrest in Mexico and the war on drugs (see Figure 2).

We observe that almost half the news about Mexico in Canada, that is, 41 percent, refers to issues of violence, crime, insecurity, drug traffic, and the murder of journalists in the context of the war on drugs. If we sum up the news items that refer to the violence experienced by Canadians in Mexico, the third most common type, we see that half of the news refers directly to violence. This leads us to think that the sun-beach-and-mariachi stereotype that used to be Mexico's image has been replaced by the perception of it as a violent, unappealing place. Just to compensate for this general image, the second most important topic is Mexico's cultural and ecological wealth, an issue to be explored by Mexican government diplomacy.

Research on how this type of image affects the exchange of people and goods between Mexico and Canada is still to be developed. It is a topic worth discussing: Does image determine relations between countries, or is it the other way around? ■■■

NOTES

¹ Government of Canada, "Canada-Mexico Relations. A Strategic Partner for Canada," 2012, <http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/mexico-mexique/canmex.aspx?lang=eng>.

² Katharina P. Roth and Adamantios Diamantopoulos, "Advancing the Country Image Construct," *Journal of Business Research* vol. 62, issue 7, 2009, pp. 726-740.

³ Peter van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴ Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 80, no. 5, Sept.-Oct. 2001, p. 2.

⁵ In the beginning, Calderón called his strategy a "war against drug trafficking"; later, because of the impact this had on public opinion, he changed it to "the fight for the security of the Mexican people."

⁶ Jorge Enrique Pérez Lara, "La guerra contra el narcotráfico: ¿una guerra perdida?", *Espacios públicos*, vol. 14, no. 30, January-April 2011, pp. 211-230, <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/676/67618934014.pdf>.

⁷ "Más de 121 mil muertos, el saldo de la narcoguerra de Calderón: INEGI," *Proceso*, July 30, 2013, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348816>.

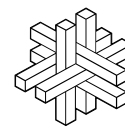
⁸ It was in this context that Canada reintroduced a visa requirement for Mexican visitors in 2009.

⁹ "Le Monde: La guerra contra el narco en México es 'mortífera,'" *ADNPolítico*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.adnpolitico.com/2012/2012/08/23/le-monde-en-mexico-el-conflicto-mas-mortifero-en-el-mundo>.

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