

# Digital dispatches from la *Crónica (Nota) Roja*: Why Sensationalism and Crime still matters in the New Latin America Media Ecology

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## Introduction

Sensationalism was the key feature of crime reporting in the Latin American press from the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until at least the 1980s (Brunetti, 2011; Parga, 1997). The so-called Red Chronicle or *Crónica Roja* - also referred to in places such as Mexico as *Nota Roja* - refers to a particular type of hard news genre that became a key selling point for many newspapers and magazines, attracting millions of readers around the region. (Ramírez Tobón, 2001; Saad, 2011). The format was so successful that even papers of record, as well as television news shows incorporated this kind of output into their daily production. The genre was based on a type of 'yellow journalism' that reported crime in explicit, gruesome ways but whose storytelling both reflected and appealed to the communities it covered. Indeed, as some research suggests, tabloid style crime reporting has traditionally shown crime as a working class issue (Grabe, 1996).

Over the years, the outlets that carried this type of journalism in most Latin American countries have diminished together with its audiences (Corona-Berkin, 1997; Parga, 1997). This reflects a global trend in which the market for crime stories has shrunk dramatically to the point that this has become much less of a tool with which to attract readers. Indeed, its popularity in mainstream outlets has seen a demise both in the global north and south (Lugo-Ocando, 2017). This is to be understood as part of a fundamental transformation in readers' consumption habits and moral frameworks. In this sense, sensationalism in crime reporting is for the most part no longer what it was (Chermak, 2013; Wiltenburg, 2004) and nowadays there are only a few mainstream news media outlets around the continent with a predilection for images of corpses in pools of blood.

Having said that, in Latin America, this journalistic genre's retreat, while inexorable, has been perhaps slower than in the US and Western Europe. Some mainstream newspapers in key capitals of the region still carry bloody pictures of violence accompanied by detailed descriptions. Despite important changes in the media landscape and news cultures, there are continuities in the narratives around crime as well as surviving media outlets that still print these stories for substantial segments of its audiences.

The study of the 'Cronica Roja' can be broadly divided into 2 different approaches. One tendency frames the tabloid press as mouthpieces of mainly right wing political interests which use sensationalism in order to divert poorer parts of society that make up the readership from more politically urgent issues by using a series of tropes that scaremonger and manipulate. Another tendency, influenced by reformulated reading of Marxist theory broadly located around the field of Cultural Studies, has revindicated the genre as a space which represents popular urban culture whose own aesthetics has its own critical potential.

In this article, we explore the Cronica Roja's continued success across the continent taking into consideration these two different appreciations of the format and both the challenges and the possibilities it has for the future.

## Society and *Crónica Roja*

The *Crónica Roja* genre was born out of contemplative cultural traditions around violence that date back to pre-Columbine societies and a rigid system of censorship imposed by successive colonial and postcolonial governments in the region. Indeed, as many anthropologists and historians have recorded, native Americans in Latin America paid particular attention to violence. Sacrifice and related forms of ritual violence were deeply rooted in cultural practices in these societies, which linked them to their own cosmology that framed conceptions of the natural and were interconnected to the exercise of power. In these communities, there was an intimate relationship between political power and ritual violence (Spencer, 2012; Swenson, 2003). These rituals were performed in public and they were done in such a way that these events communicated power while fostering social cohesion. However, and contrary to common assumptions, this way of communicating power happened within a very complex and sophisticated media ecology that incorporated theatre, news media and other forms of communication to mass audiences (Beltrán, Herrera, Pinto, & Torrico, 2008; Forment, 2013).

The other important historical feature is that since independence in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century most countries in the region have been through extreme political upheavals in which frail democracies have given way to prolonged periods of authoritarianism. For most of continent's Republican history, the public sphere was frequently restricted and freedom of expression has been an elusive, rather chimeric aspiration: a flashing light from a remote lighthouse that more often than not has been obscured by military juntas or accidental populist *Caudillos*.

In this context, reporting crime was one of the ways in which the news media found formats to sell and connect with society beyond politics. Indeed, authoritarian regimes in the region at the time made use of violence and the moral panics that this kind of journalism produced to reinforce a general need for the 'order' that *Caudillo* or strongmen were keen to impose. Consequently, one could argue that the *Crónica Roja* was both a priority for the political economy of the media as well as a way of communicating political power.

Indeed, despite the apparent depoliticized nature of crime reporting as a news beat, it remains nevertheless strongly linked to politically conservative agendas that use fear of crime to mobilize the public in their favor (Lugo-Ocando, 2007, 2011). These procedures are ascribed to larger discursive strategies in the press that legitimize the exercise of coercive power (Corona-Berkin, 1997) by means of using crime to promote fear and uncertainty. That sense of fear that these kinds of stories elicited have often been seen to be part of a discursive practice which enables social control. In 'Policing the Crisis; The State and Law and Order' (1980) British Jamaican sociologist Stuart Hall famously gave an account of the rising moral panic surrounding the relatively new crime of mugging in the UK. He mapped these kinds of news products politically, arguing that the State were able justify hard crackdowns on perceived deviating groups thereby giving the public a sense of emotional stability and deflecting from their own political responsibilities.

To be sure, as some authors have highlighted, the *Crónica Roja* developed its own particular procedures to articulate 'truth' when carrying out news reporting. In a continent riddled with poverty and inequality, with a long-standing tradition of populism, right-wing elites have to appealed indirectly to the masses in the knowledge that presenting their agendas would not guarantee electoral victory. Therefore, the *Crónica Roja* is an important mechanism to control the agenda-setting process, by bypassing debates on social issues in the public sphere and focusing instead on crime.

## Selling sensationalism in the 21st century. Some case studies.

In many places in Latin America the *Crónica Roja* continues to uphold sales and sustain ratings, which both the news media and advertisers still need to fund the current business model. By increasing audiences, these outlets become more attractive to advertisers, allowing them in turn to generate sales both by means of expanding audiences and advertisers. In these locations, this genre continues to exercise a magical spell upon audiences and attract them to news in the vane of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

*Tromé* in Peru is a case in point. The tabloid was launched in the late nineties and continues to be the most widely sold paper in the Spanish speaking world - selling more than Argentina's *Clarín* in terms of daily publications in print. Raul Castro is a former journalist at *El Comercio* conglomerate and one of the founders of *Trome* recalls why the paper worked as business model at the time - and continues to do so now:

*In strictly numerical terms, the impact of this paper was important because it entered into that area where it had no competition at the time. It had education, it had health, nutrition, women bought it. We had a difficult situation in which there were ads in the middle of the paper - which were escort ads, so a lot of women complained and so we put them in the sports part of the ads, so we segmented the readership. It was complicated, there were pushes and pulls, but we had a great marketing department that was aligned with us. We ended up producing a good outlet.<sup>i</sup>*

In Argentina, no outlet gets 'yellowier' than "*Cronica*". The outlets began its life in the 60's as a print outlet whose output focused on gory sensationalism and morbid stories of bizarre killings. As Fernando Vázquez, crime reporter at *Crónica* in Argentina points out:

*It's been said that Crónica doesn't have readers - it has fans. Crónica has developed a close relationship with the reader. The Crónica reader is from a working class background so its normal that they identify themselves with the paper. Obviously you have to adapt yourself to the client (..) If you take a look Argentina's print history, you will see that the front page photos of dead people wasn't just something Crónica did, Clarín does it too - and they are really not the same kind of newspapers. Many outlets have used the template because this is a business and you need to sell and so - they all publish dead people on their front pages. The dead exist, violence exists, we don't hide it.*

In 1994, *Cronica* made history by changing its business model and launching the first TV news channel in the country to broadcast live 24 hours a day. Bizarre, popular, populist, *Cronica* TV soon became part of the audiovisual imaginary of the country. Memories of the standard definition quality has since been celebrated for its caricaturesque breaking news alerts, the bold white textplates across the screen, the US military music news sting and perhaps most famously, headlines like: "2 people dead and one Bolivian." Fernando Vazquez remembers:

*Crónica TV emerged in 90s and it was a great success. The famous red banners, the breaking news, the exclusives, it was followed around the country, in the print outlets, in the agencies, and people were happy to buy the product. They bought it on screen. It was attention grabbing transferred what had been consumed in print to TV and that increased consumption - this was inevitable as the print press is in decline and broadcast is on the rise. For those who launched the channel it was a challenge but it was a success. There was a lot of violence, a lot of weird stories, and this made the audience feel close to the outlet. Crónica won loads of Martín Fierro awards - that showed how successful it was. And that was done with the*

*support of the people - people even used to ring up and denounce things and they would be covered. That relationship between the paper and the public from the paper - then was transferred to the TV. And the paper lost a lot of readers - the TV outlet was not a good thing for the paper.*

Today however, that kind of sensationalism has been modified - Cronica has moved up to HD - losing its grainy aesthetic - and is competing with other outlets at a time when even they are facing cutbacks due to the financial challenges faced by the media industry. Moreover, with the rise of the digital sphere, the genre itself has an uncertain future. Vazquez warns that many of these media outlets are far from knowing how to deal with these challenges or having the support and strategy needed for it,

*There is a problem here - it's been hard for Crónica to adapt. Not in terms of operative issues - but in economic terms. There are people who won't put money into digital, they prefer to spend money on the print side, because you can touch it - and that tactile part tends to appeal more. It's trying to get up to speed with the present, but these are the first steps. But people who go to Crónica want to read weird things, strange news items, crimes, but I think it is hard for those working in digital - there are no advertisers, the country is not in good shape, and if the papers has few ads - the web has less - the ads revenue is taken by Google. So the transition we are going through at the moment - not just at Crónica but around the media landscape, is a big challenge for us all.*

Despite this lack of coherent strategy, sales of newspapers in the region that embrace the genre of *Crónica Roja* endure in an ever more competitive media market. The style continues to be a profitable business perhaps because of the fact that it never depended on advertisements as such but more on direct sales to its audiences. Indeed, few of these newspapers ever had big corporations and manufacturers placing ads in their pages so when they all left the mainstream media to fund organizations such as Google and Facebook, the finances of *Crónica Roja* remained almost untouched. However, as audiences' content consumption patterns shift to cyberspace, these very same newspapers are starting to feel the pinch. It is a matter of time before the changes in the market lead them to have to rethink their current business models.

Redeeming the abject.

Over the years, newspapers that published *Crónica Roja* stories were able to ensure their success in terms of sales by creating social representations based on sensationalism, violence and sexism (Parga, 1997; Vélez, Giraldo, & Unás, 1998). In so doing, these media outlets foster a social imaginary characterised by a sense of immediacy, spectacle, chaos, 'machismo', fear and overall uncertainty. To be sure, newspapers which subscribed to the *Crónica Roja* have thrived upon the type of fear and pornography of the violence.

The question is, therefore, why, despite changes in the media ecology and audiences' habits elsewhere, does the *Crónica Roja* persist? The answer, according to Nelson Villagomez and Renata Patricia Ortiz Bahamonde (2002), can be found in the cultural and socio-economic context in which news on crime is disseminated among particular segments of the audiences; one which these authors refers to as 'news audience environment' a concept that links to the broader notion of 'news cultures'. In this sense,

*The red chronicle is not malefic, what is frightening is the way in which media spectacle and presents the events of reality. The red chronicle responds to*

*people's daily lives, which is often ignored in schools of journalism, criticized on the altars of the academy and undervalued in the studies of communication genres, the chronicle defends from ethics, aesthetics and semiology, its possibilities as a space in which people are read, reading and recognizing and recognizing they transform. The red chronicle has become the social space that allows the vulnerable class, those recognized in this type of information, because it has been the only space that has given them a representation of their reality (Villagomez & Ortiz, 2002).*

In this sense, in order to understand its perennial appeal, we need to explore the communities that engage with this genre and that sustain a market for news stories that reflect, to many of them, the daily lives of people who coexist with violence in ways that foster an intimate relationship with violence. Indeed, one of the key characteristics that one can ascribe to the *Crónica Roja* is its ability to foster communities by both moral panics and the pornographic enchantment towards violence.

However, instead of seeing this as a crude way of mobilizing the public using fear, as it is the case of the narratives on immigration in Europe (Lugo-Ocando, 2007, 2011; Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013), we need to consider it as a genre that brings together and reflects important areas of popular culture and its linked aesthetics that are often invisible in the mainstream media. Indeed, violent crime continues to be such a widespread phenomenon in these communities that reporting it in elaborated ways using data and statistics as it has become the case in most of the West (Lugo-Ocando, 2017) is not appealing to the readership. Given the levels of crime in these countries, data and numbers have become meaningless. Instead, the consumption of news around crime is more of a form of entertainment that requires a very different format, one that emphasizes individual and compelling cases rather than structure and context.

Furthermore, *La Crónica Roja* has the additional function of creating communities. As described by one of our interviewees, it is “a way of giving people something to talk about”.<sup>ii</sup> José Enrique Contreras Sánchez, who worked as a reporter for *Mi Diario* daily in the city of Maracaibo in Venezuela, adds:

*Some people used to look down on us and say that the type of journalism we did was not worth doing. They were very critical of the language we used both in our headlines and reports as well as the type of pictures we showed. But you know what? People read us at a time that they were not reading the traditional papers anymore. Our newspaper sold five times more than the main newspaper, which was our parent company. And in 2008, we won the National Journalism Award for our coverage of floods in poor areas of the city, something that was ignored by the rest of the press.<sup>iii</sup>*

Indeed, Contreras Sánchez's view evokes the debates around high culture and low culture to which Umberto Eco referred in his seminal work *Apocalyptic and Integrated* (Eco, 2011 [1964]). In that work, Eco he explained how society places certain values on different tastes and different types of consumption and that the hierarchical nature of those values are ultimately defined by power and ideology. In this sense, something is considered good or bad, inappropriate or not because of the status it has in relation to ‘class’. In this sense, the ‘distaste’ for particular cultural artefacts expressed by many of course not limited to the *Crónica Roja* - for example, cultural expressions such as the much maligned - but widely consumed - *Reggaeton* musical style bear the brunt of classist disdain.<sup>iv</sup> Both *Reggaeton* and the *Crónica Roja* share morbid sensationalism around sex and violence as well as the use of common slang and obscene language.

Indeed, the language used in the *Crónica Roja* is crucial in understanding why and how particular individuals and communities relate to this genre. Audiences are created around news that brings a sort of 'grotesque transparency' (Nahon-Serfaty, 2017) to issues and events in society that other styles in ways that the language used by the more institutional and high-brow press cannot. In doing so, the *Crónica Roja* reflects the common language that is familiar and accessible to those who live in poverty and excluded from society.

Indeed, one might argue that the pathological or sociological explosion of delinquency and criminality that are sensationalised by this kind of press reflects a negation and subversion of notions around the social contract. Indeed, one could read into the *Cronica Roja* a kind of rebellious aesthetics which not only bypasses but exceeds 'higher' forms of journalistic discourse enshrined in the rhetorics of cold objectivity and practical reason.

The *Crónica Roja* provides an interpretative but factual narrative of crime without falling into speculation. For this genre, 'violence' is a cultural object of use that is naturally inserted in the collective imaginary – a commercial imaginary given its political economy - structured in the public imagination, among other means, by the so-called red chronicle (Núñez & Noboa, 1998). The genre uses popular jargon, which not only is accessible but in being so also inclusive than the rest of society. It is therefore important to remind ourselves that tabloid language has the ability to create communities (Conboy, 2004, 2006, 2007) and serves as a mirror, even if it is distorted, of the people that no one else seems to talk about in the mainstream news. It is this genre in Latin America that provides recognition to those living in poverty (Awad, 2015) and highlights their drama and way they coexist with violence as part of their daily life.

Some say that in the wake of the fake news phenomenon, there is an opportunity for more celebratory readings of the 'cronica roja' form of journalism. Raul Castro explains:

*The tabloid is fundamentally journalistic and fake news does not incorporate this. Fake news is the result of production mechanisms made by professional trolls. For example, Cambridge Analytics released information through influencers, bloggers, youtubers that were not journalistic. This is a part of the de-professionalisation of journalism. The biggest the traffic, the congestion is concentrated around viral phenomena which are made in factories that are made strategically for political means. It's a professionalized strategy of disinformation that serves political agendas. These are not journalistic genres, they are informative, they have other characteristics. And this leaves a big challenge for journalism – but it also means we need to change the way we are packaging things. There is little point in producing serious content if no one is going to read us. It's a complex debate.*

## Conclusion

Around Latin America, the *Crónica Roja* continues to be the best-selling genre for its content of death, sex and violence which responds to predetermined cultural frameworks and communities.

In terms of scholarly research around them, instead of belittling this type of journalism, scholars might be better advised to treat this as another pillar of journalism which acts as a political institution and which has been pivotal in constructing a key part of the Habermasian 'public sphere'.

News stories told according to the logics of *Crónica Roja* often speak about issues that people think need to be addressed, when others do not, in ways that are deemed too lowly in tone and language for the journalistic establishment. To stigmatize the red chronicle is to miss the point; that it is about

acknowledging a type of news experience and storytelling which counterbalances generalized criteria and ideas of what news is about (Vélez et al., 1998).

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