

## Contemporary discourses on violence in Central American newspapers

Huhn, Sebastian; Oettler, Anika; Peetz, Peter

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## CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES ON VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

**Sebastian Huhn, Anika Oettler and Peter Peetz**

**Abstract** / It is commonly understood that criminal violence has superseded political violence in Central America. Focusing on the social construction of violent realities in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua, the authors describe the print media landscape in Central America and examine both the quality of leading newspapers and the main clusters of topics constituting the news discourse on violence. The analysis of the macro-structure of topic management in Central American newspapers allows a differentiation of the 'talk of crime': it is more heterogeneous than often thought. There are signs that the problem of juvenile delinquency is emerging as the centre of a cross-country discourse on 'ordinary violence'. On the other hand, the talk of crime is centred around a few topic clusters, with sexual violence and border-related discourse on violence being of key importance. Finally, the article points to a heterogeneous array of discourse events that is connected to political developments and power relations.

**Keywords** / Central America / discourse analysis / print media / violence

### Approaching Central American Violence

According to policy papers and academic studies, levels of violence in Central America are as high as, or even higher than in the era of state terror, insurgent action and war of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> It has become common parlance that criminal violence has superseded political violence. Actually, the high level of Central American criminal violence has become a social fact, precisely because it is commonly believed as such. From our viewpoint, it is important to recognize that (1) the 'real' level of criminal violence is mostly unknown and that (2) the 'secondary waves' of criminal violence did not move into all the countries in the region at a similar speed.

The fact that criminal violence plays a decisive role in the discursive structuring of the social world is reflected by criminal statistics, which indicate that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world. It is important to note, however, that criminal statistics must generally be treated with caution, because they reflect *and* construct patterns of violent action (e.g. Huhn et al., 2006): 'But if the information they give on crime is restricted, they may nevertheless reveal other

facts about the society that produces them' (Caldeira, 2000: 106). Central America, of course, is no exception in this. According to police statistics, El Salvador has suffered an explosion in homicides. This is connected to political rhetoric and, especially, to the law-and-order policy statements of the ruling party, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). In contrast, in Nicaragua, the threat of criminal violence is still seldom drawn upon in political discourse. This is connected to the discourse prevalent among the elite that Nicaragua is a safe country (Rocha Gómez, 2005; and for the relationship between police activity and statistics, see Rodgers, 2004: 6).

In all Central American societies, the talk of crime focuses on the ever-present danger of murder, robberies and rape, a sword of Damocles hanging over daily life. However, this seed of fear is nourished by a diverse pattern of discourse events, differing from country to country. In Costa Rica, youth gangs (*pandillas*, *maras*) are treated as a problem of marginal importance. But in El Salvador, juvenile delinquency has been perceived as a serious problem for almost a decade. Politicians and military leaders tend to characterize the *maras* as an imminent threat to national security, and, even more serious, the Central American youth gangs are said to belong to a hierarchical transnational criminal network, generally linked to the narcotics trade. These 'supergangs' (Arana, 2005) are seen as 'more violent, more organized, and more widespread than ever before. They pose one of the greatest threats to the safety and security of all Americans' (Swecker, 2005). Actually, empirical evidence on the growth and 'nature' of youth gangs has tended to be provided for local areas (DIRINPRO, 2004; Rodgers, 2006) rather than national or transnational levels. We presume that this threat is, like others, mainly constituted by discourse practices. It seems a likely supposition that even though there is scant evidence on actual involvement, the majority of crimes are attributed to gang violence.

The Central American talk of juvenile delinquency shows how public discourses produce and reproduce collective patterns of interpretation as well as systems of social rules. There is a further issue, which is not usually thoroughly investigated, and that is how the mass media are shaping the Central American public discourse on violence and crime. We presume that media and politics tend to dominate the architecture of 'the public sphere'. The mass media play a decisive role in how problems of crime, violence and insecurity should be treated. In the entire region, socio-economic development is shaped by growing human insecurity and marginalization. Thus, what is at stake in the debate on crime and insecurity is social classification. Media not only produce and distribute concepts of violence, they create groups: the groups of victims and perpetrators, the groups who combat crime and the groups who are targeted. Normative discourse within Central American media tends to defend the status quo and balance of power. According to Scheerer (1978), in periods of crisis and social change crime is used as a meta-symbol for social problems. Within this vein of media theory, it has been argued that media campaigns that promote fear or law-and-order are used as an instrument to distract from crisis and social change (e.g. Hall et al., 1978).

It is important to note that Central America is a 'bounded system' (Stake, 2000), an interdependent configuration of societies, characterized by porous borders. On

the other hand, the region – comprised of five (or six, or even seven) countries – is quite heterogeneous. In attempting to analyse the ‘social construction of [violent] reality’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) in Central America, we focus on three countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The cases are chosen for (1) a suspected similarity in the talk of (in)security and (2) the variety of forms and contexts. Thus, we take into account a variety of causal patterns and social phenomena such as agro-politics (Mahoney, 2001), political culture and regime change (Walker and Armony, 2000) and social stratification (Booth and Walker, 1999).

The article<sup>2</sup> is organized as follows. The following section deals with the basic question, ‘why and how should we analyse newspapers?’ The print media landscape in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua is examined in the third section, with the problem of concentrated ownership being emphasized. The subsequent section exposes the macro-structure of news production, and examines the main clusters of topics constituting the media discourse on ‘ordinary violence’. The concluding section reflects on the manifestations of violence in Central American news discourse.

## Why and How to Analyse Central American Newspapers

According to van Dijk, scholarly interest in news reports ‘is justified when we realize how important news is in our daily lives. Most of our social and political knowledge and beliefs about the world derive from the dozens of news reports we read or see every day’ (van Dijk, 1991: 110). Yet, an issue that deserves further examination is the question of whether there is that much interest in the press in non-OECD countries such as Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, there are various factors affecting the impact of press reports in Central America. Many remote areas still depend on radio and television. Illiteracy and functional illiteracy are widespread. Moreover, many people try to avoid the influence of mass media and instead, rely on religious services of Protestant sects to make sense of the world.

What, if anything, can a Central American newspaper contribute to the public discourse on violence? Press reports are the primary means of disseminating accounts of discursive and non-discursive events. Politicians, social scientists and the middle classes tend to rely on print media coverage of events. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Central American middle classes and the elites take media coverage quite serious. According to Adrián Vergara Heidke (2006), ‘the social influence [of the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*] is derived from the fact that it is the newspaper that is read by the dominant groups (middle upper classes, upper classes). This means that these readers refer to the newspapers that may affect their opinion on social reality (our translation).’<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that journalists employed by television or radio stations disseminate press coverage as well, though their programmes may differ from the editorial stance of the newspapers.

And finally, perhaps the cover is as important as the insides. What makes newspapers work in societies characterized by functional illiteracy is the fact that they are sold in public spaces such as at street corners, bus-stops and marketplaces. Throughout Central America, newspapers are a necessary ingredient of bustling

public squares. Thus, the public usage and visibility of newspapers have furthered our interest in analysing press discourse.

## The Central American Print Media Landscape

From the point of view of 'news sellers', the Central American media market is small but financially attractive (see Table 1). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the media market of Costa Rica is worth about US\$120 million a year, and the Salvadoran media market is generating a net cash-flow of US\$84 million. The Nicaraguan media market is the smallest, reaching US\$30 million a year (UNDP, 2003: 277).

The Central American print media landscape is heavily affected by problems of concentrated ownership and ideological news filters (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Although the 'age of extremes' is over, concern about ownership and right-wing political ambitions continue. As in other parts of the world, the Central American press is controlled by private interests with political alliances and political ambitions.

In Costa Rica, the newspaper market structure is characterized by concentrated ownership and, in particular, by the existence of the media conglomerate Grupo Nación. This conglomerate owns a wide range of newspapers and magazines (*El Financiero*, *Sabores*, *Perfil*, *Su Casa*, *El Comerciante*), with *La Nación* and *Al Día* being its leading products. In Guatemala, Grupo Nación owns around 50 percent of the daily *SigloXXI* (Gutiérrez, 2004: 986). High profit margins have allowed the company to expand into external markets (the Guatemalan daily *Al Día* and the Panamanian weekly *Capital*) and into other market segments (GLR [Grupo Latino] radio and printing services).

*La Nación* was founded in 1946 by a group of agro-exporters and social democrats attempting to avert communism (Vergara Heidke, 2006: 9). After the social democrats had sold their holdings in 1950, the entrepreneurial view became dominant. Although *La Nación* presents itself as being committed to international standards of high quality journalism (accuracy, impartiality), scholarly evidence suggests

**TABLE 1**  
**Circulation of Newspapers in 2002**

Country	Estimated circulation	Newspapers/ thousand inhabitants
Costa Rica	317,000 ( <i>La Nación</i> : 118,000; <i>Extra</i> : 90,000; <i>Al Día</i> : 80,000) <sup>a</sup>	79.25
El Salvador	280,000 ( <i>La Prensa Gráfica</i> : 110,000; <i>Diario de Hoy</i> : 95,000)	44.44
Nicaragua	84,000 ( <i>La Prensa</i> : 42,000; <i>El Nuevo Diario</i> : 40,000)	16.15

<sup>a</sup> In general, the tabloid *Extra* is not perceived as an important newspaper. For instance, UNDP refers to *La Nación* and *Al Día* as the leading newspapers, followed by *Extra* (circulation 90,000) and *La República* (circulation 15,000) (UNDP, 2003: 280).

that *La Nación* is promoting conservative ideologies and free trade principles. 'While proclaiming to be the voice of the people, it is never agreeing with them' (Vergara Heidke, 2006: 12; our translation).

The print media landscape in Nicaragua has attracted a certain degree of scholarly interest, as various factions of one family – the Chamorro family – own the national newspapers. The anti-Sandinista *La Prensa* was founded by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Z. (1891–1951), owned by former president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and directed by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro C. (1924–78). Currently, the editorial board is composed of Jaime Chamorro Cardenal, Hugo Holmann Chamorro, Ana María Chamorro de Holmann, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Cristiana Chamorro B. and Felipe Chamorro A.

Xavier Chamorro Cardenal, a brother of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Z., was owner of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional)-supporting *El Nuevo Diario*. The official daily of Sandinismo, *Barricada*, was under the editorship of Carlos Fernando Chamorro Barrios (a son of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro C.) (Jones, 2002: 78). How are we to understand the fact that a wide range of political beliefs is expressed by members of one traditional Nicaraguan family? Carlos M. Vilas has pointed to the significance of family networks and kinship in Nicaraguan politics. According to him, the revolutionary process in the 1980s was characterized by an alliance of conservatives and Sandinistas, and by 'the existence of a broad and dense matrix of family interconnections' (Vilas, 1992: 325). The Chamorro family, being one of the most traditional Granada families, is a fundamental cluster within this matrix. In Nicaragua, traditional family networks prevented social changes deriving from political ruptures. The traditional oligarchic system reproduced itself within Sandinismo and within the neoliberal system of the 1990s. Thus, instead of talking about rupture and change, we should rather speak of continuities and gradual change. The regime change of 1990 also reflected the dominant elite structure. The then-ruling anti-Sandinista party coalition – Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO) – was split into two factions (Bendel, 1996: 209ff.). The first faction was headed by president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, descendant of the traditional Chamorro family, and the second faction was centred around Virgilio Godoy and Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo, representing upper-class families with no ties to the traditional elite. Not surprisingly, Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega are the favourite enemies of *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario* – both being corrupt politicians outside the traditional kinship matrix.

In El Salvador, the leading newspapers are family-owned.<sup>5</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* was founded in 1915 by José Dutriz. With a daily circulation of 110,000, it is the country's major newspaper. Its rival, *El Diario de Hoy*, was founded in 1936 by Napoléon Viera Altamirano. Both have been in fierce competition for decades, though for commercial rather than ideological reasons. Ideologically, their publishing operations are biased, ranging from right (*La Prensa Gráfica*) to ultra-right (*El Diario de Hoy*).<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, however, that both newspapers have undergone an essential transformation in recent years. In the 1980s, press coverage tended to reflect the political beliefs of the owners. Enrique Altamirano made no secret of his anti-Communist views. In 1984, for example, he referred to an 'information conspiracy . . . being the main weapon of the totalitarian forces in their deadly fight against

the Occident' (Altamirano, 1984: 195; our translation). In this article, he criticized US-American newspapers for reporting on state violence in El Salvador. In 1984, former US ambassador Robert White publicly accused Enrique Altamirano of belonging to a group funding the death squads led by Roberto D'Aubuisson (Sheehan, 1998: 278). Apart from the fact that the owner is said to be involved in right-wing terror politics, it is important to recognize that most newspapers exercised a form of self-censorship based on fear of intimidation, bombings, torture and assassination. When the war was over, press freedom blossomed and publishing strategies changed. In an interview with *Confidencial* (the Nicaraguan weekly edited by Chamorro, the founder of *Barricada*), Altamirano stated that his newspaper had never supported political parties, but rather the free market economy. His current editorial strategy was fairly simple: 'newspapers modernize or die' (*Confidencial*, No. 116, 1998, 'Invitado de la Semana'). What does modernization mean? According to *La Prensa Gráfica*, the Dutriz family has maintained constant investment, ranging from new buildings to up-to-the-minute printing presses.<sup>7</sup> Actually, investment in new technologies is a fundamental precondition for winning the media market competition. These efforts increased as the '15th departamento' grew: Salvadorans living in the US emerged as an important target group for the 'news sellers', being connected to their homeland through the new information and communication technologies. The Salvadoran newspapers followed the general trend: merging print and online forms of journalism. As both newspapers tried to satisfy the informational needs of a great variety of readers, they developed new lifestyle papers and other supplements such as women's magazines or the *Wall Street Journal Americas*. In the course of time, editing itself got more ambitious. Journalists were trained to produce high quality information, following the international standards of accuracy, integrity and ethical behaviour as, for example, expressed in the Associated Press Standards of News Values and Principles.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, obviously, investigative journalism was still hampered by corruption, intimidation and the right-leaning editorial stance.

In general, 'modernization' also refers to the news style. Journalists have to follow the rules of providing accurate information, that is: the *who, what, when* and *where* basic facts (Bell, 2006: 240). Moreover, journalists should reflect a wide range of opinion, avoiding any underrepresentation of significant views. Though editing is still not impartial in Central America, opposite views tend to be represented. *El Diario de Hoy*, for example, frequently publishes editorials written by Joaquín Villalobos, former guerrilla *comandante* and currently at Oxford University. Moreover, Central American newspapers bring together divergent views on controversial issues through *campos pagados*, announcements written and paid for by political parties, NGOs, business associations and government agencies.

In sum, we analyse six newspapers that proclaim to be 'modern' and 'professional' (for more on method, see Appendix 2). Actually, these papers operate between the imperatives of 'modernism'/'professionalism' and conservative editorial stances. Moreover, the political bias of news coverage appears to be flexible. While news coverage of free trade issues seems to be strictly supportive of commercial interests, other issues seem to be treated in a more liberal way.



## Violence as News

Most studies about news discourse are systematic content analyses, focusing on the coverage of certain events in the news. Little work, however, has been done on the relationship between 'news' and 'silenced news'. As mentioned earlier, this article focuses on the macro-organization of news discourse, i.e. topic management.

On the macro-level, we examined the general structure of news discourse being produced by the leading newspapers of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. For the same reasons outlined earlier, we focused on the front pages of the newspapers. Our first step to identify the techniques of topic management, thus, was the examination of all front pages of *Al Día*, *La Nación*, *El Diario de Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* published in 2004, 2005 and 2006.<sup>9</sup>

Supported by the scientific software atlas.ti, we assigned all leading front-page articles dealing with 'ordinary violence' to a body of primary data (this body included a set of leading editorials as well). In the beginning, we decided to focus on 'ordinary' crime such as robbery, murder and rape. Less attention was paid to 'white-collar crimes', corruption and politically motivated violence (e.g. the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London). Moreover, we prepared a chronological index for each newspaper, listing other main themes of news coverage. While some front-page news may be described as exceptional occurrences (natural disasters, political scandals, strikes, violent political confrontations, elections), others refer to 'daily business' (political decisions, sports, beauty queens). In the course of time, we detected eight central 'families' of topics in news discourse on 'ordinary violence' (see Appendix 1). Thus, in contrast to the deductive approach of many social scientists (e.g. Briceño-León, 2001), our approach was rather inductive. The 'families' were not used as the guidelines for empirical research. Instead, they were the result of a process of summarization of approximately 1000 news texts.<sup>10</sup>

Since the newspapers decide which 'news' becomes news, they create public urgencies and social groups that have to be protected or targeted. As our data indicate, the creation of public urgencies, social groups and political responses differs from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper and from year to year.

Thus, the six newspapers analysed tend to create six different social orders, with different problems and different solutions.

The Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* establishes a dual order of violence, constituted by the white-collar crimes of the non-traditional elite and the 'ordinary slaughter' committed by the lower strata of society. In general, Nicaragua seems to run the hazard of disintegration. On the one hand, violent events in the autonomous regions of the Caribbean are given a lot of attention in the news coverage of *La Prensa*. These events tend to be linked to spatial governability, the loss of governmental control, the 'mentality of indigenous people' and the growth of transnational criminal networks and the drug trade. On the other hand, social segregation in the capital city of Nicaragua is rarely portrayed as a structural problem. In general, *La Prensa* represents the elite discourse of Nicaragua being a safe country. And if the newspaper reports on an eruption of gang violence and homicides in Managua (e.g. 4 October 2004, 10 October 2004), the reader gets the impression that the 'news event' has dropped out of a clear sky. The majority of the readers belong to the

Managua of the wealthy, a city 'that can be said to have been ripped out of the "palimpsest" city, and is neither superimposed on it nor within it, but completely separate' (Rodgers, 2004: 15). Not surprisingly, thus, *La Prensa* hardly ever gives prominent coverage of the growth of the *pandilla* youth gangs on its front pages. In general, violent crime is portrayed as a problem being generated and situated in the exterior. First, *La Prensa* regularly reports on Nicaraguans having become (fatal) victims of violence in other countries (Guatemala, the US). In the case of violence committed against Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica, *La Prensa* usually inspires a sense of urgency. Moreover, *La Prensa* highlights the role of drug traffickers, regularly reporting on (and visualizing) clandestine airfields and smugglers' boats. Seen from this way, *La Prensa's* talk of crime is mainly about spatiality and segregation.

There is a second overall topic in *La Prensa's* talk of crime, which may be summarized as 'murder, kidnapping and the judiciary', with the victims belonging to the higher middle classes and the perpetrators mostly from among the criminal gangs. Thus, a few, select cases of criminal violence tend to garner the highest print media attention. In February 2004, the assassination of Carlos Guadamuz was leading front-page news, with 14 issues dealing with this topic. In September 2004, a series of kidnappings attracted extensive attention, with seven leading front-page stories playing out the case. Again, it is important to note that 'news' never arises in a social and political vacuum. September 2004 was an eventless month. Actually, while print media coverage was focusing on specific cases, attention was given to a wide range of topics. Seen from this view, coverage of one case of criminal violence dealt with the wider topics such as the structural weakness of the judiciary, the spread of organized crime and gender asymmetry.

The second Nicaraguan newspaper analysed, *El Nuevo Diario*, represents a different social order. In sum, its news coverage focused more on the life worlds of the lower strata of society than *La Prensa* did. While killings of journalists or series of kidnappings attracted the attention of *La Prensa*, *El Nuevo Diario* extensively reported on child abuse, 'exceptional slaughter' or the assassination of *transportistas*. News coverage was generally unemotional in tone, with child murder and violence against Nicaraguan migrant workers in Costa Rica being noteworthy exceptions. As indicated earlier, the general political context is one of the independent variables expected to affect news coverage on 'ordinary violence'. In 2005, a protracted crisis in the energy sector, a frontier dispute (Costa Rica and Nicaragua), *el pacto* between Alemán and Ortega and a corruption affair discrediting the non-traditional elite (the Argüello scandal) all attracted the attention of *El Nuevo Diario*. In 2004 and 2006, on the contrary, the newspaper reported on a wide range of stories about criminal behaviour. In sum, *El Nuevo Diario* highlights the dimensions of insecurity affecting the lower strata of society. Most noteworthy, indeed, is the fact that *El Nuevo Diario* unemotionally publishes stories of human interest, with some attention given to the link between criminal violence and poverty, but little attention given to transnational criminal networks, the drug trade and external dangers.

As mentioned earlier, news coverage of 'ordinary violence' in the Costa Rican *La Nación* differs significantly from coverage in *Al Día*. In *La Nación*, the issue of violence is not treated prominently, but intensively. Even though articles on ordinary

violence frequently appear on the front page, other topics such as free trade politics, migration, poverty, corruption and the (pre)electoral process are much more important. In October 2004, a news wave occurred when Costa Rican ex-presidents Rodríguez and Calderón were arrested. The topic of corruption has never disappeared since. What matters, though, is the general social and political context. Rather than an upward spiral of progress and development, Costa Rica is actually on a downward spiral of social and political deterioration. Due to political scandals and unstable parliamentary backing, the Pacheco government (2002–6) was one of the weakest governments the country has ever had. Actually, public politics (social system, migration, free trade, health, privatizations, etc.) tend to dominate news coverage. The issue of 'ordinary violence', however, is often explicitly linked to these topics. As Appendix 2 shows, the topic is treated constantly in *La Nación*, but not excessively. Most violent news, however, refers to incidents of crime, the release of statistics (for instance, *Estado de la Nación*) or international reports, or seasonal violent crime waves (Christmas, Semana Santa). Moreover, reporting on 'ordinary violence' is centred around four topics. *La Nación* constantly points to the reciprocal effects between poverty, the decline of the welfare state, the education system, social segregation and youth violence. Second and third, the newspaper focuses on the 'topic families' of domestic violence and 'drugs and crime'. And, finally, the newspaper tends to highlight the issue of 'migration and criminal violence'. Most strikingly, *La Nación* does not restrict itself to the basic facts but rather provides comprehensive diagnoses of contemporary society. According to this leading Costa Rican newspaper, the level of violence and brutality has increased substantially in recent years. There is an ongoing concern that Costa Rican society is facing a permanent decline. As the foundations of the social security system are deteriorating, the social fabric of society (values, families) is portrayed as declining as well. In sum, *La Nación* tends to highlight moral concerns and the historical conditions unique to Costa Rica.

In contrast to the 'serious' press, news coverage in *Al Día* is more event-based in its reporting on violence and (in)security. Moreover, there is a tendency to select stories involving the 'common (wo)man'. The danger of murder, robberies and violations is portrayed as ever present, and often associated with psycho-pathology. Not surprisingly, therefore, individual tragedies feature prominently and regularly in the Costa Rican tabloid press. A large part of the talk of crime presented by *Al Día* includes minors and the spaces they occupy. First, there is a reasonably high level of reporting on school violence, drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking. Second, there are many front-page stories devoted to the problems of child abuse and domestic violence. News coverage tends to present 'conflations between the sexual abuse of minors and homosexuality' (Russell and Kelly, 2003: 9), regularly reporting on scandals of sexual abuse by priests. Nevertheless, *Al Día* also reports on women involved in child prostitution and/or child pornography as well. At the heart of this topic is the vulnerability of minors. Extensive reports on child abuse, domestic violence and school violence constantly fuel a sense of fear and powerlessness.

As indicated earlier, media attention is driven by events and the general political context. *Al Día*, of course, is no exception. News coverage differs from year to

year: although there was a reasonably high level of reporting on violence in 2004, reporting on specific cases was not as important as in 2005. Murder, robbery, sexual violence, kidnappings and bank robberies fuelled news coverage in the beginning of 2005. But it was not until several months later that *Al Día* focused on soccer, natural disasters, border disputes, free trade politics and corruption. In 2006, the national hysteria related to the FIFA World Cup (opening game: Germany vs Costa Rica) was to be focused on by *Al Día*. That same year, *Al Día* reported extensively on traffic accidents and numerous cases of sexual abuse and violence against women. In general, the reporting of the Costa Rican tabloid is based on a didactic approach, as is manifest in its detailed descriptions of precautionary measures.

In Salvadoran press discourse, we may witness the constant transmission of a few topic clusters. Both newspapers report extensively on 'ordinary violence', and, especially, on homicides and juvenile delinquency (González, 2004). As Downs pointed out 30 years ago, every problem of crucial importance to society 'leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then – though still largely unresolved – gradually fades from the center of public attention' (see Downs, 1998: 100). In public discourse, though, issues come and go as a matter of public attention. According to Downs, the 'issue attention cycle' usually begins with a series of dramatic events resulting in 'alarmed discovery' and 'euphoric enthusiasm' (Downs, 1998: 100) to quickly solve the problem. In El Salvador, this kind of media attention cycle seems to have little relevance. There seems to be no loss of print media interest, and the public does not seem to get bored with killings and juvenile delinquency. It is important to note, however, that it is not the issue of homicides and youth gangs (*maras*) that is exciting and dramatic enough to maintain constant public interest, but rather the topic clusters centred around homicides and *maras*. While news coverage stereotypes the evil of dangerous youth gangs, both newspapers tend to discover new news. In the case of Salvadoran print media attention, such discovery is linked to alarming, dramatic events (for instance, 'extraordinary brutality', violent uprisings and massacres in prisons) or new solutions (for instance, repressive or preventive measures against the youth gangs, the so-called operations *Mano Dura*, *Super Mano Dura* and *Mano Amiga*). Actually, there is a plurality of media attention cycles comprised of interconnected spirals of dramatic events, public perceptions and policies.

While both Salvadoran newspapers tend to deal with the same topic clusters, the editorial stances taken are quite different. Whereas *La Prensa Gráfica* describes *maras* as they relate to juvenile delinquency, extreme brutality and transnational (criminal) networks, *El Diario de Hoy* explicitly associates *maras*, juvenile delinquency, extreme brutality and transnational criminal networks with the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

The attention of both newspapers is clearly driven by events and the general political context. As mentioned earlier, the issue of 'ordinary violence' was not treated prominently in March 2004. Interestingly, *La Prensa Gráfica's* coverage of 'ordinary violence' significantly differs from year to year. While it focused more on the problem of *maras* in 2004, the general level of violence was often played out as the leading front-page story in 2005. This was closely linked to the dynamics of national agenda-

setting. In 2004, the presidential elections held in March shaped the world of public affairs. Tony Saca (ARENA), who was elected with 58 percent of the vote, had run an electoral campaign focusing on fear and (in)security. For instance, pro-ARENA factions accused the FMLN of recruiting *maras* members to destabilize the country. Operation *Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist), which was central to the electoral campaign, was approved in 2004. Hundreds of male adolescents were detained in waves of arrests that continued throughout the year. In August 2004, a violent prison uprising led to around 30 deaths. Not surprisingly, therefore, the issue of *maras* and zero-tolerance strategies did not disappear from the national agenda in 2004. Zero-tolerance, however, did not lead to a reduction in crime and insecurity. In the beginning of 2005, public debates were centred around the perception of increasing violence. The president responded to growing criticism with a discursive shift, highlighting the problem of social violence. Second, both newspapers extensively reported on the general level of violence and the devastating effects of small arms proliferation. The issue of criminal gangs, instead, was pushed further into the background. In 2006, both newspapers published many front-page articles on a variety of crime-related topics, with an emphasis on youth gangs, the drugs trade, US migration (and deportation) politics and, last but not least, criminal police agents and the judiciary. *La Prensa Gráfica*, accordingly, reported on the president's announcement of a 'national crusade against crime' ('War against Crime', *El Diario de Hoy*).

There is a further issue, which is not usually addressed, and that is the question of borders. In both Salvadoran newspapers, stories about migration, deportation and violence create collective attention. In dealing with the roots of crime, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* concentrate on transnational dimensions. News coverage focuses more on the deportation of criminal gang members than on other issues. Nevertheless, lengthy descriptions of Salvadorans becoming victims of robberies in Guatemala or elsewhere tend to be played out as leading front-page stories as well. From the point of view of Salvadoran news sellers, the root of criminal violence is deportation politics or the culture of violence, rather than poverty, inequality or other causes.

## Concluding Remarks: Manifestations of Violence in Print Media Discourse

Our intention here is not to portray a violent 'reality'. Rather it is to differentiate the vague notion of an explosion of crime in Central America. The findings presented in this article suggest that while politicians, military leaders and social scientists highlight the transformation of violence and the increase of homicides and youth delinquency, the news discourse on 'ordinary violence' is quite heterogeneous.

Our findings, which are visualized in Figures A1–A6 in Appendix 2, can be summarized as follows.

First, 'ordinary violence' is treated constantly in news coverage. However, it is not the most prominent issue. In sum, there are 23 months with more than 15 leading front-page articles on 'ordinary violence' (total: six newspapers  $\times$  36 months (2004, 2005 and 2006) = 216 'newspaper months'). How can we account for the

total quantity of front-page stories on 'ordinary violence'? Given the presumption that crime is exploding in Central America, the newspapers do not seem to treat the issue as the most prominent. But, in general, news reporting on 'ordinary violence' is prevalent, with some cases being covered excessively.

Second, media attention is driven by events and the general political context (*coyuntura política*). In April 2005, for instance, none of the newspapers gave much prominence to the issue of violence. But this was the month when John Paul II died. To give another example: in March 2004, the issue of violence did not attract the attention of the Salvadoran *La Prensa Gráfica*; its front-page coverage was instead driven by the electoral process.

Third, there seem to be no media attention cycles linked to the seasons. While all newspapers analysed tend to publish a few statistical overviews on all forms of violence at the turn of the year, the peak in the middle of the year seems to be less regular.

Fourth, the cycles of media attention differ from country to country – and from newspaper to newspaper. The issue of violence tends to be treated less prominently in the Costa Rican *La Nación* and more prominently both in the Costa Rican tabloid-like *Al Día* and the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran newspapers. On the other hand, however, it is impossible to assign a general level of the prominence of 'ordinary violence' to each newspaper. While some newspapers (*Al Día*, *El Diario de Hoy*) tend to dramatize the issue of violence more than others, the irregular waves of news coverage of certain events seem to contradict this general trend. As indicated earlier, media attention is driven by events, the economic and political interests of the newspaper owners and the general political context.

Fifth, news reporting differs from year to year. This is most obvious in the case of Nicaragua. While there were many issues of violence treated in both Nicaraguan newspapers in 2004, the issue of 'ordinary violence' was given less prominence in 2005, when several cases of corruption involving sectors of the non-traditional elite attracted the interest of the Chamorro-owned newspapers instead.

Sixth, media attention is clearly driven by cases. Nevertheless, chronic problems or the underlying causes of violence can become news as well. For instance, Central American newspapers regularly report on the findings of international agencies such as the UNDP.

What we can observe in Central America is the prevalence of a print media-inspired talk of crime. But what are the print media's preferred topics? Is newspaper coverage exacerbating or decreasing fear? What is the impression one gets from the news coverage? Can we observe media hype? Our findings suggest that newspaper coverage differs from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper and from year to year. Moreover, there is a complex relationship between the news on 'ordinary violence' that receives press coverage and other issues that are treated prominently in the news. Our results point to an important dynamic relation between the production of stories about 'ordinary violence' and the wider political context. On the one hand, news coverage tends to be event-based, with cruelty-related human interest stories receiving and creating collective attention. On the other hand, news coverage is a means both to uncover news and to neglect other, more critical news.

At the beginning of the 21st century, media attention undoubtedly continues to focus on violence. Our findings suggest, however, that there are six central 'families' or clusters of crime stories played out on the front pages of the leading newspapers in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua: the macro-level of violence; frontiers and violence; drugs and crime; gender, family and crime; youth violence; social structure, spatiality and crime; and, finally, violence and the judiciary.

As Appendix 2 indicates, there are oscillations in the conjuncture of news topics, moving up and down. Notwithstanding these variations, we detect a general structure of news discourse. Salvadoran newspapers focus more on the problem of *maras* than Nicaraguan and Costa Rican newspapers do. It is important to note that the emergence of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency tends to be portrayed as an imminent peril to Costa Rican and Nicaraguan societies as well. While Salvadoran newspapers appear quite sensationalist, Costa Rican newspapers seem to be highly sensitive to the emergence of a 'youth problem', and Nicaraguan newspapers tend to cover most news related to the poor *barrios* of Managua.

In Costa Rica, and to a lesser extent in Nicaragua, violence is portrayed as gendered violence. Newspapers tend to report extensively on domestic violence and child abuse. In El Salvador, instead, news clustered around sexual violence is of marginal importance.

Reporting on 'ordinary violence' requires a certain degree of contextualization. Most strikingly, the six newspaper analysed tend to establish links between the problem of violence and national frontiers. The newspapers, thus, regularly published articles on migration and violence, tourism and violence, organized trans (but non-) national crime, violence at national borders, crimes committed in foreign countries and violence in the remote areas of the Caribbean. Moreover, lengthy comparisons of national levels of insecurity regularly appear on the front pages with little attention given to the socioeconomic roots of violence. We presume that the (frontier-related) discourse of violence is crucial for maintaining or reinventing national identities.

As indicated earlier, the media create both the groups of victims and perpetrators and the groups combating crime and being targeted. Our findings suggest that social classification varies from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper and from year to year. In general, it is related to the wider political context.

There are signs that the problem of juvenile delinquency is emerging as the pivot of a cross-country discourse on 'ordinary violence'. On the other hand, we detect a heterogeneous array of discourse events, political developments and power relations. Finally, each newspaper focuses on a series of events that are played out across a pattern of both national and subnational peculiarities and cultural traditions.

Although 'modern' Central American newspapers usually admit a broad spectrum of news, they tend to produce a certain pattern of interpretation of violence centred around a few topic clusters. While some newspapers are uncovering erstwhile silenced news such as sexual violence or child abuse, others are not. While some newspapers tend to neglect critical news related to the deeper roots of criminal violence, others do not. Whether these patterns of interpretation are produced and reproduced in other spheres of public discourse, we cannot decide here. In the next



step of our research, we will proceed to the micro-level, analysing the form and content of news discourse related to other types of public discourse.

## **Appendix 1: 'Families' of Topics in News Discourse on 'Ordinary Violence'**

### ***Violence and Society***

This category includes articles dealing with violence and (in)security on a macro-level (articles on: the rise of crime; the level of violence during holidays; police resources; criminal statistics; public security in general; criminal violence and social norms, state responses on violence in general).

### ***Borders and Violence***

This category includes articles reporting on violence, crime and security in relation to national identities or foreign countries or foreigners (articles on: migration and violence; tourism and violence; violence at national borders; crimes committed in foreign countries, with nationals being the victims or perpetrators – or even without any involvement of nationals; articles comparing national levels of violence or violent behaviour to foreign countries' levels).

### ***Drugs and Crime***

This category includes articles reporting on violence, crime and security with regard to the trade or consumption of drugs.

### ***Gender, Family and Crime***

This category includes articles on domestic violence, sexual violence and violence against children or adolescents (for instance, violence occurring in families or schools).

### ***Youth Violence***

This category refers to violence committed by adolescents. Articles on violence against adolescents are also included within this category if they describe state (or other types of organized) violence against adolescents. Thus, the category includes articles on youth gangs (*maras*); adolescents being criminals or violent subjects; state responses to gang violence (*Mano Dura*); death squads killing kids or adolescents. Obviously, there are many intersections with Gender, Families and Crime.

### ***Social Structure, Spatiality and Crime***

This category includes articles relating violence, criminality and security to social structures (poverty, distribution of wealth, social or ethnic groups) or spatiality (rural regions, the Caribbean, gated communities, shanty towns).



### Judiciary and Violence

This category includes articles dealing with the judicial system (e.g. articles on laws and legal discourse; the judicial system and its actors: lawyers, judges, witnesses, etc; the judicial procedure; police, police reforms, police resources and police violence).

### Cases

This category includes all articles on specific cases. The majority of the articles assigned to this category were, of course, assigned to other topic families as well.

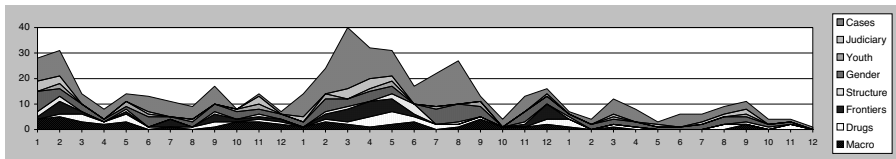
## Appendix 2: Coverage of ‘Ordinary Violence’ in Central American Newspapers

We examined the online versions of all front pages published in 2004, 2005 and 2006. Note that the online versions sometimes vary from the printed versions. We assigned all front-page stories dealing with ‘ordinary violence’ to our body of data. Finally, we assigned all front-page stories to the ‘families’ of topics: Macro = Violence and Society; Frontiers = Frontiers and Violence; Drugs = Drugs and Crime; Gender = Gender, Family and Crime; Youth = Youth Violence; Structure = Social Structure, Spatiality and Crime; Judiciary = Judiciary and Violence; Cases = Cases (see Appendix 1). We were aware of the fact that ‘there is not just one topic or possible summary of a text, but several’ (van Dijk, 1985: 75). As articles could be assigned to more than one ‘topic family’, the figures do not show the absolute frequency of press reporting, but rather the conjunctures of topic clusters.

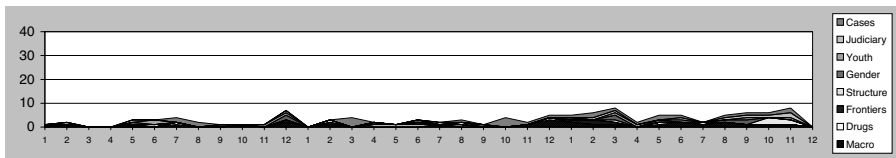
Axis of abscissae: months (2004–6).

Axis of ordinates: front-page stories dealing with ‘ordinary violence’.

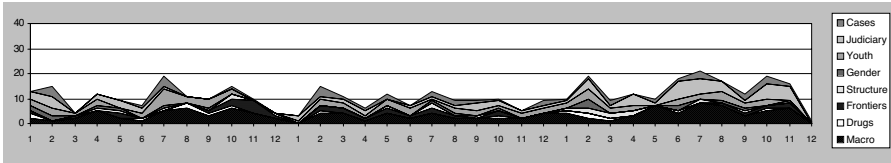
For more detailed diagrams, see [www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse)



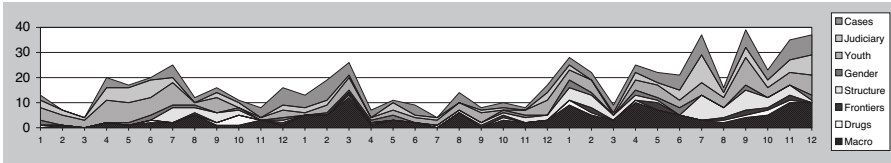
**FIGURE A1**  
*Al Día* 2004–6 (Costa Rica)



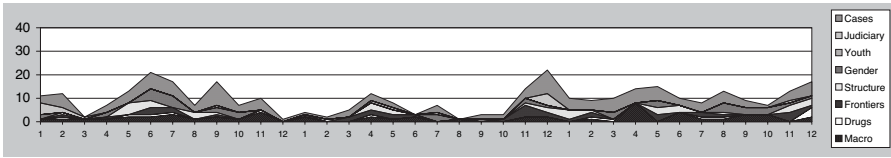
**FIGURE A2**  
*La Nación* 2004–6 (Costa Rica)



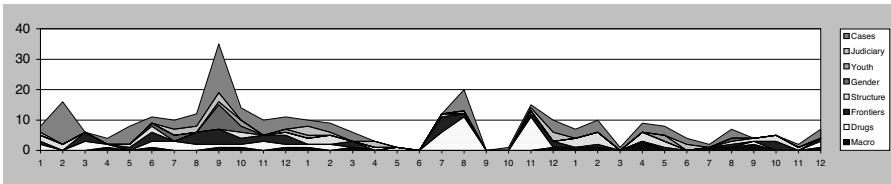
**FIGURE A3**  
*El Diario de Hoy 2004–6 (El Salvador)*



**FIGURE A4**  
*La Prensa Gráfica 2004–6 (El Salvador)*



**FIGURE A5**  
*El Nuevo Diario 2004–6 (Nicaragua)*



**FIGURE A6**  
*La Prensa 2004–6 (Nicaragua)*

**Notes**

1. See, for instance, Bourgois (2005), Briceño-León (2001: 17), Call (2000), Cruz (2003) and Lungo and Martel (2005).
2. This article is part of an ongoing research project that analyses the origins, development and institutionalization of the ‘talk of crime’ (Caldeira, 2000) in Central America. The project focuses on the interconnectedness of hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses across media, public politics, the judiciary, academic spheres and the life world. Empirically, the project is based on newspapers, legislative documents, academic papers, publications and programmes

of political parties, qualitative research interviews (35 per country; representing a wide range of professions and social classes) and, finally, short essays written by students of nine public and private schools in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. More detailed information on the research project is available at: [www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse). We are grateful to our research assistants Diego Menestrey and Rosa Wagner for working long and hard with thought and diligence. We also acknowledge the help we received from our volunteers, Nadja Ehlers, Meike Schmitz, Christian Schramm and Thomas Wagner.

3. The Latin American media landscape is the subject of an abundance of studies. Early studies such as Alan Wells' (1972) analysis of the adoption of consumerism by Latin American television were situated within the vein of dependency studies in communication theory. In general, most studies focus on media economics and its ideological foundations (see, for instance, Hachten and Scotten, 2006; Waisbord, 2000). Perception studies, on the other hand, still remain at the margins of the debate on Latin American media theory. Since the 1980s, however, discussions have mainly focused on television and new information and communication technologies (see, for instance, Hoffmann, 2004; Oliviera, 1988). Recently, the relationship between news production has been discussed by FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales), Ecuador (Cerbino, 2005).
4. 'Lo más importante y lo que le [La Nación] da cierta influencia social ("importancia") es que constituye lejos el medio más leído (no tiene competencia) por los grupos dominantes (clase media alta y clase alta), lo cual signifique que estos lectores hagan referencia a lo que dicen sus páginas y quizás guíe de alguna forma sus opiniones respecto a la realidad social' (email interview with the authors).
5. A noteworthy exception is *Diario Colatino*, which was founded in 1890 by Miguel Pinto. His grandson, Miguel Angel Pinto, sold the newspaper to Corporación 'H' in the 1980s. After the newspaper was brought to the brink of ruin, journalists and workers managed to secure its survival. *Diario Colatino* is now cooperatively owned and supported by churches, NGOs and external donors.
6. This overall ideological evaluation corresponds with the findings of detailed analyses like that of Guzmán (2004) on the coverage of the 2004 presidential elections by the two newspapers.
7. At: [www.laprensagrafica.com/GrupoDutriz/default.asp](http://www.laprensagrafica.com/GrupoDutriz/default.asp) (accessed 9 October 2006).
8. At: [www.ap.org/pages/about/whatsnew/wn\\_112905.html](http://www.ap.org/pages/about/whatsnew/wn_112905.html) (accessed 9 October 2006).
9. We took into consideration the online versions. Note that are not always the same as their print counterparts.
10. Nothing seems easier than the summarization of a news text, and nothing is as difficult. Van Dijk (1985: 76) referred to the subjectivity of topics. 'This means that we should not simply say that a text "has" a macrostructure, but that such a structure is assigned to a text by a writer or reader.' Thus, we constantly had to discuss what we found relevant and how we understood topics and themes. We had to be aware that we were constructing a macrostructure of press discourse.

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**Sebastian Huhn** is a historian and researcher at the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies in Hamburg, Germany. His current research, together with Anika Oettler and Peter Peetz, includes a project on 'Public Spaces and Violence in Central America'.

**Address** GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, 20354 Hamburg, Germany. [email: [huhn@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:huhn@giga-hamburg.de)]

**Anika Oettler** is professor of Sociology at Philipps-University of Marburg Germany. She previously served as researcher and project coordinator at the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies in Hamburg, Germany.

**Address** GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, 20354 Hamburg, Germany. [email: [oettler@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:oettler@giga-hamburg.de)]

**Peter Peetz** is a political scientist and researcher at the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies in Hamburg, Germany.

**Address** GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies, Neuer Jungfernstieg 21, 20354 Hamburg, Germany. [email: [peetz@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:peetz@giga-hamburg.de)]