

Breaking the Code of Silence

Fieldnotes, June 10, 2010: In the morning we got into the mint-colored minivan with *La Voz de Cataratas* logos and headed toward the Iguazú airport. Kelly and Silvia wanted to write a story about Argentine Air Force pilots who were training in town. When we arrived, the director of the airport informed us that the media were not allowed to take photographs or film outside, strictly prohibiting the journalists from approaching the military planes. So the three of us joined the others—Mario and Jorge from the provincial television station Canal 12, Vivi and Darío from the local cable Canal 5, and two reporters from the regional office of Radio Nacional—who were stranded in the conference room. There was a table with chairs for us to sit down, coffee was served, and the journalists were invited to interview air force representatives. Staying close to Kelly and Silvia, I followed them into a smaller room, where, in the briefing session, the young pilots were given flight instructions before a simulated attack in the province of Salta. With references to a number of maps laid out on the table, they explained to us the details of their tactical mission. When journalists from the other media left, the pilot in charge of the Hercules—a large military transport aircraft—agreed to take us onboard. Despite the prohibitions that the airport officials imposed on the media, limiting our movements in the security zone, Kelly, Silvia, and I were able to get inside the plane. We took turns sitting at the controls in the cockpit, joked with the pilots, and documented our experience using both photography and

video. Later, we climbed to the watchtower to wave good-bye to the military planes that one by one took off on their training mission.

Fieldnotes, November 26, 2010: Today over lunch in Ciudad del Este I listened to a conversation between a Paraguayan journalist who worked for one of the town's dailies and his Argentine colleague, a reporter from Puerto Iguazú. They talked about the difficulties of covering drug trafficking in the local media. They both agreed on the existence of clandestine ports along the Paraná River and acknowledged that law enforcement was aiding traffickers. "Journalists who come from outside get away with reporting on organized crime because the authorities know that their visit is temporary," one of them remarked. They arrive and then they leave. In contrast, local journalists, like them, have to stay. The Iguazúense recalled how she was once tipped off about the time and place of a contraband delivery. She made the mistake of informing an acquaintance of hers in the gendarmerie who, as it later turned out, had been involved in the deal. She did not publish the story and, despite her fears, nothing happened to her. The Paraguayan in turn shared his experience of writing a piece on prostitution in Ciudad del Este. He had pictures showing how the payment was made, how a thirteen-year-old indigenous girl got onto a motor scooter, and how she later returned with the same man. While documenting this for the media, the reporter called 911, but the police never came, reluctant to get involved, he guessed. According to the Paraguayan, the media avoided topics such as drug trafficking and child prostitution because of the *código de silencio*—the code of silence.

This code of silence was the underlying principle in local journalism, as I came to know it during fieldwork on Argentina's northern border. There were no formal guidelines that defined the interactions between news reporters and law enforcement officers—gendarmes, prefects, airport security, or the military. The scope of information that federal forces and regional police units shared with journalists depended on careful negotiations between the individuals and institutions involved. There were places where the media were not allowed and there were issues that reporters could not address, but these forbidden zones and topics had flexible perimeters and definitions. Sometimes an officer would allow a particular journalist to trespass the boundary separating the realm of state secrets, both formal and informal, from the public domain. These breeches were possible when those in law enforcement

trusted that the media were on the same side of security-making and would not disclose information that was potentially harmful to their institution and, by extension, to the government. This complicity turned interactions between security forces and journalists into a game of hide-and-seek, where the code of silence as the organizing principle distinguished what could be talked about publicly from what was to be avoided. The excerpt from my fieldnotes cited above demonstrates that the code of silence was particularly marked when it came to media coverage of drug trafficking, contraband, and other organized crime. But it was just as important in everyday situations, where law enforcement officers and reporters constantly measured their relationships on the murky terrain between public secrets and public knowledge. In this chapter I discuss how my professional involvement with the news media in Iguazú complemented my ethnographic fieldwork, allowing me to approach the code of silence, which circumscribed knowledge production about security and crime on the border, from two parallel yet critically different perspectives.

FROM JOURNALISM TO ANTHROPOLOGY

I was a journalist before I became an anthropologist. Not by training, but by occupation. During college years I sometimes wrote articles and commentaries for the press, and before I ever set foot in Latin America I worked for an online newspaper in my hometown of Vilnius, Lithuania. My job was to write stories on timely issues, often based on interviews with sources in the government, the private sector, and civil society. I attended press conferences. I traveled abroad, covering presidential visits to foreign countries, from Ukraine and Bulgaria to Azerbaijan and Turkey. My work took me from the neat and fully equipped press offices of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where I spoke to Lithuanian representatives, to backstreet internet cafés in Minsk, where I clandestinely typed my field diaries about the election and opposition protests in Belarus. Although the time I worked as a journalist was brief, during those months I was immersed in its distinct *habitus*:¹ the quick pace of the newsbeat, the constant pressure of deadlines, the framing of stories to make the headlines, the importance of recognizing trustworthy sources, and the balance between being accountable to the story, to my editor, and to the public. Even though my experience was limited, it taught me how being a journalist was more than a professional identity. For many, the pursuit of breaking news was a way of life. For some,

especially those working under oppressive government regimes or in unstable zones of conflict, it could easily be a death sentence.

Journalism is markedly different from other genres of knowledge production, scientific or fictional. It is a mode of storytelling that requires its practitioners to follow a particular tempo of work and to adhere to a standardized narrative script. It is tightly linked to political interests and the market logic, yet it claims objectivity and aspires to truth. While working for the media, I witnessed how journalists maneuvered the discrepancies between the empirical and the normative reality, deciding on what was truth and what they wanted to be truth. News had performative power; therefore, some stories were preferred over others. In a country like Lithuania, which had recently restored its independence, the media was used to protect fragile state institutions rather than destabilize them. Many journalists, whether they worked for public or private news outlets, shared in this silent pact, deploying the media in national statecraft. They turned away from some questionable behaviors of government officials if they thought that exposing them would do more harm than good for the country. Driven by political and economic interests, directors and editors of media companies were often at the forefront of these efforts to screen potential news, imposing their agenda in the newsroom, but reporters also engaged in self-censorship. As far as I could tell, blind spots in news coverage that resulted from this selective reporting did not conceal any serious breaches of government duties. Yet their very presence taught me that journalism was something else than transparent diffusion of information. I came to see media production as a powerful means of manufacturing legitimacy and, as such, a vital component of state security.

In 2006 I left my job in the media to pursue a graduate degree in anthropology. The move from Lithuania to the U.S. didn't completely cut me off from journalism. Now and then I still recorded commentaries for the radio and wrote articles for the press, even though these contributions became fewer over time. As an anthropologist with a background in journalism, I saw an obvious affinity between the two cultural fields of meaning-making. Ethnographic research and investigative reporting require some form of "deep hanging out" in the community in order to produce knowledge. That knowledge, based on information gathered through interactions with people, then circulates through publications and visual materials, from photographs to films. There is great variation within ethnographic and journalistic writing genres, but most anthropological texts are very different from stories published in the press. Only

sometimes—as in the case of long-form, narrative storytelling—do they blend. Writer and journalist Ted Conover, whose book about a prison in New York state, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000), won the 2000 National Book Critics Circle Award in General Nonfiction and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, argues that contemporary journalism encourages the production of longer, subjective stories that resemble nonfiction novels.² Conover has been blending anthropological and journalistic genres in his work ever since he wrote his first book, *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes* (1984)—a first-person account of riding freight railroads across the western U.S. that was based on his ethnographic honors thesis. He names Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, Anne Fadiman, and Sebastian Junger as other examples of this literary journalism, or creative nonfiction, popularized by the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and other magazines. Conover himself regularly contributes to the *New Yorker*, as well as to the *New York Times Magazine* and to the *Atlantic Monthly*. Still, these similarities between anthropological ethnography and investigative journalism are often potential instead of actual. Anthropologists spend years in their fieldsites, acquiring local awareness and habits, including learning the local language. In remote corners of the world as well as closer to home, they search for holistic explanations of cultural phenomena and usually write long, heavily theoretical works that circulate among their colleagues and students. Journalists, on the other hand, have a different work tempo. Foreign correspondents in particular are often parachuted to places where something newsworthy is happening and use the help of stringers and translators to talk to select local representatives. News reporters focus on urgent matters that are relevant to the publics of the media they work for, framing their stories in ways that attract the largest audience, and delivering information in short, easily accessible bits. Although investigative reporters can work on their assignments for extended periods of time—just as long as anthropologists conduct their fieldwork—with around-the-clock demand for news, such in-depth investigations as Conover's, Fadiman's, and Junger's are the exception rather than the rule for contemporary journalistic practice.

Anthropologists interested in news media distinguish ethnography and journalism by their different temporalities, audiences, and institutional logics, which include ethical considerations, financing, and disciplinary regulations (see Bird 2005, 2010; Boyer 2010; Boyer and Hannerz 2006; Hannerz 2004; Hasty 2010; Pedelty 1995; Vesperi 2010). Journalistic time is “thin”—both in terms of the tight schedules that

define the everyday routine of news reporting and in terms of the limited duration of their relevance before stories become “old news.” Ethnographic time, on the other hand, is “thick”—anthropologists engage in extended fieldwork, the pace of their research is slow, they produce dense empirical and theoretical text, and the results of their investigations are more likely to have enduring effects through teaching and subsequent studies. These divergent temporalities are a result of anthropology and journalism being subject to distinct “disciplinary apparatuses” (Pedelty 1995). According to Pedelty, “discipline is an active, productive, and creative form of power” (1995:6), which in subtle ways effectively controls what knowledge is produced. Anthropology is also characterized by more humanistic approach to sources (Bird 2005:302). The code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association calls upon ethnographers to protect the privacy of their research participants, who are often disguised—given new names and located in unspecified or fictional places. This anonymity is feasible because for ethnographic purposes, people’s individual identities are less relevant than the general patterns of social behavior emerging from fieldwork. For the journalist, however, the story comes first, and in pursuit of the story, ethics of privacy and safeguarding of sources can become negotiable (Bird 2005:307). When compared to the limited readership and delayed audience responses that anthropologists are used to, the scale and immediacy of public reaction is also an important distinguishing feature of mass communication (Vesperi 2010:7). Considering these differences, Dominic Boyer (2010:9) suggests that between news journalism and ethnography there is a productive “division of labor”: time-sensitive, intense flows of information characteristic of contemporary news make the kind of work that anthropologists do—slow and oriented to details—ever more relevant.

Despite these distinctions between anthropology and media, their similarities are also undeniable, even to the point of being uncomfortable. Ethnography of journalism is “a practice of representing practices of representation” (Boyer and Hannerz 2006:6). As an investigation of a parallel craft, it is a reflexive engagement in “studying sideways” (Hannerz 2004). Reflexivity becomes acute when anthropologists who write about news-making have a background in journalism. Elizabeth Bird, Ulf Hannerz, Per Ståhlberg, and Jennifer Hasty are only a few prominent media ethnographers who have trespassed this professional divide. Yet neither the blending of genre nor that of authors erases the boundary, as Hasty acknowledges: “For an anthropologist schooled in controversies over the politics of ethnographic representation, there is

something profoundly uncomfortable about the practices of news media, something vaguely reflective of our own discursive practices, more purely politicized but also more politically compromised than anthropology” (Hasty 2010:133). Anthropologists are often critical of journalists for their involvement with state and corporate interests, but we, too, Hasty argues, are equally immersed in the muddy relations of power. After all, both anthropology and journalism are professional regimes of knowledge production that use interpersonal engagement in the field to create strategic representations of the world. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, social science and journalism are two fields of cultural production that “lay claim to the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world” (2005:36).

When in 2008 I began preliminary fieldwork on Argentina’s north-eastern border with Brazil and Paraguay, none of these considerations about the blurred boundary between anthropology and journalism mattered to me yet. In the planning stage of this research project, my decision to focus on journalists was mostly pragmatic. The local media offered a layer of protection, establishing distance between me, as a researcher, and the organized crime and violence that I wanted to study, but couldn’t do so directly. Working with journalists was first and foremost a methodological solution to the problem of doing an ethnography of border crime. I could follow news reporters to police stations, crime scenes, and court hearings; I could attend press conferences and listen in to interviews with security officers and crime victims, all the while being relatively safe in their company. Soon, however, I became aware that the very production of knowledge about illegalized practices, organized crime, and violence merited attention. The journalists that I was accompanying in their daily routine skillfully navigated between information they received *on the record* and what they learned *off the record*, narrating some events as news stories and hiding others. Sometimes, for example, they reported on drug trafficking or cigarette contraband, quoting numbers of prohibited merchandise captured by the prefecture on the river or by the gendarmerie on the bridge. Other times—as when one reporter and I witnessed a load of smuggled oranges being transported through a clandestine passage—they neither said nor did anything. For them, when it came to crime on the border, news-making depended on recognizing the invisible but critical boundary between public secret and public knowledge. During the early days of research, as I watched journalists work and began noticing how the code of silence defined what events were newsworthy, my interests shifted from the study of border

crime per se to the complex entanglement of knowledge production and the making of security.

FROM ANTHROPOLOGY TO JOURNALISM

There is one question that was important from the start of my fieldwork in the Triple Frontier, but its significance grew over time, culminating when I sat down to write this book. Did the same code of silence that regulated the work of local journalists reporting on crime and security on the border apply to me as an ethnographer? In what ways did it affect me? In what ways it did not? There was no simple answer. On the one hand, my experience confirmed the commonly held view that disciplinary guidelines for anthropologists and journalists unevenly shape their access to local knowledge and their ability to circulate it in the public domain. As anthropologists, we can usually get away with writing about illegal practices because we hide or change the names of people and locations, making them unrecognizable to the public, particularly to law enforcement and to competing, potentially violent groups or individuals. In our search for broader societal trends and more comprehensive explanations, we are less likely to expose the identities of those who share their stories with us. Yet the representations we produce can—and do—have negative effects on the communities we promise not to harm. From the point of view of Iguazúenses, disappointed with the criminalization and securitization of the border, the line between journalistic and ethnographic representation has been blurry. Without knowing how their stories would be interpreted and what purposes they would be used for, many people still prefer the safety of silence, whether they talk to a reporter or to an anthropologist. The trust necessary for writing a critical ethnography of security that addresses the code of silence requires months and even years of deep hanging out. Once relationships of trust are built, however, we are confronted with questions about the politics and ethics of ethnographic representation. To explain the effects these concerns have had on my work, I will describe how I first learned the common sense of knowledge production in a securitized border space through my professional engagement with the media and how later these experiences shaped the scope of this ethnographic book.

Initially, my participation in journalistic production was very limited. Beginning with the second year in the field, I occasionally wrote for *La Voz de Cataratas*, the major digital newspaper in Iguazú. My first article was a report about the Fundación Mundo Sano, a nongovernmental

organization that conducted scientific research on dengue and malaria in the border area. I observed how workers set up mosquito traps in neighborhoods around town and how they analyzed specimens in the lab. I also wrote about the Iguazú division of the national gendarmerie, one of only two locations in Argentina where service dogs were bred and trained to detect drugs. These descriptive reports were prompted by encounters during ethnographic fieldwork. They gave me an opportunity to contribute to the media that I was studying and that I knew always needed more stories. Later I began writing critical commentaries about events happening in Iguazú. For example, during a prolonged power outage, which was a common occurrence in the summer of 2011, I visited health centers and interviewed doctors who were throwing away vaccines and other medications that expired without refrigeration, criticizing the precarious infrastructure and its hazards to health. When for a few days after a blackout Iguazú had no running water, I published a news piece about a brush fire in the terrain belonging to the federal police, noting that they acted irresponsibly by ignoring burn prohibitions. The editor of *La Voz de Cataratas* added my name to some of these articles, but others she left unsigned. Anonymity is widely used as a method of protecting journalists from potentially adverse reactions to their stories. In Iguazú these safety measures were merely symbolic: in the town, where journalists were known by their first names, where their cars were easily recognized when parked on the street and where their personal cell phone numbers were often made available to the public, it would not have been difficult to identify the author of a piece.

These interventions in news-making allowed me to form a different kind of relationship with Iguazúenses, thereby helping my ethnographic project. Comparing the depth of knowledge that people shared with me as a journalist and as an anthropologist I could better understand the principles underlying the code of silence. Often residents were more comfortable talking about outlawed practices such as illegal adoptions or bribes to customs officers, in intimate ethnographic settings, than they were when asked on behalf of the press. But generally Iguazúenses hesitated before addressing these questions with anyone who could share their stories in public, making the distinction between an anthropologist and a reporter obsolete. At the start of my fieldwork it did not matter whether I introduced myself as a social scientist or a journalist—people did not trust me either way, which limited our conversations to topics that were considered “safe,” like tourism. When later I began hearing stories about corrupt border officers, about the impunity of law

enforcement, and about the smuggling of food and electronics, it was again all the same whether I was an ethnographer or a reporter—by then people had come to trust me. They expected that I already had enough common sense not to disclose sensitive information in ways that could harm the community I had become part of. The boundary between those who shared in the public secrets of life on the border and those who were denied access to local knowledge was not based on their professional identities. The code of silence protected Iguazúenses from unreliable outsiders.

The difference between anthropology and journalism as two modes of knowledge production was more palpable during my interactions with the government and with the security forces. Like the residents of Iguazú, some public officials talked more openly during ethnographic interviews than when they gave comments to the media. The chief of the federal police, for instance, explained to me in an interview how rising crime (“In this town all that happens are *cosas de barrio* [neighborhood stuff]”) is related to politics (“There is no Giuliani here”); criticized law enforcement in Paraguay (“The difference between Paraguay and Argentina is that in Paraguay *la vida no vale nada* [life is not worth anything]. Here people die too, but it is different.”); showed his admiration for Brazil (“We can’t even compare with the federal police of Brazil. Have you seen their building? Please! They just press a button and call a helicopter. They have money.”); and expressed his frustration with government bureaucracy in Argentina, lamenting how difficult it was for him to have his cell phone replaced—none of which he would repeat publicly. This police chief had good informal relations with the media, never refusing to meet with his closest contacts in the press. His public statements, however, were few and brief, stripped off context, and void of interpretation. When approached by news reporters, officers in the security forces regularly used two code phrases—“for/on the record” and “off the record”—to clarify what part of the information that they were sharing could be made public and what details were to be kept secret. While for ethnographers, this distinction didn’t apply—nobody asked me to separate their stories into pieces that I could and could not include in my book—journalists in Iguazú heard the two code phrases that marked the contours of permissible news narratives every day. They respected this distinction. It allowed reporters to build relationships of trust with their sources, which facilitated media coverage of routine law enforcement activities. But journalists who feared violating the boundaries of public knowledge authorized by the security forces

left some issues out of public debates. Their complicity reinforced the code of silence.

Ethnographic fieldwork was without a doubt very important for understanding the perspective of law enforcement, which was generally not shared with the media, but there were situations when local journalists had privileged access to information from the police. With few notable exceptions—such as the chief quoted above—many officials in law enforcement and security forces had no interest in talking to a foreign anthropologist and ignored my requests for interviews. Under these circumstances assignments to write news pieces for the local media provided me with an alternative access to important data. For example, in 2010 when I was looking for official statistics about crime in Iguazú, the regional police were wary to share them with me, uncertain how they would be used in my anthropological research. Presenting crime statistics to reporters, in contrast, was a common practice. The police knew how to use the media to demonstrate the efficacy of their work. Therefore, I approached the editor of *La Voz de Cataratas* about writing an article on crime prevalence in Iguazú and used this assignment as an excuse when asking for annual statistics from law enforcement. It still took repeated visits to the police press office, but eventually they gave me the requested numbers. Once my article, “The Year of Crime,” was published in the daily, I could freely use this data in the ethnographic account.

From the legal perspective, both journalists and social researchers have equal access to public information. However, at the time I lived in Iguazú, a law mandating government institutions to provide records to the media did not exist in Argentina. When deciding how much they wanted to share and with whom, public officials had complete discretion. Sometimes they justified their refusal to provide information by referring to bureaucratic guidelines that required them to get authorization from their superiors on the provincial or federal level before talking to the press. Although these rules were often nothing more than excuses, they were effective in stalling the exchange of information. Officials in law enforcement and the justice system shared their knowledge arbitrarily, discriminating not only between local reporters and a foreign anthropologist, but also among the reporters themselves, treating some to more data than others. News-making was deeply embedded in uneven relationships between the media and their sources in the government and security forces. By switching my role from ethnographer to journalist, I was able to better recognize these distortions.

PROXIMIDAD

Writing for *La Voz de Cataratas* was only one form of professional engagement that I had with the media in Iguazú. In mid-2010, when I spent most days at the headquarters of the local television channel, C.V.I. Canal 5, from where I accompanied reporters on their news-gathering trips around town, I met Javier Rotela. Born in Eldorado, located a hundred kilometers south of Iguazú, Javier had a degree in video production and video editing from the Instituto Superior Antonio Ruiz de Montoya in Posadas. After graduating, he moved to Iguazú and began working for the television company. At C.V.I., where we met, Javier's job was to browse through raw video footage brought in by reporters and integrate it, together with news announcements prerecorded in the studio, into the evening *noticiero* (news program). I regularly stopped by his office in the afternoons when the news team returned to the station to hand over their tapes and before they left for the second round of news-gathering in the evening. Javier was a fervent critic of the media in Iguazú, disapproving of its poor quality and political undercurrents. We agreed that local journalists lacked professional training, resources, and independence, which made it unlikely that they would examine complicated social issues, much less anything related to organized crime. But criticism was not enough—we wanted to know whether an alternative was possible. That was when we settled on the idea of an investigative television program.

We called it *Proximidad*, which refers to the law of proximity—the principle of organization in Gestalt psychology holding that, other things being equal, objects that are near to one another in space or time are perceived to belong together as a unit. The name captured what we thought the program should be about: it focused on topics that were part of a broader field of local concerns, offering to look at them from diverse angles in the community. Produced as a series of seven one-hour documentaries, *Proximidad* was aired weekly from September to November in 2010. For Javier and me, this program was a collaborative undertaking, which meant that we chose themes together and we both participated in most stages of its production. Some tasks we divided to make use of our individual strengths: Javier had better technical knowledge, so he filmed six out of the seven episodes and edited all our video footage, while I had more time to investigate the topics and more experience conducting interviews. Our plan was to explore issues that were important to the community, yet for different reasons they were absent

from the public sphere. We did not want the program to be a local version of alarmist mass media coverage of the tri-border area, dominating foreign and national press. But we were equally reluctant to focus too narrowly on matters that were irrelevant beyond Iguazú, as doing so would have attested to the limitations of local journalism. Our goals were summarized in these opening lines of *Proximidad*:

Journalism is more than information. News stories leave questions that need answers; suggest ideas that lead to discussions; introduce theories that warrant investigation. We live and work here, in Puerto Iguazú, and we approach topics that are important to our community. Every week we offer you a new report. We verify, we analyze, we present—to let you form your own opinion. An encounter between opposite arguments. A crossroad of different angles. One focus. One X. *Proximidad*. Periodismo de investigación.³

As a collaborative project between a media producer and an anthropologist, *Proximidad* was an experiment of professional engagement. But our program was also experimental on another level: it was an intervention that sought to break the code of silence, which limited public debates in Iguazú.

Javier and I made *Proximidad* from scratch. In search for cables, lights, microphones, and other equipment we spent weeks traversing variety stores in and around Iguazú. Prices for electronics in this region were high and product supplies were very limited. When we could not find the items we needed from local vendors, we went to look for them across the border in Ciudad del Este, where large shopping centers were crammed with low-cost commodities—minimally taxed foreign imports, national brands, and numerous fakes. We were able to purchase the rest of our equipment there: mostly miscellaneous things like video cassettes, DVDs, and a camera tripod, not exceeding the quota for shopping abroad and saving us from trouble at the Argentine customs. Our most important and most expensive tool, the video camera, I had brought from the U.S. To have our program broadcast on Canal 5 we also had to pay owners of the television channel a standard monthly fee for airtime, amounting to 750 pesos (approximately US\$175).

With costs accumulating, we needed to find sponsorship to finance the program. Many business establishments in Iguazú—hotels, restaurants, food stores, law firms, medical clinics, and other private entities—were paying for advertising in the local media. By the time we started *Proximidad*, I knew that in some cases this was a polite way to handle extortion: business owners used ad money to silence the media, effectively preventing public discussion of inconvenient subjects such as



FIGURE 4. The preview of *Proximidad* in the broadcast studio at C.V.I. Canal 5. Puerto Iguazú, September 2010.

widespread *trabajo en negro* (the practice of paying employees off the books). In this context it did not surprise us that it was difficult to convince anyone to support *Proximidad*. Entrepreneurs were reluctant to finance a new investigative program, uncertain how it would affect their economic interests. The general manager of a supermarket chain who wholeheartedly endorsed the need to improve the quality of local journalism bluntly told me he could not risk investing in *Proximidad* because if our investigations were to cause anger among Iguazúenses, they might respond by boycotting his stores. Fortunately, we managed to find two sponsors that gave us just enough money to cover the fee for airtime.⁴ The rest—including all equipment, fuel, and time—was at our expense.

In the initial episodes we addressed issues that were at the time broadly debated in Argentina. The first program examined whether mandatory military service, known as *la colimba*, which Argentina abolished in 1995, would solve the purportedly interrelated problems of decreasing youth morality and growing crime rates, as some national politicians suggested. With memories of the last military dictatorship still haunting Argentines, it was a challenging question all over the country. But in Iguazú, where federal security forces had heavy presence and where many residents had family members working for them, any issue

related to the military was particularly sensitive. Looking for different perspectives on the matter, we interviewed public and private high school seniors and their teachers. We also attended the military recruit training camp and spoke to a number of high-ranking officials in the army and the naval prefecture. The morning after the episode aired on television, everyone in Iguazú was talking about it: from people in the streets who stopped us to offer their opinions to other journalists who summarized our arguments in their programs. Encouraged by such positive feedback, in the second episode we sought reactions from the local community to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Argentina, the first country in Latin America to do so. We interviewed representatives of state and religious institutions and we talked to same-sex couples that, afraid of losing their government jobs, asked us to modify their voices and blur their faces to make them unrecognizable in the video footage. We also dedicated an episode to the crisis of urban waste management, which included documenting the construction of a modern recycling plant to be run by a local cooperative. We filmed politicians and municipal employees in their offices, as well as people who worked at the landfill, against the toxic fumes of burning trash. As *Proximidad* gained popularity, Iguazúenses began approaching us with information, asking to investigate issues that ranged from the problems faced by the veterans of the Malvinas-Falklands War to the selling of drugs at the entrance to the indigenous Mbororé community. Some of the leads we pursued, while others proved impossible—due to limited resources, time constraints, and the overarching code of silence, from which, as we soon learned, we could not escape.

Unquestionably the most difficult episode we produced was about informal fosterage, illegal adoptions, and child trafficking, which I discuss in detail in chapter 6. For weeks we waited and were often turned away by government officials who, in the absence of legislation guaranteeing the media access to public information, enjoyed freedom from the press. By stepping on the boundary between legal and illegalized practices that lacked social consensus and, therefore, were neither legitimate nor illegitimate, our journalistic investigation tempered with and tested the code of silence. This attempt to address a contentious topic by moving it from the domain of local common knowledge to that of the public sphere was fraught with complications. Not only were the scars of previous media coverage, which accused the region of being a conduit for child trafficking, still visible and painful; there was also profound ambiguity regarding the ethical and legal status of some widespread practices.

In this context of uncertainty it was not surprising that most Iguazúenses preferred to stay out of trouble, which to them first and foremost meant avoiding talking to the police and to the media. During the production of this episode—the only investigation of illegal practices that we completed before *Proximidad* was shut down—we had to make some difficult choices about what information we could use in the program, weighing the potential consequences of both inclusions and omissions. We decided to create an assemblage of interviews with people who had encountered illegal adoptions as biological and adoptive parents, human rights activists, doctors, lawyers, civil registry employees, and politicians. But the story was inconclusive—our narrative raised more questions than it gave answers—and reaffirmed the boundary between public secrets and public knowledge that we had tried to overstep.

Producing *Proximidad* was different from writing for *La Voz de Cataratas* in that these two forms of media production—video and text—provided unequal levels of exposure. By seemingly direct reference to social reality, in the terminology proposed by Charles L. Briggs (2007), video, like photography, works as an “indexical icon,” (re)producing that which it represents. Visual stories can be read as “forms whose features provide a reliable way of knowing acts that are hidden from us—and whose reality we accept by virtue of their indexical connection to an act of narration,” Briggs writes (2007:324). Because of the proximity of the visual narrative, it has important implications for the politics and ethics of representing crime and violence. Images that document such themes as race and gender, for example, risk reifying social categories and legitimizing policies that reproduce suffering and inequality. Yet, as Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg note in their photo-ethnography *Righteous Dopefiend*, which includes a series of photographs depicting homeless heroin addicts, censoring images of taboo behaviors for the sake of positive politics of representation would distort the painful effects of marginalization, poverty, violence, and oppression (2009:15). Ethnographers and journalists alike can use the power of images, stemming from their emotional, aesthetic, and documentary qualities, to more effectively portray unacceptable social phenomena in social science analysis and news reports. Compared to written text, however, visual narratives have profound implications for the subjects portrayed, making ethical reflection a necessary component of such engagement.

Participating in the production of visual stories is complicated for those who are behind the camera just as it is for those who are positioned in front of it. In their interactions with the media, government officials and

Iguazúenses were more aware of the presence of the camera than a digital voice recorder. The camera was considered more *immediate*. Press reporters scribbled down notes or recorded interviews that they transcribed back at their desk in the office; news articles were often published the following day if not later in the future; and print media offered anonymity by frequently using generic categories such as “a resident,” “a government employee,” and so forth, as substitutes for individual identities of their sources. In contrast, although video was edited and could be manipulated to disguise people’s faces and voices, television news was often broadcast live, and together with documentary films, they were widely believed to show unfiltered and unaltered images of the world.

Since video was accepted as the least mediated and the most accurate form of evidence, it is not surprising that for Iguazúenses, being interviewed on television constituted a more serious violation of the code of silence than if they talked to a newspaper or radio reporter. Video matched their claims with their identities. Print media was limited to citing people’s statements in writing and radio added the authenticity of their voice, but only television attributed their words and their voice to an image that was unmistakably theirs. This synergy was dangerous in situations where the protection of public secrets was the common sense of everyday life. Discomfort with visual media, as opposed to print journalism, also extended to government institutions. On several occasions, when I filmed operations of the security forces—once when the gendarmerie was doing a raid at a downtown variety store suspected of selling contraband electronics, and another time when a large tree was burning in the terrain belonging to the federal police, to name just two examples—officers threatened to confiscate my camera. Although by law journalists were not required to have special authorization to film in public places, in practice their rights were circumstantial. Depending on their personal connections and the disposition of individual officers, reporters had unequal opportunities to document the activities of law enforcement and the security apparatus. As a foreigner, at least initially less entangled in the ties of social obligations that crisscrossed the community, I was usually allowed to do even less than local journalists. However, different forms of media production had discordant perimeters of the permissible. This was made clear to me when, prohibited from filming one police incident, I wrote an article about it. Although my text criticized the negligence of law enforcement, *La Voz de Cataratas* did not receive negative feedback from the police after its publication. The written text appeared to be less damaging to the fuerzas than potential video images.

There is no one reason why *Proximidad* ended earlier than we had planned. Certainly, program production was not an easy task. As we began investigating controversial themes, from child trafficking to land occupation, it was harder to find people who were willing to talk “on the record.” Going forward required more of our time and more financial resources that we did not have. Javier worked full time as the news editor for Canal 5, a job he needed to support his family, but he spent every morning filming *Proximidad*, for which he earned nothing and actually incurred further expenses. We had not yet advanced far on the episode about the local politics of illegal settlements—I had just interviewed the director of the municipal land department—when a public figure discretely warned me about the potential consequences were we to continue with the program. The threat was not of violence, but of legal action. At first, Javier and I disagreed on what to do next. I wanted to continue with this episode and go to the outskirts of town to talk to illegal settlers, but he argued that it was too dangerous. Even when I suggested filming the interviews alone and preparing the minute-by-minute outline of the program, he refused to edit the footage. “You know why?” he asked me. “Because if anything happens . . . you will get on the plane and take off. I have to stay on living here.” These words left an imprint in my mind—for their bitter honesty. They resonated with the dialogue between two journalists quoted at the beginning of this chapter, marking the outsiders from the locals. With *Proximidad* we tried to probe the code of silence, but in the end our efforts proved that media production in this small border town was less a heroic act of exposing public secrets as breaking news than it was a practice that largely depended on concerns about security. “I don’t want to make certain people upset because I don’t know whether I may need them for another project,” Javier said. At issue for him were both personal safety and economic well-being. When on the day of my birthday Javier stopped by my apartment to return the camera and hand over a bag of cassettes with our video footage, it was the sad ending to my active involvement in local media. And, though I did not immediately see it this way, the failure in journalism became an invaluable part of this ethnography.

COLLABORATION AS ENGAGEMENT

Much has been written about engaged anthropology. Scholars in the discipline have accepted that our responsibility lies not only with the academic community, which provides us intellectual, administrative,

and financial support, but first and foremost with the people who agree to share their lives with us. Ethnographic fieldwork is “mutually formative,” writes João Biehl in the first pages of *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005:11); it produces a dialogic form of knowledge. Ethnographers working with people who live under conditions of structural violence (see, e.g., Farmer 1992, 2003; Bourgois 2003; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, Fassin 2007, 2013a, among numerous others) have used their research to advocate for policy reforms and to foment a broader, issue-focused dialogue between community members, clinicians, government agencies, civic groups, social scientists, and other parties.⁵ Some activist anthropologists have allied themselves with the communities they study, working on specific local projects that provide practical solutions for those stuck at the intersection of their aspirations for justice, security, and human rights, which are not always compatible (see, e.g., Goldstein 2012).

In a way, the work of a public anthropologist resembles that of a journalist: both want to communicate critical insights about social life, particularly addressing those who wield political and economic power. But the methods of scholarly and journalistic knowledge production are not easily reconciled. After publishing *Enforcing Order* (2013a), an ethnography on urban policing in the *banlieues* of Paris, Didier Fassin saw how difficult it was to maneuver the boundary between the realms of academia and the media. Journalists have to package their stories in formats that we ethnographers—usually much less limited by constraints of time and space—find too confining. Rather than backing out, however, Fassin made a call for “critical public ethnography”: a conversation between ethnographers and their publics, which “generates circulation of knowledge, reflection, and action likely to contribute to a transformation of the way the world is represented and experienced” (Fassin 2013b:628). As anthropologists, we find ourselves wedged in between the people we write about and those whom we write for. Often, rather than entangling ourselves in the webs of obligations to the broader society, we are inclined to stand with those about whom we write, to advocate on behalf of communities that accept us into their midst, that teach us their ways of life, and that share their most dire problems, even though is not always easy (particularly for those who study groups that behave in ways we don’t agree with, such as engaging in violence). The work of a public anthropologist is based on the premise that all these groups of people—those we interact with during research and those who are potential readers of our ethnographies—are inevitably connected,

and we should not discard our role as intermediaries between them. As Fassin put it, carrying on fieldwork we accumulate many debts to different parties; “making it into an intellectual production is repaying them—at least in part” (2013b:640).

It is important that after completing our research we present our work to diverse publics—including, and especially, the people we write about. But in situations that permit such arrangements we should also approach the process of fieldwork as a form of engagement, based on partnership and entailing obligations. Such collaborative fieldwork can be equally rewarding for everyone involved. In anthropology of news media, “epistemic fellowships” can be built around what Amahl Bishara (2013) describes as ethnographers and journalists “writing alongside” one another. While living in northeast Argentina, for periods of time I worked together with local reporters and published several stories on matters that were relevant to the residents of Iguazú. Besides interviewing them, on several occasions I also asked my journalist peers to reflect on their lives in the tri-border region by writing something for a distant academic audience in the U.S. and in Europe, where this book would most likely be read. Kelly’s letter, from which I quote in the introduction, was her response to such an invitation. Still, writing *alongside* each other risks becoming writing *past* each other. Except for rare, truly collaborative texts where authors mold their separate identities into one narrative voice, “writing alongside” leaves one author distinguishable from another. Anthropologists and journalists might be present next to each other in the same place at the same time, but the audiences they write for usually do not overlap. In video production, in contrast, the roles of team members can be more difficult to tell apart: each episode of *Proximidad*, for example, resulted from our joint efforts to select topics and create content for the program, which was made for the community of Iguazú.

A television program as a form of knowledge production is very different from an ethnographic text. I can compare my experience of writing news articles for *La Voz de Cataratas* with writing this book by looking at the ethics, temporalities, and logistics that define journalism and anthropology as two separate even if closely related disciplines. But a similar comparison with *Proximidad* would be incomplete because it would not treat television as a distinct medium. To render filming, as a process, and video, as a form, visible in this ethnographic text, I had to bring them forward. All but one of the chapters of this book follow the standard layout, in which news production in Iguazú—print journalism, radio, and television—is the content of anthropological analysis.

Such ethnography of news journalism is attentive to differences that exist between modes of media production, but its baseline remains the written text. In chapter 6, however, I make the form of video and the process of filming more prominent. By subjecting ethnographic material to the structure of “takes” used in motion picture production. I juxtapose the flow and the depth of an ethnographic narrative and the ruptured, incomplete mode of storytelling characteristic of video-making. Blending the production of fieldnotes (writing) with the production of “takes” (filming) highlights differences in process as well as in form between ethnographic research and journalistic investigation. Such an unusual organization of the chapter, when the structure of video is brought into ethnographic writing, adds to the overall argument of this book: it shows how and why the two forms of representation are unevenly affected by security concerns.

Media anthropology has a history of cultural activism. Visual ethnographers like Faye Ginsburg and Terry Turner, pioneering this mode of collaboration, designed and participated in indigenous media projects that used video as a form of expressive culture and political engagement, empowering disenfranchised groups (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). Strictly defined, activist research requires the existence of a conscious political alignment with a group of people and interaction on dialogic terms (see Hale 2006). In addition to activism and advocacy, there are other, perhaps less radical but not less meaningful, forms of public engagement that anthropologists have been pursuing, including social critique, sharing and support, teaching and public education, and collaboration (Low and Merry 2010). Although during ethnographic fieldwork in Iguazú I actively participated in projects that served the local community and though this book contains political critique, the most significant form of engagement that underlies my work was the production of *Proximidad*. As a collaborative undertaking, *Proximidad* mattered in several ways. On the one hand, the program contributed to the Iguazú media sphere by starting vibrant public debates on significant matters that had been silenced in the community, including the role of the military in contemporary Argentina and the rights of same-sex couples. On the other hand, two episodes—one about the construction of the municipal waste management plant and one about education and health care in the Mbororé community—despite containing critical views, were used for promotion and advocacy, attracting public attention to the recycling cooperative and to the indigenous school. *Proximidad* not only expanded dialogue on neglected



FIGURE 5. Javier during filming of the episode on waste recycling. Puerto Iguazú, September 2010.

topics in the public sphere, but also brought other tangible, albeit modest, benefits to the community.

As I note throughout the book, *Proximidad* also had profound implications for my research. Despite differences between anthropology and journalism, their goals are similar (Bird 2010:5). Aware that each of these forms of knowledge production has limitations, we can experiment with combining them in order to tell difficult stories to more people. It may well be that the problems we encounter in the process are the most critical part. What I learned while writing for *La Voz de Cataratas* and collaborating with Javier on the making of *Proximidad* informs the ethnography and analysis presented here. As a journalist, I was often frustrated by the absence of laws that would ensure public accountability and transparency. Scholars have shown that these projects are ideological and contradictory and that they contribute to, rather than eliminate, the production of public secrets (see, e.g., Hetherington 2011). Yet from the pragmatic perspective of the media in Iguazú, accountability and transparency were highly desired as improvements to the status quo. Until formal mechanisms through which government institutions would be obligated to share information with the public were created, reporters were left at the mercy of particular officials who limited the scope of news. But as an anthropologist I was able to see how, in the context of increased government and mass media surveillance of the tri-border region, local journalists were also complicit in maintaining the code of silence. Their tactical switches between information “on the

record” and “off the record” and deliberate uses of visibility and invisibility were intricately connected to security, which in Iguazú required experienced maneuvering between public secrets and public knowledge. Without *Proximidad* I wouldn’t have learned just how difficult this news-making process can be.