

*“The Pictures in Our Heads:” Portrayal of Paco in the Argentine Media and Political Narrative*

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LAST- 4000

December 16, 2011

In the past ten years Argentina has seen the emergence and surge of *paco*, an inexpensive derivative of cocaine. It has become a major focus of attention in its links to poverty and crime, and has also become a journalistic staple in the Argentine media, almost always associated with poverty, violence, and crime. The media paints a picture of *paco* use almost exclusively by poor youths in the *villas*, or slums, who will commit crimes and acts of violence while under the influence or to feed their drug habit. Politicians have capitalized on this association of *paco* with poor young people and the *villas* in their discussion of insecurity issues. This paper analyzes media coverage of *paco* in the last ten years to argue that *paco* has become a way of talking about insecurity in Argentina. I argue that the media is responsible for both the heightened sense of insecurity and the association between *paco* and crime- an invention of the media that exploits the very fears of crime that the media has created). This media creation is, in turn, exploited by politicians who associate *paco* with young people and the *villas* to portray the *paco* problem as a youth problem or an immigrant problem rather than a structural one in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for the *paco* issue specifically and the insecurity problem in general.

## Introduction

Citizen insecurity has become one of the biggest issues to Latin Americans in the past ten years, as shown by public opinion polls. In the past decade in Argentina, insecurity consistently ranks as the principal problem facing the country, and the perception of insecurity in Argentina is sometimes higher than that of every other Latin American nation. The media can also play a significant role in shaping the perception of insecurity among citizens. The crime section is a permanent fixture in major newspapers and Argentine newspapers have the highest rate of crime reporting in the region, and thus the capacity for over-reporting of crime, inflation of crime statistics, and sensationalism of and emphasis on certain crime-related issues. The media's power to set a country's agenda- to focus the attention of the public on a few key issues- and to paint "the pictures in our heads" of public issues- is significant and well documented, and when the media emphasizes a crime issue, it can become a part of the public and the political agenda.

In the immediate aftermath of Argentina's 2001 economic crisis, poverty skyrocketed to over 50% and unemployment rose to around 20%, increasing Argentines' feelings of insecurity amid social and political unrest. Another consequence of the economic crisis was the emergence of *paco*, an inexpensive and highly addictive cocaine derivative that appeared in Argentina around 2001 that has steadily grown into a worrisome phenomenon. Since the early 2000s, *paco* has appeared more and more frequently in the Argentine news media, and is almost always associated with poverty and crime. *Paco* very frequently appears in the police section of the newspaper and the majority of the time is discussed within the context of poor (mostly young) users who live in the *villas miserias*, or shantytowns, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

In this paper I will discuss how the media has created paco's association with poverty and crime. Politicians have seized on the media's creation of the paco problem- already portrayed as a threatening issue. I show that immigrants and young people are scapegoated in the media and by politicians for the majority of the paco problem. This is significant for two reasons: 1) It feeds a false perception of insecurity, largely created by the media, who sensationalize crime; and 2) It represents a political ploy that attributes the problem to marginalized groups in an effort to appease public perceptions of insecurity. This, in turn, is facilitated by long-standing xenophobia against Latin American immigrants by politicians who, in this case, replace the overt racism of the 1990s with a more implicit racism "justified" by this very real social problem. I will argue, using my own original research looking at the portrayal of paco in the largest Argentine newspaper, that the media is responsible for both the heightened sense of insecurity and the association between paco and crime- an invention of the media that exploits the very fears of crime that the media has created). First, I will demonstrate that paco emerged within the context of economic decline, perceptions of insecurity, and xenophobia. I will then establish the media's powerful role in portraying the paco issue and in inflating fears of crime by looking at the media's representation of paco. In my third section I will discuss the political uses of paco, before concluding in my final section. This interdisciplinary approach- involving the survey of sociological, communications, and political science literature - fills the gap in the literature about the portrayal of paco and takes the findings of media analysis a step further by analyzing the political implications of the media's construction of a specific issue.

## **The Paco Problem**

In order to understand my argument and analysis, it is necessary to first establish the paco problem by positioning it within the broader context of economic decline, perceptions of insecurity, and anti-immigrant sentiments. In this section I will make the argument that paco emerged during the economic decline following restructuring- a period that also saw a rise in the perception of insecurity among the Argentine public. These two are not directly related, though. I argue that the media is responsible for both the heightened sense of insecurity and the association between paco and crime, that crime is actually low and that the association of paco with crime is a media invention that exploits the very fears that the media invented. I will explain what exactly paco is and discuss its arrival in Buenos Aires, which was initiated by economic decline that also brought public perceptions of insecurity and began the scapegoating of immigrants.

### *What Is Paco?*

In order to understand how paco is portrayed in the Argentine print media, it is necessary to first gain an appreciation of what exactly paco is. It is difficult to define paco (the Argentine nickname for *pasta base*, or cocaine base paste). Comparatively little is known about its chemical makeup and there is a great deal of inconsistency about what constitutes the product, especially between different countries. Cocaine base paste (cocaine sulphate) is most commonly understood as the residue that remains in the pot after cocaine powder is produced, and/or as an intermediary product in the processing of the coca leaf into cocaine powder (cocaine hydrochloride). In the initial stages of coca processing, the coca leaves are crushed, soaked in alcohol with benzol (a petroleum derivative used to manufacture motor fuels, detergents, and pesticides), and shaken. The

addition of sulfuric acid and sodium bicarbonate forms a precipitate, and when this precipitate is washed with kerosene and chilled, crystals of crude cocaine (the base paste) are left behind.<sup>1</sup> Cocaine base paste is highly addictive, highly dangerous to the user's health (much more so than any other type of cocaine product), and very inexpensive. It is very quickly absorbed when smoked (most often with a homemade pipe, or *pibe*) and produces a very short and intense high. Though users are often first attracted to the drug for its cheapness, once addicted users can smoke anywhere up to 100 doses per day, thus making the product expensive.

Though cocaine base paste has been used in the Andean countries since the 1970s, the phenomenon only arrived in Argentina around the time of the 2001 economic crisis. As unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment rocked the nation, *paco* became popular as a cheap cocaine high, and between 2004 and 2007 *paco* consumption increased by 500%.<sup>2</sup> Current estimates of the number of *paco* addicts in Argentina range from 180,000 to 700,000.<sup>3</sup> Though there are few studies that investigate the emergence of *paco* in Argentina, those that do point to changes in the international cocaine business as a result of the U.S.-funded counterdrug program, Plan Colombia. After the implementation of the program in 2000, Argentina was transformed into a country of both cocaine consumption *and* production. A crackdown in Andean countries on the chemicals necessary to produce cocaine shifted drug production to Argentina, where these chemicals are less tightly controlled.

*Paco and the Economic Decline:*

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Morales, *Drugs in Latin America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1986), 467.

<sup>2</sup> "El 'Paco,' la droga que se vincula al delito y a la pobreza," *El Clarín*, March 3, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

It is necessary to examine paco in the context of economic decline, as the events during, leading up to, and immediately after the 2001 financial crisis were responsible for the initial arrival of paco in Argentina and allowed it to take hold. Paco initially fulfilled the need of a group looking for a replacement to a cocaine high. Soaring poverty and unemployment rates leading up to and during the crisis, combined with wage cuts and the freezing of bank accounts that allowed only a small amount of money to be withdrawn weekly, created a new market for an inexpensive cocaine substitute, and drug dealers responded. A large group of people was all of a sudden impoverished (and in many cases jobless) or had access to very little money, and most likely turned to paco out of desperation. Drug dealers realized that they had a new product to sell, which could be produced very cheaply by substituting any manner of inexpensive, easily-obtained chemicals to make the product. In a situation of unemployment and poverty, the drug flourished, and, because it is so addictive, those who tried the product quickly became habitual users. Though economic conditions have steadily improved since 2002, paco continues to thrive because drug dealers learned in the wake of the economic crisis that the drug is profitable, and it remains attractive today because it is still so inexpensive.

#### *Perceptions of Insecurity*

Insecurity concerns have ranked highly on the agendas of most Latin American countries for the past decade, but Argentina consistently has either the highest or one of the highest rates of citizen insecurity (traditionally defined as the fear of falling victim to crime and/or violence) in the region.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that Spanish word

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<sup>4</sup> Latinobarómetro: Opinión Pública Latinoamericana, “Informe Latinobarómetro 2007,” Latinobarómetro, <http://www.der.oas.org/INFORME%20LB%202007.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2011).

*seguridad* does not differentiate between security, as in the subjective feeling of confidence, and safety, as in the objective sense of public safety, thus it is difficult to tell whether surveys that poll *inseguridad* reflect a perceived crime wave or citizens' emotional state.<sup>5</sup> As rates of perceived insecurity in Argentina began to climb in earnest following the economic crisis, it is reasonable to conclude that the elevated crime rates that mirrored the marked economic decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s instilled in Argentines this feeling that they are not safe. Like the emergence of *paco*, high rates of perceived insecurity appear to have taken root due to the conditions present during the turbulent years of the economic crisis, but have remained present and have greatly increased since then. It appears as though, once Argentines experienced high degrees of insecurity in the years surrounding the economic crisis, they have remained very sensitive to these feelings that they are threatened, which have only increased.

Considering the high rates of citizen insecurity, it should be no surprise that the Argentine media closely follows crime issues. Significantly, a study found that, out of 14 newspapers in Latin America, Argentine newspapers had the highest rate of crime reporting.<sup>6</sup> They also emphasize violent crime, and often publish statistics that appear overblown or of dubious source; for example, one opinion piece published by *El Clarín* claimed that 90% of crimes are committed under the influence of drugs.<sup>7</sup>

The government has attempted to improve citizens' perception of the security situation in a number of ways, but ultimately, its responses have not been effective in

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<sup>5</sup> Patricia Di Filippo, "Fear and Loathing in Buenos Aires," *The Argentina Independent*, May 12, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Kessler, *El sentimiento de inseguridad: Sociología del temor al delito* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2009), 10.

<sup>7</sup> "La policía es la única que no se entera," *El Clarín*, November 15, 2010.

making citizens feel safer. Since 2002, examples of security policies implemented by the government include a policy of voluntary disarmament in 2006, an “Agreement for Democratic Security” (intended to offer effective security policies while respecting the rights of citizens) in 2009, the creation of a Security Administration by the president in 2010, a substantial increase in the number of closed-circuit television cameras in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area in February of this year, and a plan to bolster police forces in the capital in June. State politicians have fallen under criticism for failing to address the issue at hand. In the minds of many, the state ignores security issues or discusses them but actually does nothing. According to one citizen, “the national government has chosen to systematically dismiss complaints or claims for greater security and ... to deny a reality that is evident for everyone.”<sup>8</sup> When the state does act, the state handles the security situation reactively rather than proactively, responding to a high-profile crime or crime wave, but in a way that only preserves the continuity of the current pattern of policies and does not search for innovative new solutions or attempt to repair structural problems that may be at fault. The government’s failure to ameliorate the high levels of perceived insecurity is reflected in the consistency of public opinion poll figures regarding insecurity: in 2006, 23% indicated that crime was the biggest issue in the country, that figure rose to 25% in 2007 and to 37% in 2010, when only 2% of respondents believed that there was security in the country, and 92% of respondents thought the government should declare a state of emergency in the area of crime.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, citizens also indicated a serious lack of confidence in the government to find a

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<sup>8</sup> “Falta de respuestas a la inseguridad,” *El Clarín*, October 21, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Infoamérica: Revista Iberoamericana de Comunicación, “Informe Latinobarómetro 2010,” Latinobarómetro, [http://www.infoamerica.org/primer/latinobarometro\\_2010.pdf](http://www.infoamerica.org/primer/latinobarometro_2010.pdf) (accessed October 27, 2011).

solution: in 2006, 52% of respondents reported that they believed the government could not find a solution to the security problem, by 2008 the figure had risen to 75%, and to 82% in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

*Precedent for the Scapegoating of Immigrants*

During the economic decline in the 1990s, leading up to the financial crisis, politicians and the media scapegoated Latin American immigrants for Argentina's social and economic problems. Immigrants were explicitly discriminated against and used as scapegoats for crime issues by the public and politicians in the media during the 1990s, thus there is a clear precedent for the scapegoating of immigrants by politicians that is happening today. During that time, the Argentine government and national media called attention to the influx of Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Peruvian immigrants that they claimed was of similar scale to the wave of European immigration a century earlier.<sup>11</sup> The state and the media publicly blamed the new group of immigrants for the social and economic woes Argentina was experiencing at the time, claiming that the immigrants were responsible for a sharp increase in unemployment and crime. As statistics showed that immigrants had not, in fact, become a larger share of the population during the 1990s, it is logical to assume that the rapid increase in immigration was constructed as a way to justify placing blame on the Latin American newcomers for the country's rising social and economic issues.<sup>12</sup> Anthropologist Alejandro Grimson points out that,

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<sup>10</sup> Centro de Estudios para la Convergencia Ciudadana, "Encuesta de Opinión, Capital Federal: Índice de Temor Ciudadano 2011," Centro de Estudios para la Convergencia Ciudadana, <http://www.centroconvergencia.com.ar/descargas/pu-itc6.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Alejandro Grimson, "Ethnic (In)Visibility in Neoliberal Argentina," *NACLA* 38:4 (Jan./Feb. 2005):25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

historically, “diversity” in Argentina was invisible amid the racial homogeneity of its mostly-European population, but by the 1990s that difference was increasingly highlighted by the influx of ethnically indigenous immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Terms like “Bolivian” became a way to encompass the broader categories of “poor” and “black,” and during the 1990s in many contexts, “poor” became a way of saying “Bolivian,” or “foreign.”<sup>14</sup> Not just first-generation immigrants, but also their Argentine-born children, became known as “*Bolivianos*” or “*Peruanos*,” etc, and thus they too became seen as foreigners. It is noteworthy that the socially marginalized became seen as “foreigners” because it allowed the sense of “otherness” usually associated with immigrants to be transferred to Argentine groups who were socially excluded. This sudden visibility of ethnicity catalyzed a wave of xenophobia, during which both the national and local governments instituted anti-immigrant policies. Politicians responded by cracking down on illegal migrants in the name of saving Argentine jobs and identifying them as the source of crime. This was clearly a way to displace blame that would otherwise fall on the shoulders of politicians for the worsening economic and social issues.<sup>15</sup> Argentine citizens were also caught up in the wave of xenophobia, as one public opinion poll in the nineties shows that 81% of Argentines felt that foreign workers should be strictly limited and 91% felt that immigration hurt Argentines, while 50% of respondents supported the deportation of undocumented workers.<sup>16</sup> Though the sheer enormity of the economic crisis that hit Argentina in 2001 ultimately demonstrated that immigrants could not be the only ones

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

responsible, many of the same xenophobic sentiments are still visible in anti-immigrant sentiments today.

### *In Conclusion*

I have demonstrated thus far that paco initially emerged during the economic decline that took place around the financial restructuring (which occurred in 2000-2002), and that paco took hold under these conditions. Scapegoating of immigrants also began under the context of economic decline, as did heightened perceptions of insecurity. Positioning of the paco problem within this broader context of economic decline, xenophobia, and perception of insecurity allows me to take the next step in arguing that the media is responsible for the elevated perception of insecurity in Argentina and the association between paco and crime (which exploits these very fears that the media invented). The factors which I have outlined in this section are underscored in the media's treatment of paco, upon which I will now focus.

### **The Media's Representation of Paco**

I will now discuss the media's representation of paco and show that it has the ability to increase perceptions of insecurity and link paco to crime. My research shows that between 2001 and 2011, paco was most closely associated with poverty in newspaper coverage (poverty words occurred most frequently- see table 5). Though numerous studies on paco and articles written outside Argentina note that the drug is also an emerging middle-class phenomenon, the Argentine media creates an image of poor young males in the villas, addicted to paco and ready to rob or kill for money to support his habit. The media also strongly link it to drug trafficking. The image of paco it has

constructed clearly falls within an established propensity by the Argentine media to over-report and sensationalize crime, as well as to scapegoat immigrants.

### *Media Analysis*

In my research, I searched *El Clarín* for articles that mentioned the word “paco” between 2001 and 2011 and counted how many articles mentioned the search term every year.<sup>17</sup> My sample size was 430 articles. Having a general sense of the most frequently-occurring keywords in articles that mentioned paco from articles that I had read, I searched each article (keeping track of what year each article appeared in) for these keywords and their derivatives (plural vs. singular, noun vs. verb), as well as their synonyms (“*crimen*” vs. “*delito*” for example). I used the words “*villa*,” “*delito*,” “*adicto*,” “*marihuana*,” “*cocaina*,” “*alcohol*,” “*joven*,” “*narcotraficante*,” “*matar*,” “*robar*,” “*arma*,” “*violencia*,” and “*pobre*.” I tallied which keywords were mentioned in each article (but not the amount of times mentioned in each article) to find the number of articles that each term appeared in by year. I then put the specific terms into larger, more general categories, (again, by year).

**Table 1: Number of mentions of “paco” by year (by number of articles)**

| 2011 | 2010 | 2009 | 2008 | 2007 | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 102  | 48   | 128  | 61   | 50   | 27   | 9    | 5    |

Source: own data.

I found that the word “paco” first appeared in articles in 2004, but did not appear a significant amount of times until 2007 (see table 1). This was not coincidental, as 2007 was a presidential and legislative election year. The number of mentions rose slightly in 2008, and then soared in 2009 (see table 1), also an election year. Mentions dropped

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<sup>17</sup> I did not include articles in which “Paco” was mentioned as a nickname for Francisco.

significantly in 2010 but rose dramatically again in 2011, another presidential election year. Thus, there was a clear trend between greater mentions of *paco* in news articles and election years, which indicates that *paco* was a campaign issue which was most likely discussed in conjunction with insecurity. *Paco* is also represented as a drug of the poor and of addiction- it is not a recreational drug or a “party drug,” but one that is highly dangerous and harmful.

**Table 2: Number of mentions of each keyword by year**

|  | 2011 | 2010 | 2009 | 2008 | 2007 | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| “Villa”  | 33   | 31   | 51   | 18   | 12   | 11   | 1    | 2    |
| “Crimen”/<br>“delito”                                      | 15   | 14   | 27   | 16   | 21   | 1    | 1    | 2    |
| “Adictos”/<br>“Adicción”                                   | 26   | 8    | 41   | 14   | 15   | 8    | 2    | 3    |
| “Marihuana”  | 19   | 5    | 18   | 4    | 7    | 7    | 3    | 3    |
| “Cocaina”  | 27   | 7    | 18   | 7    | 8    | 6    | 1    | 3    |
| “Alcohol”  | 6    | 3    | 7    | 0    | 5    | 3    | 1    | 1    |
| “Joven”/”Chico”/<br>“Adolescente”/<br>“Menor [de<br>edad]” | 27   | 14   | 55   | 32   | 30   | 12   | 4    | 2    |
| “Narco”/<br>“narcotraficante”<br>/”traficante”             | 33   | 13   | 28   | 15   | 12   | 2    | 3    | 2    |
| “Robar”/”robo”   | 20   | 13   | 26   | 13   | 9    | 3    | 0    | 1    |
| “Matar”  | 10   | 9    | 18   | 8    | 13   | 2    | 0    | 0    |
| “Violencia”/<br>“violento/a”                               | 10   | 8    | 21   | 11   | 11   | 3    | 0    | 0    |

|                       |    |    |    |   |    |   |   |   |
|-----------------------|----|----|----|---|----|---|---|---|
| “Pobre”/<br>“Pobreza” | 10 | 12 | 19 | 7 | 11 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| “Arma”/<br>“Armado”   | 12 | 7  | 16 | 5 | 4  | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| “Inseguridad”         | 12 | 8  | 21 | 8 | 4  | 0 | 1 | 1 |

Source: own data.

*How the Media Portrays Crime and Acts as an Agenda Setter: Secondary Sources*

The media’s potential to overemphasize crime and set the public agenda is nothing new. The power of the media to set a country’s agenda, or to focus attention on a handful of key public issues, has been studied since Walter Lippman’s seminal work on the subject in 1922. Readers get factual information from news media sources but also acquire a sense of how important issues are by how much they are emphasized by the news. A news organization’s agenda (note that “agenda” is not meant to imply a premeditated goal) is seen in how it covers public issues over a certain period of time.<sup>18</sup> Over this period of time, which could be a week, a month, a year, or even a number of years, a small number of issues receive significant attention, others receive light coverage, and many are rarely or never mentioned. A wealth of studies have found significant evidence of the media’s ability to influence the public agenda, or the focus of public attention.<sup>19</sup> The way that public agenda is most often assessed by public opinion polls that ask what the most important issue in the country is at the time. The landmark study on the issue of agenda setting, which has been reproduced in numerous different contexts since, found that people’s responses regarding the most important issues at the

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 12.

<sup>19</sup> David Weaver, et al., *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images Interest* (Westport, C.T.: Greenwood, 1981), 22.

time closely mirrored the pattern of news coverage the month before by newspapers, magazines, and television news programs.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 3: Number of mentions by category per year**

|                               | 2011 | 2010 | 2009 | 2008 | 2007 | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Crime words                   | 35   | 27   | 53   | 29   | 30   | 14   | 1    | 3    |
| Violence<br>Words             | 33   | 24   | 55   | 24   | 18   | 7    | 1    | 0    |
| Addiction<br>Words            | 26   | 8    | 41   | 14   | 15   | 8    | 2    | 3    |
| Poverty<br>Words              | 43   | 43   | 70   | 25   | 23   | 16   | 2    | 5    |
| Drug-<br>Trafficking<br>Words | 33   | 13   | 28   | 15   | 12   | 2    | 3    | 2    |
| Youth<br>Words                | 27   | 14   | 55   | 32   | 30   | 12   | 4    | 2    |
| Other drugs                   | 46   | 12   | 36   | 11   | 15   | 13   | 4    | 6    |
| “Insecurity”                  | 12   | 8    | 21   | 8    | 4    | 0    | 1    | 1    |

Source: own data.

Agenda-setting effects in the Latin American context were also found in Argentina in a study on the 1997 legislative elections in Buenos Aires.<sup>21</sup> The study found that consistency between the public and news agendas greatly increased leading up to election day, demonstrating a substantial effect of the media in the late stages of the electoral campaign. In addition to playing an important role in setting the public agenda,

<sup>20</sup> Weaver, et al., *Media Agenda Setting in a Presidential Election*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Juan Carlos Cuestas, Sebastián Freille, Patricio O’Gorman, “The Media and Public Agendas: Testing for Media Effects in Argentina During 2003-2008,” *Revista de Economía y Estadística* 67:1 (2009): 100.

the media also influence our perspective and how we understand issues covered in the news by focusing on certain characteristics of each topic.<sup>22</sup> Each topic of focus in the news media has numerous characteristics used to describe it, and for each topic of focus the media gives attention to some characteristics and emphasizes other characteristics less or does not emphasize them at all. This agenda of attributes within each topic covered by the media is another aspect of the media's agenda-setting role, and influences the pictures of the issue that we form and hold in our minds.<sup>23</sup> This is because which aspects of an issue are covered in the news- and the relative importance placed on these various facets of an issue- makes a substantial difference in how people see the issue.

More specifically with regard to the media's portrayal of crime and the effects resulting from it, it has been widely established that the media overemphasize the issue of crime and lead the public to think that crime rates are much higher than they are in reality.<sup>24</sup> Media effects have been established merely from the sheer volume of coverage on a certain issue. It follows logically, then, that scholars have found evidence that media effects produce higher levels of fear of crime, especially considering the media's disproportionate focus on violent crime.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 4: Number of mentions of each keyword, 2001-2011**

|           |     |
|-----------|-----|
| Villa     | 159 |
| Delito    | 97  |
| Adicto    | 117 |
| Marihuana | 66  |

<sup>22</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Lucía Dammert, "Does It Take a Village? Policing Strategies and Fear of Crime in Latin America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 48:4 (winter 2006): 30.

<sup>25</sup> Dammert, "Does It Take a Village?" 30.

|           |     |
|-----------|-----|
| Cocaina   | 77  |
| Alcohol   | 26  |
| Joven     | 176 |
| Narco     | 108 |
| Robar     | 85  |
| Matar     | 60  |
| Violencia | 64  |
| Pobre     | 68  |
| Arma      | 55  |

Source: own data

The Argentine media has molded paco into a part of the public agenda, through the volume of coverage on the topic and the sensationalization and association with crime. The media also shapes how people think about paco and the image of it they hold in their minds: one of poor, immigrant children using the drug in the villas. The keywords I use in my study are all examples of the characteristics that the media has given paco. There is a tendency for people's opinions to mirror the pattern of news coverage and to reflect how issues are portrayed, and because the media has made paco into an important public issue intricately linked to crime, paco has become seen as a serious threat to security. Also, the media's significant and established influence on electoral campaigns has made it logical for politicians to jump on and exploit the image of paco that the media has constructed. Further, it has also been established that the media overemphasize crime and lead the public to think that crime issues are worse than they are in reality. Media effects are also proven to produce higher levels of fear of crime. In the case of the Argentine media, it overemphasizes the paco problem and creates an association with crime. Because of its over-reporting and disproportionate emphasis on the violent crime

associated with paco, Argentine citizens think that the crime problem is worse than it actually is, which provokes a heightened sense of insecurity.

**Table 5: Number of mentions by category, 2001-2011**

|                      |     |
|----------------------|-----|
| Crime                | 192 |
| Violence             | 162 |
| Addiction            | 117 |
| Poverty              | 227 |
| Drug-<br>trafficking | 108 |
| Youth                | 176 |
| Other drugs          | 143 |

Source: own data

#### *The Portrayal of Young People and Immigrants in the Media*

In order to understand the media's portrayal of paco, it is necessary to give some examples to illustrate how the media feeds this imagery of young people and immigrants as criminals and make paco into part of the problem. One article in *El Clarín* profiles a boy who started to use paco at age thirteen and robbed his younger sisters' clothes and his father's store in the villa where he lives. Another article identifies one villa as "paco territory" and describes several groups of thirteen or fourteen-year-old boys smoking paco there, saying, "their bodies are decaying, very skinny, their clothes hanging and dirty."<sup>26</sup> It then alludes to the connection between young paco users and crime by giving a statistic that asserts that 68% of paco consumers end up stealing.<sup>27</sup> Still another article states that there were children in the villas who no longer recognized their own mothers

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<sup>26</sup> Ricardo Roa, "Los hicos del 'paco': camino directo a la perdición," *El Clarín*, March 15, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

and stole from them, adding, “They are capable of killing. To them, life is worth nothing.”<sup>28</sup> The pictures of paco-addicted children in these newspaper articles show that the children are of indigenous descent, which signifies “immigrant” in Argentina, and a wealth of articles about arrests of or violent crimes involving drug dealers allude to their immigrant status.

It is clear that the media constructs an image of a constant threat of crime, especially those committed by paco-addicted young people. However, it is also clear that this image is false: Argentina’s crime rates are among the lowest in Latin America.<sup>29</sup> The perception of insecurity in Argentina has increased since 2002, even as crime rates have steadily gone down and economic conditions have improved following the 2001 crisis. Currently, rates of insecurity double the crime rate, thus Argentines seem to be responding to something that is not, in reality, not there.<sup>30</sup> The sensationalization of the paco issue by the media and its over-reporting of crime thus seem to be explain the disparity between the subjective fear of crime and the objective threat.

### *In Conclusion*

This over-reporting and sensationalization of paco, and the media’s attribution of the problem to a group already demonized as criminals, feeds a sense of false insecurity. This provides fodder for political ploys based on the same assumptions and stereotypes. I will now focus on the use of paco by politicians.

### **Political Uses of Paco**

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<sup>28</sup> Ricardo Roa, “Todo por dos pesos,” *El Clarín*, March 31, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Kessler, *El sentimiento de inseguridad*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

In essence, politicians capitalize on this media construction of the relationship between paco, immigrants, and crime to suggest that insecurity is a youth problem rather than a structural problem. The use of the association between paco and both young people and immigrants is an attempt by politicians to ameliorate the public's perception of insecurity and to free themselves from responsibility for the insecurity issue. It is easy for politicians to identify paco as the monster that turns young people into thieves and killers, and in turn direct the focus to paco and young people as the cause of the insecurity problem rather than problems like poverty or unemployment. Immigrants, too are a convenient scapegoat for politicians, as they are a group that is already vilified and has a history of being linked to crime.

*How Politicians Have Used the Association with Young People*

It is also clear that the media clearly associates paco with youth, which allows politicians to talk about paco- and the insecurity issue more generally- in terms of a youth issue, as opposed to a structural issue. This way, politicians can address the issue in a manner in which they are less responsible for the structural elements that led to the paco (and insecurity) issue. It is far easier for politicians to point to misdirected youth, who are using drugs and committing crimes, as the crux of the issue, than to point to issues like poverty, crime, and unemployment, which have clear policies for which politicians are or will be (in the case of challengers in an election) held responsible. It is convenient for politicians to talk about paco as a problem of the youth because it is easy for them to demonize it (very few people would disagree with the assertion that paco is a bad thing) and express how unfortunate it is that paco is victimizing the youth, without addressing any underlying social conditions or proposing solutions to these issues. The media has

cultivated a dramatic image of paco which brings to mind young, skeletal, haunted-looking paco addicts, and this also helps elicit an emotional response from people rather than a critical one. There is also a tendency on the part of adults to pity children and to not hold them responsible for their actions, which also deflects the focus from structural issues.

The past three elections in Argentina are prime examples in which politicians take advantage of the media's construction of the paco problem and its inflation of insecurity issues. In 2007, as he was running for mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri, when discussing solutions to security issues, highlighted the need to "work with groups at risk to prevent children from dropping out of school and falling into crime" and also to "work on addiction, because the issue of paco is very serious,"<sup>31</sup> clearly stating a relationship between paco, youth, and insecurity. In 2007, presidential challenger Francisco de Narvaez stated that, "Paco is pushing young people to desperation, violence, and crime,"<sup>32</sup> demonstrating the political use of paco as something around which everyone can gather and condemn, and the attribution of violence and crime committed by young people. The 2007 and 2011 presidential candidate Elisa Carrió is also well-known for her frequent discussion of the evils of paco in both of her campaigns. In 2007 she stated that, "the expansion and the production of paco condemns some 500,000 adolescents to marginalization and crime."<sup>33</sup> Carrió also claimed that it was necessary to give paco a larger role in the agenda of the presidential campaign, saying that the "one million young

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<sup>31</sup> Hector Gambini, "Seguridad: la prioridad de Macri es conseguir Policía y Justicia propias," *El Clarín*, June 25, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Hector Aizpeolea, "Por primera vez todos los candidatos hablan del problema," *El Clarín*, October 12, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> "Carrió presentó su plan de seguridad para la Provincia," *El Clarín*, October 13, 2007.

people between 15 and 24 that do not study and do not hold a job are vulnerable to the pandemic of drug-trafficking.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Carrió has used (potentially dubious) statistics to characterize paco as a youth-related insecurity issue.

*How Politicians Have Used the Association with Immigrants*

Politicians also capitalize on the media’s construction of the paco problem to suggest that insecurity is an issue of youth and immigrants (or their children) by scapegoating immigrants. The media has associated paco with poverty and young people not just in a general sense, but more specifically with the villas. The demographics of the villas differ from that of the city of Buenos Aires, proper, in that the majority of residents are immigrants. The association between the villas and immigrants is already strong: a report issued by the city of Buenos Aires found that 52% of foreigners living in Buenos Aires made their homes in the villas, with Paraguayans, then Bolivians, then Peruvians being the most numerous.<sup>35</sup> Thus, simply the use of “villa” in a crime article often implies “immigrants.” There is also already an association between immigrants and crime from when they were scapegoated in the 1990s.

The 2007 election marked the first time that paco appeared as a major part of the electoral campaign, and there was clear evidence of the scapegoating of immigrants. Then-mayoral-challenger Mauricio Macri pledged to “urbanize the villas,” a plan that included opening and illuminating streets.<sup>36</sup> While the initiative was not expressly identified as a way to combat crime, the illumination of streets and the initiative’s plan to

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<sup>34</sup> Rudolfo Lara, “Buenos Aires vota gobernador y define la elección presidencial,” *El Clarín*, October 28, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Gutman, “Macri habló de ‘inmigración descontrolada’ y recibió acusaciones de xenófobo,” *El Clarín*, December 10, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Fernández Quinti, “Macri: ‘Vamos a urbanizar las villas, abrir las calles e iluminar,’” *El Clarín*, June 17, 2007.

partner with the Agency for the Prevention of Crime indicates that this was at least a part of this plan's intent. At the same time, governor of Buenos Aires province, Daniel Scioli, emphasized the importance of public security for his government and his plan to "go to the salvage yards to find the criminals who steal cars, and attack the paco kitchens."<sup>37</sup> Later, in 2010, Macri directly attributed crime and drug-trafficking to immigration. Thus, both Macri and Scioli clearly identified the villas with paco and crime.

*In Conclusion: Why Politicians Use Paco*

Having seen how politicians use the media's association of paco with young people and the villas, it is important to explain why. First, Argentina faces outside pressure to appear accepting of immigrants. Cristina Kirchner asked the world's developed countries to avoid xenophobic practices at a European Union summit in 2010, and then, in September 2011, the United Nations Committee on Migrant Workers expressed concern about Argentina's "discriminatory attitudes" toward workers from African and fellow Latin American nations, and specifically regretted, "statements in the [Argentine] media which associate migrant workers with crime ... xenophobic statements from politicians and discriminatory actions towards migrant children in schools."<sup>38</sup> After direct public criticism, both the media and politicians face pressure to be implicit rather than explicit in their connection of immigrants to paco and crime.

Second, Argentina publicly takes pride in its progressive migration law, which guarantees immigrants access to public services and outlaws discrimination and deportation. Thus, the majority-immigrant communities in the villas are a convenient

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<sup>37</sup> Guido Bravlavsky, "Festejos y una obsesión del gobernador electo: la seguridad," *El Clarín*, October 29, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> "UN Concerned with Argentina's 'Discriminatory Attitudes' Towards Migrant Workers and Children," *MercoPress*, September 23, 2011.

scapegoat for politicians because it is a group for which they are less responsible- in that they are “others” and not citizens- than the rest of their constituency, but, at the same time, people cannot charge that politicians should combat the problem through deportation or immigration reform. It makes even more sense that immigrants can be easily used as a scapegoat when one considers that, though Argentines do not like to admit to any type of prejudice about people of other nationalities and/or races and see it as not “progressive,” there is still substantial prejudice against immigrants in Argentina, especially Paraguayans and Bolivians.

Thus, it is clear that politicians strongly associate both youth and immigrants with paco and crime, and poor children living in the villas who are immigrants or the children of immigrants are therefore blamed the most for the paco problem. By exploiting the media construction of the association between poor, immigrant children and crime, politicians suggest that insecurity is a youth issue and an immigrant issue instead of a structural one. This is a way of both attempting to absolve themselves of responsibility for the insecurity issue and to lessen the public’s fears. Because of the very negative and sensationalized image that the media has painted of paco, it is convenient for politicians to demonize it as a key insecurity issue because it is an easy target- no one is going to refute the notion that paco is negative. The political use of the youth is especially important, as young people tend to provide an easy way to deflect the focus away from structural issues. This emphasis on the youth is interesting, however, considering that, according to the World Health Organization, the rate of murders by youths in Argentina is one of the lowest in the region.<sup>39</sup> It also seems that the notion that a significant portion

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<sup>39</sup> Di Filippo, “Fear and Loathing.”

of crimes are carried out by minors is a myth, as official statistics for the Supreme Court of the province of Buenos Aires indicate that those under 18 were responsible for just 4% of total crimes committed in the first half of 2010.<sup>40</sup> It would be reasonable to suggest, then, that the strong association between children and crime (and paco especially) is a media creation that capitalizes on the fear of crime that the media has already invented. It has already been established that Argentine newspapers over-report crime, and that newspapers tend to focus on sensational and violent stories because those are what sell, and the association between youth and paco seems to be an example of this.

## **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that paco is closely linked to both poverty and crime in the Argentine media, but more specifically with the villas and the youth. Politicians exploit this association and use it their own political advantage by continuing to frame the paco issue- which is a way of addressing the larger security problem- in these terms, in an attempt to free themselves of responsibility. Paco emerged during a period of economic decline, during which perceptions of insecurity and xenophobia also appeared. My research indicated that paco was most closely associated in the media with young people and the villas, and from the literature on the media's ability to skew the news by reporting an issue in a certain way or with a certain frequency, it is reasonable to conclude that the Argentine media over-reports crime and sensationalizes the paco problem. Because crime rates are comparatively low and have steadily decreased over the

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<sup>40</sup> InfoSur Hoy, "Argentina: What Age Can Minors Be Held Criminally Responsible?" InfoSur Hoy, <http://en.mercopress.com/2011/09/23/un-concern-with-argentina-s-discriminatory-attitudes-towards-migrant-workers-and-children> (accessed December 8, 2011).

past decade, it is clear that the heightened sense of insecurity in Argentina is false. I have argued that the media is responsible for these elevated fears and for the association of paco with crime, which is in and of itself a media creation that exploits the very fears that the media has invented.

This paper also makes a valuable contribution to the communications literature with its new data, and the topic has important implications in Argentine politics. This paper demonstrates the failure of Argentine politicians to take responsibility for the nation's problems and their own failures in addressing them. This has important implications for governmental accountability in Argentina: how can citizens trust politicians when they are not fulfilling one of the most basic and urgent needs of their citizens- their personal safety- and are instead trying to shirk responsibility?

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