

# BOLETÍN

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*In this week's Boletín discover more about la narcocultura and its impact on society from a journalist and author who has been in the thick of it, reporting from Mexico City, for over twenty years. If your IRP is about Escobar or El Chapo you won't want to miss it!*

👋 **Welcome to Boletín**, an English-language newsletter covering historical, cultural and topical stories related to the A Level Spanish course. These newsletters accompany a student worksheet which can be downloaded [here](#). This week:

1. Introduction to issue 123 of Boletín
2. An interview with Ioan Grillo
3. Tier 2 & 3 vocabulary and grammar search for students
4. Boletín update and download links

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## 📌 Edition 123.

Pop-culture narco figures like Pablo Escobar and El Chapo still remain popular as Independent Research Project (IRP) titles on the A Level course. Escobar alone was mentioned in the 2018, 2019 and 2022 WJEC examiner reports.

## Boletín #123

*An interview with author and journalist Ioan Grillo.*

- *The impact of narco culture*
- *Challenges in reporting*
- *The reality of narco life*
- *Beyond the superficial*
- *The glorification of narcos*



In 2022 WJEC advised future candidates that:

*Care needs to be taken where candidates have used a TV series or film based on a real-life person or events as a basis for their topic. Firstly, what they reference in their presentation needs to have come from reading not viewing and, secondly, in the discussion, they need to be aware that what they have watched is an artistic representation of the historical facts and may contain sequences that were invented by the scriptwriters. Frida Kahlo, Che Guevarra and Pablo Escobar, for example, can be the basis for interesting research and discussion but only where real reading research has taken place.*

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This issue features an interview with Ioan Grillo. Ioan is an experienced journalist and a writer known for his books which demystify narco culture. He is based in Mexico City and has been covering Latin America since 2001 for news media such as Time Magazine, Esquire, CNN, Reuters, Al Jazeera, The Houston Chronicle, The Associated Press, GlobalPost, France 24 and The Sunday Telegraph. Ioan first appeared on my radar when he went on the Joe Rogan show a few years ago. I decided to email him out the blue to see if he'd be interested in helping me out with this issue and thankfully, he was more than cooperative.

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### **An interview with Ioan Grillo.**

**Can you provide a brief overview of what your job entails and how you ended up in Mexico City given your upbringing in England?**

*I first came to Mexico City with the dream of being a journalist. Not thinking so much about drug traffickers but thinking more about my illusions of guerilla warfare against military dictatorships of the 20th century and then found myself covering drug traffickers which then escalated in both importance and violence, I have been covering it ever since. You know, I'm a journalist not just a narco journalist and I cover various things, from immigration to elections to natural disasters. But I have been, a lot of my career, focused on drug traffickers, cartels, drugs, organised crime, and gangs. I've been pursuing these things, writing stories, writing books, making documentaries about these organisations, about the effects, about the violence, about wherever it leads.*

**How did you become involved in journalism and what inspired you to focus on the cartel/crime side of things?**

*I was inspired to focus on the cartel crimes side of things when I arrived in Mexico because I think I immediately saw, back in 2001 when I first started reporting, that this was a big story. It would get much bigger over the years, but also growing up in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s I was around a lot of people taking drugs, I knew people who died of drug heroin overdoses, and so it's kind of interesting to me this kind of linking of worlds. Of a place where there's a lot of drug consumption and places which produce and traffic drugs.*

## **In what ways do drug cartels impact the cultural/societal fabric of Latin American countries?**

*So, talking specifically about Mexico there is an enormous impact of drug traffickers and drug cartels on society. Something that people call narco culture or narcocultura which kind of encompasses elements of music, particularly the narco corridos (the drug ballads) but also elements of slang, of fashion, of attitude.*

*In some very big narco cities, an extreme example being Culiacán in Sinaloa, the narco culture is extremely present and you see it very visibly. In other places like say Mexico City it's a bit less visible but you still see it around. You might go to the grocery store and the guy there could be wearing a baseball cap with JGL (Joaquín Guzmán Loera) or something like that. You see this influence of people listening to the drug ballads (narco corridos) on the street and so forth. So, it's very present.*

## **How has cartel journalism led you to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics in the region?**

*As well as covering narcos, I'd like to just cover Latin America, to cover Mexico and to cover the extremely rich culture here. I've been here for 23 years. You soak it up and you see it everywhere and there's just so much fascinating culture, completely independently of the drug cartels. But the drug cartels are coming out of this society and of this culture. So, if you go to the countryside where a lot of drug traffickers come from, if you spend time in some of these big drug trafficking areas, then there's a very distinct country culture which is different from the city culture. Country culture is family orientated but a bit clannish with feuds and traditional ways of having parties and meals and so forth. You see all of that entwined within the cartels and within the drug traffickers.*

## **What challenges do journalists face when reporting on drug cartels, and how do these challenges influence the narratives presented to the public?**

*So, there's obviously the threat or violence. These are very violent organisations and there are many violent individuals. There's mass murder committed against each other, against civilians, against journalists. There's been more than 150 journalists murdered in Mexico in the time that I've been here. So there's always the pressure that reporting could end in violence. There's the pressure of what can be written, what names can be included and to that effect there's a certain form of censorship in the reporting. But a second challenge, I think, is trying to understand this information when you're dealing with this weird clandestine world which is very, very big and is present in many aspects of life including the economy and politics. But, at the same time it's kind of hidden. It's organised crime. It's mafia and it's more open than organised crime in other countries. A lot of these figures are quite visible and fairly easy to find in some senses. So, the challenge is to make sense of this information and to find the good information because there's a lot of bad information out there.*

## **How does the portrayal of drug cartel figures in popular media differ from the reality you've encountered in your reporting?**

*The TV series Narcos, which I think a lot of people will have seen, focuses a lot on the top 1%. In the same way that in the real world you have a top 1% of rich people and then a lot of*

people below that in the upper middle class, middle class, working class and then underclass you get the same in the Narco world. It's the same as in a legitimate company like Coca-Cola. You've got the very top people who earn lots of money and then there are mid-managers, and then lower people in the same company. So, really when you get into the narco world there's a big world of people. Some of them are living with a lot of money, as per the image of drug traffickers with money, but then some of them are low down and are getting paid quite low amounts of money to go out and commit murders, move drugs over the border, watch safe houses or watch after soldiers, all these many, many jobs that are involved in this industry.

The second thing is it's TV, so you've got good looking people and that kind of glamour. In the real world you've got, you know, real people. What you don't get from the TV series is the real pain and impact of the violence. Now, I don't know how popular a TV series will be showing this, it would be very harrowing, but the real nasty brutality and the effect there's been on regular society, regular civilians. People losing sons, fathers, brothers, husbands, wives, daughters because of this open violence. You can start to appreciate that in somewhere like the UK, when there's violence it's on a completely different level. You start to appreciate how important and good it is to live with that kind of security.

**Can you share a particularly challenging or memorable experience you've had as a journalist working in close proximity to cartels?**

There's been many. But one which I described in one of my books happened back in 2014 when I was covering an [uprising of vigilante squads](#) of gunmen fighting the cartel in Michoacán. Later on in the year a lot of these vigilantes became gangsters themselves or gangsters basically just pretending to be vigilantes.

So, I went out with a group of about 50 guys who were pretty heavily armed. They had AK47s, grenade launchers and even 50 calibre rifles. I was getting on OK with them, taking photographs and kind of joking about with them on an OK level and then one of these guys came out and said "you know he's DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), this guy's DEA. Why you letting him take your photograph? He's DEA pretending to be to be a journalist". It all changed very, very fast and I said "look, I'm not American, I'm English", I showed them my website and they chilled a bit, but this guy said to me "if I see you again, I'm going to put a bullet in your head. I'm gonna throw a grenade at you". I left after that but at the time, due to the adrenaline, I was more annoyed with myself that I'd missed out being with them when they went off and got into a big gun fight.

**What broader societal implications do you see arising from the glorification of figures like El Chapo or Pablo Escobar?**

It's a tough question and I want to write a further essay about the glorification of narcos. So, on one side there is an influence on Latin Americans who see this glorification of narcos through music and through so many things which is one of the factors that influences them to go into the drug trade.

At the same time, loads of people around the world watch movies about gangsters and don't go into the trade. It's the same here (in Mexico). A lot of these gangsters are influenced by American movies like Scarface or The Godfather. So, it is a tricky one in terms of the morality or the ethics of this thing. I do think you have to try and find ways of creating peace

*and reducing the violence here, but I don't know if waging a fight over culture is the way to do it even though it does have an impact. You have to change real things on the ground, give real opportunities to people, have real social work programmes and this kind of thing.*

**For students researching figures like El Chapo or Escobar, what advice do you have to ensure their projects go beyond superficial stereotypes?**

*I think you should try to find some good writers. Check out some of my books or reported pieces. I hope I try to go into some more context and depth. Try to read longer pieces and you know, maybe not just watch Narcos. Although, Narcos is a decent series which does have something in there as does the Mexican El Chapo series. Read up a bit more on the broader impacts on society.*

[Check out Ioan's book 'El Narco'](#)

**How can students delve deeper into the cultural and historical context surrounding these figures? What would you suggest they read or watch?**

*If I may, I think my first book El Narco is quite an easy read which does look into the culture, the history, the religion, into all of these things around the whole narco culture in Mexico. Some movies that I think are good or interesting are the Brazilian ones, they're a bit different. Both City of God and the Elite Squad films get quite a bit deeper into some of the history. Books like Killing Pablo are still quite good, but I think you can watch a lot of YouTube stuff too. A colleague of mine, [Luis Chaparro](#), has some good journalism as well on this.*

**Are there specific aspects of these figures' lives or the cartel-culture that students often overlook?**

*Well, I've talked to various drug traffickers and many people in this world, some quite high up and some quite low down. When you get to know them, you see it's a mixed bag. A lot of them have quite harsh, bad lives, beyond the glamour, quite painful lives. They know they're dealing with death and prison and violence and all these kind of things. Sometimes, on a personal level, trying to get to the humanity behind them is a bit harder from a distance when you're seeing these characters from afar. But they're kind of complete people, I guess with all of these aspects.*

**When studying notorious figures, how can students approach their research ethically, avoiding the glamorization of criminal activities?**

*Pues, creo que se debería ver el impacto profundo a la sociedad, hay que considerar la cuestión de las víctimas, aunque también entender que las personas impactadas por la violencia son los inocentes además de los propios victimarios involucrados en el mundo la criminalidad.*

**In your experience, have you observed any positive outcomes from studying these figures in a more nuanced manner?**

*Pues, es bueno buscar la verdad y tener un buen entendimiento sobre este fenómeno. Entonces investigarlo más profundamente, explorarlo desde todos los ángulos posibles, aunque es difícil ver realmente consecuencias positivas. Lo triste es que no hay solución fácil.*

**For students unfamiliar with narco-journalism, how would you describe its role in reporting on crime and culture?**

*Pues, si hablamos de narcoperiodismo hay diferentes cosas. Hay periodistas que vamos cubriendo mucho el narcotráfico para los periódicos, las revistas, escribimos libros o hacemos documentales. Creo que el narcoperiodismo es crucial para entender todo esto y ha sido un gran trabajo de muchos periodistas en México, en Colombia, en Centro y Sudamérica. Por toda la provincia, en los pueblitos, cubriendo, a veces con salarios muy bajos, la cuestión del narcotráfico. Aunque, hoy en día hay más narcoperiodismo realizado por youtuberos, aunque es un poco más amarillista y quizás es una cuestión de gente que está un poco más dentro del crimen que quieren contar sus historias.*


**What misconceptions do people commonly have about narco-journalism, and how can students approach it with an open mind?**

*La frase "narcoperiodismo" es algo nuevo. Hice una entrevista con Joe Rogan quien subió el video con el título de "narcoperiodismo". No sé si hay malentendidos, creo que hay que saber que es un trabajo duro y difícil, hay que saber los límites y tener cuidado con lo que se ve en YouTube, los youtuberos suben videos que a veces contienen mala información sin fuentes.*

**How can students broaden their understanding of South American culture beyond the narratives typically associated with drug cartels?**

*Hay mil cosas que van más allá de la droga y la delincuencia. La religión es muy interesante, aunque no soy religioso es interesante ver las figuras religiosas desde la virgen de Guadalupe, los santos populares, la cultura prehispánica, los aztecas, las mayas, los Olmecas, todos eso es super interesante. La música. Ya llevo veintiséis años aquí y recientemente empecé a entender la música ranchera y otros cantantes que muestran el alma de América Latina. La comida es algo super especial.*

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 **Tier 2 & 3 vocabulary.**

- Amarillista (adj) - *sensationalist*
- Profundo (adj) - *deep*
- Victimario (nms) - *killer, murderer, assassin*
- Cubrir (vb) - *to cover*
- Tener cuidado (vb) - *to take care/be careful*
- Fuente (nfs) - *the source*
- Más allá - *beyond*
- Alma (nms) - *the soul*

 **Grammar to look out for.**

1. Apocopated adjectives
  2. Use of *ser* and *estar*
  3. The use of *se* in the passive voice
  4. The preterite tense
  5. The imperfect tense
  6. The gerund
  7. Indirect object pronouns
  8. The present perfect
  9. Adjectival agreement
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