

Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales

ISSN 2955-8921 e-ISSN 2955-8778

Vol. 4, No. 3, Setiembre – Diciembre, 2025

Recibido: 30/07/25; Revisado: 12/09/25; Aceptado: 01/11/25; Publicado: 24/11/25

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57188/RICSO.2025.857>

Communicative Risk Governance, Collective Emotions, and Municipal Security Policies in Nezahualcóyotl

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Abstract

This article examines risk governance and the formation of collective emotions associated with public insecurity in Nezahualcóyotl during the period 2011-2012. Using a multidisciplinary approach that combines social work, public administration, and communication, it analyzes the mechanisms through which the municipal government, the print media, and citizens produce and circulate representations of crime. The research combines media content analysis, a review of local policies, victimization statistics, and semi-structured interviews with community actors. The results show that the interaction between official discourses, territorial narratives, and media framing constructs a system of emotional governance where fear, anxiety, and injustice become regulatory principles of public action. The study also identifies inconsistencies between the municipal risk communication strategy and citizen perceptions, which affects institutional legitimacy. It concludes that local governance requires the integration of emotional diagnoses, informational transparency, and stronger community participation to reduce the distance between institutions, the media, and citizens.

Keywords: Risk governance; public communication; collective emotions; municipal security; social work, media agenda.

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Gobernanza comunicativa del riesgo, emociones colectivas y políticas municipales de seguridad en Nezahualcóyotl

Resumen

Este artículo examina la gobernanza del riesgo y la formación de emociones colectivas asociadas con la inseguridad pública en Nezahualcóyotl durante el periodo 2011-2012. Utilizando un enfoque multidisciplinario que combina el trabajo social, la administración pública y la comunicación, analiza los mecanismos a través de los cuales el gobierno municipal, los medios impresos y los ciudadanos producen y difunden representaciones de la delincuencia. La investigación combina el análisis de contenidos mediáticos, una revisión de las políticas locales, estadísticas de victimización y entrevistas semiestructuradas con actores comunitarios. Los resultados muestran que la interacción entre los discursos oficiales, las narrativas territoriales y el encuadre mediático construye un sistema de gobernanza emocional en el que el miedo, la ansiedad y la injusticia se convierten en principios reguladores de la acción pública. El estudio también identifica inconsistencias entre la estrategia municipal de comunicación de riesgos y las percepciones de los ciudadanos, lo que afecta a la legitimidad institucional. Concluye que la gobernanza local requiere la integración de diagnósticos emocionales, transparencia informativa y una mayor participación de la comunidad para reducir la distancia entre las instituciones, los medios de comunicación y los ciudadanos.

Palabras clave: Gobernanza del riesgo; comunicación pública; emociones colectivas; seguridad municipal; trabajo social; agenda mediática.

Governança do risco comunicativo, emoções coletivas e políticas municipais de segurança em Nezahualcóyotl

Resumo

Este artigo examina a governança do risco e a formação de emoções coletivas associadas à insegurança pública em Nezahualcóyotl durante o período de 2011-2012. Utilizando uma abordagem multidisciplinar que combina serviço social, administração pública e comunicação, ele analisa os mecanismos através dos quais o governo municipal, a mídia impressa e os cidadãos produzem e circulam representações do crime. A pesquisa combina análise de conteúdo da mídia, uma revisão das políticas locais, estatísticas de vitimização e entrevistas semiestructuradas com atores da comunidade. Os resultados mostram que a interação entre discursos oficiais, narrativas territoriais e enquadramento da mídia constrói um sistema de governança emocional onde o medo, a ansiedade e a injustiça se tornam princípios reguladores da ação pública. O estudo também identifica inconsistências entre a estratégia municipal de comunicação de risco e as percepções dos cidadãos, o que afeta a legitimidade institucional. Conclui que a governança local requer a integração de diagnósticos emocionais, transparência informacional e maior

participação da comunidade para reduzir a distância entre instituições, mídia e cidadãos.

Palavras-chave: Governança de riscos; comunicação pública; emoções coletivas; segurança municipal; serviço social; agenda da mídia.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of public insecurity in Mexico has generated profound transformations not only in the exercise of security, but also in the ways in which the population interprets its environment, trusts institutions, and defines the legitimacy of the state (Bailey, 2014). In the last decade, multiple studies have shown that the social construction of risk is strongly influenced by the media, government policies, and the subjective experiences of citizens (Altheide, 2006; Beck, 2009; McCombs, 2004). In this context, municipalities are critical spaces for analyzing risk governance processes, given that they concentrate direct experiences of crime and the most immediate institutional responses (Vizcaya, 2015).

Nezahualcóyotl is an analytically relevant case due to its population density, its historical condition of urban marginalization, and its persistent exposure to common crimes (Forné, 2008). During the 2011-2012 period, the municipality faced significant pressure derived from both the national context of violence and the intense media coverage of local events. The narratives of risk produced by the print media strongly influenced the way residents interpreted crime, which in turn affected their perception of government effectiveness (Navarro, 2005). This interdependence between communication, politics, and emotions poses challenges for municipal governance.

Risk governance involves not only managing real threats, but also managing expectations, fears, and collective representations. In this sense, social work takes on a strategic role by operating at the intersection between institutions, communities, and media discourse (Von Sprecher & Boito, 2010; Torres-Carrillo, 2022). Its ability to interpret the emotional dimension of social conflict and to strengthen community ties makes it a key player in building public trust.

This article seeks to answer three central questions: first, how did the media frame insecurity in Nezahualcóyotl during the study period?; second, how did the municipal government attempt to manage risk communication and respond to citizen demands?; and third, how did these interactions influence collective emotions and institutional legitimacy?

2. Methodology

The methodological approach was mixed, combining documentary analysis, content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and statistical review (Faneite, 2023). Three newspapers representing different territorial levels were selected: *El Universal* as a national media outlet, *El Heraldo de Toluca* as a state media outlet, and *Punto Neza* as a strictly local media outlet (). All articles related to security and violence between July 2011 and December 2012 were collected.

Content analysis was performed following Krippendorff's guidelines (2013). A coding matrix was used to identify thematic frequencies, actors mentioned, institutional evaluations, risk metaphors, and emotions evoked. To complement these data, official municipal documents were reviewed, including government reports, communications on security programs, and police statistics.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal officials, journalists, and neighborhood leaders. Experiences of fear, institutional trust, interaction with the police, and perceptions of government communication were analyzed. Finally, victimization statistics from INEGI were used to contextualize the findings.

3. Resultados

The press analysis revealed three main patterns. First, the national press constructed a narrative of insecurity linked to the country's structural crisis, highlighting institutional weakness and the presence of criminal organizations. This narrative reinforced feelings of anger, frustration, and injustice among the population. Second, the state press emphasized administrative deficiencies in the State of Mexico, particularly lack of coordination between corporations and budgetary problems, which accentuated perceptions of mistrust and governmental disorder. Third, the local media outlet Punto Neza reproduced narratives that highlighted everyday crimes in great detail, generating feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and imminent danger.

A review of municipal documents showed that the local government attempted to position its security policy as a model of community policing. However, institutional communication failed to counteract the dominant media narrative. Municipal communications used technical and administrative language, lacking explicit recognition of citizens' emotions, which reduced their persuasive effectiveness.

The interviews indicated that residents interpret insecurity less on the basis of actual data and more through accounts from neighbors, informal social networks, and local news. The perception of imminent risk acts as an emotional regulator that determines daily behaviors, mobility schedules, and community relationships. The interviewees agreed that official communication is often late, lacks credibility, or minimizes problems, which amplifies the distance between citizens and institutions.

This table corresponds to the first part of the results section, where three patterns of press framing were identified. It includes representative excerpts from key informants who commented on the influence of each media level on public perceptions.

Table 1. Comparative framing of insecurity across media levels and emotional effects

Media level	Dominant framing	Emotional impact on the population	Excerpts from key informants
National press	Structural crisis of the country, institutional weakness, organized crime as a national threat	Anger, frustration, sense of national injustice	One journalist stated that people in Nezahualc6yotl react strongly to national news because they believe these events confirm that the of government has lost control. A community leader added that national reports make residents feel abandoned by federal authorities.
State press	Administrative deficiencies in the State of Mexico, lack of coordination between police agencies, budgetary limitations	Distrust, perception of governmental disorder	A municipal official commented that when state newspapers highlight administrative failures, residents interpret this as evidence of political negligence. A neighborhood representative explained that these narratives reinforce the belief that the state government does not prioritize their municipality.
Local press (Punto Neza)	Detailed accounts of everyday crimes, emphasis on proximity and recurrence incidents	Anxiety, vulnerability, and imminent of danger	A resident interviewed said that local news makes her feel unsafe even during daytime because stories describe crimes on streets she walks daily. A social worker noted that constant exposure to local violence creates a sense of permanent alert.

As shown in Table 1, the three media levels produced distinct emotional effects linked to the framing of insecurity, which helps explain variations in residents' attitudes toward institutions and everyday mobility patterns.

This table corresponds to the section discussing the mismatch between municipal communication and citizen perception. It incorporates excerpts from interviews illustrating why official communication failed to counter the dominant media narrative.

Table 2. Assessment of municipal communication strategies and citizen responses

Municipal strategy	Intended purpose	Observed limitations	Excerpts from key informants
Police proximity model described in official reports	Strengthen trust through community-based policing and territorial presence	Limited visibility of officers, inconsistency in patrol routes, lack of citizen engagement	A local shop owner stated that the police appear only after incidents occur, which contradicts the discourse of proximity. Another interviewee mentioned that patrols pass quickly and do not interact with residents.
Technical and administrative language in official statements	Present security policy as professional and evidence based	Failure to acknowledge emotional realities residents; perception of detachment	A municipal worker to admitted that official statements tend to minimize local fear. A resident explained that the technical language feels distant and does not speak to their daily experiences of danger.
Reactive communication after violent events	Contain public concern and maintain institutional legitimacy	Late response and lack of contextual explanation intensify distrust	A journalist expressed that official statements are often released long after rumors circulate in neighborhoods. A community leader noted that people rely on friends and social networks long before trusting municipal information.

As shown in Table 2, the communication strategies implemented by the municipal government were insufficient to counterbalance the emotional and narrative force of local media coverage.

This table corresponds to the final segment of the results section, where interviews describe how residents construct insecurity through interpersonal networks, rumors, and local media exposure.

Table 3. Citizen interpretive mechanisms, emotional regulation, and institutional trust

Mechanism of interpretation	Description	Emotional and behavioral consequences	Excerpts from key informants
Narratives from neighbors, family and community networks	Information spreads through close social ties, often based on partial or exaggerated accounts	Heightened fear, restrictions on daily routines, reduction of evening activities	A resident stated that news from neighbors feels more real than official data because they trust people they know. Another interviewee mentioned that she avoids going out after sunset due to stories shared in her street.
Informal communication in digital networks	Use of WhatsApp groups and neighborhood Facebook pages to circulate warnings or rumors	Amplification of danger perception, crime saturation, or increased vigilance	A social worker explained that WhatsApp groups constantly send alerts, some unverified, creating a permanent state of alarm. A youth interviewed said that neighborhood posts often exaggerate events, but people still react with fear.
Combined influence of local news and personal stories	Residents interpret crimes through both media narratives and lived experiences	Deep distrust of institutions, skepticism toward official messages	A retired resident claimed that official reports never match what people see on the streets. Another interviewee argued that the government only communicates good news on , while the neighborhood sees the opposite.

As Table 3 demonstrates, citizens interpret insecurity through interconnected personal, digital, and media networks, which collectively reinforce emotions of proximity to danger and weaken municipal credibility.

4. Discussion

The results confirm that security governance in Nezahualcóyotl cannot be understood solely on the basis of crime indicators, but requires analysis of the circulation of narratives and collective emotions. The media construction of insecurity has direct effects on institutional trust, preventive behaviors, and citizen evaluation of the government. According to Beck (2009), contemporary societies are characterized by the omnipresence of risk, which becomes a structural component of everyday life and a political resource (Chávarro, 2018). In this sense, risk communication becomes a critical dimension of government action.

The study shows that the municipality's strategy did not incorporate emotional diagnoses and, therefore, failed to connect with the subjective experiences of residents. Previous research has shown that effective public communication in contexts of insecurity requires recognizing the emotions of fear, vulnerability, and mistrust in order to generate credibility and citizen participation (Malone, 2010; Altheide, 2006). By failing to do so, the local government allowed the local press to define the dominant structure of meaning, which amplified the emotional cycle already described in previous studies.

From a social work perspective, the notion of emotional governance is particularly relevant. Professionals in this discipline are in a privileged position to identify collective affections, mediate them, and contribute to security policies that integrate communicative, social, and subjective dimensions (Gray & Webb, 2020). The interdisciplinary perspective of social work allows for the opening of channels of community participation and the strengthening of neighborhood cohesion as a preventive strategy (Cisterna & Moreno, 2024).

5. Conclusion

Security governance in Nezahualcóyotl during 2011-2012 was marked by tensions between official discourse, media narratives, and citizen experiences. The press played a central role in the emotional construction of risk, while government communication failed to counteract this influence. Citizens experienced a cycle of emotions characterized by anxiety, injustice, and institutional mistrust, which affected the legitimacy of the municipal government.

Evidence indicates that effective local governance requires integrating media content analysis, emotional diagnostics, and participatory strategies. Social work, with its community focus and analytical capacity, can play a fundamental role in constructing more humane, transparent, and emotionally informed security policies. Reconfiguring the relationship between the media, institutions, and citizens is an essential requirement for improving perceptions of security and strengthening public trust.

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Cómo citar:

Mejía Rubio, S., Carreón Guillén, J. & Quiroz Campas, C. (2025). Communicative Risk Governance, Collective Emotions, and Municipal Security Policies in Nezahualcóyotl. *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales*, 4(3), e857. <https://doi.org/10.57188/RICSO.2025.857>