

Audio of this segment available at
http://www.rightsaction.org/video/elestor/As_It_Happens_March_15_2007.mp3

C. David Johnson: When it comes to online video-sharing website YouTube, the line between reality and fiction can get a little blurry. Real, candid videos share space with the occasional hoax, like "Lonelygirl15" or "Bridezilla".

Earlier this year, a Canadian graduate student named Steven Schnoor posted a nine-and-a-half minute documentary on YouTube. It shows the forcible eviction of indigenous peasants from their land, in the region of El Estor, Guatemala. So far, it's been viewed by nearly twenty-five thousand people.

But the documentary has not received unanimous praise. In fact, Mr. Schnoor says, his work is being unfairly discredited — by none other than Canada's ambassador to Guatemala, Kenneth Cook.

We reached Mr. Schnoor in Montreal.

Helen Mann: Hello Steven Schnoor.

Steven Schnoor: Hello Helen.

HM: Tell me about the footage in your documentary and how you obtained it.

SS: The footage was shot over the span of January 8th and 9th of this year in eastern Guatemala, in the region of El Estor. There were some illegal evictions that took place on behalf a mining company owned by a Canadian mining company called Skye Resources out of Vancouver. These evictions were known in advance and I headed there to the region with a Canadian journalist and a Mexican photographer to document what would happen.

HM: You say illegal evictions. At the same time you show in that footage the prosecutor reading the eviction order. Why are they illegal?

SS: Well, one of the things you don't see in that footage is the prosecutor is reading a property number on that eviction notice. That property number refers to a different piece of land than where they're actually standing. This was pointed out to him by members of the community: they pulled out maps, they indicated that the property number he read on his eviction notice does not correspond to the land they were on. It didn't matter. The eviction carried out regardless. That same eviction order was used in all five communities that were evicted over those two days.

HM: Let's talk about Ambassador Cook's claims. He suggests that some of the content in your video is false, starting with the photographs that are included in that. What do you say to that?

SS: It's ridiculous. All of those photographs were shot by Mexican photographer James Rodriguez on the evictions of the 8th and 9th of January of this year. The ambassador claims that one of the photos in question — it has an old man with his head in his hand, he's in despair, he's surrounded by police — the ambassador claims this is such an old photo, it goes back to the civil war, he's seen it many, many times before. It's such a ridiculous claim. I can show him the negatives. It's just so ridiculous.

HM: The other claim he makes involves the Mayan woman who is at the centre of this. She's very vocal in going after the authorities who are tearing down those homes. I gather he says she's an actress.

SS: Apparently he's claiming that she's an actress whom I paid and I set up the whole thing.

HM: So who is that woman? She is a resident of that community?

SS: She had been living there since September as with the other people that you see in that video. She was living in that structure that had been set up — that was her home since September of last year, and she's watching it being dismantled.

HM: Now, how can you prove that the ambassador's supposed allegations are false? Are you making efforts to do that?

SS: I have. I mean, he's claiming that she's an actress whom I paid and I set up the video as a work of propaganda. I can assure you that I did not pay her, I did not set it up; I was in the field, I captured what had happened. Now if he's going to change and if he's going to claim that she is an actress whom somebody else paid — I mean, I've asked him for his proof for these statements — where is he getting this information from? Why does he think that? And I have not heard back.

HM: Why do you think Ambassador Cook would want to discredit your work in this way?

SS: I can only see this as an apparent effort to defend the company's position and discredit, again, what are very long-standing land claims, development and human rights needs of these very impoverished local indigenous Mayan Q'eqchi' peoples. And it's also not the first time that the embassy in Guatemala City has spread misinformation about people who are working in ways that may problematize the efforts of Canadian mining companies. I have received misinformation about other people who are working in the region — about Guatemalan environmentalists. I was told that Guatemalan environmentalists manipulate the poor, illiterate campesinos into thinking that mining will give them AIDS. Well this is not true. If you speak to the environmentalists in question, no one has ever said that.

HM: What are the implications to the community down there of these claims he's making?

SS: Look, the situation down there is very bad. It's very tense, and this only makes things worse. This is a very dangerous game to play. From what I understand, he had phoned the bishop in the region — the head of the diocese where the evictions took place to

convince him, again, that I had paid the woman, that she's an actress, and that I had used old photographs, and so on and so forth. For all I know, the ambassador is trying to sway the head of the Catholic Church on-side, to convince him that the voices that are in opposition to the evictions are illegitimate and to discredit them, and if the ambassador's claims get some clout in the region, you know, this is only going to complicate matters further. It's only going to take an already tense situation, a community that is already divided and make matters much, much worse.

HM: You've said that these allegations he's making are part of a pattern — that this kind of thing has been done before by the embassy down there. Where does Foreign Affairs play in all this, as far as you're concerned? Have you heard anything from them? Have you contacted them?

SS: I've contacted Peter MacKay — I left messages, I haven't heard back. I can only assume that the ambassador is representing Foreign Affairs' position, which is going to defend the interests of Canadian mining companies in the region and this is one way of doing it. The mining company claims that the evictions were peaceful, the forces that carried them out were unarmed — I mean, this is totally ridiculous, and so when people like myself bring footage forth that suggests something to the contrary, the embassy is now up and defending the companies and trying to discredit people like myself and the communities. To me, this is a very big problem — it's not just about me and one particular video. This is Foreign Affairs' position of defending the interests of mining capital in the region, at the expense of, in this case, entire communities.

HM: Now, you mentioned contacting, or trying to contact Mr. MacKay. There's also a letter been sent to him by a number of non-governmental organizations who are supporting your work. What are those folks seeking?

SS: Immediately, an apology, a retraction of these comments, an explanation as to why these comments would be made — how the highest ranking representative of the Canadian government in Guatemala would make such egregious statements. And then beyond that, an inquiry into the larger context, in terms of what type of policy position these comments represent.

HM: Before I let you go I want to ask you one more thing. What struck me was while all this activity was happening, while these people were having their homes dismantled, there was a huge police presence in the background. It was fairly peaceful; you were filming this situation. What did the authorities make of you filming this? Did they try to stop you?

SS: They didn't try to stop me. It was a tense situation. You know, I was being really discrete with my camera, I wasn't poking it in people's faces. Some of the footage you'll see when I do pan across certain cops they immediately dart their heads down. And I got out of there pretty quickly — I didn't stick around. There was some intimidation of journalists who were there and I just happened to sort of evade it to that moment and then I shot my footage and I left. But there are evictions in Guatemala quite often. An eviction a couple years ago at a finca — a plantation — in another part of the country — you know, ten people were killed, so what you see in this video is relatively — unfortunately relatively tame for Guatemala.

HM: One more thing: I just want to ask you as well about the images towards the end of the video which show a community nearby where the homes are actually burned to the ground. When were those photographs shot and who were they shot by?

SS: Shot by Mexican photographer James Rodriguez on January 9th of this year — 2007. They were shot in a nearby community called Barrio La Revolución. That's quite close-by from the community where you see the video footage. Those were company employees you see who were paid approximately \$8 US per day to burn down people's homes. You also see the police standing by doing nothing while the homes are burning. Of course the company claims they didn't pay the employees, they don't know who the workers are, they don't know who's burning down people's homes, but that's what you see.

HM: Mr. Schnoor, thanks for talking with us.

SS: Thank you very much.

HM: Alright, goodbye.

SS: Goodbye.

CDJ: In Montreal, that's citizen-journalist and PhD candidate Steven Schnoor. His documentary of police evictions in Guatemala is still available for viewing on YouTube. Shortly after Mr. Schnoor's video was posted on YouTube, Canada's ambassador to Guatemala, Kenneth Cook, met with members of the Maritimes-Guatemala "Breaking the Silence" Network. Kathryn Anderson is one of them. We reached her at her home in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia.

HM: Hello Ms. Anderson.

Kathryn Anderson: Yes.

HM: Tell me about your meeting with Ambassador Cook. What was the purpose for you getting together with him?

KA: The purpose of our meeting was to discuss with the ambassador the mining situation with Canadian companies in Guatemala.

HM: Was anyone at the meeting with you?

KA: Well there were five of us — five members of the Breaking the Silence Network.

HM: And what did Ambassador Cook say about the documentary?

KA: Well what he suggested to us was that a photo was used of a man that was in fact a photo that had been around for many years and had been used, and that he had seen it in other places. And he also suggested that a woman had been paid to act in the YouTube video.

HM: And you say he suggested. Did he say it directly?

KA: He said it directly, yes.

HM: How did you react?

KA: Well at that time we were just listening, and we did not push it any further. We simply heard that as information from him.

HM: Did he provide any context for his comments? Did he say anything else?

KA: No, other than suggesting that the YouTube video might be lacking in credibility.

HM: And nobody asked any further questions or anything of him with regard to that?

KA: No, because we were just listening at that point.

HM: What do you think of those comments now?

KA: Well, you know we had that meeting that afternoon, and then by chance he (Steven) came along to a supper that we had planned that evening with another person and so of course we asked him to clarify the comments. Our conversation in general with the ambassador was agreed on as off-the-record, but I think it was normal for us to ask for a clarification, which we did, and immediately were satisfied with Steven's response that everything in the video was indeed correct and did happen at the evictions of people from INCO/Skye Resources land. And the next day I happened to be with him when he called another journalist, Dawn Paley from Vancouver, to confirm that she indeed had similar photos and was willing to confirm that, and that happened, and so I was very satisfied, as I think we all were, that the allegations of the ambassador were not true.

HM: Ms. Anderson, thank you very much for telling us about it.

KA: Ok, that's fine. Thank you.

HM: Alright, goodbye.

KA: Bye.

CDJ: Kathryn Anderson is in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia. We called Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs repeatedly with a request for an interview on the situation. The department has promised to get back to us.

Skye Resources refused to comment beyond the two press releases that outline the company's take on the matter. Both press releases confirm that the Guatemalan National Police did remove people from the land, and in one, the company's CEO Ian Austin expressed his gratitude towards the Guatemalan government for upholding Skye's right to the land.