



Televisa's Danielle Dithurbide reporting from the Enrique Rébsamen School in southern Mexico City.

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In the Media, Tragedy. On the Social Networks, Confusion and Solidarity

The best remembered incident of the September 19, 2017 earthquake was fake news: the report that a little girl was alive under the rubble of the Rébsamen School. This report caught the imagination of and inspired hope in millions of people, concentrated media interest, and for a couple of days symbolized the efforts by thousands of rescue workers at that site and many others in Mexico City.

Amidst the confusion, that news item was souped up with details that made it plausible. One rescue worker swore he had heard her; another, using a heat sensor, thought he found indications that she was moving. Someone else said the little girl was named Frida, and then

someone else said her full first name was Frida Sofía. Dozens of media outlets, many with reporters posted outside the collapsed school, disseminated these details. The Televisa conglomerate stationed one of its reporters there 24/7 and, since rescue attempts were broadcast there live and nationwide, many tv viewers followed the dramatic event on that company's stations.

When two days later, the heads of the Ministry of the Navy coordinating rescue efforts at the Rébsamen School confirmed that the little girl did not exist and that the stories broadcast in the media were due to a chain of mistakes, many people felt tricked and expressed their irritation at Televisa and the government on the social networks. Even today, some people think that the story of "Frida Sofía" was a lie cooked up to entertain tv viewers; but the believers in this extravagant conspiracy do not explain why a media outlet would want to invent

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that story when victims were trapped in the rubble city-wide and even in the Rébsamen School itself. Nineteen children and seven adults perished in that school alone.

After the earthquakes, the social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and Messenger, were means for linking up solidarity, but also for spreading rumors. They served as information sources for conventional media and linked up the citizenry. Telephone lines were overloaded and the power outages in the first few hours—or even days in some places—after the quake kept thousands of people isolated in certain parts of the city. With the September 19 quake, more than 1 800 cellular phone towers were temporarily out of order because the power was out. This made transmitting information and requests for help difficult in the critical minutes after the disaster in several areas.¹

Despite this, calls to remove debris or take food and utensils to collapse sites did spread on line.² Announcements amidst the urban chaos (“Don’t clog the roads by using your car,” “Give ambulances the right of way”) alternated with messages inviting people to amass donations. Some cybernauts published lists of buildings that had been damaged and of shelters. The www.desaparecidos-sismo.mx website listed people whose whereabouts were unknown. Beginning on Wednesday, September 20, Google Maps had already identified places that needed help both in Mexico City and in states like Morelos, Puebla, Mexico, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, where the quake affected the population just as much if not more than in the nation’s capital. The cellular app Waze not only displayed more efficient routes for getting around but also donation centers, shelters, and high-risk areas.

Created on Tuesday the 19th, the Twitter account @comoayudarmx (meaning @howtohelpmexico) had 17 100 followers and acted as a bulletin board to bring together supply and demand. @Brigadas19S and @juntosismocdmx (meaning @togetherearthquakemexicocity), created in the afternoon of September 20, had 1 700 and 8 500 followers, respectively, and linked up hundreds of people who wanted to participate in rescue efforts. With computer technology back-up from Google, the creators of www.salvatucausa.mx (translated as www.saveyourhouse.mx) designed a digital tool to connect architects and engineers, even some living abroad, who did a first damage assessment based on photographs sent by the interested parties.

Unfortunately, however, from the first moments after the earthquake, fake rumors that made solidarity more

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cumbersome also began circulating. After the September 7 quakes that particularly affected the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, WhatsApp spread a message that went viral, falsely quoting specialists in Mexico and the United States as saying that a “mega-quake” was coming soon in both countries. When the September 19 quake happened, that message was revived, as was another that quoted a supposed United Nations warning. It is impossible to know how many people believed these tales. The same social media immediately followed them with messages clarifying that no one can predict an earthquake.³

Confusion is the most fertile breeding ground for disinformation. When the facts are not sufficiently clear or when society cannot identify authorized, trustworthy spokespersons in a crisis, fake news flourishes. Fear, then, is the most vigorous detonator of obfuscation. When at risk, people are more prone to believe unproven statements or believe those who simply replicate or improvise statements without accredited sources.

On Wednesday, September 20, for example, a story came out that said that the buildings at 300 Insurgentes Avenue and the Condesa Plaza were on the point of collapse. Although Mexico City authorities immediately clarified that, at least until that moment, no one had discovered any structural damage in either building, some media outlets’ online portals and dozens of Twitter accounts continued to present the fake rumor as fact. The image of a supposed break in the second story of southern Mexico City’s Periférico outer beltway also circulated on line, but the photo was a fake. Both the company that manages that freeway and the Mexico City government denied that any damage existed there. On September 21, another rumor spread: that a seismic alert test (the system of sirens all over the city that sound an alert every time an earthquake takes place on the coasts of Guerrero and Oaxaca) was scheduled. This rumor stirred up a lot of fear because on September 19, a test had been made two hours before the earthquake, on the thirty-second anniversary of the 1985 quake.

In the face of the fake news, the media —by no means exempt from mistakes themselves— and the authorities reacted with common sense, explaining that people should not believe everything they heard.

Starting on Tuesday, September 19 at 5:11 p.m., then-Minister of the Interior Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong (@osoriochong) urged the population to “Please not create or believe rumors. Be alert for information from official accounts and the authorities.” Less than two hours later, the Ministry of the Interior Twitter account, @SEGOB-mx, tweeted, “In an emergency situation, analyze and verify the information you consume; refrain from spreading rumors. Stay calm and remember that #PrevenirEsVivir [Prevention Means Life].” These kinds of clarifications were pertinent, but insufficient. The extremely suspicious public could well suppose that if the government was talking about rumors, it was because it was trying to hide serious facts. These speculations never had any basis, but they also spread like wildfire on the digital social media.

In addition to wrong or fake information about the disaster areas, there was confusion about the support needed. In this kind of a scenario, the intervention of citizens without any explicit party affiliation made it possible to gather donations and circulate information. On Wednesday, September 20, a group called @Verificado19s (meaning “September 19, Verified”) began operating, but its Twitter account, which five months later was still active and had 37 000 followers, dates from Saturday the 23rd. The promoters of this citizens’ coalition designed an online map showing the disaster sites in Mexico City and the kind of material and human support each one required. According to one participant, they created a network of cyclists and motorcyclists who transported “tools, material, food, medication, and, in some cases, specialists, to the disaster areas, where the monitors confirmed that the needs were being met.”⁴

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Furthermore they organized a mechanism to check the veracity of many news items circulating on the Internet. The rule was to only disseminate the reports that passed the verifiers’ tests. “A network of volunteers picked up the needs in real time in online chats with monitors in the field who had verified information; others picked up the requirements when information on Twitter and other chats from other neighborhood networks created after the earthquake needed verifying; in that case, a #Verificado19s monitor would be sent to corroborate the report, since all the information had to be verified.”⁵

The rule for carrying out this work was very simple: “Something is verified when it meets one of two requirements: 1) you saw it with your own eyes; or, 2) at least two different people who saw it with their own eyes told you. Any other information is *not verified*.”⁶

#Verificado19s was organized after a call went out by the Horizontal Cultural Center, a collective interested in information and discussion about public issues. Members of the following social organizations and companies participated: Ahora, Artículo 19, Ayuda Óptima, Bicitekas, CartoCrítica, Cítrico Gráfico, Centro Pro de Derechos Humanos, Cencos, Codeando México, Cultura Colectiva, Data Cívica, Datank.ai, Democracia Deliberada, Devf, Fósforo, Horizontal, La Lonja MX, McKinsey, OPI, Oxfam, Revista Paradigmas, R3D, Serapaz, Social TIC, The Data Pub, Tú Constituyente, and Vice. They also had technical support from Google México.⁷

#Verificado19s became the seal for trustworthy information about the earthquake. More than 500 people on the street and in offices processed more than 20 000 pieces of information in the 10 days after the quake, according to the collective. Given the local and federal governments’ difficulties in informing in a trustworthy, effective way, these 500 citizens contributed to organizing solidarity and dispelling uncertainty about what was going on and what was needed after the tragedy.

In addition, the coalition built —although less successfully— a network for aiding the other places in Mexico affected by the quakes. Ten days later, #Verificado19s coordinators who had dealt with emergencies organized and presented a series of open questions —actually, open discrepancies— about the performance of those in power vis-à-vis the earthquake. Among other questions, they asked, “Why were all levels of government incapable of establishing in real time and truthfully a logistical network

to deal with supply, storage, and distribution of tools, materials, equipment, medication, food, labor, and specialists in areas at risk and with collapses, as well as to facilitate the work of rescue teams?” “Why did the citizenry once again do the work of the civilian authorities and the armed forces?” “Why was there not better communication with families in terms of empathy, dignity, and respect?” “Why was the government incapable of making public a list of the missing in a centralized, verified, transparent, and timely fashion?” “Ten days after the earthquake, why did the government not yet know and make public the exact number of people left homeless by the quake?”⁸

#Verificado19s’s reproaches have never been explicitly answered. The experience of this earthquake indicates that neither the federal nor the city governments had sufficient protocols in place to deal with an emergency of such magnitude. The authorities made mistakes in their response, but it was swift and organized, particularly with regard to rescuing victims and the first tasks to support those left homeless. In contrast with the other September 19, in 1985, when an 8.1-magnitude quake devastated the central part of Mexico City and for hours the government was absent, on this occasion, the authorities reacted immediately. However, communication with the public faced at least six problems:

1. The 2017 earthquake affected very diverse parts of the city: the North, in the Lindavista neighborhood, and the extreme South, in Xochimilco and Tláhuac, and of course, neighborhoods like the Condesa, Roma, and Del Valle, near downtown. Rescue efforts that were soon headed up by Army and Navy personnel were carried out in different, far-flung areas.
2. The initial effects made coordination and communication difficult among different areas of government. Failed telephone lines and power outages in large swathes of the city also affected the authorities.
3. Official information got lost in the ocean of messages that inundated the social media. Scanty and dispersed, the authorities’ messages had insufficient influence, particularly in the hours and days immediately after the quake.
4. Official sources suffer from a lack of credibility among the active parts of society, notably mistrustful of the authorities. Many people prefer to believe the most alarmist stories. When government spokes-

persons exist to clarify them, the suspicion addicts suppose that, if the government is saying a certain event did not happen, it is because it wants to hide something.

5. The digital social media, with their universal access and the ability to propagate ideas instantaneously, are fertile ground for disseminating rumors. But they also serve to clarify fake news, as happened thanks to the work of citizens to verify the reports about the quake.
6. Whether as a result of a deliberate decision, or pressured by the circumstances, the authorities did not interfere with the spontaneous organization of thousands of citizens who collaborated to rescue victims, to gather donations, and carry out all manner of support. It was difficult, but also undesirable, to centralize these activities; and for that reason it was not easy to gather information about them all.

The complaints of #Verificado19s and the many lessons about this earthquake will have to be weighed so that Mexico City can intelligently prepare with sufficient resources for the inevitable —and perhaps worse— future earthquakes. Any preparations must take into account the willingness of the citizenry to act in solidarity, as well as the capability the digital social media can have for coordination and clarification. ■■■

Notes

- 1 Comisión para la Reconstrucción y Transformación de la CDMX, “Programa para la reconstrucción de la CDMX,” January 2018, p. 54, <http://www.reconstruccion.cdmx.gob.mx/storage/app/uploads/public/5a5/951/9f3/5a59519f3f047556008364.pdf>.
- 2 See my article, “El sismo en las redes,” *La crónica*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2017/1048058.html>.
- 3 Among other notices countering this old rumor, an article originally published on April 19, 2016 by the UNAM National Seismological System (SSN) circulated again: “Los terremotos no se pueden predecir: SSN,” http://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2016_251.html. [Editor’s Note.]
- 4 Alberto Serdán, “Lo que vi en #Verificado19s,” *Animal político*, September 27, 2017, <http://www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-el-da-to-checkado/2017/09/27/lo-vi-verificado19s/>.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Tweet on the @Verificado19s account, <https://twitter.com/verificado19s?lang=es>.
- 7 “¿Quiénes somos?” <http://www.verificado19s.org/#nosotros>.
- 8 “#Verificado19s,” *Horizontal*, <https://horizontal.mx/verificado19s/>.