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Balance Sheet of Post-Quake Face-to-Face and Online Social Mobilization

At 11 a.m. on September 19, 2017, the seismic alert siren sounded at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and we all participated in the annual test to commemorate the September 19, 1985 earthquake. After embellishing the civic exercise with the narratives and anecdotes of those of us who had lived through the event 32 years prior, and at least two hours after going back to work, the earth again shook furiously. The new earthquake once again brought us face to face with the event that has been linked historically to the resurgence of solidarity and citizens' movements that gave rise to Mexico's late-twentieth-century electoral reforms. Except that this time, something new was added, something indispensable for social interaction and communication at that moment and the days and weeks following: the communications media and, in particular, the so-called social media. The latter were key for organizing —and disorganizing— the flow of aid, requests for help that in a matter of minutes became insufficient, as well as to inform and misinform about what was happening. The virtual networks also fed solidarity and trust among people who could not help each other face-to-face, but without whom it would not have been possible to maintain support networks or contact rescue workers in the most direct way possible.

So, yes, solidarity was built, but rumors and lies were also exacerbated: from what seemed like innocent, but unverified, messages propagating rumors, which led to citizens' initiatives like #Verificado19s, to plays dubbed as Machiavellian propaganda involving a non-existent little girl named "Frida Sofía" and a rescue dog oddly also named Frida, both mentioned by representatives of the Navy and the mainstream media.

https://horizontal.mx/a-un-mes-de-verificado19s/

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It must be said that, in contrast with the 1985 earthquakes, in Mexico City, both the federal and local governments seem to have reacted relatively promptly and in accordance with their agendas for territorial and population control. On the other hand, although the spontaneous help by civil society was key in the first hours of the tragedy, it is also true that, as the days passed, most of the donations collected had to be turned over to pro-government, military, or civilian groups to handle. In some cases, the population resisted that, and there were even sites where local residents organized to prevent it. However, in general, the impression that several of us who tried to distribute aid directly in the weeks after the quake was that proceeding that way, particularly in places far from the urban area and even in other states, implied growing

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risks and obstacles. The circumstances, then, pushed us to take that aid to the "authorized" collection centers, where those in charge then distributed it.

In contrast to these acts of solidarity, many large stores benefited from the tragedy: the public flooded their aisles, shooting sales up spectacularly. In the media, entertainers praised people's attitudes and asked them to take everything from the most obvious, like water and clothing, to the most complicated, like cement crushers, to the collection centers. So, lines of people at the cash registers, whether to purchase their own emergency rations or to donate to earthquake victims, were a common sight at that time.

Aid from other parts of the country and from abroad was unprecedented. For example, items were purchased on line to be delivered in Mexico; and people send donations on line to personal accounts to be used to purchase whatever was needed at the moment.

At the UNAM, donations at the University Olympic Stadium reached epic proportions: hundreds of young students, professors, and employees built and organized a collection center capable of filling tractor-trailers in minutes, which then went mainly to the most inaccessible areas of the southern part of Mexico City and the state of Morelos. Organized in brigades, those working in the stadium quickly unloaded the donations from cars and pick-up trucks, classified them, trained and equipped volunteers, and set up a logistical plan to make sure the aid went where it was needed. When this donation center was later demobilized, it was due to strange, controversial circumstances that sparked speculation and explanations reported on by the press. The important thing is that women and men working and studying in the university made their contribution to the heroic efforts of those days.

Society to the Rescue . . . of Itself

Women played a fundamental role, not only in the tasks traditionally —and conservatively— assigned to them, like caring for the injured and cooking, but also in other areas, like clearing rubble or searching for people trapped under it. This could be seen all over the city, but it was particularly noteworthy in a building at the corner of Bolívar and Chimalpopoca, reminding us of the stories from 1985: women seamstresses being over-exploited in precarious conditions.[1] Their case was widely reported on in social media like the Facebook pages of Guerrilla Comunicacional México (Mexico Communicational Guerrillas) and Brigada Feminista de Apoyo CDMX Sismo (Mexico City Feminist Support Brigade).

It is important to point out that the mainstream media focused its attention and broad coverage on other disaster areas, like the Rébsamen School, the scene of the botched "Frida Sofía" case. But, meanwhile, the case of the sweatshop and a toy factory that seem to have existed in that building on Bolívar Street sparked insufficient interest to even report on what had happened there, much less do any follow-up on the case.

Some thought that these mainstream media wanted to minimize the coverage of the work being done by women rescue workers who were risking their personal safety to lend solidarity to other women, women workers who had been made invisible. I should point out that documents were discovered amidst the rubble revealing a terrible reality not usually considered when people think about Mexico: the existence of sweatshops employing undocumented immigrants.

Another building that caught the public eye differently way depending on the media outlet providing the coverage was the one at 286 Álvaro Obregón Avenue. Just like in the other cases, initial help came from civil society, which spontaneously organized rescue efforts. And, also like in other cases, the Navy and Army only arrived to block that work, control access, and propagate deceptive versions of the situation that gave hope to family members waiting behind military cordons. This is where flashy teams of Israeli and Spanish rescue squads disembarked, giving the impression that they were going for specific objects and bodies, or to pose for photographs that circulated widely on social media, often emphasizing how physically attractive they were. Meanwhile, the relatives of most of the victims saw valuable hours go by before having to begin searching and rescuing themselves, days later, when the

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international rescue teams and Navy and Army personnel practically abandoned them to their own devices.

Among the many buildings that collapsed was one at 119 Durango Street in the Roma neighborhood. Most of the people left homeless by this were of Otomí origin, an indigenous people from central Mexico. So, for weeks afterwards, between 70 and 200 people lived in the street —different media outlets also said that Otomí families were living in nearby buildings. They were denied access to existing shelters that were supposedly full. This caused indignation on the social media since other —middle-class— victims from nearby buildings were not classified as "irregular population" and seemed to have no problems being admitted to the shelters. Some journalists like Gloria Ramírez, from the *Desinformémonos* website, even reported discriminatory language used against these families by some neighbors.

In the southern part of the city, in the Coapa area, damage was heavy. Although media attention focused on schools like the Rébsamen School, or the Mexico City campus of the Monterrey Technological Institute for Higher Learning (known as Monterrey Tech), many other buildings collapsed, became uninhabitable, or require important repairs and reinforcement.

Despite the fact that the city's official death toll was set at 369, many say that there may be victims who were not counted, like the immigrant women workers exploited because they did not have work permits. In the case of Coapa, the victims could be many more. Videos circulating on social media showed that more people than reported may have died, for example at the Coapa Walmart or in the Galerías Coapa mall, but until this is confirmed, they remain ghosts of urban legends disallowed by the authorities.[2]

Chiaroscuro: A Balance Sheet of Possibilities and Achievements

It would be impossible in this short article to attempt an exhaustive list of the damage done in the city and surrounding states like Morelos, in addition to that in the places hit by previous and later earthquakes, affecting mainly communities in Oaxaca and Chiapas. However, the common denominator seems to have been help from civil society, as well as the fact that information began to be controlled by the military in the first few hours after the disasters. Everywhere, the media amplified and hid certain dynamics and events.

As pointed out above, in addition to broadcasting news that was not always real and requests for support that a few minutes later were no longer useful, on social media, society seemed to project a narcissistic image of itself. It looks like not a few people took advantage of the situation to show and exaggerate their actions as good Samaritans. In addition, in what could be considered rather self-satisfied gestures, some companies, organizations, and not a few individuals disseminated the work being done by civil society in general, and by young people, in particular the so-called millennials, as though it were the determining factor in the crisis, even if that were not necessarily the case.

A more sober, detached analysis might make us recognize that society was not able to be as effective as it would have liked, and that, despite their good intentions, many people went from one place to another, but arrived everywhere late.

This short review of events has shown how both face-to-face and online social action was channeled, managed, and mediated by pro-governmental civilian and military actors. They clearly monopolized control of access, both physical and virtual, such as filtering or blocking aid. On the other hand, as I mentioned before, the information disseminated both verbally and on line was not always true, and at different moments, disinformation fed a kind of hope that on several occasions tied the hands of civil society, giving it back a distorted image of itself. VM

Notes

1 The case of the seamstresses in 1985 was paradigmatic for thinking about the priorities of those in power, both publically and privately. One account can be found in Perla Miranda, "Ellos querían sus cajas fuertes: las mujeres atrapadas en los escombros no importaban," *El Universal*, September 19, 2016, http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/entrada-de-opinion/colaboracion/mochilazo-en-el-tiempo/nacion/sociedad/2016/09/19/ellos-querian-sus. [Editor's Note.]
2 A video about the Coapa Walmart store is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjH-VvL6bqA. [Editor's Note.]