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# PROTEST PUBLIC RELATIONS

COMMUNICATING DISSENT AND ACTIVISM

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## 7 Activists' communication and mobilization tactics to find Ayotzinapa's 43 disappeared students

*Luis Rubén Díaz-Cepeda, Ernesto Castañeda, and Kara Andrade*

Since 2006, Mexico has been going through a rough period where the aim to control the profits from illicit drug traffic by different groups and state actors has caused the murder of at least 234,996 people as of October 2016 (INEGI, 2018) and 30,499 missing people (RNPED, 2018). In 2017, at least 18,898 homicides were attributed to organized crime (Dittmar, 2018). This increased level of violence started with the war on drugs ordered by former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006–2012) and his strategy of Joint Operations between military personnel and police to enforce the ban on illicit substances. Military involvement continued during Enrique Peña Nieto's administration (2012–2018). In fact, in 2018 the federal government passed the Internal National Security Law that formalized the continued patrolling of the streets by the army; a measure that in 2006 had been announced as temporary.

Since the beginning, activists and those who have suffered directly or witnessed the violent side-effects caused by this strategy have protested the militarization of the country. During this time, some social movement campaigns appeared such as the movement against the militarization of Ciudad Juárez in 2008, the Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity (Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad, MPJD) in 2011; and the students' movement #Iam132 (#Yosoy132) in 2012. However, thanks to a savvy PR strategy from the activists involved in the Ayotzinapa movement, the demand of finding the students reached levels of mobilizations that far surpassed the previous protests.

The Ayotzinapa movement started when on the evening of September 26, 2014, two of the five buses with student teachers for the Normal rural Isidro Burgos<sup>1</sup> were attacked. Police and unidentified gunmen opened fire for unknown reasons on the buses of students in Iguala, Guerrero. Six people – three passers-by and three students – were shot and killed, more than 20 were wounded, and the 43 students were taken by uniformed police officers and men dressed in military garb (Gibler, 2017). The Attorney General claims that the students were turned in by corrupt local police officers to a drug cartel and they were murdered and incinerated. However,

this version was contested by the parents of the students based on reports of several human rights organizations and forensic experts, which claim that there is not enough evidence to support this theory. Hence, the location of the students is still uncertain.

This was not an isolated case in Mexico, yet it gained national and international attention, arguably, this was caused for two reasons. First, the fact that a large number of college students were the victims and second, the use of an effective communication strategy and tactics by the activists involved used an effective communication strategy and tactics. Thanks to their PR strategy, they were able to break the media siege imposed by the federal government and tell the story of the disappeared students attracting national and international attention to the event and to the subsequent behavior of the federal government. Even though mobilization has not accomplished the goal of finding the students, it has arguably added to the further discrediting of Mexico's federal government, and the ruling party – *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) – who lost the following mid-term elections. Moreover, José Antonio Meade, the PRI's candidate, came out third in the 2018 presidential election.

### Successful PR strategy

The story of Ayotzinapa has rippled out well beyond the borders of their small school tucked in the mountains of Guerrero and into the international media spotlight. In consequence, it is important to understand how the students and teachers of Ayotzinapa experienced and responded to this situation within their community and outside of it, how they subsequently organized around it and the networks that helped make several campaigns to seek justice for the 43 disappeared have global significance.

This chapter demonstrates how the existing communication network of the Teachers' College or Normal Rural School Raúl Isidro Burgos in Ayotzinapa, herein called *La Normal* (Navarro, 2001), made it possible to respond quickly to the crisis of the disappeared students. Then it will focus on how communication became a prominent part of the social movement campaign organization, and how it shaped tactics and strategies for growing the movement beyond Mexico. Access to new information and communication technologies (mobile phones, computers, Wi-Fi-connected cameras) made it possible for *La Normal* to mobilize activist networks beyond their pre-established networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). They were able to create a "logic of connective action" through social networks and this changed the scale of the movement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The campaigns around the missing students are promoted by the activists in different arenas rather than by only one organization. The role that communication has played in this case aligns with Jo Freeman's three propositions: (1) "the need for a pre-existing communications network or infrastructure within the social base of a movement" which makes

“spontaneous” activity possible, (2) this communication network must be “co-optable to the new ideas of the incipient movement”; and (3) the presence of one or more “precipitants” or immediate catalysts that spark the fire for the spontaneous action to occur (Freeman, 2003, pp. 22–24).

This chapter relies on data collected through a series of interviews conducted separately by each one of the authors in-person, except where noted, in Mexico and the United States. The interviews we draw on for this chapter are:

- Raúl Romero is a member of the Zapatista movement and Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity (MPJD) (March 23, 2016).
- Omar García is an Ayotzinapa student and spokesperson of the Ayotzinapa movement (February 22, 2015).
- Julio Cesar Guerrero is a campaign coordinator for the Caravana 43. Phone interview (March 22, 2015).
- Alicia Hopkins, a philosopher, is a member of the Youth in Alternative Resistance Collective (November 9, 2014).
- Raúl Benítez-Manaut is a professor at Mexico’s National University UNAM (February 24, 2014).
- Luisa Ortiz Pérez, PhD, is an activist and organizer (March 20, 2015).
- Vidulfo Rosales Sierra is a lawyer from the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center. He works pro-bono on cases for the indigenous and poor people Guerrero, Mexico (March 23, 2015).
- Mark Stevenson is an Associated Press Reporter. Mexico City Bureau. Email interview (February 13, 2015).

Data also comes from the analyses of secondary sources and ethnographic work in activist events. Díaz directly observed key actors in Mexico City during the beginning of the movement (October to December 2014). During this period Díaz attended several organization meetings, marches, and rallies. Castañeda attended a presentation of the report from an international group of experts in Washington DC where he interviewed some of the activists from New York. Andrade conducted a number of trips to Guerrero including visiting the Ayotzinapa Teachers College and shadowing local activists during their community organizing and communication efforts.

## History

### *National context*

The war on drugs that former President Calderon (2006–2012) started in 2007 faced strong opposition by some activists because they considered that having the military policing the streets would bring an increase in violence and human rights violations. They were right. By the end of Calderon’s administration, there were around 23,000 disappeared and

approximately 70,000 dead from drug-related violence from 2006 to 2012 (Stevenson, email interview, February 13, 2015). Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) was Governor of the state of Mexico (2005–2011) when the protests of a group of farmers from Atenco were violently repressed, and protesters were jailed, hit, and sexually abused. With the election of Peña Nieto as president for the 2006–2012 term, activists were concerned that the militarized strategy not only would continue, but rather would increase, and drug-related violence would intensify. They were right again. According to official reports over 100,000 people were killed during the first five years of EPN administration (INEGI, 2017). These violent living conditions have been protested by diverse activists, who also denounced the high levels of corruption by government officials. This cycle of protest reached a climax with the Ayotzinapa social movement in 2014.

It is important to notice that the Ayotzinapa campaigns could not have reached the participations levels they did, without the previous mobilizations in Mexico (Castañeda, Díaz-Cepeda, & Andrade, 2018), for they created political awareness in those who later would become activists and develop the networks that will sustain the movement (Díaz-Cepeda & Castañeda, 2018). This cycle of mobilization started in Ciudad Juárez with the movement against the militarization of the city,<sup>2</sup> continued with the Movement for the Peace with Justice and Dignity<sup>3</sup> and then with the students' movement #IAM132.<sup>4</sup> All of these movements used new communication technology and social media<sup>5</sup> to spread the message that the government was responsible for the narco-violence. The evidence collected and disseminated by the Normal students and their allies through their PR tactics would change the view that it was all the sole fault of drug lords. This was important because, "Until Ayotzinapa happened, it was hard to convince public opinion that it was also the state that was killing and disappearing people"<sup>6</sup> (Romero personal interview, March 26, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

### *The night of Iguala*

#### *The federal government's version*

The evening of September 26, 2014, 43 student teachers were kidnapped. It is still not clear what happened to them. Mexico's federal government claims that policemen took the students to a local cartel, which killed and incinerated them. However, several organizations such as the Interamerican Court of Human Rights claim that the evidence presented by the General Attorney is not conclusive or has been obtained by torturing defendants (GIEI, 2017). The students' parents and their lawyers claim that the military was involved and that the students were being kept at a military base.

Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam claimed that on Saturday, November 8, 2014 gang members were apprehended and confessed to



in Mexico and other countries, meets with people and tells the story of what happened on September 26, 2014, the night when 43 of his schoolmates disappeared. Since that night none of the 43 young male students have been seen.

García is a second-year student at the Normal Rural School Raúl Isidro Burgos in Ayotzinapa, a public rural teachers' college in southwest Mexico. He is the spokesperson for the disappeared students in Iguala, and he considers himself an activist and most of all, a teacher in training. The story Omar García told Andrade of that night is different from the story the mass media tells. In the evening of September 26, 2014, a group of freshman students from the Normal were headed to Iguala to raise funds for a trip to Mexico City to participate in student demonstrations commemorating October 2, 1968, the date of the Tlatelolco massacre of Mexican university students at the hands of the military (Rodríguez, 2014). Students seized five buses to get there together. This was a common practice that is often tolerated and had never been repressed so swiftly and violently before.

For years, he said, the students had been retaining commercial and tourist buses as a public service to the school. During bus retentions, the students would peacefully, with no weapons or any kind of force, ask the bus driver for temporary use of the bus; if the driver agreed, the passengers would be offloaded to other buses and the students would take the additional buses for a few weeks and then return them without any damages. That night, the driver agreed to turn over the bus he was driving as long as he could drop off the passengers he was currently transporting. García says, "We had done that before, many times and the driver would follow-through" (García, March 22, 2015, personal interview). García thinks that the students were tricked by the bus driver because this time things would go differently.

After they arrived at Iguala and the passengers got off, the driver told the students that he would be right back and then locked the doors behind him and did not return. The Municipal Police arrived, and then things grew violent quickly. The students stuck in the bus called for backup. The other 70 colleagues waiting on two buses just outside the city decided to drive in and just as the first bus arrived it was intercepted by patrol cars. One of their colleagues was shot in the head and then García, who was at the school at that time, received a call from another student who said: "The police from Iguala are shooting at us, we have one dead" (García, 2015, personal interview).

Thirty students from the school, among them García, immediately set off toward Iguala to help their colleagues. When they arrived, the scene was quiet, and they were told by the survivors that many of their colleagues were shoved into seven police cars behind the buses. They did not know how many. Aldo, the one who was shot in the head, was taken away in an ambulance. The few colleagues that remained stayed with the buses

killing the students and burning their remains for eleven hours in a public municipal dump and then throwing their ashes in the river (Archibold, 2014). In January 2015, Felipe Rodríguez Salgado, a leader of the local *Guerreros Unidos* gang, was arrested and reportedly told investigators that he had been given orders to kill the students because they had connections to rival gang *Los Rojos* (Archibold, 2015). The Mexican government presented this as “the historical truth” of what occurred that night. At the end of January of 2015, the Attorney General made a public statement that detailed how the students “were grabbed by police, handed over to drug gang members, who killed them and incinerated the bodies” (AP, 2015). The government version was broadly reproduced by mainstream media, but it was not accepted by the students’ parents, schoolmates, and activists because the version they had from surviving students differed from the official one.

The parents’ suspicions of the official version, which were initially portrayed as foolish by mainstream media, would later gain scientific support as the Argentina’s international forensics team, which was brought in to help identify the remains, stated there was not enough scientific evidence to conclusively prove the theory presented by then General Attorney Jesús Murillo Karam (AP/AFP, 2015). The questions then remained, who took the students? And where were they? Activist Alicia Hopkins argues that Murillo Karam’s statements did not have the purpose of answering these questions truthfully, but rather “With this press conference and the support of the political class the federal government wanted to close the case and move on” (personal communication, November 9, 2014). Against the government’s predictions, the search for the truth would continue.

#### *The version from one of the Ayotzinapa students*

In a noisy greasy-spoon diner near the historical district of Mexico City, 24-year-old Omar García half-sits on the chair, his left leg ready to stand up at any minute and his hand holding the strap of the black backpack resting by his sneaker-clad foot, just barely under the table. It is an early Sunday evening in February 2015, and it has just started to rain. It is getting noisier in the diner, which makes it hard to hear García’s quiet deep voice, so I [Kara Andrade] lean in to listen to him. He has short straight black hair, dark brown skin, a wide face with a slight goatee and sad dark brown-eyes that belie his age. His left eye looks slightly swollen and half-open, and there is a small scar on his lips. I ask him if he wants to eat something or to drink some coffee. He shakes his head answering. “No, thanks, I just ate.” “I only have about half an hour,” he tells me in Spanish. “And then I have another meeting with colleagues” (García, 2015, personal interview). No problem, I tell him. He looks over his shoulder, fidgets a lot in his seat, and lowers his head to think. This is the way his life is now, he tells me; he travels a lot to Mexico City, to other states

to protect the evidence. "The police were still making the rounds there, and the army was at the entrance. They were all there," García says, his left eye twitching (García, 2015, personal interview). When Andrade asked him what happened to his eye, he says the military threw a rock at him on January 13 when the parents of the missing students and other students and teachers from the school tried to gain access to an army base in Iguala (BBC, 2015). He considers this is part of his work as an activist and as a student at Ayotzinapa's teacher's college. They wanted to search for the missing students in the military base where the teachers and students suspected the disappeared were being held or where they suspected the bodies had been burned.

### Activists' communication and mobilization tactics

#### *Catalyst for action*

What allowed bringing sustained attention to the disappearance of the students in Iguala was that the other students at the school, and its affiliated network, were able to respond to the physical and subsequent disqualifications in the mainstream media by using a pre-established structure of committees, secretariats, and delegated leaders for consensus-based decision-making. One of the main ways this consensus on how to respond to crises was reached was through a General Assembly of teachers, students, and affiliated committee members. The morning after the disappearances happened, García said, the General Assembly met to first establish the facts behind the event and work through the unknowns

We didn't have a clear count of how many of the colleagues had been disappeared. We thought it was 58, then 57, then after the meeting we knew it was 43, and we thought they were in jail.

(García, 2015, personal interview)

Also present in that meeting were volunteer lawyers, including Vidulfo Rosales Sierra, from the Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña, Tlachinollan A.C. (Tlachinollan Human Rights Center), who works on cases for the indigenous and poor people of Guerrero, Mexico. By then the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center had been working with the school for six months on previous attacks on the students, but nothing of this magnitude (Rosales Sierra, 2015, personal interview). "We had no idea that they were orchestrating a forced disappearance" (García, 2015, personal interview). The decision was made to get the students out of jail, except that when they arrived there were no students to be found.

A series of meetings were then held by the Student Government Association, which is formed by 19 committees; among those are External Relations, Delegates, Political Education, Rural Labor. Each committee has a

president, treasurer, speaker, and secretary who serve during one or two years. Members are nominated by vote or consensus, and once in office each member has to meet with the affiliated student organizations, non-governmental organizations, unions, and other allies.

The educational program at Ayotzinapa's teachers' college includes activist training, which takes six months to complete. Students typically start in August, and by February they are part of the committee, communicating with members, traveling to different places, to different committees, and "learning as you go" (García, 2015, personal interview). García was part of the Political Education secretariat in the role that was delegated to him as the speaker for the Ayotzinapa students.

The Political Education secretariat is where a selected group of students receive an education on leftist ideology and activism training. This training allowed students to have a fast and efficient response to the kidnapping of their classmates. They videotaped the attack, and when policemen took their classmates, students called for a press conference immediately after the event and spread the news with their political allies via WhatsApp and to the general population via Facebook. By doing so, they were able to break the news siege that the state frequently uses to hide this kind of news.

Every member of the External Relations secretariats has a region in Guerrero where they work. Every weekend they have to visit the organizations in their area, help them, check in with them, and see what they need. García states that there is also a list of organizations, schools, and unions beyond Guerrero that the school has maintained relationships with for years and many of which volunteer and provide different types of support for the school. These organizations extend into national and international networks. Among these are State Coordinating Committee of Education Workers of Guerrero, or CETEG, which was the force behind Mexico's democratic teachers' movement, the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers, or CNTE (Bocking, 2015). Each secretariat is responsible for maintaining contact with all these organizations as they pertain to the secretariat's specific projects and goals through physical visits, the use of mobile phones, emails, telegrams, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The school also has a pirate short-range FM community radio station that broadcasts daily. By the time the Assembly learned the students were not being held in Iguala's jail the entire network of organizations had already been informed through the various secretariats of the attack on the students through various mediums of communication.

In conclusion, during this first stage of the movement, thanks to the student activists' knowhow and an information strategy that included face-to-face meetings, as well as contact via communication technologies with their political allies, they would later be able to defeat the government strategy of framing the students as criminals and the narrative of these

is also a long tradition of repressing young people which is not forgotten. This repression is something Pérez considers a specific strategy by the state to terrorize an entire community. She witnessed violent repression by the Mexican police and military in Mexico City during marches in support of the Ayotzinapa movement.

I had never felt fear when protesting for myself or others. The days of the first marches, the violence started. There was heavy violence during the marches, and the police were using the excuse of anarchists having infiltrated the marches to resort to violence, things like hitting baby carriages, hitting women on the head ... [During one of the public vigils being held for the students] it was held in open space, in the Zocalo and they turned off the lights. You know the Zocalo has four entrances and if they close those off no one can move from the inside. There was a vigil at night. They turned off the lights and let loose the police. You can only imagine what happened ... It made us all cry.

(Pérez, 2015, personal interview)

The repression of Ayotzinapa was similar to other movements classified as student movements, such as the night of Tlatelolco in 1968,<sup>9</sup> the break of the National University of Mexico (UNAM) students' strike by Federal forces in 1999,<sup>10</sup> and even previous attacks to the Normal's students by the Federal police.<sup>11</sup> However, one thing that was significantly different was the use of social media to document the marches, vigils, protests, and "die-ins" that were being staged at different schools and public places, as well as subsequent repression. The disappearance of the students was discussed and documented in many ways by different people, captured on video, uploaded to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and then hashtags were created to follow and comment on those shared moments. Twitter hashtags translated from Spanish to English include "We Are Not a Number" and "I Am Tired" with videos also being filmed by students all over the world showing solidarity. There are recordings of statements such as "We are the 43" and videos narrating the different phases of the complex storyline behind the students' disappearance.

Videos and photography served a vital function of creating testimony and evidence of state repression. Social media then distributed beyond Mexico's border.

They [the police] couldn't hide behind it and say that they [marchers] were agitators. They were striking, and you could hear and see people saying I was walking out of the metro, or I was there with my colleagues from organizations, NGOs, collectives, mother's groups and they were hitting them, and people recorded them saying things like "Maybe this will make you stop marching, assholes, these students deserved it."

(Pérez, 2015, personal interview)

*Pre-existing communication networks*

While Ayotzinapa's strongly coordinated actions used high levels of organizational resources to build relationships and mobilize locally and even nationally, the content sharing across social media networks is not something they had anticipated (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Garcia, now an avid Twitter user, says that before his colleagues disappeared, he didn't even know what Twitter was. He did not own a cellphone until someone from one of the partnering organizations donated the phone and taught him to use social media on it. Now he has almost 23,000 followers.

Smartphones became essential to the campaign. The parents carry simple cellphones, and they have not been protagonists in online or social media strategies. But others in their networks of support have. Stevenson points out that

the community police movement (UPOEG) quickly took up their cause and launched an effort to search for the students – an effort that has since expanded to searching for clandestine graves of other victims.

(Stevenson, email interview, February 13, 2015)

UPOEG search leader Miguel Angel Jimenez-Blanco<sup>12</sup> operated a WhatsApp group chat with journalists, updating them on how many bodies had been found (Andrade, 2015a, 2015b; Andrade, Castañeda, & Díaz-Cepeda, 2017). Similar Facebook and Twitter accounts also exist. The Michoacán self-defense movement in 2013 also began a Facebook page to reach out to the public. The more recent predecessors were the YoSoy132 movement and the use of Facebook pages by anti-drug gang bloggers like ValorPorTamaulipas.<sup>13</sup>

The use of social media for the Ayotzinapa movement has created solidarity and collective identities that go beyond conventional or “brokering” organizations “carrying the burden of facilitating cooperation” of large-scale action networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Postings across trusted social networks, for example through the use of images like the portraits that become transferable digital memes, allowed for the spread of awareness about the atrocities that took place in Iguala.

Online videos and photos were transmitted under the hashtags #FueElEstado (translated to It Was the State) #EselEstado #NoSomosUnNúmero (We Are Not Just a Number), #YaMeCanse (I Am Tired), #US2tired, #yanoscansamos (We Are Tired) #AyotzinapaSomosTodos (We Are All Ayotzinapa), and #Ayotzinapa. Supporters would often tag pictures of themselves with “I am Ayotzinapa” hashtags and spread them through their online networks. Others created websites or blogs. Supporters created their own personal frames and meanings and claimed their own stake in the movement. In this way Ayotzinapa's original communication network and messages acquired mass appeal throughout Mexico and beyond.

To this day there are more questions than answers, and still, nothing is known with certainty about the disappeared students. The story of their disappearance, however, has gained international attention. The teachers, parents and students of Ayotzinapa sustain the momentum in their state of Guerrero through marches, popular assemblies of local residents and teachers working with labor and teachers' unions, peasant organizations and community-run police movement or *auto-defensas*, the taking of toll booths and the blocking of major highways into an otherwise touristic Pacific-coast area known for beaches and weekend getaways (Asfura-Heim & Espach, 2013).

On a national level they have organized with other student networks inherited from the #YoSoy132 movement of 2012 (Díaz-Cepeda, 2015; Guillén, 2013; Muñoz Ramírez, 2011). Internationally, the campaign has spread to universities in many countries where vigils, protest marches, and actions such as "die-ins" have been staged; songs and poems have been performed on social media. The parents, students, and teacher's plea for justice and accountability by the Mexican government for the Ayotzinapa student disappearances have become part of the demands of other causes and social movement campaigns such as disappeared migrants all over the world, forced disappearances, political prisoners, police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others at the hands of the police (Tilly, Castañeda & Wood, 2019).

There are also growing international alliances with groups such as School of the Americas Watch, and a coalition of US-based organizations that helped the parents of the disappeared students to organize Caravana43 in March 2015 in which three caravans with a total of 15 parents visited more than 40 cities across the US. "The main aim," the website states, "is to provide an international forum for the parents who have lost their children in a government of systemic violence and impunity." All the financial resources, according to Julio Cesar Guerrero, Campaign Coordinator for the Caravana43, are provided by the coalition members who donate \$1,000 to a group account for the parents' travel, food, and other costs (Guerrero, 2015, phone interview).

We decided from the beginning not to ask for money from anyone. That creates impediments for the project and future actions. It also means negotiating and renegotiating our actions. So, we financed independently.

(Guerrero, 2015, phone interview)

#### *Weaknesses of the movement*

While the social media element is its most innovative element, UNAM analyst Raúl Benítez Manaut,<sup>15</sup> saw the pro-Ayotzinapa campaigns having a limited lifespan because of their radical nature, the impractical nature of

their request of "You Took Them Alive, We Want Them Back Alive!" and the sporadic resorting to violence.

They've done things like burning the government building in Chilpancingo and align themselves with groups that are very radicalized, and there's a rejection of that type violence in Mexico. If they continue with that discourse, they will be completely tuned out; they are already being tuned out in Mexico.

(Benítez, February 24, 2014, personal interview)

If they employ similar tactics during electoral campaign times, Benítez Manaut fears there will be full-scale repression by the Mexican police. It would not be the first time the Mexican government would have done this, he warned.

After a brief period of tolerance, by the end of 2014, the Mexican government used their worn playbook strategy to intimidate, isolate, and criminalize. They repressed manifestations in order to make people less likely to attend them. They marginalized the movement by having political leaders constantly claiming that the case was closed, and it was time to move on. For example, national media began covering it less and political leaders such as former president Vicente Fox stated on CNN in Spanish that it was time for the parents to "accept the reality" of what happened to their children (CNN, 2015). Also, they started prosecuting and presenting charges on protesters for damaging public property.

The movement's longevity might also be impacted by the fact that the main organizing entity, *La Normal*, has no monetary resources of its own beyond the contacts and networks that provide it support. So, while social media networks are self-organizing and amplify the message of the movement without a central or "lead" organizational actor, the question is how long can it sustain without those resources? Social Movement Organizations require considerable skill, experience, resources, and professionals who, ultimately, need to be paid for doing the heavy lifting of being a change agent (Freeman, 2003, p. 31).

Despite the popular outrage, political parties and powerful political actors in Mexico ignore Ayotzinapa altogether.

It has failed to be co-opted by the political players because it's so unstable because it's so fragile and because there's a claim for social justice. Political parties really don't want to have a lot to do with it because it's really dirty. (Pérez, August 20, 2015, personal interview)

That means it would not be incorporated into any public policy proposal and it would not be debated in Congress, no matter how many people Tweet or Facebook about it.



Nobody wants to touch it because it's nasty stuff. It's drug stuff, it's repression stuff, it's the military, and there are all sorts of mechanisms of co-optation or buying out, and eventually, the main repression will come as well.

(Pérez, August 20, 2015, personal interview)

Thus, despite citizen indignation and widespread mobilization, politicians and state actors have shown little interest in this issue.

### **Ayotzinapas 43's lessons**

This case study is an example of critical public relations theory, as it privileges the perspective of activist and attempts to learn how PR can be used for the benefit of the powerless. As such, it diverges from Excellence Theory assumptions. Excellence Theory is the dominant paradigm in public relations theory (Dozier, Guning, & Gruning, 1995; Grunig & Grunig, 1989). For the most part, this tradition was built from the perspective of resource-rich organizations (Grunig, 1992) that took power as a given. Their staff are concerned not to abuse that power and show Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and that organizations should avoid manipulation of the public. Instead, they were to reach mutual understanding by challenging activists via a two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Grunig, 1997). In the same token PR had been perceived by some activists as an undesirable and unethical "set of techniques for pursuing corporate interests rather than promoting common interests" (Miller & Diman, 2008, pp. 4–5). In a few words, both scholars and activists considered PR of exclusive use by resourceful organizations.

This paradigm started to break with the worry of peripheral scholars with issues of power and persuasion within PR theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Edwards, 2012, 2016). This concern created a critical public relations theory, which takes into consideration the needs of the powerless; just as the Frankfurt School did back in the 1970s in Sociology (Horkheimer, 1972). Several scholars (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) have called upon researchers to do more thinking on how PR theory can account for power relations and how this knowledge could be used by activists to improve their possibilities of modifying the existing power balance and promote their causes. In Karlberg's words "Researchers should pay more attention to the communicative needs, constraints or practices of citizen groups themselves" (Karlberg, 2009, p. 271).

Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay (2012) point out that critical public relations theory developed fringe concepts such as power and persuasion/advocacy that may interrupt the colonization of knowledge made by orthodox PR theory. Coombs and Holladay challenge the Excellence Theory's use of Hegel's dialectic method by pointing out that "We need to move beyond description to explore the dynamics of how and why the

Excellence dialectic occurs" (2012, p. 886). Perhaps, the ana-dialectical method developed by Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel (1974) can conceptually help us to achieve this goal. This means that while Coombs and Holladay make a correct appreciation of Hegel's dialect method, one needs to remember the positive moment of the dialect process: the affirmation of the negation. In other words, it is true that the status quo (thesis) is challenged by social movements (antithesis) and in solving their conflict, they create a new order (synthesis). However, it is often forgotten that for social movements to have enough power to effectively challenge the status quo, they first need to affirm themselves (affirmation of the negation). This affirmation is the positive moment of the dialectic method, the time of activists. This chapter aims then to illustrate the PR tactics and channels used by Ayotzinapa activists to persuade Mexico's government to find the 43 missing students.

Our research shows that similar to other recent social movements such as Occupy (Di, 2015), the Tahrir Square (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), and South Korea (Choi & Cho, 2017), Ayotzinapa activists used social media to get organized, to disseminate their message, and to announce and call for protests. For the most part, these disruptive tactics were a continuation of the traditional off-line repertory, but enhanced by the use of social media. We found instances of both dissent and protest PR that at their climax jeopardized the stability of Peña Niteo's administration. However, regardless of the efficient use of communication technology and their savvy PR tactics – that allowed activists to mobilize a large segment of the population at an international level – the political class overpowered the protests and diminished the movement.

## Conclusion

Our research showed that from the very beginning the mobilization for Ayotzinapa was a complex social movement made up by different SMOs and joined by regular citizens who were outraged by the forced disappearance of the 43 students. Participants had a different level of expertise in the use of PR to promote their cause. The first reaction was made by other students of the *Normal* who were well trained in traditional disruptive tactics such as demonstrations, dies-in, streets closing, and even direct and violent confrontation with the police, but somehow lacked abilities to go beyond their close circle. Yet they purposefully documented the attack, contacted their close allies via WhatsApp, and called a press conference the same night of the events, functioning as "citizen journalists" (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012, p. 373).

As social activists in Mexico City, the center of political life in this country, learned about the events through WhatsApp messages from Ayotzinapa students and their allies, they put their knowledge of social media management to the service of the cause and organized the Solidarity

Committee. It was from this committee that they set the strategy to bring the students back alive. They called for the First Global Action Day and coordinated the different social media campaigns needed. For the most part, these campaigns were made up of dissent tactics, looking to disseminate their ideas and change the government thinking and behavior.

At this early stage, parents had no experience whatsoever. In consequence, they did not play an active role in spreading the message to dissuade Mexico's federal government to find out the truth and their children alive. As parents gained experience, by November 2014, they had become the lead strategy coordinators of the different campaigns. The first (and permanent) campaign has been to find the students alive. Subsequent campaigns were organized to challenge the government's narrative and to free people detained during the protests. These campaigns included a combination of off-line and on-line disruptive tactics such as presenting portraits of the missing students and national and international caravans.

As time passed by and the demands not resolved, at the climax of the movement there was a dissenting PR stage where SMOs involved not only called for new legislation but a new government. On the streets, protesters chanted: It was the State! And since 2014 they got organized on the Popular Citizen Constituent (*Constituyente Ciudadana Popular*, PCC)<sup>16</sup> and the People's National Convention (*Convención Nacional Popular*, PNC)<sup>17</sup> (Díaz-Cepeda, 2016).

It is important to notice that the success of the movement of mobilizing thousands of people at a local, national, and international level was due to a combination of face to face relations and the online connections. The personal webs, prestige, and trust that core activists participating in the Ayotzinapa movement had built over their life brought a network of other activists and their organizations willing and able to mobilize their resources in support of this cause. In Mexico some of these organizations, i.e., Services and Counsel for Peace (*Servicios y Asesoría para la Paz*, SERAPAZ),<sup>18</sup> supplied logistics and a channel of communication with the government. Thanks to Facebook campaigns other organizations, and civil society mirrored their efforts at a national and international level without the need of Ayotzinapa activists or the parents to travel thousands of miles to attend these protests. In fact, a large number of local protests were not coordinated by any central committee, as they were spontaneous or locally organized.

Unfortunately, these efforts and the participation of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights had been fruitless as the EPN administration (2006–2018) insisted in their version that students were killed and incinerated by a criminal organization. The official version recognizes the complicity of local police officers, but it denies any participation of the army and does not allow any investigations in that direction. As of summer 2018, the location of the missing students is still uncertain.

This case study shows evidence for the growing importance of social media networks, new mobile communication technology, and PR tactics

around them. However, as Downing (2008) warns, succumbing to technological fetishization is a grave delusion. For while it is vital that the message is spread via social media, it is still necessary that the message resonates with people in the physical world. Where categorical groups (e.g., students) are attacked, contentious politics aims for groups in power to share resources and opportunities with them (Tilly et al., 2019). While new communication technologies help with the diffusion of social justice claims and popular knowledge of a struggle, getting demands met and producing durable change is not any easier than before.

¡Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!

## Notes

- 1 Normales rurales are rural teachers schools created in the 1920s during President Álvaro Obregón's administration by the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, who served as the Minister of Education. They were established with the goal of bringing social progress to the peasants living in Mexico's countryside through education. Since their launch they are organized in the Mexican Federation of Peasant Socialist Students (*Federacion de estudiantes campesinos socialistas de Mexico*, FECSM) and engage in activism in order to demand better social conditions for the students and the poor (Navarro, 2001). Students follow a socialist and activist approach where they take part in the peasants' struggles, as most of them are peasants themselves.
- 2 The movement against the militarization of Ciudad Juárez started in 2008 when a small group of activists protested the military strategy of former President Calderon (2006–2012), a strategy that caused the death of over 6,000 people in Ciudad Juárez from 2008 to 2010 during the Chihuahua Joint Operation (Monárrez, 2013, p. 214). As violence increased, more activists joined the movement and Ciudad Juárez became the epicenter of resistance to the war on drugs.
- 3 On March 27, 2011, the son of Javier Sicilia, a famous Mexican poet, was found dead, along with six other people. In a demand for justice, Javier Sicilia started a caravan from Cuernavaca to Mexico City. His demand for justice and for an end to President Calderon's war on drugs was quickly joined and supported by numerous people and regular social activists. The MPJD toured the country with two caravans. In these two caravans, they had a direct dialogue with the victims of violence, showing that the violence was happening across the country. Despite Calderon's refusal to end the militarization of the country, the MPJD deserves credit for showing that Mexico was going through a human rights crisis.
- 4 In 2012, the student movement #YoSoy132 translated to "I Am 132," a phrase inspired by the 15M and Occupy movements began when students confronted the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, later to become president of Mexico, about his policies as governor and what the students' considered the Mexican media's biased coverage of the 2012 general election. Using video students spread their messages virally through mainly Facebook and Twitter to 50 cities in the country. This strategy would also help to build transnational links with Mexican students abroad and to gain the support of other international collectives (Gómez-García & Treré, 2014). The #YoSoy132 campaign was successful in mobilizing university students, both online and in street protests, and had an impact in the steps the administration

took with initiatives around education, energy, and telecom reforms in Congress. They were able to organize the first independent debate of the presidential candidates, where the only absent candidate was Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN). It was broadcasted on YouTube and reached a larger audience than the televised ones. Despite all their efforts EPN was voted President of Mexico for the 2006 to 2012 period. Thought with less visibility, EPN continued with the same military strategy and drug related violence not only continued but escalated.

- 5 See "Yo Soy 132, a Networked Social Movement of Mexican Youth" (Díaz-Cepeda, 2015).
- 6 Si el estado estaba asesinando a la sociedad y estaba desapareciendo y asesinando no teníamos como comprobarlo hasta que sucedió lo de Ayotzinapa.
- 7 Raúl Romero (35) is a life-time activist. He has participated in the Zapatista movement and the MPJD.
- 8 <http://ilustradoresconayotzinapa.tumblr.com>.
- 9 Similar to civil rights movements in the United States and Europe during the decade of 1960s, students in Mexico were demanding more democratic conditions in the country. These protests increased and as the Olympic Games in Mexico 1968 were about to be inaugurated (October 12, 1968), the administration of then President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was in a hurry to end the protest. On October 2, 1968 during a peaceful student manifestation, protesters were shot and many of them were killed or disappeared (to this day the number is unknown). Mass media did not report the attack. Since then October 2 has been commemorate by students, activists, and social organizations as a day of resistance.
- 10 On April 20, 1999 the assembly of the students of the Mexico National University constituted the Strike Council and closed the University in protest for an increase to the 20 cents tuition fees because this increase violated the right to a free education. The strike continued for nine months until the night of February 6, 2000 when then President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León ordered the Federal Police to take control of the University facilities. Federal forces continued patrolling the campus until April 23, 2000, violating the autonomy of the University. Main stream media supported these measures and activist students were portrayed as lazy people or even as criminals.
- 11 On December 12, 2011 two *Normal* students were shot death by the Federal Police during a highway blockade.
- 12 Miguel Ángel was found death on August 9, 2015. He received several death threats due his involvement in activism. For more on Miguel Ángel and his use of communication technology see "Interview with activist Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco" (Andrade, Castañeda & Díaz-Cepeda, 2017).
- 13 [www.facebook.com/ValorPorTamaulipas](http://www.facebook.com/ValorPorTamaulipas).
- 14 [www.caravana43.com/about.html](http://www.caravana43.com/about.html).
- 15 President of the non-governmental organization Collective of Analysis of Security with Democracy, A.C.
- 16 <http://nuevaconstituyente.org/>.
- 17 [www.tlachinollan.org/convocatoria-vi-convencion-nacional-popular/](http://www.tlachinollan.org/convocatoria-vi-convencion-nacional-popular/).
- 18 <https://serapaz.org.mx/>.

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