

Technologies of hope. Technopolitical Appropriations in the Search for Missing Persons in Mexico. The case of *Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte*

*Tecnologías de esperanza. Apropiaciones
tecnopolíticas para la búsqueda de
personas desaparecidas en Mexico. El
caso de Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte*

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In Mexico –between 2006 and 2018– 35 265 people were forced to disappear; the ineffectiveness of the state has forced their families to lead the search. *Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte* do this by using various technologies to locate their bodies in hidden graves. Its most powerful technopolitical action is to transmit its findings “live” to combat the official narrative that denies the existence of this crime.

KEYWORDS: Disappeared, hidden graves, technopolitics, necropolitics.

En México, entre 2006 y 2018, 36 265 personas fueron desaparecidas: la inoperancia del Estado ha obligado a que sus familias encabecen su búsqueda. Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte lo hacen empleando diversas tecnologías para localizar sus cuerpos en fosas clandestinas. Su acción tecnopolítica más potente es transmitir en vivo sus hallazgos para combatir así, la narrativa oficial que niega la existencia de este crimen.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Desaparecidos, fosas clandestinas, tecnopolítica, necropolítica.

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INTRODUCTION

Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte are a collective of family members, very often mothers, looking for those who have been made to disappear from them, in hidden graves in Sinaloa, a state in the north of Mexico that has been key to the appearance, development and proliferation of drug trafficking, with one of the most important criminal groups in the world residing there: the Sinaloa Cartel, which has produced iconic figures such as “El Chapo” Guzmán.

In this land where the number of people who have disappeared is only recognized to be 2 637²—of officially 36 265 in the whole country—*Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte* are marking a tendency in the collectives of relatives of those who have disappeared in Mexico, their main motive being that of searching for them in hidden graves.³

This search for *treasures*, as members of the group prefer to call the bodies taken out of these graves, is one of the most important exercises in communication to have been made in terms of the significance and the representation, both of the one who has disappeared and of the unidentified body that is found by the collective.

“The work of making the disappeared appear again”, as expressed by Irazuzta (2017), in a situation that is the setting for many wars, gives *potency* and *agency* to those searching, as it reshapes the breakdown of meaning and the individual and social catastrophe the affected people are immersed in, as the center of their lives becomes locating their loved ones whether alive or dead; this search is conducted through new forms of collective organization, and also through using new devices

² The *Rastreadoras* themselves consider that are at least twice as many who have disappeared in their state.

³ The national human rights organization, *La Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos* (CNDH, 2017), reported that 855 graves had been found in Mexico between 2006 and 2018; from which 1 548 bodies were exhumed, with a further 35 000 pieces of bone; and the national search organization, *Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda* (2019) has reported the existence of 36 708 unidentified corpses.

for taking action, which in the present case will be referred to as: *technologies of hope*.

This article describes the application of various communication technologies that Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte use to locate hidden graves; in the identification of the treasures found; and for their constant denunciation of the ineffectiveness and indifference that they suffer from the authorities who have systematically failed to fulfil their obligation to look for those who have disappeared.

Supported by the theoretical notions of the “disappeared who reappears”, mentioned above (Irazuzta, 2017); “loss of potency” (Reguillo, 2017); “the symbolic functions of bodies” (Larrosa-Fuentes, 2018) and “communication technologies as devices for taking action” (Avalos González, 2018), the present text sustains that the narratives built up by Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, through their communication and technopolitical practices, form “technologies of hope”, whose appropriation implies the symbolic function of bodies (both those of the searchers and of those who are being searched for) as a form of political action that “makes the disappeared reappear” not from an notion of absence in death but one of presence in life.

The methodology used in this work consisted of ethnographic observation during a search in the field undertaken by Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte on November 19th, 2017;⁴ eight qualitative interviews with various members of the group; an interview in depth with their leader, Mirna Nereyda; and a netnographic observation of the Facebook page⁵ that the collective has, and uses to display its communication and technopolitical practices; in this case the analysis concentrated specifically on the videos that the collective shares of the searches in the field and transmits “live” on Wednesdays and Sundays.

The question directing this work was: In what way are the communication and technopolitical practices of the collective Las

⁴ The search was conducted on the periphery of Los Mochis, Sinaloa. On that day, the collective succeeded in finding nine treasures in the same number of hidden graves.

⁵ Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Las-Rastreadoras-del-Fuerte-267629457048946/>

Rastreadoras del Fuerte “technologies of hope” and how do the group, through these, question the narrative imposed by the State for naming or signifying the disappeared person?

To answer this question, the text is divided into five sections; in the first there is a brief summary of the context in which enforced disappearances take place in Mexico; then there is a conceptual outline of what is a disappearance and what is a disappeared person; then the seasonal fluctuations that empowered the creation of the collective and the building up of their labors of searching; next, the communication technologies and the devices for taking action used by Las Rastreadoras in the search for their missing ones are described; and finally the paper closes with how these processes have created new collective potentialities and technologies of hope that play a part in how those who have disappeared in the north of Sinaloa are named, signified and searched for.

TO DISAPPEAR IN MEXICO

The Mexican State currently recognizes the disappearance of 36 265⁶ people; 26 938 male and 9 227 female. Most disappeared after the 11th of December 2006, the day on which the then president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, declared war on organized crime.

In this war, civil society has been the sector most injured and violated in terms of civil rights, with 226 024 people in Mexico murdered (Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública [SESNSP], 2018); 36 265 who have disappeared (Registro Nacional de Personas Extraviadas y Desaparecidas [RNPED], 2018) and 310 527 more who have been displaced as a result of the violence (Comisión

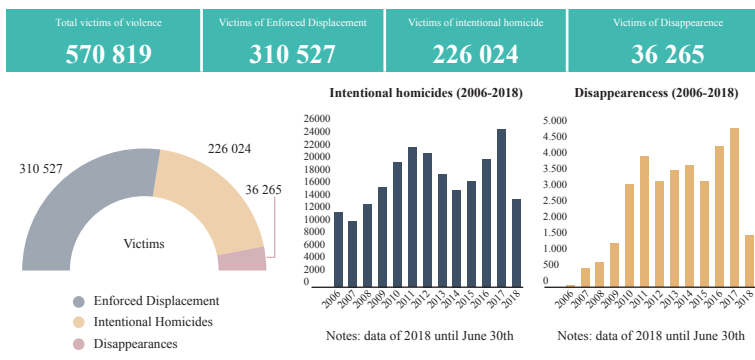
⁶ Data until January 17, 2019; This is the number of people recognized by the Mexican State by the Registro Nacional de Personas Extraviadas y Desaparecidas (RNPED), the black figure for the commission of this crime indicates that for each complaint filed there are two more that are not made (Franco, 2018). In information of the new federal government the disappearance of 40 thousand 180 people was recognized; however, there is no public record to break down the information, which is why this text chose to work with the latest official data of the RNPED.

Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C [CMDPDH], 2017).⁷

In spite of these alarming figures, during the administrations of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), the Mexican State systematically denied the there was a crisis of human rights, and even repeated to organizations such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Office of the High Commission of the United Nations for Human Rights that everything was quiet in the country. The new government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024) recognized the crisis of human rights in the country and the responsibility of the State for creating thousands of victims; without, however, immediately changing the security strategy of previous administrations.

These international organizations have therefore not stopped insisting that human rights are being systematically violated in Mexico and crimes against humanity are being committed, such as: murder, torture, forced disappearance, forced displacement and extra-judicial killings.

FIGURE 1
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN MEXICO (2006-2018)



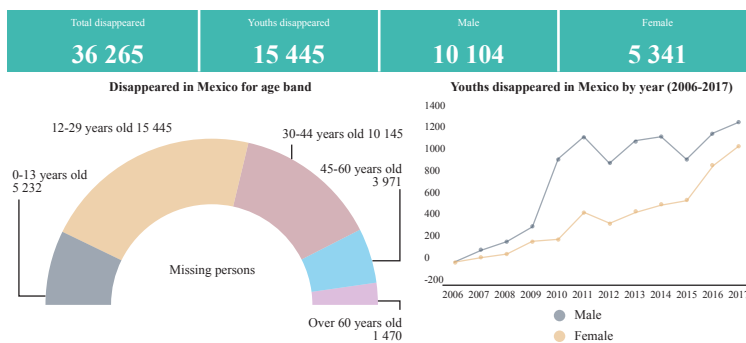
Source: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (2018); Registro Nacional de Personas Extraviadas y Desaparecidas (2018), and Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos A.C. (2017).

⁷ The figures for victims of violence were calculated from the January 1st, 2006 to April 30th, 2018.

Among the crimes against humanity that have been committed in Mexico, according to international principles of human rights, are: the disappearance of 43 students from a rural teachers training college, the Escuela Normal Rural “Raúl Isidro Burgos” of Ayotzinapa, which took place on September 26th, 2014 in Iguala, Guerrero; the extra-judicial killing of 15 civilians by the Mexican Army which occurred in Tlatlaya, in Mexico State, on June 30th, 2014; the “serious violations” suffered by 49 female migrants found dead in Cadereyta, Nuevo León, in May 2012; and the disappearance, torture and homicide of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, between the 22nd and the 23rd of August, 2010. To name just some of the cases that acquired the most social and media attention in recent years.

The profile of a disappeared person in Mexico is that of a young person aged between 14 and 29 from the lower or middle classes. Of the 36 265 people who have disappeared in the country, 15 445 are young; which means that 42 percent of those who have disappeared were aged between 14 and 29; and of these young people forced to disappear, 10 204 are men and 5 341 women.

FIGURE 2
YOUTHS DISAPPEARED IN MEXICO (2006-2017)



Source: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (2018); Registro Nacional de Personas Extraviadas y Desaparecidas (2018), and Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos A.C. (2017).

Young people are the main victims of disappearance because their working capacity is pressed into tasks of forced labor such as: 1) human trafficking and the sex trade; 2) the illegal cultivation of marijuana and/or opium poppies; 3) the chemical manufacture of synthetic drugs; 4) the transporting of the drugs; 5) targeted killings inside and outside the dominated territory; and, 6) the illegal extraction of minerals, especially iron, which is exchanged on the black market for chemical precursors required in the production of methamphetamines (Franco Migues, 2018).

Conceptualizing disappearance and the disappeared

In judicial terms, disappearance is a crime that consists of “the arrest, detention, kidnapping or any other form of deprivation of liberty”; in fact, in the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the precision is made that this crime can be committed by “officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect consent or acquiescence of the Government” (ONU, 1993, p. 1), and in any case there is enforced disappearance when there is a refusal to disclose what has happened to the persons concerned or their whereabouts, or there is a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such people outside the protection of the law (p. 1).⁸

⁸ The first international acknowledgement of crimes of disappearance was made on September 20th, 1978, when the United Nations Organization (UN) published resolution 33/173 in which the General Assembly called upon governments of the United Nations to devote appropriate resources to searching for victims of enforced disappearance “and to undertake speedy and impartial investigations”; also to “ensure that the human rights of all persons, including those subjected to any form of detention and imprisonment, are fully respected”(ONU, 1978, p. 166). Since then, the enforced disappearance of persons has been recognized as a serious and flagrant human rights violation, which was reaffirmed by the United Nations in 1992 with the publication in resolution 47/133 of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, where it is

No person just disappears; they are made to disappear, and is therefore the victim of a crime, not just someone who is away or missing, as the Mexican State generally asserts. In this sense, disappearance is a crime that is not only permanent but also aggravated every day the person is not found; it is therefore imprescriptible, and as explained by Ferrándiz (2010), supposes per se “the absolute defencelessness of the victims” (p. 165).

A good deal of this international judicial recognition of disappearance and forced disappearance we owe to the struggle by the collectives of relatives of those “detained/disappeared”,⁹ who systematically denounced commission of this crime mainly in the military dictatorships of: Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Guatemala, to mention some of the cases that were brought to the UN Commission of Human Rights.¹⁰

A series of conceptualizations of a judicial-political type such as this should always be accompanied by socio-political and socio-historical discussions that can place the disappearances and the disappeared persons in frames of context and meaning that will make it possible to understand not only why such persons disappear (as explained above),

established that the systematic practice of such acts is of the nature of a crime against humanity.

Also in 1992, an International Convention was held on the Protection of All Persons against Enforced Disappearances where countries, including Mexico, agreed to create “mechanisms to prevent enforced disappearances and to fight against impunity with regard to the committing of this crime”.

⁹ A social and later analytical category used to name in Argentina all those who had been deprived of their liberty by the military dictatorship that ran the country from 1976 to 1983.

¹⁰ However, disappearance was a crime that was committed and recognized in the context of two historical events of great significance, World War I and World War II; in the second case there was particular emphasis on the practices of terror and domination used by the Nazis against the Jewish population, with the same activity repeated by the regimes of Franco in Spain and Mussolini in Italy. Another precedent of forced disappearance occurred some years prior in the Soviet Union, when it was used against dissidents or political opponents of the communist regime.

but also what are the social representations used to signify, name and represent both the disappearances and the disappeared.

This is an important point because every victim of forced disappearance has the right to have their dignity and personal integrity respected, but also every moment in history and every context gives a specific tint to the disappearance, both in socio-political and socio-cultural terms, as the connotation –sometimes rather generic– given to disappearance in treaties and international human rights legislation corresponds to a particular kind of disappeared person and no longer covers current forms of disappearance, which are outside the category of arrested/disappeared and refer to another type of disappearance orchestrated by organized crime and drug trafficking (Dulitzky, 2016), which is what happened in Colombia and is now happening in Mexico.

Robledo (2016) points out that disappearance and the disappeared should not be separated from the social life they are in, as it is in this framework that the actions taken by members of their family searching for them occur and the desire for justice is expressed, not just in the construction of their *memory mechanisms* (Souza, 2018), but also in the judicial-political and social-political struggle they engage in in order to gain recognition for: 1) the existence of the crime; 2) the innocence of their disappeared loved one; and 3) the incapacity of the State to deal with this humanitarian crisis.

Gatti (2017), one of the principal theorists on disappearance, created a conceptual genealogy to establish what is meant by “disappearance and speaking of someone as having disappeared. In his socio-historical reviews, following Mahlke (2017), he establishes that the ideal type of a disappeared person cannot only be considered judicial-penal, as criteria that are aesthetic, psycho-clinical, socio-political and socio-historical also apply.

The aesthetic refers to the universal representations showing what disappearance, the disappeared person, and the suffering created by these two elements in their families, mean; the images of mothers holding pictures of their disappeared loved ones against their chests are perhaps the most powerful representations, as well as the posters put up in public plazas or shared on Facebook or Twitter with the word “disappeared” (Franco Miguez, 2016).

Psycho-clinical is a reference to the forms taken by the psycho-social and psycho-emotional materialization of unresolved grief, the breaking off of a biographical process and the fragmentation of daily life that are generated after the disappearance. Here, it is the condition of the victims and their empowerment, that form the criterion for analysis applied to thinking of the disturbance and the effects that:

Continue in the survivors and their social surroundings, with their pain being assigned to the field of arguments and power relations in which forms of solidarity may be found but there may also be practices of stigmatizing and public rejection (Robledo, 2017, p. 21).

This process is closely connected to the socio-political, the space where the mobilization produced by public recognition of the absence and the inaccessibility of justice, is articulated; this is where, as noted by Butler (2016), “the destabilizing and democratizing nature of grief” (p. 45), help to make the tragedy and the pain it creates, visible.

In this sense, public demonstrations by families of the disappeared in Mexico, are not only actions demanding public attention but also actions of memory, as they do not end with gaining the public visibility that acknowledges the existence of the disappearances, because they also express the socio-historical causes that are causing them; which makes this component key for thinking about the causes linked to the committing of this crime in the past and in the present.

Most of the disappearances in Mexico in the past had political-ideological components; which means that it was mainly the Mexican State that made people disappear in the belief that their actions and thoughts represented a danger to the established political order.

In the period known as the “Dirty War”, which lasted through the nineteen sixties and seventies in Mexico, 532 cases of enforced disappearance are known to have occurred (CNDH, 2001); although the government has only acknowledged its participation in some of these acts, in which 275 persons were victims of this crime.

The current socio-historical scenario that has led to the disappearance of 36 265 persons in Mexico is one in which the presence and the predominance of organized crime is decisive to thinking of the

disappearances as a strategy of terror, and at the same time, thinking of the disappeared as victims of the violence involved in a war against organized crime, whose cauldron is not necessarily found in the field of politics and ideology but in a situation of *necropolitics* in which “violence is the most profitable business” (Valencia, 2016), because it flourishes in an intertwining of relations where *narco-power* and *narco-empowerment* are operated by a *narco-machine* (Reguillo, 2011), itself an instrument of violence, betting on dissolution of what’s human through the constant exercise of fear and terror practiced by organized crime in direct collusion with the State.

Therefore, as claimed by Gatti (2017), disappearance is “a catastrophe” because it implies not only a destabilization of social structure and fabric, but also of human relations that now have to reformulate presence as absence, life as death, all through narratives where the present simply cannot mix with the past because the disappeared person is “neither alive, nor dead: but disappeared”. This uncertainty not only leads to the production of permanent grief but also to the creation of struggles to keep the memory alive, and bring peace and justice on the basis of, and with the help of, the hope involved in the search.

Therefore, when speaking of disappearance and situating the disappeared, one cannot and should not ignore the context (aesthetic, psycho-clinical, social-political and social-historical) in which the person was made to disappear, as this is where the analytical key lies to understanding this deplorable deed not only as a crime (in judicial terms), or only as a condition (that of the disappeared person as a victim), but also as the expression of a social moment where the power of the State and/or the power of the *narco-machine* have established criteria of exclusion in which *necro-politics* operates, making the lives of some people rather than others more vulnerable and twisted; feeding schemes of terror which, as in the Mexican case, take the young as their principal victims.

In the specific case of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, the aesthetic, psycho-clinical, social-political and socio-historical criteria appear linked together to a particular reality in which the search in the field arose as a real possibility in a context in which the relatives had

recognized the violence and the violent people prior to the abduction of their treasures, but also knew their effects and actions. Searching for their disappeared loved ones in hidden graves in Sinaloa was for them –unlike other collectives– always an option they would have to take up already encumbered with other senses and meanings; for this reason it is no accident that they should be called *seekers* (*rastreadoras*) and the object of their searches: treasures, not just bodies.

Potentializing the search to face up to the disappearance

Irazuzta (2017) claims that the work of “making the disappeared appear again” is mainly rooted in agency of those searching, as “the disappeared” is a powerful figure because “in spite of the emptiness it evokes” (p. 141), it is not isolated from their history nor is identification made impossible, and the absence of the victim becomes “a ghostly presence, socially dense, exceptional in the course of any society’s life, active” (p. 142); thus, agency is produced in those who search, because it gives the catastrophe that they are suffering a new significance, as they activate new forms of association that make them emerge in the public space.

But before this agency is recognized, those who search experience a loss of potency that takes them through various landscapes that lead them, without their knowing it, to their rebelling; inspired by the *potency* of Spinoza (1977), Reguillo (2017) explains that *the rebellious landscapes* –collective expressions of rejection of the order of the system– emerge: “wherever people experience a loss of potency and are capable of naming –albeit vaguely– where this malaise comes from and can agree with others about this experience” (p. 53).

This desolate view of disappearances in Mexico not only explains the many reasons for which relatives of those who have disappeared, principally their mothers, join in the search, but also shows that the loss of their potency (vital pulse) is not only in the sadness caused by a disappearance but in the constant reiteration of the absence that provokes unending grief because the loved one cannot be found (Diéguez, 2016).

Mirna Nereyda, leader of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, told us that the creation of the group came as the result of the sum of individual tragedies suffered by each family; for example, she became a seeker

or searcher (*rastreadora*) on July 14th, 2014, the day her son, Roberto Corrales Medina, was forced to disappear by armed men who took him from his business located in the municipality of El Fuerte, Sinaloa.

That day, the word *disappeared* came into her life with a terrible force; creating a loss of potency, in Spinoza's sense, that paralyzed her body and her life until she learned –as the other members of Las Rastreadoras did– to name what hurt her. Until she learned that the search for her son, whom she found with her own hands three years later,¹¹ could only be conducted if she recovered the potency of her body.

The potency referred to, according to Irazuzta (2017), has a double link because it occurs in the body present here (that of the seeker) through the signifying of the body absent from here of the disappeared treasure, which creates a system of communication between them in which both potencies exchange the meanings that promote the agency that detonates in them the searching and the hoping.

Larrosa-Fuentes (2018), who has researched the use of the body as a symbolic screen in political contexts, explains that each body, by itself “communicates political opinions through its public adherence to this or that political project, but also through its body language, clothing, postures and more. Thus bodies become symbolic screens that project political ideas and opinions” (p. 164).

Although they are not essentially pursuing a political project, the collectives of relatives of those who have disappeared, like Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, do use their bodies and the ghostly manifestation of their disappeared loved ones –when they appear in photos, textiles or images printed on their clothes– as political tools, but also as forms of insurrection because when they decided to go in search for their children in hidden graves, what they did (and Las Rastreadoras continue to do) was to create a powerful communication device that helped other mothers to: 1) name their grief; 2) identify

¹¹ Mirna Nereyda found her son Roberto three years after his disappearance in a spot between the communities of Ocolome and Los Muros. She herself dug up her treasure from a hidden grave. Even though she had kept her promise to find him, Mirna still stayed on as head of Las Rastreadoras.

the potency of their bodies; and 3) activate their capacity for agency, which is considered to be activated every time they go out as a group to search for their disappeared treasures.¹² This notion of the body as a symbolic screen, and the recognition of political potency, make of the disappeared person:

A socially effective figure for establishing significant connections between the past and the present, and between these, and those who have disappeared, to mobilize society morally and politically and make the seeker a political subject proposing a fundamental criticism of society (Irazuzta, 2017, p. 148).

Calling themselves “treasure seekers”,¹³ implied a political vision of their action, as the bodies that members of the group would be looking for in hidden graves would not only project the bloodiness of the violence but also the process through which political action (looking for them in graves) removed them from the statistics of death and placed them on a plane of identification and would, as a result, show the ineffectiveness of the Mexican state in searching for the men and women who have disappeared.

On this subject Reguillo (2017) states that every landscape of insurrection passes through three stages: 1) Identification of the malaise that stops us from acting; 2) The accumulation and concentration of this malaise that come with the recognition that it is intolerable, and at the same time, articulate the capacity for collective naming and the meeting with others, with whom it is possible “to move from a state of sadness to one of happiness, with the potency to act”; and 3) Collective action where it is possible to mention “the forces that undermine the affections that make us persons” (p. 56). For her, “the connected multitude makes

¹² Most of the members of Las Rastreadoras joined the group after seeing Mirna Nereyda searching for her son in hidden graves (information obtained from personal talks with the author that took place in the field on the 19th of November 2017).

¹³ This nickname was also given to them by the journalist Javier Valdez, who was murdered on May 15th, 2017.

its presence felt” in this last expression. But as Reguillo explains, this is not enough without a desire to link the recovery of potency to the ability to rename the tragedy that will not go away.

We decided to get together as *rastreadoras* when we realized that we shared the same grief, and also the same indifference of the authorities ... because having a loved one forced to disappear in Sinaloa (in Mexico) means accepting you’re alone, as no authority, and not even society, is going to do anything for your disappeared loved one or for you; so what united us and still keeps us together is the desire to find our treasures ... to find them no matter how we do it (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).

This statement from Mirna Nereyda makes the desire that unites them as *rastreadoras* visible: locating their disappeared treasures; this is the activity that links each of their actions as a body that, in communicative terms, had learned that their tragedy was no longer a personal matter, but a collective problem, and this is what produced a very important subjective change for those who form the group, as they recognized themselves for the first time to be a part of a collective.

This recognizing oneself as part of a communion of pain (*communitas doloris*) implies breaking away from the inertia in which the malaise of sadness or grief has led us to break off communication or to isolate ourselves from society, and go on to a space where people recognize that their grief may be communicable, because, as suggested by Das (2008), based on Wittgenstein: “the statement ‘I’m hurting’ is not a declarative sentence aiming to describe a state of mind, it is a complaint” (p. 432), and this complaint –as explained by Diéguez (2016)– “far from making the pain incommunicable, encourages an encounter on the basis of a mutual recognition of each other in experiences of pain” (p. 50), but also through a desire, which in the case of Las Rastreadoras, is to search, hope and find.

This “searching in the field” to make the disappeared reappear as treasures has, without a doubt, been one of the most important communicative elements with Las Rastreadoras; but so is knowing that you are part of a *structure of feeling*, as it is called by Larrosa-Fuentes

(2018) –inspired by Raymond Williams–, a process through which bodies identify through communication with other bodies sharing similar experiences of life; being in Las Rastreadoras, as members declared in the interviews, made them accept that their disappeared treasures might be lying in hidden graves, and that this ought to be one way to find them: however, it also kept them united as a group, even though some of them already found their relative, because they feel the need to help others find their treasures, just as they (their fellow members) had helped them find theirs: “I’m still missing all the treasures of my sisters” said Rosario, who has been very skillful in the field finding graves.

Calling themselves *Las Rastreadoras* and naming those they are searching for “disappeared treasures”, implies a constant opposition to the predominant narrative in which the existence of the disappeared person is denied, either because for organized crime the victim is disposable or because for the State, they are only criminals or bodies in a ditch, but not people.

We decided to call our disappeared loved ones *treasures* because this is what they really are ... they are treasures that someone else decided to bury in the ground never to be found. They are treasures because each body that we find is the most precious thing for the family looking for it. We are seekers because we want to find our treasure ... so for us they are not just bodies found in a grave; they are treasures that were finally discovered by us to give them to their families (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).¹⁴

In this search, Mirna Nereyda showed –through her words and her actions– that calling those who have disappeared “treasures” is a political and highly symbolic matter; watching them articulate around an objective for which they use a number of forensic and technological aptitudes, made it possible to establish that their bodies, like nodes in a field of searches, propitiate the creation of a communication space that is strictly in opposition to the mortuary violence of searching in

¹⁴ This testimony was obtained during a search in the country conducted on November 19th, 2017; on that day, the collective found nine disappeared treasures.

a hidden grave, as every body found opens the possibility of meeting again and hoping.

When this happens, Las Rastreadoras make a point of saying “mission accomplished”, and this is when their insurrection located in a particular territory of Mexico makes sense to them, but it is also where the recovery of their lost potency occurs because every finding implies a renewal of the hope of getting their loved ones back, as this exhumed treasure is the result of “the work of making a disappeared person reappear” (Irazuzta, 2017). Since the group was started in 2014, Las Rastreadoras have located 128 treasures, of which 88 so far have been identified.¹⁵

FIGURE 3

LAS RASTREADORAS DEL FUERTE ON A FIELD SEARCH
(OCTOBER 19TH, 2017)



Source: The author.

Technologies of hope and techno-political search activities

Toret (2015) defined techno-politics as “the collective capacity for appropriating digital technologies for collective action” (p. 21) and maybe, when we think in these terms, we imagine the various technological applications and appropriations of social movements and

¹⁵ Figure up to January 31st, 2019.

uprisings like Occupy Wall Street, the 15-M anti-austerity movement in Spain, the Arab Spring, or #YoSoy132; but this collective capacity for appropriation also has micro-social manifestations that have an effect on collective action, and on many occasions these are not the reactions of young people but of adults not particularly involved in technologies who start by being forced to use some technologies for the first time and then go on to incorporate them into their lives when they find they cannot do without them.

Such is the case of the collectives of relatives of those who have disappeared in Mexico, as most of them are made up of grown women and men who had few to none techno-digital skills before the disappearance of their family member; which then led them to take these technologies in hand to turn them into devices for taking action and searching. In Las Rastreadoras, members of the group, as they explained in the interviews, used mobile phones or digital social networks (Facebook) very little or not at all before the disappearance of their loved one.

When their relative was forced to disappear everything changed as they had to find ways of communicating their tragedy, and neither the government nor the mass media provided spaces for them even to publish a photo of their disappeared person; so they learned to use Facebook to create a profile to help with the search; they taught themselves how to use WhatsApp to stay in touch as a group; and developed skills for reading maps on Google Maps; all with the aim of applying these abilities to the search for their disappeared loved ones.

“My life now is to search for all our treasures” one of Las Rastreadoras told us in the office the collective has in the city of Los Mochis, Sinaloa; she also mentions the various actions they have taken to coordinate the search in the field and the propagation of the search leaflets they design and share every day on their Facebook platform.

The office they have is small, and hanging on their walls as well as pictures of hundreds of disappeared treasures there are shovels, picks and metal tools used in the search for hidden graves. Among the technological possessions they have there is a computer they use to communicate their findings through Facebook; a GPS they use to add to the accuracy of the coordinates they are sent anonymously through

WhatsApp; and a camera with which they make a photographic and video record of their searches in the field.

The link between action and communication, as the concept of techno-politics explains, is seen in “the tactical and strategical use that is made of digital tools applied to organization, communication and collective action” (Toret, 2015; 36).

Avalos González (2018), suggests that, for this to happen, the technologies should be thought of as devices for taking action, which implies getting over the notion that they are “technical artefacts that work” and thinking of them rather as “elements that establish ideas, possibilities for action and processes of definition of all those who take part in political action” (pp. 77-78).

“The technologies we use and learn to use are those that help in finding the treasures”, said Mirna Nereyda, and their learning is not individual, but collective, as many of the communication technologies were learned after taking courses in digital tools for human rights defenders.

Their clear definition of the tactical and strategic use of the communication technologies, and the determination of which possible courses of action these might give them, they told us in the interviews, start with very basic questions like: “Can this help us with improving our searches? Could this work to get the leaflets on the men and women who have disappeared to reach more people?”.

At the center of their definitions is always the search and better communication between the members of the different “seekers” in the team; for example, the mobile phone is used to keep up with the searches in the field, as sometimes they cannot go themselves, but they know what is going on through the exchange in real time of audios, texts, photos and videos on the WhatsApp group they set up as a collective; however the collective capacity that they have developed for appropriation of the digital tools is centered on the desire that moves them as a group: the search for and finding of their treasures.

We have taken many courses for human rights defenders, as we now know that that is what we are; but what interests us as a group is to find ways of being able to see the coordinates we get sent, on the computer,

because some of them would be for inaccessible places or places being watched by the narco ... so we would ask, and now we know how to use Google Maps or Google Earth, and this way we have been able to refine the search because now we have learned from the computer how to identify differences in elevation of the ground ... this, for example, was also taught to us by families in other collectives who are also searching in the field (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).

The desired collective action, as Mirna Nereyda explained, consists of appropriating the technologies for searching in the field, work that makes it easier to identify possible locations for findings, but does not supplant the skill they have developed for: 1) identifying irregularities on the ground with the naked eye; 2) spotting branches and bushes that are not growing naturally in certain parts; 3) finding signs of criminal activity in the area searched; and 4) detecting the origin of fetid odors sometimes found on the plots of land they inspect.

In this sense, their technopolitical activities are concentrated on giving and showing information that may be useful for identifying all those treasures that are found in hidden graves by Las Rastreadoras; so they have chosen to transmit their searches in the field “live” through their Facebook platform.

A journalist who came with us on a search asked us why didn't we put everything we did up on Facebook, but the truth is we didn't know how to use these things and we hadn't even thought of it ... everything was more direct because we just communicated with the families and that was it; but she taught us how to do it and as a collective we saw it was a good idea ... we started with just the photos, then we added videos, and now we do live transmissions, and these especially have led to many families being able to identify their relative from what they see on the “Face” (Facebook) (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).

This technopolitical activity, explained by the leader of Las Rastreadoras, can also be thought of in terms of the notion of a “connected multitude”, which according to Toret (2015) is “the capacity to connect, assemble and synchronize, through technological and communication

devices, around specific objectives, the minds and bodies of a large number of individuals in sequences of time, space, emotions, behavior and languages” (p. 20); today, there is a network of contacts around Las Rastreadoras which not only follows their searches in real time, but also makes available to them their personal and collective intelligences to be employed in the processes of searching and recording.

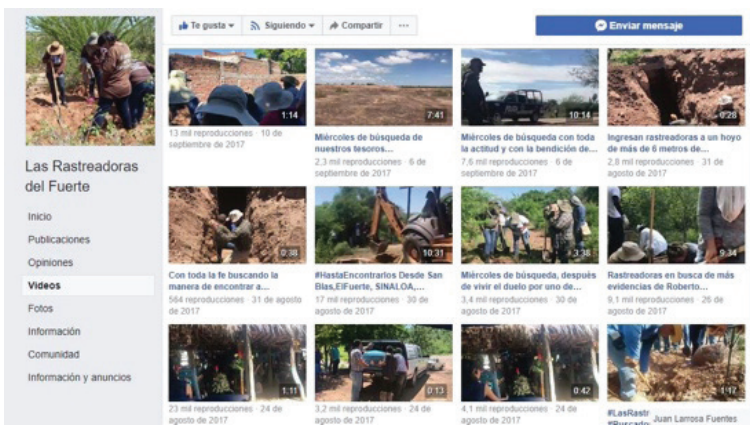
Some of the technologies they have been offered and been trained in the use of are: aerial and terrestrial drones; applications for identifying cavities in the subsoil; and programs to make maps and databases in order to systematize the graves and the treasures located in them.

Currently, Las Rastreadoras are designing a map with information on all their searches in the field, and a page where anyone who has lost a person can check the information on the data base they have built up over the years. This project arose from the interest of a group of experts in technology, and academics who had seen their transmissions on Facebook.

In this sense, as suggested by Avalos González (2018), communication technologies acquire meaning as devices for taking action when they are used through a strategic sense that implies a previous definition of the use of the device in terms of a determined end; in the case of Las Rastreadoras, this was a gradual process because it meant recognizing the scope of each technology and the particular advantage that could be derived from each of them; for example, in our observations in the field it was possible to see that recordings or taking photographs, and their subsequent sharing on digital social networks, stemmed from a logic where the first thing to do was to make the finding visible (the knowledge that a treasure had been found); then, recording the finding (the treasure had to be seen and well recorded) and then came the testimony that was socialized with others (who were not present in the search but present in the transmission): not only the finding or the features of the treasure that had been found, but also the reports to the authorities by explaining that the searches took place where the authorities had already been or in places they had been asked to look but never did. This report was essential because it also emphasized where the search was being conducted, making the authorities responsible for their safety there.

On their Facebook page, Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte have a collection of 31 videos that were recorded live during the searches in the field that they undertook. On average, every video is played between 6 and 7 thousand times, and receives from 200 to 300 comments. Most of these are mainly requests for information on the physical features or distinctive characteristics of the treasures found, and any details of clothing found with them. Some of the comments were made live during the broadcasts, but most of them were made over the next few days.

FIGURE 4
VIDEOS OF SEARCHES PUBLISHED ON FACEBOOK



Source: Facebook page of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte.

With the netnographic analysis that was made of this platform, and especially of the search videos, our aim was to understand: the narrative used in the videos; the interaction with users of the site, and the type of messages that were sent about the content, and the lived experiences that were shared by those watching online.

The narrative used in the videos always sought to create a sense of community around the searches, because –as Mirna Nereyda said– the recordings are made thinking of the families who have a loved one who has disappeared, though also of all those who might be moved by

the subject and might help with the diffusion of the work done by Las Rastreadoras.

The videos are also evidence that proves the Sinaloa authorities have been remiss in their work of searching for the disappeared; the videos provide incontrovertible evidence of the locations of the treasures found in hidden graves.

We learned that these recordings were very powerful proofs that the government was not doing its job which is why we had to go out and dig up the graves ... even if they say what is shown in the videos are lies ... when we put them on the Facebook we also create witnesses who can confirm what we find when we go on a search ... in fact, many families go to the public prosecutor and say they saw a treasure with particular features on our videos and so they are forced to give an answer (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).

Although the virtual presence provided by the medium makes it possible for them to interact through it, what Las Rastreadoras do is to read some of the messages during the live transmission but without giving complete answers, just partial replies, as they invite anyone who has more information or doubts to come to their office; that is, to see Rosario; because they cannot know if someone is telling them the truth or has just sent a message to check them out and spy on what they are doing: “so we can distinguish between someone who really has a disappeared person and someone who doesn’t”, Mirna explained.

One persistent element among the users who watch the videos is the constant requests for help with their own cases, seen in the comments they make that describe their disappeared loved ones in the hope that Las Rastreadoras might come across them in their searches. There are also frequent messages of support, with many of the comments praising the work and the courage of the collective.

The communicative capacity of Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, through their technological appropriations, seen in the recording, the diffusion and the distribution of these search videos is a key collective action in the search and identification of those who have disappeared in the north of Sinaloa.

On the basis of the foregoing we maintain that Las Rastreadoras are taking technopolitical action on a micro-social scale seeking to help reduce the loss of potency suffered for years by the families of those who have disappeared, and this they do by offering a capacity for agency and ways of facing up to their misfortune, but also through the hope that is implied in the finding of their treasure; this led me to consider their use of such devices for taking action, or having recourse to them, as technologies of hope, whose appropriation implies the symbolic function of bodies (those of the searchers and those of the searched for) as a form of political action that “makes the disappeared reappear”, not from a notion of absence in death as much as an action of presence in life.

The opportunity to see the searching “live” also makes it possible to reconfigure the social and media representation that exists of the relative of a disappeared person, as, far from being an ailing figure, those who appear turn out to be women and men who have recovered potency making themselves agents of their own searches and procedures for obtaining justice, which they do without forgetting that “to search for the disappeared in graves” is, as it should be, an obligation of the Mexican State.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

We asked at the beginning of this research, how the communicative and technopolitical practices of the collective Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, may amount to new ways of naming the disappeared and how this new representation of them questions the narrative imposed by the State on the topic.

We can say from what has been expounded in this article so far, that the narrative constructed by Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte, by means of their technopolitical practices, not only questions the official narrative but also clearly shows that it does so because their insurrection in a particular place is an important collective element for more families to recover their lost potency, which was taken away from them with the disappearance of their relative and, at the same time, they discover that their pain can be communicated both within and outside the *comunitas*

that allowed them not just to name it, but also to activate through it a capacity for collective naming that brings them closer to others who suffer from the same absence of a relative and the neglect of the State.

The communication of this pain also leads to the communication of hope and the re-naming of the horror through granting dignity to the body exhumed from the secret graves, which is one of the most powerful counter-narratives they possess as a collective and is fixed in their technopolitical actions when it is seen that the videos they transmit live on Facebook become extensions of the search for other families watching a broadcast who have found their disappeared loved one.

These broadcasts make it possible to see the institutional indifference the victims of disappearance suffer from, but also the recovery of the potency of those who find the “reappeared disappeared” person, who comes to be seen as a treasure claiming not just identity but also justice. Following Irazuzta (2017), this double link makes agency appear as a reaction to the systematic violation of human rights, but also, as Reguillo (2017) would say, expresses a landscape in rebellion where the technologies of hope become devices for taking action focused on the strategic searching of the men and women who have disappeared.

There is still a lot to understand and much work to be done to properly comprehend these technological appropriations in the collectives of relatives of the disappeared in Mexico, and at the same time, connect these political-communicative actions by virtue of what could or could not be transmitted among those sharing these communicative expressions. This paper is a spur to keep promoting this kind of work in the field of communications, which still has a long way to go in understanding the representation and self-representation of the victims of violence in Mexico.

The challenge is to think that the disappearances, in the plural, matter to us because they involve a “disappeared self” facing these two choices: apathy or hope. The first separates us from the disappeared ones and increases the stigma laid upon them; whereas the second extends a humanitarian bridge between the two parties, making it possible to understand their actions of searching as political acts; here lies the force of the technopolitical message put out by Las Rastreadoras with the use they make of the technologies of hope in which their bodies and

those of their disappeared treasures work as symbolic screens that initiate acts of rebellion and a recovery of their potency:

Life for the Rastreadoras is to search, this has become our life. We are not just one group, we are a family and this family is still missing many treasures. I come on the searches to find treasures, that's what I do every Wednesday and Sunday because this is my life. I found Roberto, my son, but I am still missing the treasures of my partners ... My Roberto is theirs and every one of theirs is mine, and until we have found them all I shall not stop looking ... and this is what we want to communicate with everything we do (Mirna Nereyda, search leader).

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