

The Tweets that Spoiled the Party

A Mexican experience of how social media gives a voice to people in uncertain times

by Mariel García Montes

If you were a live, conscious individual before the year 2000, it is likely that your heart jumped with a hint of unexplainable excitement when, after years of talk, it was time for the Millennium celebration.



Original image by Niklas Pivic, at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/44124300615@N01/25957602/>

A “hint of unexplainable excitement”. Like the one you get when it is about to be your birthday. On that day, you will look more or less the same you did before; your ideas won’t radically change, and life will go on as normal. But it still sounds like something special, doesn’t it?

A few days ago, one of the events that cause these hints of unexplainable excitement finally took place in Mexico, after having been discussed for decades. On the 15th and 16th of September of 2010, Mexico celebrated the 200th anniversary of the start of its independence war.

Where does this hint of excitement come from? We aren’t talking about silver glasses with ‘2000’ on them, or about lots of birthday gifts.

It comes from education. In primary school, you learn as a Mexican child that you can be proud of Mexico because it managed to get its act together and fight for independence from Spain. It is independent. You are independent. [Eat!](#) [Celebrate!](#)

There is something, however, that people didn’t learn in school: that the 200th anniversary would take place in the middle of an armed conflict that respects no institutions, no individuals and no agreements. That it would be antagonized by the difficulty of finding meaning in something greater than everyday worries.

As you read this, there is a Mexican mother grieving someone your age. The cause of his premature death? A drug cartel fight. There is a Mexican teenager who cannot go out at night

anymore, since she doesn't know if she'll make it back home. There is a friend of yours who didn't get hired after the interview, and that will join the ranks of a cartel instead. His life expectancy doesn't go beyond three years from now. There is a town where people check online social networks for information on shoot-outs before going out to work to know what roads to avoid. To these people, 200 years don't matter 'just because'.

The 'war' against narcotraffic, the most important topic in the life of Mexico for the last four years, has cost just under 30,000 lives of military, civilians, government officials and drug dealers. On a national scale, perhaps it doesn't sound like many people – but that's one murder a day for 82 years. The number is close to the total population of a small country like Monaco.

Those 30,000 deaths, along with daily scenes of violence and uncertainty, have taken a toll on Mexican society. A toll that the press has, for the most part, stopped talking about. Those notes aren't worth being murdered over. For this reason, millions of Mexican people turn to social networks to speak out loud.

They want their concerns to be heard. Here is an opportunity for you to listen.

If you take a close look to the online postings about this celebration, you can listen to a thousand reflections that came with each minute of party. Should we be celebrating in a year in which the war against narcotraffic has reached its bloodiest point? Is it safe to celebrate, now that we know that the narcotraffic is willing to take civilians' lives as a response to the government? Is there anything left of the moral foundations of the country we created now that so many are just shooting each other?



This screenshot was taken on Twitter, the most widely used micro-blogging service in Mexico. It shows a message posted on the first day of the celebration by a young Mexican man who is into technology. He studies computer engineering at university, is 33 years old, and loves to play football. His message? *"There is nothing to celebrate"*.

I must have heard the same opinion in every bicentennial-related conversation I heard. And truth is people have reasons to show this pessimism.

Hoy al ver la ciudad vacía en viernes por la noche mientras escuchaba más historias de matanzas rompí en llanto, literalmente.

1:50 AM Sep 18th via Tweetie for Mac

"Today when I saw the empty city, on a Friday night, while listening to more stories of killings, I broke down in tears. Literally."

I wish I could tell you that her reaction is only created by watching the news for too long. The truth, however, is that this young girl lives in Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city in the country, also known for being the last stop of cocaine on its way to the US. Some of her other posts talk about technology, mention shootings, and describe life in Juarez as "her extreme sport". Her generally upbeat tone was anything but upbeat when she posted this message a couple of days after the celebration.

It is hard to stay upbeat when most of the news in your country deal with a conflict that doesn't seem to be getting any better.

Ojalá que sí viva México, porque creo que se esta muriendo desde hace algunos años...

12:16 PM Sep 15th via web
Retweeted by 45 people

Reply Retweet

"Hopefully Mexico will indeed have a long life, because I think it has been dying for a few years", said a journalist on the same service. 45 people reposted his message on their account.

But it is not only middle-aged media men who notice that things aren't going right. Even the youngest ones dedicate some of their voice to the understanding of the happenings.

La narcoguerra empaña el bicentenario de México <http://bit.ly/cdiYgt>

8:56 PM Sep 16th via TweetDeck

Reply Retweet

This brightly-colored message was posted by a high school student in eastern Mexico. She likes writing about things she eats and school. She spends a lot of time chit-chatting with her friends. She barely ever posts political tweets. However, during the celebration, she posted the link to a Spanish article on how the *narcowar* 'darkened' the bicentennial holiday.

The gray film that covered the celebrations, as described by that article, points to the main concern that everybody had, leaving morality aside: security. Was it safe enough to celebrate

the country in a year when the war had seen plenty of bombings and murders in public spaces?

pero si pedimos todos estar alertas mañana en
#reynosafollow

September 15, 2010 12:16:18 AM CDT via web

“We ask everyone to be alert tomorrow”, said a Twitter user before the celebrations started. The post was marked with an identifying code – a ‘hashtag’ in Twitter parlance. The one he used, #reynosafollow, is used by hundreds of people in the Mexican city of Reynosa to mark, and so share, information about situations of danger, such as shoot-outs, or happenings that authorities do not recognize, and that media do not report about.

Just as I wrote this article and reloaded my Twitter page, I saw that, three minutes ago, somebody posted a #reynosafollow message about a new shooting that was taking place then.

The security plans for the celebrations were talked about on the media. Hundreds, if not thousands, of policemen were standing in celebration sites for as long as things lasted. Small children that walked with their parents looked at them silently, thinking thoughts we can only wonder about.

The news about a violence-free bicentennial party made media around the world. And the personal pages of thousands of Mexicans who wrote about it.

se termino el puente Bicentenario, a seguir trabajando por
México, ojala los llamados al dialogo sean reales.....buenas
noches a todos

7:46 PM Sep 19th via web

“The Bicentennial holiday is over. It’s time to keep working for Mexico; hopefully all calls for dialogue will be real... Good night to all”, said a businessman, along with other Mexicans who expressed relief at the apparent lack of violence on the occasion.

A collective, but silent, “we made it”. Both on and offline.

We made it through the most expected date of the country. The six people I have quoted above, me, and the other 110 million Mexicans, who have voices like the ones you saw above.

The celebrations are over. But #Reynosafollow, violence in Juárez, uncertainty in a country that doesn’t understand the conflict unfolding within its borders? Those things aren’t over, and it seems certain that social media will continue to provide a barometer, a sounding board, and, quite literally, a lifeline, for people caught in their clutches.

For you, social media can be an opportunity to listen to their voices. Use it well.