

Leonardo Curzio\*

# The Role of the Media in the 1985 and 2017 Earthquakes

To my colleagues JCH, EM, and MCT, with whom I went through not one, but several earthquakes.

"We have to report what's going on; whoever is afraid to can leave now; we're staying because people are waiting for us."

JOSEFINA CLAUDIA HERRERA  
News director of *Enfoque*



Imagen/Excélsior TV

## A New Opportunity

Not every city in the world has had as many opportunities to redefine its future as our country's capital. The last, devastating earthquake once again gave us the opportunity to rethink our circumstances in four fundamental spheres: the way this city is governed and our level of civic culture; the way we build and appropriate the public space; the information we have about risks; and our culture *vis-à-vis* civil protection.

It is a good idea to take these elements into consideration in the much-needed review of what happened on that September 19 afternoon and in its aftermath. I maintain that the communications media, supplemented in this case by social media, did not limit themselves to covering what happened that day —when, by the way, at no time did broadcasting cease—but also documented the full process. All of this had an enormous impact on the way the event and its consequences were covered. Naturally, many lessons have been learned from past experiences, and others are still to be learned. I'll begin looking in reverse order at the four factors that should be rethought.

## Civil Protection

An old proverb says that you must make a virtue out of necessity. After the devastating 1985 earthquakes, Mexico City discovered that, despite its long history of earthquakes, just like in many other spheres of government activity, it had not developed an effective mechanism for saving lives by alerting the population sufficiently in advance of a big quake. We also did not have a universal civil protection culture with regard to building regulations; and to this, we must add corruption, which makes it possible to build using low-quality materials in high-risk areas.

The population had not really taken on board a protocol of civil protection in their homes or businesses, much less in schools. We lived, literally, like we had in previous centuries when big cities were exposed to natural catastrophes without enjoying the elements to mitigate their impact or reduce the risk to people's lives.

In 1985, the media did not act in a coordinated fashion because there was no clear mechanism of how to respond to the emergency. Each media outlet did what it thought would be the most useful. Also, the government response was chaotic and even contradictory. Officials did not even know how to classify or organize international aid, and the

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deployment of federal forces irritated rather than helped a population enraged by governmental incompetence.

The experience was so harsh and so full of lessons that the Mexican state, so loathe to creating modern administrative apparatuses, designed various mechanisms to predict and deal with an earthquake emergency. The first thing was to create scientifically respectable institutions that could nurture decision-making and disseminate timely information to the public. The National Seismological System (ssn, <http://www.snn.unam.mx/>), created September 5, 1910 as part of our university, deserves special mention. Over the years, it has become a point of reference. We also have to mention the implementation of the seismic alert system, a civil protection siren system, which, even with its breakdowns and some mistakes, has become a very effective mechanism for giving the population advance warning of an impending earthquake, a warning that can make the difference between life and death.<sup>1</sup>

## Information

The media have become effective conveyors of this information and the alert, which is truly crucial when an earthquake is about to hit. They also play a very important role in the continuous dissemination of procedures and civil protection protocols that the population should follow; for prevention, at the time of the emergency; and in the first hours after an earthquake. In addition, the media disseminate emergency numbers to deal with issues like gas leaks, people buried under rubble, and in general, everything that must be done in the critical moments of an emergency.

One of the most complicated things is planning information —what should be reported and how it should be presented. At times when people are very nervous, coordination of all the members of the system is crucial

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for ensuring valid information. It is equally important to plan in uncertain circumstances, in which broadcasting could last indefinitely, something that requires an intelligent, functional logistical chain, since no one knows when events will end and what working conditions will be, since power outages could occur or telecommunications could fail. Rounds are organized; risk areas are assigned; teams are relieved; and exhausting watches are implemented. It is no simple matter: everything is done on the fly without any certainty about the magnitude and impacts of the quake.

These are not minor issues, although many of us take them for granted. But this long learning process bore fruit in the September 7 and 19, 2017 earthquakes despite the feeling of helplessness and disorientation we all feel after the Earth shakes, even those who have been through several quakes, including the one in 1985. The September 19, 2017 quake left its mark because of its magnitude, but the city showed that, with information, it can become more resilient.

The media also contributed to channeling humanitarian aid. It is essential that human or material support be delivered in a short time. We should note that in the last earthquake, the social media noticeably and effectively complemented the work of the traditional media in requesting volunteer support, food, medication, tools, and other materials, and also in cutting off aid from a place that had already received it and redirecting it to another where it was needed.

The possibility of keeping people informed about everything that was going on in the city led most of the important media (radio and television) to deliver on-going 24/7 coverage. It has been severely criticized as well, due, for example, to the way that certain radio stations and particularly certain television networks covered the “rescue” of a non-existent little girl (“Frida Sofía”) who was supposedly under the rubble of a school in the southern part of Mexico City. I disagree with those who say this was an attempt by a corporation to try to create some kind of *telenovela* in the midst of the events.

Everyone has their own resources, but I must say that live coverage with absolutely no certainty about what is really going on or might happen leads journalists to improvise with more or less accuracy. I was fortunate in sharing the first three hours after the earthquake with two exceptional journalists, Mónica Garza and Hannia

Novell, and I think that what is broadcast to the public should strictly be what is known. It's true: in those moments, everything is an approximation, nerves, and the hope of having good news to impart, not because of any spirit of manipulation or sentimentalism, but because of the very human hope of finding someone alive. That mixture of impotence and hope that thousands of people demonstrated on the streets of Mexico City and that led them to help their fellows is also experienced in a television studio.

Going back to the issue of "Frida Sofía," it was a mistake not to verify "her" identity, but the idea that broadcasting the story was an attempt to manipulate people's feelings to get higher ratings seems profoundly misguided. All media try to get exclusives or scoops, and therefore, it is perfectly conceivable that, given the remote possibility that a little girl might be found alive, the company in question (Televisa) would try to keep the story on the screen. They lost the bet, but that does not prove bad journalism, since they did have an official source—which also was mistaken. Just like the population at large, the media's approach to reality is literally made on the ground, in the moment; that is, they have no advantage in terms of time or anything operational. They are in the field just like the rest of the actors under the public eye, since millions of people were following their broadcasts on that day. For me, the case of "Frida Sofía" is simply a mistake in coverage, and that's all.

## Information about Risks and Dangers

One of the main things Mexico City lacks is information about the present and future use of the land. This leads to an almost absolute lack of certainty about the future of the neighborhoods and towns. Anything can happen: from the construction of a 27-story building next door to the university, to creating a mall in a town that has no means of access or egress. The logic of the market and the interest of developers have made Mexico City one of the planet's most chaotic urban centers. Experience indicates that, despite advances in creating a risk atlas, access to it was restricted.<sup>2</sup> Fate would have it that every September 19, Mexico commemorates National Civil Protection Day and holds a huge earthquake alert test, flying flags at half-mast to honor the victims of the 1985 quake. This

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means that politicians commonly talk about civil protection on that day. On the day of the 2017 earthquake, I was hosting a morning radio news program (the first broadcast of *Enfoque* [Focus], on Stereo 100 and Radio 1000), and I asked Mexico City Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera if the risk atlas would be made public. A few hours before the devastating quake, he assured me that it could be consulted on line. The information is finally available, as is an important geophysical study by the UNAM (the topographical risk map of Mexico City), but a fundamental weakness was clearly illustrated by the 2017 earthquake. I hope this lesson remains writ large in the historic memory and that, starting now, every citizen who purchases a home knows the level of risk he/she is exposed to.

The city will continue to grow in a disorderly fashion; that is, the interests of real estate companies, so closely linked to the capital's political class, will continue to prevail over those of the public. It is not reasonable to think that we will do things differently now, but, even so, the hope that our city has the aim of changing after the earthquake encourages me. A few years ago, I was reading an introductory study of the history of the city that said that few capital cities have squandered as much cultural and architectural heritage as ours has. The El Colegio de México's inauguration in the 1970s led many to fantasize about a well-urbanized southern part of the city, dominated by culture. Today, the road up to the Ajusco area, where the college is located, is a human, ecological, and aesthetic failure.

In the western part of the city, we have the most widely known—but by no means the last—case of urban collapse: Santa Fe. Originally planned as the modern expansion of the city, today it is a choked area, lacking in attractive spots (except for malls) and with serious urban management problems. It is the most recently built up part of the city, but it is not healthy. While in the Ajusco area, creeping squatting has gobbled up the ecological

area, in Santa Fe, voracious developers in open complicity with local governments (from Manuel Camacho Solís [1988-1993] to the current administration) have ended up killing the goose that laid the golden egg. It is a strange area that tries to look like Houston with infrastructure that nobody would envy in Piedras Negras, Mexico. It's an urban model that should not be repeated, but the city is rushing toward collapse because we lack a model that includes four essential elements: public space, social cohesion, ecology, and mobility.

The first step in establishing this is to designate someone responsible for the use of the land, like in any serious city. Neither the Legislative Assembly nor the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (Seduvi) have been able to show that they defend the public interest. Suspicions of corruption during every reclassification of land use are practically a certainty. We urgently need an autonomous technical body with an enormous, transparent mock-up of land use and a vocation for creating the best city possible, similar to the one that exists in Singapore. Never again must decisions about land use be left to politicians on the payroll of the real estate companies.

The second step is for the Economic and Social Council to convince private business of its predatory model's irrationality. Today, real estate developers are perceived as enemies of progress for the city. Every time they announce new investments, the citizenry trembles in fear because their activities become declarations of war against residents instead of being seen as opportunities for progress. Private business must realize that social responsibility starts by behaving in such a way that you are not seen as a predator.

## Reconstruction

Nowhere is it written that we will make the most of the opportunity that has opened up to us. People are already talking about disaster sites being included in plans for a gigantic speculative manoeuvre. Cities' decline is not a story put about by doomsayers. It's a reality, and if we do not correct our path, our city—that irritates us so very much today—will become one of the worst places on the planet to live.

One important lesson we learned from the 1985 earthquake involves how reconstruction is handled. The pro-

cess had very precise stages: first, the risk to each of the buildings affected was assessed. This was not a simple procedure due to the enormity of the damage. The affected buildings were classified into three major categories: those without serious damage that required repairs to their exteriors; those requiring major intervention, but could continue to be used; and finally, those that were uninhabitable because they posed a risk for both owners and neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

The information was uploaded to a platform operated under the aegis of a commissioner for reconstruction, Ricardo Becerra, whose presence, aided by that of distinguished citizens, guaranteed that reconstruction funds would be handled in a transparent, non-partisan way. The overall amount came to a little over Mex\$8 billion, and the Mexico City legislature completely arbitrarily decided to put a group of legislators in charge of monitoring how they were dispensed —this decision, by the way, was challenged in court by the opposition. The resulting scandal was so huge that both Becerra and Sub-commissioners Mauricio Merino, Katia D'Artigues, and Fernando Tudela resigned in protest due to what was clearly a non-transparent handling of city resources and the fact that this implied a clear risk that benefits to earthquake victims could be used to create political clientele; unfortunately, this is typical of the way Mexico City is governed. Finally, all this was reversed amidst generalized discredit and indignation.

This lesson will have to be learned by a capital that has the country's most expensive local legislature and a weak administrative apparatus dominated by the power of its legislators. ▀M

## Notes

**1** The project began in 1989 with the Seismic Alert System for Mexico City (SAS), consisting of 12 earthquake sensor stations distributed along the Guerrero coast. This system pioneered the service worldwide, issuing the first alert on September 14, 1995. At first, it was played on the radio and on loudspeakers situated in schools and housing projects; later an app for cellular phones was designed; and beginning in 2015, sirens were attached to light posts throughout the city. [Editor's Note.]

**2** Since the days after the 2017 earthquakes, an updated risk atlas is available at <http://www.atlas.cdmx.gob.mx/>. [Editor's Note.]

**3** A color was assigned to every level of damage, like a stoplight; green was for those with the least damage and red for those in the worst conditions. [Editor's Note.]