

Feminist techno politics, multi-field struggles and the collapse of walls. A Network Ethnography of #8M2021 in Mexico

Tecnopolítica feminista, contiendas multicampo y derrumbamiento de muros. Una etnografía en red del #8M2021 en México

<http://dx.doi.org/10.32870/Pk.a12n22.719>

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Received: November 14, 2021

Accepted: February 14, 2022

ABSTRACT

In this paper we present the results of the analysis of the feminist mobilizations that occurred in Mexico around March 8, 2021 from the follow-up of three hashtags that articulated a series of technocommunicative actions of socio-digital intervention and discussion: #LeyOlimpia, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles. The objective was to show the deployment of these forms of technopolitics through a network ethnography, which allowed us to identify nodes, actors, nuclei of relationships and key narratives. Faced with political and social contexts of violence, normalization and impunity, through multi-field struggles, feminist actions name and make visible overlapping problems that are part of an urgent agenda, breaking into online and offline spaces with demands to challenge power. The results allow us to reflect on the “walls” in the face of protests.

Keywords

Feminist technopolitics;
Network Ethnography;
Technocommunicative
Actions; Power

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RESUMEN

En este artículo presentamos los resultados del análisis de las movilizaciones feministas ocurridas en México alrededor del 8 de marzo de 2021 a partir del seguimiento de tres hashtags que articularon una serie de acciones tecnocomunicativas de intervención y discusión sociodigital: #LeyOlimpia, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador y #TomaLasCallesNoCalles. El objetivo fue mostrar el despliegue de estas formas de tecnopolítica a través de una etnografía en red que nos permitió identificar nodos, actores, núcleos de relaciones y narrativas clave. Frente a contextos políticos y sociales de violencia, normalización e impunidad, mediante lo que proponemos denominar contiendas multicampo, las acciones feministas nombran y visibilizan problemas superpuestos que forman parte de una agenda urgente de interpelación al poder en los espacios en y fuera de línea. Los resultados nos permiten reflexionar sobre los muros ante las protestas.

Palabras clave

Movilizaciones feministas;
etnografía digital;
acciones
tecnocomunicativas;
poder

INTRODUCTION

This article is part of the research project Generation, political subjectivity and activism in the post-#YoSoy132¹ scenario, which aims at analyzing contemporary activism in Mexico. It represents a first stage of broader research, which entails the exploration of case studies of political activism made visible through socio-digital narratives, set in a context of pandemic which took place during the 2020-2021 period. A decade after the cycle of global mobilizations initiated by the Arab Spring, in addition to the movement of the outraged, feminist demonstrations in Mexico have played a leading role in these demonstrations, which is reflected in the effervescence and public visibility they have achieved.

In terms of territorialization, through an approach from the coordinates of meaning of digital ethnography and social network analysis, we explore the feminist demonstrations intertwined with International Women's Day 2021 (#8M2021), as part of a process of analysis and historical-cultural interpretation of the construction of political subjectivity with a gender perspective that makes the discursive dispute over systemic, structural and symbolic subjections visible in different social fields where violence against women has accrued and is outrageous in a number of ways.

History

The message “It's for them. For all of us” is shared along with a photograph widely disseminated in the context of 8M 2021 in Mexico, which shows a girl floating in the air flying a kite with the backdrop of a security wall in front of the National Palace in

¹ This project receives funding from the Research and Postgraduate Division of the Universidad Iberoamericana for the period 2020-2022.

downtown Mexico City, tapped with the names of murdered women and a huge phrase of which only the word femicide can be seen in full (see Image 1).

Image 1. It is for them. for all of us



4:18 PM · Mar 8, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Source: Tinky Winky (2021).

This photograph can be interpreted as a symbol of condemnation, history and redefinition of media narratives, which also transmits affection (Butler, 2010) and a testimonial, prefigurative and poetic slogan of what happened in a State that follows the logic of caring for monuments and not for bodies; a moment of resignification on behalf of the victims of disappearance and violence.

It is also a sign of the weariness and demand for justice, as it makes the appropriation of the safeguarding walls, placed in the National Palace prior to March 8, 2021, visible, where the women's collective "Vivas Nos Queremos" decided to turn the fences into a memorial for the victims of femicide, widely taken up in social networks.

According to Cerva (2020), feminists share a double situation of indignation in the face of violence and the lack of attention from the State, which leads them to generate alternative strategies that impact the public, private and now the digital area. This explains part of what has led, from academic analysis, to pay attention to feminist protests occurring in digital spaces in Mexico (on the specific case of #8m, see for example García-González and Bailey Guedes, 2020; Alfaro-Beracoechea et al., 2022).

Undoubtedly, the online dimension has boosted the modes of action and communicational impact in public life (and therefore in politics), causing protest activities to cease to be isolated events. This is possible because the platforms associated with the internet, wireless communications, digital media and a series of social software tools have caused the development of omnidirectional communication networks (Contreras, 2019) that expand the public space (Rodríguez, 2020). Therefore, since the dynamization and growth of these technologies, sociodigital networks and platforms have become increasingly relevant.

Latin America has positioned itself as the region with the highest participation in social networks globally (Acosta, 2018). In this context, within the online social media ecosystem, Twitter has become one of the most important communication spaces in current politics (Maranon et al., 2018), by redefining activism through one of its main features: the hashtag, which allows the organization of content through the categorization of information (Gelpi, 2018). It is a proven tool for the expression of the political mood from micro-stories (Lara, 2018).

It allows the user to be a current person, to feel that he/she has presence, that he/she is interconnected and that he/she is heard (Menéndez, 2011). According to Acosta (2019), the digital space becomes a place for participation and discussion of the public; it is presented as a new way, in which citizenship takes on a different value in terms of activism and deliberation on public affairs. Therefore, according to Ávalos (2019), the technological variable has become a fundamental element of the political production of activism.

According to Burgos (2016), the narrative can be fixed in the imaginaries of people in the present; that is, immediate actions are those that may be seen and, although they are then absent, it is possible for them to return. “The narrative function, today, means, at least in the sense that should interest the social communicative practices proper to citizenship, exercise of rights and expressive practices of citizens” (González, 2015, p. 4).

In this context, the cycle of global mobilizations of the last decade has implied a change in organizational, performative and collective action forms. According to Tarrow's (1998) perspective, “a cycle is a stage that opens and closes certain mobilization repertoires, which respond to certain conditions of opening or closing of the structure of political opportunities” (Tamayo, 2019, p. 52). Feminist activism has been very important during these years in the public space and has generated great changes in organization, communication and action regarding the deployment of tactics in socio-digital networks. Thus, we place ourselves in the perspective of technopolitics for the analysis of feminist mobilizations (Reverter, 2001 and 2013; Ricaurte, 2015; Rovira, 2018; Natansohn and Paz, 2019).

Violence against women is expressive, as Segato (2013) points out, and can only be understood in terms of the power exercised by the State, in this case absent, which allows for impunity. The systematic violence exercised on women's bodies and that erupts in the form of femicide, rape, harassment, punishment for abortion, etc., contains a pedagogy of cruelty, which is “exercised on women's bodies and essential to forge

subjects docile to the market and capital” (Segato, 2013, p. 56). This is the violence named, denounced, made visible through feminist mobilizations in the last decade globally and in Latin America.

With this context as a starting point, in this article we analyze the movements that took place around the commemoration of #8m2021 in Mexico, an ephemeris overflowing with disputes due to the accumulation of violence mentioned above. From the selection of three hashtags appearing in this issue, #LeyOlimpia, #NingúnVioladorSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles, we can see the complexity of feminist activism in the socio-digital space, a new aesthetics and culturalization of political practices, the linking of their forms of direct action and representation to the idea of cultural and political counter-information (Lago, 2015).

Method

The methodological proposal implemented in this research is based on an ethnographic approach in which we do not consider a general theoretical framework, but rather both the pre-existing theoretical resources (stated throughout the text) and those that are constructed (as part of the analysis) derive from fieldwork and interpretation strategies.

In specific terms, faced with the challenge of the massiveness of information in digital spaces, the methodological intervention was maximized with an adaptation of network ethnography (Howard, 2002) that stipulates the need to incorporate visualizations of social network analysis to strengthen the starting point of ethnographic fieldwork in digital media and, with it, face diverse challenges: the massiveness of existing online information, the identification of structures and relationships in the framework of decentralized sociodigital memberships, and the need for strategies to generate qualitative samples at the beginning of the inquiries.

Moreover, the networks visualized within the framework of the ethnographic approach allow researchers to elucidate both their own position and that of potential whistleblowers in relation to the rest of the community, with the advantage that it is a type of analysis that regularly assigns ordinal values to the norms of trust and reciprocity surrounding social actors (Howard, 2002).

This is supplemented by the presentation of images as a qualitative strategy that faces challenging panoramas of questions that do not have calculable answers, among which appear the borders and bridges among communities, the definition of relevance of central nodes in different spaces of the network and the relational particularities of each scenario (Venturini et al., 2019). In this direction, the insertion of screenshots of representative tweets supplements the qualitative inquiry through visual expressions of demonstrations, that are typical of the culture of ubiquitous mediations (Aguado, 2020), relevant for the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon in a broader sense.

On this basis, in this article we present several advances in the exploration of Mexican feminist demonstrations taking Twitter as a starting point, awaiting a second

multiplatform and connective stage of ethnographic immersion. By understanding these expressions as part of a heterogeneous historical-cultural process, the performative constellations in the time of the now, disintermediated and prefigurative (Rovira, 2019), are agglutinated in transversal and overlapping disputes that we have characterized sociologically (already in an interpretative exercise derived from the research) as multi-field contests; that is, in the search for a scenario of analysis taken from a significant date, what we found were disputes overlapping in various fields and social trajectories.

For the inquiry herein, derived from the qualitative view of the different socio-digital expressions based on a flexible, inductive and interpretative design (Mendizábal, 2006), three of these social fields were chosen, understood as scenarios of confrontation also against multiple walls: 1) the political-legislative, in the plane of digital violence; 2) the political-partisan, regarding the patriarchal pact; 3) the urban public space and the gender gap in the nomenclature of the city, represented by #LeyOlimpia, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles, respectively.

In terms of social network analysis, we condensed each of the inquiries into a methodological effort to locate relational structures to account for particular political essences, the exact and the indeterminate, hence after varied tests in the conformation of the databases, the different types of nodes, as well as in the forms of spatialization, we put in evidence the relevance of two particular strategies.

#LeyOlimpia was worked through a perspective of social network analysis and actor-network theory (Latour, 2008), in line with previous discussions on this interrelationship (Venturini et al., 2019; Pedraza and Rodriguez, 2019). In contrast, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles were analyzed using network reduction techniques proposed by Borge-Holthoefer and González-Bailón (2017), to identify relationship cores and central nodes. We present the analysis structured around these hashtags below.

#LeyOlimpia

As the digitalization of social interactions increases, issues such as violence against women are also being transferred, now in the digital space. According to UN Women (2020), 73% of women in the world have been victims of digital violence²; in addition, 23% reported having suffered online harassment, and 90% of the victims who suffer from the distribution of intimate content on social networks are women. While in Mexico, cyber harassment affected 9.4 million Mexican women, of whom 40.3% suffered sexual advances and 32.8% received unsolicited sexual content, with women between 18 and 30 years of age clearly being the most exposed to being victims of digital violence (INEGI, 2019b).

² UN Women (2020) defines digital violence as that which is committed and spread through digital media such as social networks, email or mobile messaging applications and that causes damage to the dignity, integrity or safety of the victims.

Given this, the visualization of the Olympia Law represents an effort to portray the heterogeneity of actors involved, longitudinally, in the acquisition of public relevance for legislation on digital violence.

From an actor-network theory perspective (see Image 2), the graph provides immediate considerations in the identification of the different ways of naming the topic of conversation, in this case through the nodes #LeyOlimpia and Ley Olimpia, which on the one hand grant the possibility of breaking the centrality of the hashtag in the analysis of sociodigital phenomena and, on the other, show communities of meaning to channel different visions, encompassed in a general way as the activist and journalistic.

The activist community identifies around #LeyOlimpia with an almost symbiotic relationship with the account of the main promoter of this initiative, @OlimpiaCMujer, as well as high-level political personalities, such as the head of the Mexico City Government, Claudia Sheinbaum, in the context of the approval of the law in the country's capital in December 2019 (see Image 3).

Image 3. Tweet My commitment to the compañeras of the National Front for Sorority



Source: Sheinbaum (2019).

As a result of a multimodal approach, from the interweaving between five categories: 1) user accounts, 2) term used (Ley Olimpia or #LeyOlimpia), 3) date, 4) place and 5) hypertext format in the tweet, the particularities of each type of node stand out, such as user accounts featuring activists, feminist collectives, political personalities, journalists, media and local and national legislative instances, which show a political-institutional, media and social-activist intertextuality that manifested longitudinally in the networks during 2019 and 2020 until appearing as a claim in the conjuncture of 8m 2021.

Likewise, the journalistic relevance determined by the use of the phrase Ley Olimpia in November 2020 stands out, as observed in the network, which is explained because it was when the Senate of the Republic unanimously approved its incorporation in the context of the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, a legislative procedure that finally concluded in April 2021 with the approval by the Chamber of Deputies.

#UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador

On March 4, 2021, the National Electoral Institute (INE) approved the candidacy of Felix Salgado Macedonio to run for governor of the state of Guerrero for the National Regeneration Movement (Morena) political party, despite the accusations of rape against him. The indignation in the face of this fact was immediate.

As we have pointed out, most of the feminist mobilizations that have taken place in recent years at a global level have denounced the violence exercised against women in its multiple forms. The results of the 2016 National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relationships (ENDIREH) indicate that.

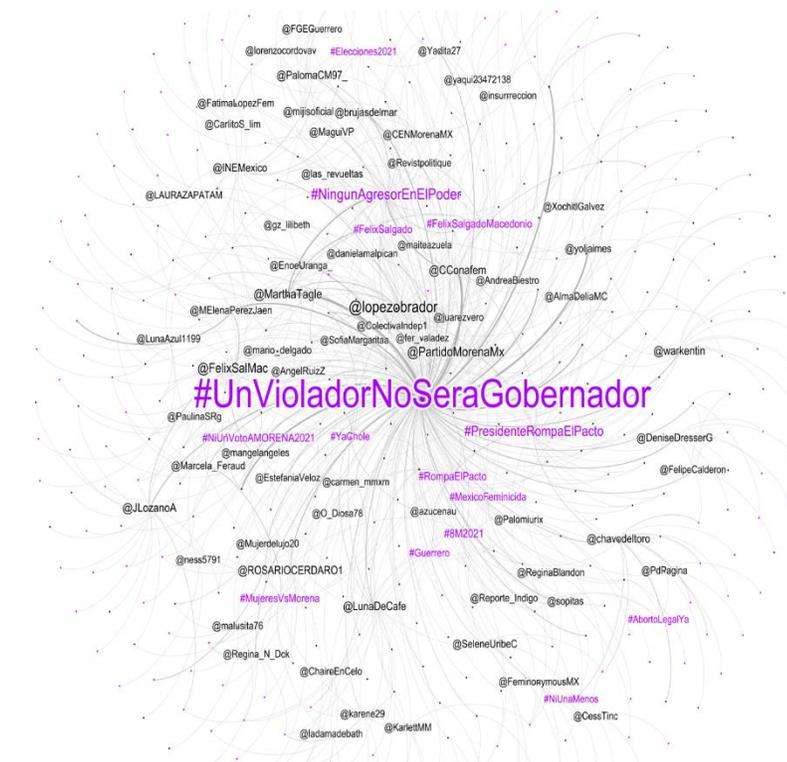
66 out of every 100 women aged 15 years or older living in the country have suffered at least one incident of violence of any kind in their lifetime. 43.9% of them have suffered violence by the current or last partner throughout their relationship while 53.1% have suffered at least one incident of violence by aggressors other than the partner throughout life (INEGI, 2020).

That is to say, in a country like Mexico, where the figures of violence against women are devastating, the candidacy in question was a trigger of indignation for feminist activists.

In this context, on March 5, 2021, the trend #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador began to be positioned on Twitter, chained to #PresidenteRompaElPacto that was in circulation days before in open questioning to the Executive Power embodied in the figure of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, because this is what happened in the same party which brought him to power in 2018. That hashtag contributed to the social debate on the implications of the cover-up that occurs among men about openly violent, macho and misogynist behaviors. Reguillo (2017) argues that much of the effectiveness of 21st century networked activism is linked to naming problems, as occurred in this case.

When analyzing Image 4, the most relevant nodes in terms of the dissemination of information nucleated around this hashtag were Félix Salgado Macedonio's own account, followed by the feminist collective Brujas de Mar, the activist Estefanía Veloz and the writer and journalist Alma Delia Murillo.

Image 4. #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador



Source: developed by the author.

The most mentioned nodes were in that same order: #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador, @lopezobrador_, #NingúnAgresorEnElPoder, #PresidenteRompaElPacto, @PartidoMorenaMx and @FelixSalMac. Likewise, the most active nodes showed diverse political actors, including Martha Tagle, Javier Lozano, the Colectiva Nacional Feminista Ningún Agresor en el Poder, Gabriela Warkentin and Luna de Café. This allows us to conclude that the relevance of #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador in its intertextuality allowed us to glimpse a crossover between the social fields of political-partisan actors, journalists and activists.

The activists' questioning of the party in power was striking, which reaffirmed the conformation of feminism as a bloc not complacent with the government in power, as in other six-year periods, geographies and contexts, regardless of their party

affiliation. In this sense, the intervention in the National Palace stood out as a clear techno political action from the projection of the phrase “A rapist will not be governor” on the building that houses the highest political power in Mexico (Image 5).

Image 5. Tweet #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador



Source: Torres Miranda (2021).

The screening was a deliberate action to make the message visible and amplify it. It did not remain in the networks, but forced national and international media coverage and contributed to the social debate, in terms of the aforementioned mobilization repertoires.

#TomaLasCallesNoCalles

The hashtag #TomaLasCallesNoCalles was an initiative promoted by the Lado B women's collective. They, through their official Twitter account (@Colectivo_LadoB), issued a call to generate a symbolic protest that consisted of renaming public spaces. As part of a nationwide invitation, they incited to make the women they admired visible by means of posters superimposed on the names of streets and avenues throughout the country (Hernández, 2021). They could be activists, artists, politicians, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, victims of femicide, victims of violence and missing women (Image 6).

Image 6. Tweet Mi calle será en honor a Miroslava Breach



Source: Catalina (2021).

The relevance of the action was to generate a representation of appropriation and resignification. According to Rovira (2013), this is a way of new visibility, which is a form of symbolic power, as it configures the perception of reality. According to Butler (2010), images in turn structure the way we register reality, so they are closely linked to the interpretive scenario in which we operate.

The actions initially called on Twitter brought together a large number of women who took to the streets to paste posters, stickers and banners to intervene in streets and avenues. Thus, for the #8m2021 protest, several spaces had already been renamed. Evidence of the actions could be seen with the hashtags #TomaLasCallesNoCalles and #8m2021, in which photographs and messages of support for these events could be seen.

feminist, reporter and political scientist (@CarlaPaucic); Raquel Ocaña (@raquelocaaa); Martha Tagle, congresswoman and feminist (@MarthaTagle).

The most mentioned nodes in relation to #TomaLasCallesNoCalles were: #8m2021, #AbortoLegalYa, #LasCallesTambiénSonNuestras, #DíaDeLaMujer, #8m #LoVamosATirar, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #VivasNosQueremos.

As a result of the above, it may be inferred that the relational structure of networks expands the bases of protest, not only through the appropriation of digital spaces and the construction of alternative forms of communication and organization, but also through the tucking of multiple causes that form semantic communities strengthened with previous historically relevant slogans, finally assembled as intertextualized political-discursive interventions beyond the networks. In this case, related to the protests against femicides and the struggle in favor of abortion, among others.

Conclusions

In this section we point out the main contributions of this article, structured in three dimensions. In addition, we point out some of its limitations, as well as possible directions of analysis to strengthen the historical-cultural interpretation of feminist mobilizations in times of digital technologies, as a necessary and collective mission.

First, in theoretical-conceptual terms, although we start from an approach based on feminist technopolitics, we chose to pick up the ethnographic postulates towards an interpretation of culture based on hermeneutic work, through the codification of categories derived from the analytical work itself. As a result, the notion of multi-field struggles emerged, as the interpretation progressed, not only in its definition, but also in its characteristics: they are overlapping, longitudinal, intertextual and interconnected struggles.

We consider that these struggles are overlapping because there is never only one at a time; they are longitudinal because they are taken from the continuum of manifestations that occurred at different moments throughout recent history; they are intertextual from the discursive positions of the different actors involved; they are interconnected because they refer to the feminist struggle in general and are usually accompanied in a sense of multiple and agglutinated political claim.

Secondly, with respect to the methodology implemented, we highlight the implementation of a network ethnography, unprecedented in recent studies of sociodigital mobilizations. It is a strategy that combines the epistemological imperatives of ethnography, based on a specific analytical technique: the analysis of social networks. The main objective in this dimension was to confront the massiveness and quantification of data typical of online scenarios to investigate with qualitative intentions the scenario of feminist protests in Mexico, in the context of March 8, 2021.

As a scope we identified an enriching diversity of database preparation maneuvers to overcome the visualization of networks exclusively from user accounts. The networks have been elaborated with three types of nodal categories: heterogeneous networks from the actor-network perspective, bimodal networks involving both user accounts and hashtags, and networks with only one type of node: hashtags.

As limitations of this type of analysis, we find the centralization on Twitter (which in media terms is relevant, but also socially limited) and the fact that it presents only the stage of first immersions, with a view to a multiplatform and connective analysis that details in greater depth the processes of political subjectivation that are behind the interaction in the networks.

Finally, thirdly, we identified actors and narratives present around three hashtags: #LeyOlimpia, #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles. One of the main coincidences in the analysis of the three demonstrations was that the most relevant nodes were politicians, collectives, activists and journalists. Viewing the tweets of these actors is understood from the specific capital they have in and outside the network, an aspect that remains to be evaluated in detail, especially with regard to collectives and activists.

In the cases of #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador and #TomaLasCallesNoCalles, the narratives were articulated through two major supplementary possibilities for the understanding of a feminist time. In the first case, a prefigurative enunciation and, in the second, through a call to action. Future and present, together.

Likewise, we identified a learning process in these mobilizations of denouncing ways that managed to amplify the visibility of the slogans to move the conversation to a broader public debate. Even, as shown in the case of the Olympia Law, accompanying lobbying processes over time with the most important political actors in the country.

The performative constellations associated with the hashtags reviewed allude to three social fields of analysis (legislative, political-electoral and urban public space) which in turn, comprise just three confrontation scenarios that could be identified in the #8m2021 sociodigital protests.

The wall, used as a metaphor for the place of institutional power, constitutes a site with a high hegemonic and symbolic value. That is why it is remarkable how the activists reused it as a canvas to write down their slogans. The performative deployment on these walls resorts to *escrache*, the renaming of streets and squares, as well as graffiti and artistic-cultural interventions. As social artifacts, the walls were vulnerable to re-signification.

The analysis also shows narratives associated with hashtags, which in the case of #LeyOlimpia has long accompanied mobilizations for legislative reform to end digital violence. The #UnVioladorNoSeráGobernador was fundamentally articulated with that of #PresidenteRompaElPacto, the confrontation in the political-electoral field occurs here through the denunciation for the nomination of candidates with accusations of sexual violence. The #TomaLasCallesNoCalles was accompanied by

#LasCallesTambiénSonNuestras, #8m2021, #NiUnaMenos, #AbortoLegalYa, where the slogan was the call to action to take to the streets, thus also confronting the fear due to the constant violence suffered by women in urban public spaces.

The multi-field struggles, identified in this analysis as a longitudinal, overlapping, intertextual and interconnected feminist political phenomenon, were characterized by weaving technocommunicative actions inside and outside the socio-digital networks. We will have to continue exploring feminist mobilizations through the deployment of tactics and repertoires of connective action, which in technopolitical terms can impact public discussion and continue to break down borders.

To conclude, we return to the image of a girl –smiling– suspended in the air, flying a kite in front of an immense wall that protects the National Palace, a space intervened with photographs and stories of femicide victims.

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