

Cyberfeminists in Mexico City. Discourses and Tactics

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Worldwide, network activism is said to have an enormous political power by using social media platforms. This assumption exists *inter alia* because of the “Arab Spring” (2011) in the Middle East, in which protests were organized on Twitter¹ and Facebook, the protest movement “Yo Soy 132” (2012), which began with the distribution of a video on YouTube and fights for a democratization of the media in Mexico or the #BlackLives-Matter movement (2013) in the U.S., which focused on the killings of Afro-Americans by police officers. Over the last years, feminist actions on the internet have also been taken up by news media, and they have triggered social debates on sexism and sexual violence, from #Aufschrei (Outcry) (2013) in the German-speaking context, to #NiUnaMenos (Not-OneLess) (2015) and #MiPrimerAcoso (#MyFirstHarassment) (2016) in various countries in Latin America, to #MeToo (2017), which is making headlines and has consequences beyond the U.S. Thus, it becomes clear how the internet facilitates networking across national borders. However, at the same time the local contexts do not lose importance.

In Latin America, the internet was used early on, for example in Mexico by the Zapatistas (Le Bot 1997). Cyberfeminist² collectives in Mexico City such as Modemmujer and La Neta as well as individual persons as Cindy Gabriela Flores were also among the avant-garde. They were influ-

1 Twitter was renamed X in July 2023. As this article draws on research prior to this date, this study will continue to refer to the platform as Twitter.

2 This article uses the term cyberfeminism which emerged in the 1990s, aware of the variety of different terms as “Technofeminism” (Wajcman 2004), as it is used in Spanish academic publications (Miguel and Boix 2013; Reverter Bañón 2013) as well as during activist meetings such as the “I Encuentro Internacional de Ciberfeminismo” in Ecuador in 2017. On the website of the meeting, however, it is also clear that “Ciberfeminismo” is now used as a collective term as it was announced that there will be lectures and workshops by “Activistas digitales feministas”, “Hackfeministas” and “Ciberfeministas” (Ciberfeminismo El Churo 2017). This work therefore calls the current activists cyberfeminists, but with the assumption that different types of activism are hidden behind it.

enced by the virtual as well as the local academic, artistic, institutional or autonomous feminist movements. Through radical innovations within internet technologies, the growing number of internet users, and the increasingly fragile frontier between analog and digital spaces,³ the cyber-feminist activism of today is becoming more and more relevant. Nowadays, violence and protest are present in both worlds. Current (cyber) activists in Mexico are witnesses of a terrifying amount of violence against women, as well as against media professionals, while they are also directly affected by it.⁴ With different campaigns and actions, they draw attention to this political and social situation. Technical development, new ways of communicating on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as current forms of feminist protest such as pop feminism⁵ influence their activism.

Hence, this article presents some of the results of a discourse and dispositive analysis from 2017 of five collectives in Mexico City, which are the media-activist collective Luchadoras, the YouTube collective (e)stereotipas, the technology-focused groups ADDFEM and Ciberseguras, and the drone Droncita,⁶ which was brought to life by the activism collective Rexiste.⁷ The focus was set on their activities from 2015 to 2017. This selection attempts to capture the heterogeneity of the movement(s) and to show a representative variety of thematic emphases within the discourse analysis. From a cultural studies perspective, the analysis makes use of an interdisciplinary selection of sources, scientific methods and theories. It primarily applies the methods of discourse analysis and dispositive analysis by Margarete and Siegfried Jäger, which are based on Michel Foucault's discourse theory (M. Jäger 2010; S. Jäger 2001; 2012). Classically, dis-

3 To read more about the dissolving boundaries between analog and digital spaces, see Mitrović (2022).

4 For more information regarding the current violence against journalists in Mexico see Artículo 19 (2019), for violence against feminist activists see Artículo 19 (2015).

5 "Pop feminism" has become a known term since around 2014, when American singer Beyoncé displayed the word "Feminist" in big bright letters at a concert and British actress Emma Watson gave her speech for the UN campaign HeForShe. The Mexican collective (e)stereotipas, for example, use the term in their self-description ("feminismo pop latinoamericano") and also wrote about it (Ruiz-Navarro 2016).

6 Droncita is a drone with "her" own Twitter- and YouTube-Account and described as the "little sister" of the collective Rexiste.

7 A short introduction to the work of these five collectives can be found in Spanish in the article "Activismo ciberfeminista actual en la Ciudad de México" written by the author in 2017 (Mitrović 2017a).

course analysis is based primarily on linguistic texts. However, this article also takes into account visual as well as audio-visual material because visual communication is gaining importance on the internet and the increasing interest in visualization, visibility or the depiction of reality in cultural studies with the emergence of the “Pictorial Turn” (Mitchell 1994) or the “Iconic Turn” (Böhm 1994). The analysis is no longer just about what can be said, but also about what can be seen. While examining the tactics, the ideas of Michel de Certeau (1984), and especially of Jane Armstrong (2007), who researches the Grrrl movements which are some of the cyberfeminist pioneers, become relevant. The corpus of analyzed material of the discourse and dispositive analysis contains over one hundred selected contributions from the online presences of the five collectives and projects. It includes the contributions from their websites as well as from their accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, press articles in news media, both from and about them, and a list of examined articles of a specific edition of the local city magazine *Chilango* published in June 2017.

Additionally, it includes material from the project “Enlaces|Links (2017-2019) about feminist activism and internet(-technology) in Mexico and Germany. It was created and artistically directed by Jan-Holger Henies and the author, some of the here discussed collectives participated in the project. The project’s center is the multimedia exhibition “Estamos conectadas|Wir sind vernetzt”. Accompanied by workshops and talks, it has traveled in varying formats from Mexico City and Berlin to Guadalajara, Monterrey, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Kassel, Köln and Kiel.

“War Against Women” and Women Against Violence

The structural analysis of the online presence of the selected groups shows that the issue of violence against women is the most treated topic. The activists call for the destruction of existing patriarchal social orders to facilitate a more just and free world. The collectives challenge the macho-structures in the judiciary system, military and police as well as the silence of the families of victims of violence, which protect the perpetrators. These structures reveal the extent to which this violence has already been normalized.

Instead of a sheltered retreat for women and other genders, the “new space” has opened up as another contested field, with the possibility of

spying on, controlling and attacking women. Thus, further violent phenomena have arisen, against which the cyberfeminists fight.

In this context, both *Rexiste* and *Luchadoras* use the term “guerra contra las mujeres” (*Rexiste* 2017; *Luchadoras* n. d.). This “war against women” takes place in different ways, at different levels and in different situations and spaces. (e)stereotipas, with the hashtag #MiPrimerAcoso (#MyFirstHarassment) and the participation of thousands of women reporting their first experience of harassment, created awareness for the frightening normality of violence against women in Mexico, also showing how early it begins. The chart, “What did #MyFirstHarassment show us?” (*Abu Shahab* 2016; author’s translation) indicates that most of the tweets about a person’s first experience of harassment were at the age of eight. Moreover, four out of ten harassments were in fact sexual abuse, 62 percent of the offenders were unknown to the victims, and 47 percent of the incidents took place on the street.

The normalization of sexual harassment in society is exacerbated by the complicity of the judiciary system. In one case, *Catalina Ruiz-Navarro* of the (e)stereotipas had clearly identified the person who harassed her. A police officer took photos of her buttocks with his cell phone. But trying to file a charge against him was pointless. (e)stereotipas then launched the hashtag #YoDenunciéY (IReportedAnd) ((e)stereotipas 2016) and asked women to share their experiences with the police when they wanted to report cases of sexual harassment. With the judiciary system and police preventing the filing of charges by women who were victims of harassment and abuse, the demand for justice and display of solidarity with sexually assaulted or murdered women has come to play an important role in the cyberfeminist activism. *Luchadoras* express it through hashtags like #JustiziparaMara [sic] (JusticeForMara) or #JustiziparaLesvy [sic] (JusticeForLesvy). *Rexiste* transforms their hashtags about the demand for justice into street art actions, carries them into the urban space, and then through photos back into the internet. In addition, in a text for March 8 of 2017, *Rexiste* calls out to break the silence and to stop protecting violent offenders: “We will not keep silence. We will not protect the aggressors. We will not protect them because they are family, friends or lovers. It is time for the shame to change sides” (*Rexiste* 2017; author’s translation). Hence, they show in which social realms the perpetrators are often to be found. Moreover, the last sentence is crucial because it condemns the widespread

view in society that the victim must be shamed and ashamed, but not the culprit.

Condemnation and shame play an essential role in violence against women in Mexico. The image of women in general media and society also contributes to this phenomena: even the logic of arguments that women deserve violence or death has become common.⁸ This, for example, is shown in the case of Karla Saldaña which was widely reported on in Mexican news media and discussed in social networks. She was sitting in a car with several men when they had a fatal accident in Mexico City. Quickly, the only focus of attention became Saldaña as the only female victim:

the society accused her for going out at night, without telling her husband, for getting into a stranger's car, accompanied by other men. For going out like this, she was "an easy catch". "Because she's a bitch, she died", was the chorus on social networks" (Castillo 2017, 87; author's translation).

The indignation of feminist movements regularly erupts in protests against this kind of justification. This appears in the form of organized events on the streets as well as actions on the internet. Droncita and Luchadoras create a counter-public through the documentation on location. Droncita also inserts photographic and cinematic documentations of protests, demonstrations and interventions in the urban space into the virtual space. Luchadoras creates public attention by publishing background reports or interviews at demonstrations (Droncita Rexiste 2015a; 2015b; Zamora 2017; Barrera 2017). The interwovenness of analog and digital spaces can also be seen in more recent feminist protests such as the so-called Brillanteada in 2019 (Suárez and Mitrović 2023).

While violence against women is the main topic, it is not surprising that the discourse analysis reveals that the concept 'woman' remains central in the collectives' texts, and is also supported by the use of feminist and/or feminine colors like purple, pink and white, symbols like the feminist risen fist, and metaphors, for example, of resistance. Although the dissolution of gender binaries therefore plays less of a role, in their politics they

8 Following Lamas, this is based on concepts deeply rooted in the society, which in the sociological sense can be understood as stereotypical role models. In Latin American, but especially Mexican contexts, these are due to the *machismo* and *marianismo*. Here, the *machismo* calls for a strong, brutal man, while as its counterpart the *marianismo* sees the woman in reference to the holy Maria, as a spiritual figure, who is chaste and has to endure suffering (Lamas 1995).

do take into account poststructuralist approaches from Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs*.⁹ Therefore, the figure “cyborg” plays an important role. Haraway described cyborgs as “illegitimate offspring [...] often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins” (Haraway 1985, 68). She refers to the emergence of technology in the military context, and its subsequent spread in many different areas of society. The appropriation of technology is one of the first subversive tactics of cyberfeminists. Thus, the activists invalidated the stereotypical image of the technologically distant woman. Moreover, they used technology that was originally military for their protest movement and the creation of a counter-public. This is a tactic that repeats in Droncita, as drones were first used by the military. Only since a short time they are used for civil purposes and by feminist movements worldwide (Suárez 2016). Droncita could not be more contrary to the original image of a drone because her name is a diminutive of the word drone and Rexiste introduce her on their website as a white, smiling drone on a bright pink background. Only the fighting spirit has remained.



Figure 1. Meme “Mom, I’m a feminist – Oh dear, you’ve become a lesbian!”. Photo of the exhibition “Wir sind vernetzt | Estamos conectadas” at Atelierhaus im Anscharpark in Kiel (2019). © Mirjana Mitrović.

9 To read more about the hope of the dissolution of gender binaries, see Mitrović (2017b).

In particular, however, the focus is on breaking discriminatory stereotypes, which support existing violence structures and serve to justify them. Hence, the dissemination of an image of the strong woman, as an individual and in a collective, is of great importance. To achieve this goal, the cyberfeminists produce humorous YouTube videos, combative GIFs or initiate hashtag actions of solidarity. Humor thereby is a traditional cyberfeminist tactic that can be found since Haraway's manifesto to the Grrrl movement.

Tactics: Techno-tactics, "Raising/Giving Voice" and Networking

Michel de Certeau separates tactics from strategies. He describes a strategy as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated" (Certeau 1984, 35 f.). On the other hand, he describes that a tactic "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power" and therefore "operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them [...]" (Certeau 1984, 37). Armstrong refers to de Certeau in her investigation of the Grrls tactics, but for her tactics are "far more important than the opportunistic tricks described by de Certeau; they are guerrilla activities and, when combined, they become powerful strategies for constructing alternative feminine and feminist identities" (2007, 375; author's translation). This is the approach which this article follows.

In the following, three results of the dispositive analysis of non-discursive tactics will be presented. These non-discursive tactics are not understood as part of the discourses, but as actions for arranging and structuring the contents of discourses. They serve the cyberfeminists to spread their discourses and thereby create a counter-public for their concerns. Their goal is to bring social change. Hence, the central tactics of the collectives are shown, tactics which Armstrong (2007) also attributes to the Grrrls: the so-called techno-tactics, networking and "raising/giving a voice".

First, techno-tactics are about the appropriation and transfer of technological knowledge. This includes understanding practical processes, such as how to install a hard disk with more memory in your own computer, or learning programming languages to critically reflect on how the relationship between technology and people is or how it should be. This

DIY¹⁰-attitude came from the punk scene and was also already used in the Grrrl movement (Armstrong 2007, 169). Rovira Sancho describes it in the following way, also in respect of sharing knowledge:

Being capable to do one's own things, to share them and teach them to others, like artisans who improvise, learn and leave tutorials for anyone to play with. It is a bricolage but not as a specialized commercial endeavor, but the other way around, de-specialized. To not depend on money, escape from it and brands (2017, 52; author's translation).

Tactics of this kind were necessary in particular at the beginning of the cyberfeminist movement to be able to use the only recent computer and internet technology. In the meantime, the technology has become more complex, but at the same time is often easier to use. The research shows that techno-tactics continue to be important for cyberfeminist movements, yet they are not a priority for all collectives. While ADDFEM, as part of the hacker scene, is actually seeking a practical and theoretical exploration of technology as well as knowledge transfer, Ciberseguras focuses more on security and practical tips. Rexiste "lives" techno-tactics through the creation and use of Droncita. The technical knowledge transfer is also provided by the publication of the construction manual of the drone. Luchadoras defines a "Feminist Internet" as one of its goals. They have not primarily contributed to the practical implementation of this aim, but to discussions of topics such as *sexting*, the creation of *Editatona*¹¹ events, and their participation in the project *Dominemos las TICs* with the international Association for Progressive Communication (APC) and La Sandía Digital.

Second, networking is one of the central tactics of cyberfeminist movements. Haraway describes it in the *Manifesto for Cyborgs* as following: "Networking' is both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy" (Haraway 1985, 90). This illustrates the subversiveness of the tactic. It is commonly used in capitalist contexts, such as businesses, but is also used in the feminist resistance. When Armstrong in 2004 talks about the Grrrls websites' networking tactics, hyperlinks are still the focus of attention. Until today, the websites of Modemmujer and Cindy Flores,

10 Abbreviation for do-it-yourself.

11 *Editatona* is the name of an event where women meet to write articles about important women in selected fields for Wikipedia. This is meant to bring attention to these women and close the existing gap in Wikipedia, where there are far fewer contributions about women than about men.

both part of the early cyberfeminist scene in Mexico, have a list of hyperlinks that refer to related and recommended sites. Today, the networking has transitioned (mostly) towards the use of social media platforms. Facebook posts are shared by other activists, and tweets get liked, retweeted or marked as favorites on Twitter, which can be seen as a modernized form of the hyperlink. In addition, the cyberfeminist activists use the tactic of networking not only intensively in virtual contexts, but also in urban spaces. Rexiste published a photo of the Spanish sentence “I do not know you but we need each other to create a new world” (author’s translation) that was sprayed as a stencil on a wall. This not only symbolically marked the seizure of urban public space (as with many of the artists’ street art interventions), but also a type of networking on the street and through the digital photography also on the internet. In fact, most of the activists of the five collectives know each other personally, whether through activism or privately.



Figure 2. “We have to unite and become a stronger force within the Internet, too.” Interview with Estrella Soria (ADDFEM). Photo of the exhibition “Wir sind vernetzt | Estamos conectadas” at Atelierhaus im Anscharpark in Kiel (2019). © Mirjana Mitrović.

The proliferation of the internet and of internet users worldwide has resulted in larger and cross-border networks, but that does not mean the links created by it are closer, more reliable or more helpful. Instead, it shows that often temporary alliances have been made. Even if networking

via the internet has been expanded, networking in material spaces remains indispensable. The current cyberfeminists build on local feminist structures, whether through cooperation with established net policy NGOs (such as APC) and feminist NGOs (such as CIMAC¹²), by offering workshops in autonomous areas (such as the hackerspace Rancho Electrónico) or government-funded institutions (such as the Centro de Cultura Digital, CCD). The importance of networking with other not necessarily feminist social movements such as “Yo Soy 132” and the solidarity with the victims of violence such as the families of the 43 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa,¹³ is also noticeable.



Figure 3. Interview with Anaíz Zamora and Eve Alcalá (Luchadoras) as part of the exhibition “Wir sind vernetzt | Estamos conectadas” (2017-2019). © Jan-Holger Hennies.

Third, the tactic of “giving voice to women” has been used since the 1970s to exchange views and to focus on key issues, such as the right to a life without violence, or the right to free expression of one’s own sexuality. In particular, the motto “the private is political” played an important role, even at the beginning of the cyberfeminist movement in Mexico. ADD-

12 CIMAC. *Comunicación e Información de la Mujer*. was founded in 1988 by professional female journalists in Mexico.

13 The case of the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa in 2014 is internationally known. Here, the involvement of organized crime and state institutions was proven. This shows the complexity of the structures of violence (cf. Franco 2017).

FEM and Ciberseguras continue with this tactic by organizing meetings in protected analog spaces. Luchadoras often carried out interviews with “fighters” from all over the world at *Rompeviento*,¹⁴ and created their own media platform. (e)stereotipas also often use the form of the interview, trying to give voice to multiple marginalized groups, such as women with disabilities ((e)stereotipas 2017a) or women who support the right to abortion ((e)stereotipas 2017b). Hashtag actions like #MiPrimerAcoso have become a way to share experiences, create awareness, and encourage discussion. *Rexiste* rarely “gives a voice” to single persons, but rather features protests and demonstrations as a whole, often through photographs and videos of these, and their distribution on the internet.

In conclusion, the analysis of the five cyberfeminist collectives in Mexico City shows that, because of the local context, violence (on- as well as offline) is so present in cyberfeminist discourses in Mexico City, that other themes hardly emerge with the same attention. A fact that Erica Smith from APC sees as problematic:

“[...] The focus of feminism—when we talk about the internet—should not necessarily be violence, we reject this, because we cannot reduce gender to violence”, says Erika Smith. “That’s why we talk about the feminist internet, because our space cannot be just denunciation and outrage. What we want is openness, we have to ensure it” (Guerrero 2017; author’s translation).

But the main focus of the current cyberfeminists is precisely on criticizing the judiciary system and authorities, police and military personnel, as well as general society in regard to violence against women, yet also on highlighting the associated protests against the current local power structures. Here, visibility and the creation of counter-publics by the activists play an essential role. Nevertheless, the relevance of the original cyberfeminist focus on dealing with internet technology from a feminist perspective has not diminished. This debate remains essential, as the number of internet users continues to increase, but digital gaps continue to exist. At the same time, studies of the enormous and still unclear effects of technology on individual and social life are gaining importance. Here, a feminist perspective not only looks promising, but necessary.

Studying the tactics and putting them in a historic context shows that the current cyberfeminists still build on tactics of feminist groups from

14 *Rompeviento* is an online-TV-Channel which started during the “Yo Soy 132”-Movement in 2012 and aims towards the democratization of the Mexican media.

the 1970s, but updating them with new technological possibilities, e.g. by social media platforms. In addition, networking persists as a crucial tactic but is now present in the interconnected worlds of on- and offline. Thereby, and by using techno-tactics, they refer to international thinkers like Haraway or pioneers like the Grrrl movement as well as to local figures like Cindy Gabriela Flores. Finally, it is encouraging that the cyberfeminist movements have appropriated the urban space and cyberspace as spaces of action. The activists are thus represented, linked, and present as effective subjects and collectives in both, the analog and digital world. Their discourses, as well as their actions and visibility, attack existing patriarchal power relations and structures, and undeniably influence the construction of a new social perception of reality.

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