

Interview with activist Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco

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Biographical introduction

Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco was coordinator and community organizer for the Union of Towns and Organizations of the State of Guerrero (UPOEG 2016), a coalition of hundreds of self-defense groups, including a women's brigade of one hundred women armed with low-caliber weapons to patrol their hometown of Xaltianguis.

Miguel Ángel was a political activist and a community organizer in Guerrero, one of the most conflictive Mexican states known for its history of conflicts, lawlessness and most recently, organized drug cartels. Miguel Ángel –a father of seven– migrated and lived in the United States for a few years. After returning to Mexico, he became an activist, a community organizer, a community police leader, and an active link between activists, human rights advocates, journalists, and civil society organizations.

His preferred weapons for organizing were the Internet and especially Whatsapp on his mobile phone, which enabled him to chat, call, and form groups with other people using the same mobile phone application. The application helped Miguel Ángel to connect with other activist groups across Mexico. He based his decision to use Whatsapp mostly on practical and cost-effective grounds. He set up a Whatsapp group that included some 180 local and international reporters to where he published first-hand reports from Guerrero.

Miguel Ángel conducted all his activism in Guerrero, Mexico, beginning in his hometown of Xaltianguis, two hours south of Acapulco. In 2014, he organized an all-female community police, for which he received international media attention. He wanted women to learn to protect themselves and not let other people attack or intimidate them.

He had many reasons to get involved in his community. His interpretation of the Bible and his understandings of history shaped his work ethic and sense of duty to overcome “evil” in the world. His main goal was to stem the violence, the abuse of power and corruption in Guerrero.

The “war on drugs” has produced thousands of deaths in Mexico. Over 25,5000 people have been reported “disappeared” or missing since 2006 (Human Rights Watch 2015). Community organizers, human rights activists, journalists and others are among those missing and killed. When 43 Ayotzinapa students disappeared in September 2014, Miguel Ángel organized search parties. Miguel Ángel actively supported the parents of the missing 43 students of Ayotzinapa. While searching for the students, he found and helped excavate clandestine mass graves throughout the state of Guerrero. Even though the students’ bodies

were not found, he continued this work and helped to locate and identify bodies, many which turned out to be those of smuggled migrants (CNN 2014, Jenkins 2015).

For Miguel Ángel the violence exercised by the state and that by organized crime were not different in their consequences; he intuited Tilly's (1984, 1985) warning not to differentiate analytically between illegitimate and supposedly legitimate violence. Miguel Ángel was not formally trained in human rights or politics; he was an organic intellectual (Gramsci 1994). Miguel Ángel acted on the idea that there was a need for citizens to arm themselves and to use violence when necessary to stop organized crime and abuse even when committed by local and federal police and governments. The following interview documents his views on government, citizenship, social change, and his use of messaging technology to achieve his goals. Our aim is to understand the reasons behind such altruistic activism despite the real risks involved, and to connect large scale social change with personal narratives (Castañeda 2009).

His mission and vision

MAJB: I consider myself like a street sweeper who must deal with the ugly, [and] remove the dead dogs [from the streets]. I do not like my role [as a leader] (...). I identify with the street sweeper whose duty it is to sweep... I prefer to be with the people, even though I don't make any money, and neither eat well, nor [do I] have a secure position. I prefer it this way. I do not want to be the leader of anything, nor do I want to be beneath anybody.¹

Using WhatsApp to Spread Information

KA: When did you begin to use the WhatsApp application?²

MAJB: I began to use it about a year ago, for personal messaging with friends. [In our activist organization] we communicate constantly, so we were spending so much money on messages or calls, and, because I travel often, I have a lot of expenses. I had to find a way to lower my costs. I noticed everyone sending messages on WhatsApp, and I realized that it was more economical. I also saw other members using it too, and partly because of convenience; I just had to copy and paste instead of repeating to write [the message] over and over again.

I was a little slow at first because I am not very good at these things, but I had to learn quickly out of necessity. I used to text each reporter individually, or take a long time to answer when they texted, as I have a list of more than 180 reporters (...)

The [WhatsApp] group is designed to be able to upload relevant, first-hand information. Yes, first-hand information, news I can get out to them quickly. Why? Because international news reporters have to inform about what is happening. I called this *Fuente Informativa* (news source), because news

² All questions posed in Spanish by Kara Andrade; responses were translated by the authors.

reporters can get information from here and give it to their media organizations and say “this is what’s going on” and (...) analyze, if it is convenient or not for them to come to Mexico (...) or plan to come to Guerrero.

What media are we talking about?

Univision, Telemundo, Sky News, the media in Germany, France, England, Spain, I don’t know, Japan, there are so many (...) the New York Times, BBC, Al Jazeera, Milenio (...)

What are the things that interest international media?

Relevant stories, issues that have to do with something new. For example, when I organized the all-female community police, I became a “success” because they were the first women-led community police force in the world; we created more consciousness and awareness among women. In Guerrero, this caused a news sensation; they came to film from Mexicali, from Mexico and the United States. I have noticed that whenever there is something new or something that benefits the people, it attracts international media’s attention. It is not the type of sensationalist journalism that exists in Mexico. The national media wants to see the deceased, the dismembered, and those types of things. In Mexico, it is all about sensationalist journalism. The national media is controlled by the government, so they cover only what is beneficial [to them] and what does not affect the government.

Have there been news stories that have had an international impact?

Internationally, I would say that if I uploaded something like, “we found some bodies in Iguala”, they would react quickly. For example, when we reported, as you may remember, the [43 Ayotzinapa] missing students, it received international attention.

Were you among the first to break this news, or were there others?

We were the first.

Because you are out there near the Ayotzinapa students, right?

That is why I call it *Fuente Informativa*, because I upload what I see, or whatever is within my reach, wherever I may be. With this situation, we have some community projects in the area, and have 19 teenagers involved in the Ayotzinapa case. The families and the assembly asked us to speak up for them. And I have an obligation to the assembly.

So, are you a part of the Ayotzinapa assembly?

No, they [the community projects] are from the area where I live, but I have nothing to do with Ayotzinapa. Even if I wanted to partake; they do not like us because they say we are on our way to becoming a pro-government group. For us, the assemblies are the ones that are in charge, the assembly rules. So, in the Ayotzinapa case, only the community can change it, it is only up to them. We believe in the authorities, we hand everything over to them, to the commissioners, to the delegates, to the district leaders. We obey the assembly, but the authorities are the ones that endorse [our actions] not the assembly itself. We cannot do it only with civilians, which is where the differences are. And for that reason, we work in that way, we work with the government, we coordinate

with them (...) But why? Because we give them [government officials] the option to fulfill their word. I have already done my part, but we know they have not.

Who are the groups on WhatsApp?

They are people like me, they just want what is best for their families. I am in this with my wife, she is the leader of the group. Those who are involved and committed to this, we know that our lives do not mean anything to the government. We know they can take us down, so we have to make the most out of this communication. Now that we are in contact with groups in every state, we are doing precisely that. So we are learning how to communicate faster, because we've realized that the government's source of power is communication, which they are good at using. For the government, to circumvent the official media channels is to declare war on them. We are living through a revolution in Mexico now, but we are not living it like we did before [not with arms but through communication].

But how has communication changed with the Internet and new technologies?

The Internet came along and changed everything, it makes us feel like we are part of something at any given moment. Look, UPOEG has sown its seeds among the people, they are arming themselves. We have over a thousand armed towns, but we are not looking for a civil war. We are arming the towns so people are not pillaged, robbed, killed, their women and daughters raped, and criminals doing as they please. We want to establish order. Hence, we try to provide the towns with arms, not to fight the government, we are not interested in that. For one simple reason: if we did that, we stand to lose everything. The country's most powerful political leaders are going to hop on their planes and leave Mexico. Once we killed each other, they will come back; there is no point (...) Now, we're busy with creating electoral registers, we are forming a party. The political parties have always used us; for the first time in history, we are using one.

What's the name of the party?

The Humanist Party.

Recording electoral fraud with cellphones

Members of Jiménez Blanco's organization UPOEG decided to run for local offices in the legislative and municipal elections held on June 7, 2015. But they did not win any seats. Miguel Ángel partly blamed the losses on vote-buying and lack of transparency. One week after the elections, he travelled around the region to collect voters' testimonies of alleged vote-buying and coercion, which he recorded with his mobile phone (as shown in the photo). Those elections proved to be one of the country's most violent ones, with 21 assassinations of campaign officials and coordinators, their relatives and bystanders.

It was in June, exactly one week after these contentious elections, that Jiménez traveled to San Marcos, Guerrero, to collect voters' testimonies of alleged vote-buying and electoral fraud. He sped along pot-holed roads through small towns, texting, and making sudden stops at speed bumps. He made phone calls while he used his elbow to steer the car. He had two mobile phones, a big crack on his

windshield, and a Walkie-Talkie crackling with chatter from the local community police.



Miguel Ángel filming a testimony. Photo by Kara Andrade

This is how he described his methods for collecting testimonies from voters about alleged vote-buying:

It is very simple. We record the complaints by phone and pass it on to a friend who is in charge of that, and then the lawyer starts working [on the case]. We have about ten complaints.

Later, they transcribe the audio, list the witnesses, and go over other evidence in order to make a general complaint. This is how Miguel Ángel explains to a meeting why this is important:

It is about showing a few people that if they have the courage to speak publicly, they will see that other people will show courage too. Look, our proposal is very simple: if one of you were offered money or anything in exchange for your vote, we just want to videotape you and get your full name. We will videotape your face, so, [in future], we can file a formal complaint only with facts. It is not a personal complaint, all that you need is to give your testimony i.e., “I am so-and-so, at X time Mr. X arrived and offered me or gave me 100 pesos, 200 pesos. He gave me 200 pesos to vote for their party.” See, it is not against any party (...) it’s against government corruption. But we also do not want you to lie (...)

When you narrate that part, your testimony needs to last only one minute, it has to be very synthesized, just give the facts (...) Testify how you remember it at the time, "they gave you all money in exchange for casting your vote for their candidate and that it was so and so." Say that you remember who it was and that he belongs to X party. Tell us how you all were asked to vote, and give the name of whoever it may be, René or whatever his name may be (...). You need to testify only about what you saw; we just gave you an example, it is about what you saw, not what we believe (...).

Like I said, our testimony has to be seen as "listen, people over there have the courage to confront these issues", and then other towns will begin to do the same. Suddenly, there will be a spark in every town that is protesting ... I remember, 6 years ago they gave 100 pesos per vote, that was the norm. Now they do not pay 100 Pesos, now they pay 200, 300, 500, up until 1,000. Now, imagine that in the upcoming election, they are going to pay 1,500, 2,000 Pesos; I mean, with every day corruption becomes more powerful, and, whose fault is it? Ours, it is our fault.

And what are you expecting from the people here?

The only thing I expect them to do is to keep on fighting. That is my only hope. I do not expect anything from the people. I want people to react, I would love it, if they organized themselves, if they came together. (...) I do not want them to back themselves into a corner, but instead that they defend their kids, fight for them and fight for a better future. It is hard but that is the idea (...) You know, out of sight, out of mind; if people do not speak up, the state will not pay attention (...). The number one problem is not the government, it is not organized crime, it is not the drug dealers. They are not the problem. The name of the problem is apathy. The problem's name is lack of participation, lack of citizen will. This is the number one problem. For me, the second problem is that those of us who participate, we (...) fight internally. We have not understood that unity is strength (...). This is problem number two: the leadership divisions we have to live with. Yes, we are fighting, but everyone does so on their own (...).

Community police forces

But are you arming the towns?

Of course, we are arming the people. We have many armed towns.

Who is giving them the weapons?

They [arm] themselves. Each person has their own guns, their own rifles (...) they all have arms. We do not give them the weapons. Either they have them or they get them, but they are old weapons, just some stupid shit, you know. Do you understand why we arm the towns? Do you know what I mean?

So that they can defend themselves?

No.

So, it's not for self-defense?

No. See, we are organizing community police in every town, so that they can defend themselves from kidnappers, thieves, murderers, rapists, and

extortionists. We do not want to battle the government, and we will not allow people to do it either. We would not win, Kara. If we were to have a coup, millions would die, it would be stupid. Those with power will take off on their planes with their families to New York, or to whatever country, to live a f... fabulous life; they will not even use all their money. And after the rise, they will come back here to see how we are here in Mexico, and they will again oppress the survivors. I do not see any sense in us fighting, you know? I'm not against the government, I'm against the misuse of power.

How does the work you do here help the country?

So that the people in the towns begin to understand their role as citizens, as a people. When they are able to achieve something that, and this becomes known on a national level and on a global level, people elsewhere see this and say: if [they] can do this, then so can we.

While we were talking, we passed a military checkpoint. Why is the army here?

The army is all over. They are afraid that we are going to rise up in arms.

And is that why there is a community police?

After many abuses in Ayutla, people got tired and began to organize themselves and for that reason they started the community police. See, the situation got so extreme that you have to realize, "I do not have any more money; they will take my dignity now." When they take away the only thing that people have left, their dignity, that is when [they say] enough is enough... Clearly, what I do threatens the government. Because organizing the people is much more dangerous than arming people for an uprising, don't you think?

Miguel Ángel explains how different community policing groups fight among themselves:

This group [we just visited] is fighting with another group, there is division. That is why we urgently need to arrange a meeting... so they can dialogue. People are tired. Economically speaking, everyone has suffered the consequences (...) And above all there are clashes, one group arguing against the other, we need to stabilize this. That was the government's bet: that people would get exhausted as time goes by and get divided. Now, there is internal division not because of power, but because of poverty, the fight is an internal one.

Risks and threats

Have you faced death threats?

Not anymore. They have tried to kill me a few times, they even put a price on my head (...). For example, in my own town, I am a wanted man. They tried to kill me many times (...). They get angry, because I interfere [with their business] and do what I want. So, they always want to kill me, but they can dream on. The problem is that I am not going to stop just because some morons want to kill me. Listen, Kara, everyone who fights for social change has a similar fate, and you cannot deny it, either you go to jail for life or they kill you.

And you, what do you prefer?

To die, they will never get to torture me (...), I would never enter a jail cell alive, because if they put me in jail, they are going to torture me (...) just to get information out of me. The government is always looking for truthful information, but it is not hidden. For example, we use WhatsApp, the government has access to see all of our information. What can we hide? Everything is there. Because the government is watching us. To them, we are simply some type of guerrillas, don't you think? We are not guerrillas, but they are definitely observing us. Look how funny this is, my phone is recording all that we are saying right now, my phone is being tracked by the government, my phone has been [tapped]. They watch us organizers day and night.

But aren't there other apps that are safer?

Well, I will learn how to use them and then I shall communicate that way, but, until then, we will not use them. Besides, we do not have time to learn new technology.

That is worrying, because they can attack you, they can follow you, there are many dangers, don't you think?

Yes. I am aware of that, but, I don't know why, it does not worry me. I try to make sure that one can speak clearly, as I am not a guerrilla fighter because I just am not. I am not a drug dealer, nor a murderer, nor a thief. Since I am none of these, it does not trouble me. If I were a part of any of that, I would worry people learned that I was a disgrace (...).

There is some danger; the government has already obstructed me. I do not get involved with the attorney general, or Mexico's deputy attorney, or their agents. We need order, they need to understand that we need order. It can't be the case that they are killing us left, right and center, while the government assumes that we are fine, we are fine, we are fine.

Miguel Ángel, there had been many people that they have attacked, for example: the doctor who was on Twitter, she was doing something similar on Twitter in Tamaulipas and they killed her. There were also bloggers who had done nothing more than to report on their communities, it happened in Ciudad Juarez. It happened in other places in Mexico, where there are people using technology, for transparency, for, I don't know, activism, and they killed them.

Sure, I know.

So, it doesn't matter whether someone is a radical guerrilla fighter or a thief?

No, I gave my personal opinion of what would worry me. I know it is worrisome, because the government's biggest concern is that we have the ability to organize and coordinate ourselves, and they want to prevent this by any means necessary. So I know this, [but] personally, I am not worried. I have other ways of communicating that the government will never know about.

How so?

Well, we visit every town and we communicate face to face, which, regardless of what they say, is the most perfect way [to communicate].

I do not know if you, at any point, received some type of threat, something that directly impacted you or other journalists that are a part of the group?

Up until now, I have not received any new threats, other than the ones that I have already had. Besides the normal ones, that they want to kill me, that there are bounties for my life, but new threats, no.

But how do you know if these are just empty threats?

No, I have already been persecuted. They have chased me in my town. I play hide and seek, I get to one spot, then another and then another, and we go like this in circles. The advantage is that I have people who inform me. Before I go to a place, they warn me (...). This is something that I fully understand, I do not do it for me, nor for the adults that are alive now; I do it for the new generations, for my kids. If someone does not sacrifice now, I ask myself, who is going to do it?

And your family?

The mom of my daughter keeps saying, "I do not understand. You always say and claim that what you do is for your kids, but you are never with them." And I tell her, one day my kids will wake up and learn what their father did and how he tried to change this dammed situation in the country, so that they could have a better place. And if they do not understand that, it is not my problem. It is true, I have to pay the price, and they will also have to pay. I am terrified that something could happen to my kids but not to me (...). Listen carefully, I love my children and I am doing this out of love. If I had no sense of what I wanted to do, then why would I fight? There is something that keeps me fighting. We all need a dog chasing us, a reason to fight.

Assassination

Miguel Angel Jiménez Blanco's bullet-ridden body was found on August 8, 2015 outside of his hometown in Guerrero; he was 45 years old (Andrade 2015a, Andrade 2015b, Jenkins 2015). His murder, still pending investigation, with no clear suspects or answers is not unlike the case of Ayotzinapa's disappeared students. Miguel Angel's murder case may remain unsolved, which would not be unusual for Mexico.

About the authors

Kara Andrade did the interviews with Miguel Angel Jiménez Blanco. Ernesto Castañeda helped with the material selection, editing, and analysis. Luis Rubén Díaz-Cepeda helped with the translation and further editing. We thank Christopher Perl for helping with the first round of translation.

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