Oscar Morales: ‘How I used Facebook to protest against Farc’

Oscar Morales, 35, is a web developer who in 2008 used Facebook to rally 12million people to protest against Colombian communist guerrilla organisation Farc. He is in London this week for youth activist gathering One Young World. www.oneyoungworld.com

By Andrew Williams
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Why did you start the campaign? It started when everyone heard the story of a boy called Manuel on the news. His mother was kidnapped by Farc – the terrorist organisation that calls itself a revolutionary movement – and he’d been born in captivity. In January 2008, when he was four, it said it was going to release him but 20 days later it emerged Farc didn’t even have him any more. It had abandoned him two years previously. When he was found he had malaria, tuberculosis, a broken shoulder and was about to die. Everyone in Colombia was shocked by this story. That’s why I started the Facebook campaign, called One Million Voices Against Farc, gathering people to protest about its cruelty.

How fast did it grow? Extremely fast. We were gaining thousands of supporters each hour. People wanted their voice to be heard. Our message was ‘no more kidnapping, no more lies, no more Farc. It was so successful we decided to protest in the streets. Colombians living abroad arranged their own marches. In a month, we’d organised protests in 200 cities around the world.

What is Farc? The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia was formed in 1964. The government back then was very oppressive and Farc wanted to overthrow it. Colombia has become more democratic and our economy has improved and people have access to education and jobs now. Farc lost support. It started kidnapping wealthy Colombians, holding them to ransom, and did business with the drug cartels. It started bombing the main cities in the 1980s and 1990s. People became very afraid because of the bombs and kidnapping. No one would say anything against Farc as it was very dangerous and the army wasn’t able to contain it. Our current president opposes Farc. Membership has dropped from 40,000 to 7,000 and it’s back in the jungle. We want Farc to release its hostages, negotiate with the government and end the violence. There are still around 200 hostages.

What effect did the campaign have? The campaign convinced people to say: ‘We don’t tolerate the kidnappings and we want their freedom.’ On the day of the protest, February 4, 2008, the whole country was surprised by how many people marched. More than 500,000 people joined our Facebook group. Months later many freed hostages said they’d heard our protest in captivity on a radio and it gave them hope they’d survive. We showed most people don’t support Farc. Many members left and rejoined society. A new law says former
members will only go to jail for eight years, then they’ll get education and housing. They are quitting in large numbers.

**Is your own life in danger?** All the organisers have received death threats via e-mail. I keep a low profile and vary my routes when I travel in case people are following me. I trust there is an angel protecting me.

Does using Facebook, where your identities are revealed, make your supporters vulnerable to Farc reprisals? In the past, people who organised protests remained anonymous. This time we showed our real names and faces. We had so much support, it made us feel safe. Showing our identities gave us credibility.

**What’s the One Young World event about?** Colombia is just one story among hundreds. Social media tools are empowering young people in new areas of advocacy. Young people don’t just play Nintendo and eat crap. The event is about them getting together with activists from other countries.